

Victim of the Sexual Revolution

Terry Southern's telling trip from hipster to has-been

By Nick Gillespie

Just how cool was the writer Terry Southern in the 1960s? That's him on the cover of *Sgt. Peppers*, for God's sake, sporting Italian shades and flanked by the likes of Lenny Bruce, Marlon Brando, and W.C. Fields. As journalist Lee Hill makes clear in his engaging and competent biography, *A Grand Guy: The Art and Life of Terry Southern* (HarperCollins), the '60s were relentlessly good to Southern, best known today for his screenwriting work on *Dr. Strangelove*, *Easy Rider*, and other signature films of the decade.

His success was a long time coming. After serving in Europe during World War II, Southern developed a minor reputation in the '50s as an occasional contributor to acclaimed small mags such as *Paris Review* and the *Evergreen Review*, as the author of the wicked novel *Flash and Filigree* (think Nathanael West

tempting to say that he was *the* dominant American writer of the decade. Certainly no other author playing at what Southern sarcastically referred to as the "Quality Lit Game" managed to have more simultaneous critical and commercial success in fiction, journalism, and, above all, screenwriting.

The '60s saw the American publication of *The Magic Christian*, which had appeared earlier in England to rave reviews; the above-ground re-release of *Candy*, the smart and smutty update of *Candide* that went on to become a massive bestseller and cultural touchstone; and highly regarded reportorial forays for *Esquire* and other glossies. (His "Twirling at Ole Miss," an absurdist account of campus life at the University of Mississippi, remains one of the seminal texts of what later came to be lionized as the New Journalism.) As the cowriter of

Then it was essentially all over for Southern, his success ending as abruptly and definitively as the race to put a man on the moon. Though he would live for another quarter-century, dying from respiratory ailments in 1995 at the age of 71, he would never again come remotely close to the success—or cultural relevance—he enjoyed during the '60s.

As sympathetically depicted by Hill, those final years were painful, steeped in humiliation and desperation. They also present a literary mystery: What could have possibly happened to Southern's estimable talent? In different ways, Hill's book and a wide-ranging and uneven collection of Southern's writing, *Now Dig This* (Grove Press), edited by Southern's son Nile and Josh Alan Friedman (the son of Southern's fellow "black humorist" Bruce Jay Friedman), provide intriguing answers to that depressing question.

Southern spent the last two-and-a-half decades of his life writing self-parodic drivel for *National Lampoon* (*Now Dig This* includes several examples, including a once-famous but poorly aged bit about necrophiliac Vietnam vets); failing miserably as a writer for *Saturday Night Live* ("the worst [job] I've ever had," he said of the experience); and pursuing unlikely film projects (including a doomed adaptation of his friend William Burroughs' memoir *Junky* involving *Easy Rider* partner Dennis Hopper).

The only large projects Southern managed to complete during his last 25 years were the execrable 1988 movie *The Telephone*, which was written with the musician Harry Nilsson and starred Whoopi Goldberg as a crazed actress, and the maudlin 1991 autobiographical novel, *Texas Summer*.

So what happened? Southern was undone by a number of factors: His fondness for booze started to catch up with him. He managed his money poorly

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in an L.A. plastic surgery office) and, most notably, as the coauthor of *Candy*, a notoriously banned "db" (dirty book) published by Maurice Girodias' legendary Olympia Press (the same Parisian house that originally put *Lolita* and *Naked Lunch* into print).

It was only in the '60s that Southern, already approaching middle age in a decade that fetishized youth, fully came into his own as a countercultural hipster. By penning darkly subversive novels such as *The Magic Christian* and screenplays for films such as *Dr. Strangelove*, he helped to create an America energized by newfound sexual liberation, urbane coolness, and casual iconoclasm. Indeed, though he is largely ignored today, it is

films such as *Dr. Strangelove*, *The Loved One*, *Barbarella*, and *Easy Rider*, Southern seemed to be at Ground Zero of almost everything that was happening.

Though the film versions of *Candy* and *The Magic Christian* were massive flops, they were the sort of star-studded failures—each featured appearances by the likes of Marlon Brando, Ringo Starr, Richard Burton, Peter Sellers, James Coburn, Anita Pallenberg, Roman Polanski, and Raquel Welch—that bolstered Southern's reputation. He closed out the decade with the archly decadent novel *Blue Movie*, which chronicles a legitimate film director's attempt to make a porno flick with A-list stars and top-rate production values.



and found himself in chronic trouble with the Internal Revenue Service. The money problems in turn encouraged him to make bad choices in pursuit of cash.

