

Jerry Falwell from David Duke. And the "tolerant" objection raised against Okie religion is the same one that foes of immigration often level at newcomers: they have so little historical experience with democratic institutions that they have not yet learned to adjust their political goals to constitutional realities. Specifically, since most Pentecostals do not at any level believe in the separation of religion and politics, they cannot assuage liberal fears that they do not believe in the separation of church and state. Along typical minority-politics lines, the media leads the wider public to feel Okies are arguing for special treatment when they feel they're arguing for basic rights.

These Christians are viscerally terrified of government, even if they do see it as a source of economic advancement. Their anti-Communism is really an opposition not so much to an economic system or even to authoritarianism per se as to the religious persecution that always accompanies Communism. Their opposition to federal efforts to end segregation stem primarily from a fear that at some point the federal government will act to dilute the religious—not racial—composition of their own communities. If we give religion its rightful place in the Tathams' political worldview, their voting patterns become more logical: they are part of a conservatism directed more against the Warren Court than against the New Deal.

These are important distinctions for anyone seeking to understand how the huge Reaganite coalition has been reduced to a rump of people more or less like the Tathams. If the book is a bit too long and discursive, if Morgan is occasionally too patient with hokey anecdotes, it is only because he has important sociological work to do here: detailing the position of a major group inside the tribal pluralism that is becoming the *modus vivendi* of California society. Morgan's book does for the Okie migration west what Nicholas Lemann did for the more important Mississippi migration north in *The Promised Land* (1991)—it draws not just comparisons but identities. And just as Lemann showed us that much of the northern underclass is merely Delta sharecropper society bricked in, Morgan gives us a vivid portrait of Midwestern hardscrabble farm society aired out. □

## PILGRIM IN THE RUINS: A LIFE OF WALKER PERCY

Jay Tolson

Simon & Schuster/544 pages/\$27.50

reviewed by JOHN R. DUNLAP

In a 1983 lecture on Herman Melville, Walker Percy remarked that *Moby Dick* "was a consequence, not merely of great gifts, but also of great good luck"—the luck of a novelist "breaking into the freedom of his art," as happened to Melville when a whaling yarn somehow evolved into "a narrative that unfolds not merely itself but oneself and others' selves." Percy, too, knew the feeling: on many occasions in his life, he enjoyed luck of a variety so decisive that it's hard to come away from Jay Tolson's *Pilgrim in the Ruins* without a sense that Walker Percy's life was charmed.

Consider how Percy's first published novel, *The Moviegoer* (1961), took the 1962 National Book Award. The usual procedure for deciding the award begins with publishers' recommendations, but Percy's publisher, the disagreeable Alfred Knopf, felt no enthusiasm for *The Moviegoer* and was annoyed by its poor sales. As it happened, however, A.J. Liebling had just finished writing a book on Louisiana politics, and his interest was piqued by a review mentioning the New Orleans setting of this first novel by an unknown Southern writer. Liebling bought a copy of *The Moviegoer*, which so enthralled him that he recommended it to his wife, Jean Stafford, one of the judges on the NBA fiction panel. Stafford arranged for the other two judges to receive copies of Percy's novel along with the ten other novels nominated that year. When the judges met in March 1962, their choice was unanimous.

Percy also had the good fortune of superb editors—sympathetic craftsmen

John R. Dunlap teaches English at Santa Clara University.

like Stanley Kauffmann at Knopf and Robert Giroux at Farrar, Straus. There was, too, the regular correspondence with his lifelong friend Shelby Foote, a major source for Tolson. And there was Percy's apprenticeship under the formidable Caroline Gordon, a close reader who guided Percy through his unpublished *The Charterhouse*. When the novel was rejected by Scribner's in 1953, Gordon's blunt reaction kept Percy's spirits up: "They just don't get it." And the rejection started a chain of circumstances that brought Percy into contact with Elizabeth Otis, whose literary agency served him well for the rest of his career.

