

Writer created likeable criminals

By JOSH KRAUTER
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Editor's note: In this weekly series, we explore the lives and works of notable Nebraska artists of the 20th century.

"I may be wrong - I have been wrong about so many things - but I can't recall ever hearing or knowing of a son-of-a-bitch who did not do all right for himself. I'm talking about real sons-of-bitches, understand. The Grade-A, double-distilled, steam-heated variety. You take a man like that, a son-of-a-bitch who doesn't fight it - who knows what he is and gives his all to it - and you've really got something. Rather, he's got something. He's got all the things that are held out to you as a reward for being a non-son-of-a-bitch."

- Jim Thompson, "The Nothing Man"

Jim Thompson made a living writing about and for SOB's, but he didn't get any of the rewards for not being a SOB until after his death.

Robert Polito, author of "Savage Art," a biography of Thompson, called him a "novelist of failure, not a failed novelist." This is certainly true. Thompson wrote about killers, corrupt cops, alcoholic reporters and other

assorted failures, but his novels were always sharp, clear and exciting.

His life was another story. Thompson was often overlooked, and when he died, none of his books were available in the United States.

Thompson was born in Anadarka, Okla., in 1906. His family moved back and forth from Burwell, Neb., and Oklahoma throughout his childhood.

At age 25, Thompson enrolled in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as an agriculture major. His professors were so impressed with his writing that they recommended him to Prairie Schooner Editor Lowry Wimberley. Thompson later wrote fiction and poetry for the publication, but he quit school for financial reasons.

Thompson then embarked on a series of odd jobs, including being a steppolejack, burlesque actor, professional gambler and seller of bootleg whiskey. He was working in the West Texas oil fields when he began to be published in true-crime magazines.

He moved back to Oklahoma and joined the Oklahoma Federal Writers Project in 1936, becoming head of the organization in 1939. In 1940, he resigned and spent the next 10 years working in an aircraft plant and later reporting for the New York Daily News and the Los Angeles Times Mirror. His time in New York and Los Angeles provided information for his crime novels.

State of the Arts

He published his first novel, "Now and On Earth," in 1942. His first few novels were described as "proletarian, populist" works and were more connected to his Midwest upbringing.

From his third book, "Nothing More Than Murder," to his last, "King Blood," he stuck with crime fiction.

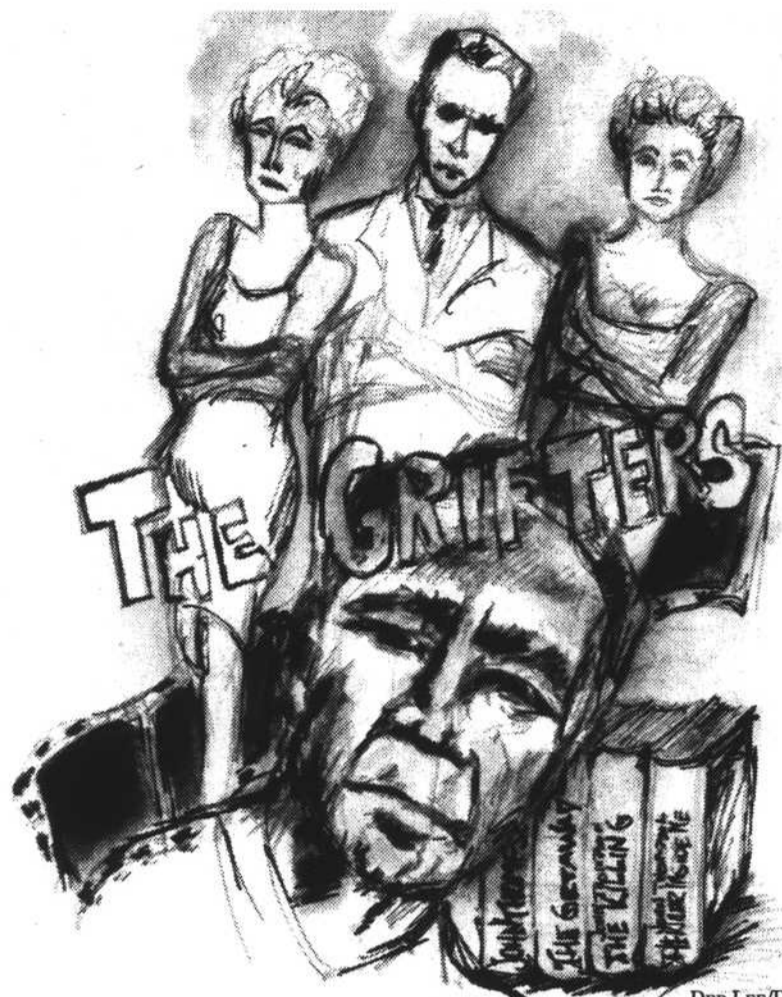
"They embraced passionately. Her body pressed against the meat cleaver, concealed inside his shirt, and Ardis shivered with delicious anticipation. Very soon now, it would all be over. That stupid ox, her husband, would be dead. He and his stupid cracks - all the dullness and boredom would be gone forever. And with the twenty thousand insurance money, ten thousand dollars double-indemnity ..."

- Jim Thompson, "Forever After"

Thompson's novels and stories owed a lot to the clichés established by crime writers before him, particularly Raymond Chandler. But Thompson's novels were more nihilistic and much darker than his peers' and influences'. He often wrote from the point of view of the criminal, giving him or her a quick-witted, likable personality, forcing the reader to identify and empathize.

Thompson wrote 12 novels between 1952 and 1954, including what most critics hail as his masterpiece, "The Killer Inside Me." Also during this time, Thompson wrote screenplays for Hollywood films, including Stanley Kubrick's "The Killing" and "Paths of Glory." Thompson had a bitter falling out with Kubrick after "Paths of Glory." Thompson claimed to have written the bulk of the screenplay, but Kubrick took more credit. The screenplay won an Oscar in 1957.

Thompson began to get bitter. His books sold 200,000 copies each in the 1950s, but he was critically shunned. Eventually his audience waned, too. He wrote for the TV series "Dr. Kildare" to make money and turned out generic work for many magazines to make ends meet.



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Thompson's drinking was getting worse, too. He had been drinking heavily since he was a child when his alcoholic grandfather would serve him drinks. Thompson had been hospitalized for alcoholism when he was only 17. By the late 1960s, Thompson's books were out of print in the United States, and he began to drink himself to death.

"I have never been able to understand the high regard that leaders of dangerous missions have for sobriety. Sober, one challenges the fates; unsober, the fates cannot be bothered with you. While the drunk wanders unharmed amid six-lane traffic, a car swerves up on the sidewalk to pick off

the sober man. While the drunk walks away from an eight-story fall, the sober man stumbles from the curve and breaks his neck. It never fails. That's the way it is, so that's the way it is."

- Jim Thompson, "The Nothing Man"

In 1977, Thompson died at the age of 71. He didn't live to see his revival.

In 1985, Vintage Crime/Black Lizard books reprinted 17 of his novels. Critics began to belatedly praise his works. Two of his novels, "The Grifters" and "After Dark, My Sweet," were made into films.

The "novelist of failure" was finally getting his shot at success, but he wasn't around to see it.

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