His abiding interest in film robbed him of his creative independence. In an early '60s essay in *The Nation* included in *Now Dig This*, he contends that "it is not possible for a book to compete, aesthetically, psychologically, or in any other way, with a film." But film is inherently collaborative, artistically and especially financially, and Southern had bad instincts when it came to picking projects and partners that would pay off. Even as movie deal after movie deal fell through, he didn't have the discipline or confidence to write novels over which he would have exercised something like complete control.

As important, Southern's predilection for metafictional conceits fell out of literary favor; as Robert Rebein argues in his new study, *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists*, the postmodern irony that infuses books like *Candy* and *The Magic Christian* was "absorbed" into a "new

realism that is more or less traditional in its handling of character, reportorial in its depiction of milieu and time, but... [also] self-conscious about language and the limits of mimesis."

Most profoundly, Southern became a victim of the cultural revolution he helped instigate. One of his signature flourishes was the shocking sexual innuendo, and he never tired of it, even after America ceased to be scandalized, or even titillated, by such antics. It may have been risqué to name the president Merkin Muffley in 1964's *Dr. Strangelove*, but by the end of the decade, even the premise of *Blue Movie* was bordering on passé.

Yet Southern kept at it, with increasingly puerile and dated results. In the end, he had the rotten luck to outlive, but never quite outgrow, the sexual revolution he helped inspire. ♦

Nick Gillespie (gillespie@reason.com) is REASON's editor-in-chief. A version of this appeared in the July 1 edition of the Washington Post's *Book World*.

of the U.S. population, Indians own nearly 5 percent of the United States"?

Osborn fails to mention that other American Indian nations have not been able to free themselves of the control of the U.S. Department of the Interior, which not only determines how and when those lands can be used, but also restricts any competition against the welfare services it provides to its effectively captive audience. He notes in passing the mismanagement of Amerindian funds committed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs; he neglects, however, to add that over the past century, and especially over the past three decades, a number of Amerindian leaders have called for an end to the bureau, and increased

**Most disturbing in
The Wild Frontier is a
lack of any analytical
context for the
gruesome and detailed
body count William
Osborn provides.**

opportunities for privatization, with little success.

Thanks to the financial bumbling of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the relationship between the United States and native nations remains a pressing issue. Less known, but perhaps even more compelling, is the uninterrupted story of violence, coercion, and force in U.S.-American Indian affairs, on both sides. An honest account of the so-called American-Indian War would interrogate the power struggles behind the mechanisms of government and continue this investigation through the present day.

Perhaps some persistent investigator will even get to complete an interview with Bruce Babbitt before the final word on the issue is written. ♦

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The Orange Revolution

How "nut country" conquered America

By Brian Doherty

For such a perfect place, Southern California's Orange County breeds a lot of dissatisfaction. The sprawling county located between San Diego and Los Angeles seemed so quintessentially American that Walt Disney chose it as the home for Disneyland. The weather is nearly ideal, if sun, sea breezes, eternal blue skies, and year-round mild temperatures are your bag. It's a land of fruit groves, gorgeous beaches, and tract houses in planned suburbs carved out of rolling hills.

Yet this prosperous and Edenic scene was the breeding ground for a radical '60s counterculture that indelibly stamped America. It was home to a conspiracy of militant malcontents who, while never representing a majority of Americans'

concerns, raised such a well-organized fuss that they took over a major political party. American politics and culture would never be the same.

This counterculture wasn't the one

Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right, by Lisa McGirr, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 395 pages, \$31.95

exemplified by those loud, dirty kids from Northern California, who made such a splash with their sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Orange County's was a suburban counterculture of housewives, engineers, dentists, businessmen, and veterans who embraced a hardcore conservatism that

combined libertarian disdain for centralized state power with unyielding anti-communism and moral traditionalism. They may have dressed straight, but their beliefs were no closer to the American norm than Wavy Gravy's.

Orange County was the place, after all, that once boasted mass ocean baptisms by the legendary "Jesus Freak" leader Rev. Chuck; high school auditoriums filled to the rafters with thousands of kids excused from classes to attend Fred Schwartz's traveling "School of Anti-Communism" (Schwartz authored that thrift-store classic, *You Can Trust the Communists—To Be Communists!*); and school boards that banned UNICEF Halloween coin collections and any mention of the United Nations in the classroom. In 1968, *Fortune* quite casually—and not without evidence—condemned Orange County as "nut country." The combination of rabid anti-communism, staunch social conservatism, and anti-Washington sentiment placed the county's right-wingers far outside the

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