Percy was almost 46 when he accepted the National Book Award for *The Moviegoer*, acquiring instant fame and a generous new print run. It is in paperback to this day, and none of his six published novels has gone out of print. But if the serendipity of his rise is something of a legend in American publishing, this and other instances of Percy's good fortune came to him the hard way.

He was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in May 1916, the first of three sons, to LeRoy Pratt Percy and Martha Susan Phinizy. They were not a happy family. Both parents were of the Southern aristocracy, freighted with the artful strategies of *noblesse oblige*, the father's family going back through several generations of stoic achievers given to bouts of melancholy. The year after Percy's birth, his paternal grandfather committed suicide; twelve years later, when Percy was 13, the father took his own life in a grisly repetition of the grandfather's self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Tolson recounts a “strangely gratuitous and self-dramatizing” comment Percy made to a student at Louisiana State University almost half a century later, when Percy was on a one-year teaching stint at LSU. Late one afternoon the student, a young man named Wyatt Prunty, happened by the open door of an English department office and stopped when he saw Percy sitting alone in the office, his feet propped up on another chair and “his gaze fixed in the middle distance.” Distracted from his reverie and without pausing a beat between sentences, Percy said, “Well, hello, Wyatt. I guess the central mystery of my life will always be why my father killed himself. Come here, have a seat.”

In fact, by his own account Percy was neither deeply saddened nor idly fascinated by his father’s suicide. He was angered—and taken with a seething determination from the age of 13 “to make damn sure that it didn’t happen to me.”

After spending a year with the mother’s family in Athens, Georgia, Martha Susan Percy and her three sons were invited by the well-to-do “Uncle Will” (William Alexander Percy, first cousin to Walker’s father) to stay with him at his home in Greenville, Mississippi. Within a few years of their move to Greenville, Martha Susan—always rather aloof and emotionally distant from her sons—died in a car accident; Will Percy promptly adopted the three boys.

Years later Percy would joke that if it hadn’t been for Uncle Will he would have wound up selling cars in Athens. But there was nothing flippant about his closely written tribute in an introductory essay to a 1973 reissue of Will’s memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee* (1941). Lawyer, planter, war hero, poet, lifelong bachelor (owing, apparently, to an “extreme idealization of women”), Will Percy had “a complete, articulated view of the world as tragic as it was noble.” From Uncle Will, Walker and his brothers learned Shakespeare, Keats, Brahms, Beethoven; they also learned character, and Walker himself gained “a vocation and in a real sense a second self.”

Another influence was the Catholicism Percy embraced under the usual conditions of disaster and good fortune. Percy’s keen interest in science—to which, as a chemistry major at Chapel Hill, he attached a rather callow hope for a complete worldview—led him to medical school at Columbia. After receiving his M.D. in 1941, he contracted pulmonary tuberculosis during his internship as a pathologist working on the corpses of derelicts at Bellevue. A lengthy period of enforced inactivity at sanatoria in Saranac (New York) and Connecticut gave Percy ample time—four years, all told—to explore his own deepest convictions, while grappling with the awkward discovery that he was now a certified medical doctor with no real interest in being a physician.

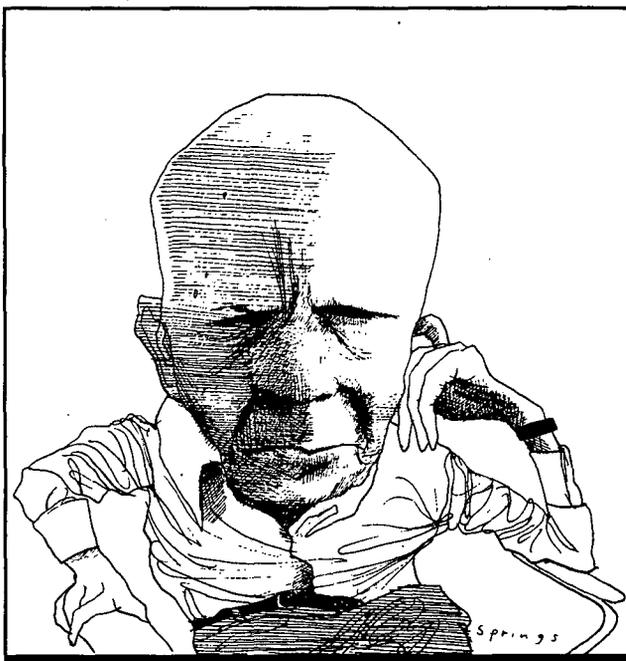
Percy had been firmly agnostic since his late childhood. In Birmingham, his parents belonged to a small congregation of progressive Presbyterians whose

debate with a fellow patient who happened to be a well-informed Catholic, he discovered Marcel and Maritain. He read Aquinas.

At this time in his life, though, Percy was still more of a woolgathering misfit than a serious thinker. When Uncle Will died of a stroke in January 1942, he left a substantial fortune to his three adopted sons. Roy took over the Percy plantation in Greenville, and Phin eventually took up a career in law. (Both the younger brothers served with distinction in the Second World War, which left Walker feeling all the more useless during the stay at Saranac.) It would not have been inconsistent with Walker’s depressive temperament if he had taken his inheritance and settled into the life of a genteel bum.

His depression, with the attendant self-disgust, dogged him most of his life, and Percy’s keen interest in bourbon would have turned into a problem were it not for the moderation imposed on him by chronic diverticulosis. In a letter to

Shelby Foote, written when he was in his early sixties, Percy took exception to his friend Robert Coles’s portrait *Walker Percy: An American Search* (1978), which Percy appreciated but thought too generous. “What little I accomplish,” he wrote, “seems to get accomplished through a peculiar dialectic of laziness, malice and self-centeredness.”



But that is to ignore the immeasurable influence of Mary Bernice (Bunt) Townsend, whom Percy married in 1946, a personal triumph related by Tolson with tenderness and humor. Bunt and Walker took religious instruction together, and were received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1947. In 1948

they settled in the town of Covington (“This is the nonplace for me!” Percy exclaimed when he first saw the town), near the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, across from New Orleans.

Once settled, Percy was certain he wanted to write, and he had found a theme, which Tolson identifies as “the question of why man feels so sad in the twentieth century.” Percy’s answer—which he would compose in several

“diluted religiosity” was taken up with ethics and social action more than with mystery and belief. Uncle Will, the spiritual loner, was himself a lapsed Catholic, without formal religion. Young Percy, a voracious reader, embraced the scientism of Julian Huxley and H.G. Wells.

In Saranac, however, his confidence in science started crumbling, as he waded into extensive readings of Dostoevsky and Camus, Jaspers and Heidegger. He read deeply in Kierkegaard, and in spirit-

(continued on page 69)

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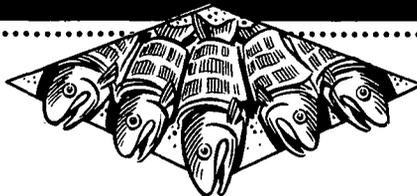
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### Washington Post

The first balmy paragraph of what the editors of the incomparable *Post* would like to call a news story:

Marshall Hull was too far away from the Capitol grounds yesterday to see Bill Clinton place his hand on the bible and recite the 42-word presidential oath. But from his wheelchair on Pennsylvania Avenue NW, the 52-year-old Hull, who has cerebral palsy, could hear Clinton from a giant, cone-shaped speaker strapped to a light pole—and his eyes filled with tears.

"Bill Clinton, president now. Is he? Is he?" Hull asked.

Yes, finally, he is.

[January 21, 1993]

### Newsweek

Another black eye for Eurocentrism, thanks to the spreading enlightenment of multicultural audacity:

... to anthropologists, the folks who study manners and mores on faraway shores, until recently it wasn't at all clear that falling in love is a global foible. To them, love seemed a mainly Western thing, an emotion too complex for less sophisticated cultures to grasp. The assumption was that to be moonstruck, you had to have a few centuries of romantic art and literature behind you, plus the leisure of romantic dalliances.

Now it appears that was a strictly Eurocentric view. Over the past few years researchers have been tuning in love's old, sweet song in remote hamlets and time zones. They are encountering it even in so-called primitive societies where prearranged marriage is the rule. One far-ranging 1992 study reported finding evidence of the phenomenon in as many as 147 of 166 different cultures. Its absence in the other 19, say study authors William Jankowiak of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and Edward Fischer of Tulane University, probably reflects a deficiency of their study methods, not of local ardor.

[January 18, 1993]

### New York Post

The fey Cindy Adams finds the next Peggy Noonan hyperventilating under a palm at the Beverly Hilton:

Susan Sarandon of "Lorenzo's Oil," known for her political roles as well as her movie roles: "I feel passionately about feeling passionately. More and more, as things get demeaned and deadened, I feel that political commitment is what can save us all."

*Bush could've used her as his speechwriter.*

[December 17, 1992]

### Toledo Blade

Ghastly new perversities being practiced in progressive Toledo and soon to spread to other unchaste regions where unheard of diseases and calamities are as sure to follow as Gore follows Clinton:

As 1993 dawned around the world, circles of dancers moved gently to the strains of ancient religious chants, expressing humanity's deepest desires to peace.

The movements they performed have come to be known as the Dances of Universal Peace, a collection of simple folk dances combined with the singing of sacred phrases from various world religions.

Developed by the late Sufi mystic and teacher Samuel Lewis in the 1960s, the dances are now performed regularly in the Toledo area. . . . Sister Mary Frances Uicker, a Detroit music therapist who leads a monthly group at The Barn, 529 Stewart Rd., Monroe, said Mr. Lewis referred to the dances as movements that taught people how to move peacefully with one another.

"Our physical movements relate to all the ways we need to interact with one another in terms of peacemaking in a more global sense," she explained.

"That's why we're always in a circle. There is no hierarchy and no domination of one by another. It's being part of a whole and breaking off for the individual experience and then coming back into the whole. It's breaking into partnerships, then breaking off and receiving a new partner. You bond with people, let go, form new bonds, receive and welcome new experiences, and reverence experience."

[January 2, 1993]

### Boston Sunday Globe

How to make friends and influence the people of South Los Angeles—as reported in faraway Boston:

Seven months ago Steve Lim stood in the New Star Market in blazing South Los Angeles and encouraged his customers to loot the store.

"Take what you need, take what you need," he remembers telling them. "Just don't burn it. Please don't burn it down."

They didn't.

While six Korean-owned markets within a one-mile radius were put to the torch, the New Star Market survived. It is a rarity in its mostly black and Latino neighborhood: A store owned by outsiders that has cultivated relations with the community.

[December 20, 1992]

### Harvard Crimson

In the student paper of a once distinguished university, more puerile patter from another of the student body's ponderous mediocrities:

I have a confession to make. I'm in love. But the object of my devotion is pledged to another. In fact, she's been married for nearly 20 years. My prospects don't look good.

Her husband, you see, is the next president of the United States.

I'm in love with Hillary Clinton, fortysomething wife of Bill and soon to be First Lady.

Don't get me wrong—I realize the problems. She'll be in Washington; I'm in Cambridge. She's Protestant; I'm Jewish. She hates Tammy Wynette; I like her.

But in spite of these admittedly daunting obstacles, I plan to proceed. . . . My friends tell me I'm crazy. "You're crazy," they tell me. "You're writing a thesis. You won't have any time for her." . . .

I hope I'm making myself clear. This is more than just another Harvard guy hitting on another Wellesley (class of '69) woman. I've finally found that ideal female, that perfect combination of brains and beauty, warmth and wisdom, legs and leftism. So she's married. Details, details. He travels a lot on business. . . .

[November 17, 1992]