



Performing Arts

Authors Out Here: Fitzgerald, West, Parker, and Schulberg in Hollywood

Tom Cerasulo

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Novels and movies are so closely knit in the present-day entertainment industry that it seems strange to think of a time when the two arts were not entwined. While few would now bat an eye at the film adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," Tom Cerasulo takes us back to a time when film adaptation of literary work was still a novel idea, in an engaging look at several writers who made Hollywood the target of their literary goals. In *Authors out Here: Fitzgerald, West, Parker, and Schulberg in Hollywood*, Cerasulo eschews overly scholarly prose to get at the economic realities and individual idiosyncrasies that led these authors to write for the Hollywood movie machine.

The book is centered on Fitzgerald, and examines Dorothy Parker, Nathanael West, and Budd Schulberg largely in terms of how they related to him—particularly his infamous friendship with Parker, and how he and West differed in their approach to Hollywood. The beginnings of the literary careers of each of the four subjects are examined in what might seem to be an excess of detail, but the reader will appreciate seeing how their trajectories led from the beginning points to the period covered in this book.

Cerasulo draws liberally but with an expert eye for relevant information from various biographies of the authors. He shows how Fitzgerald and West were facing one form of desperation or another before looking to Hollywood as a means of income: the former concerned with paying medical bills for his wife's mental problems, and the latter's more or less existential dilemma concerning the nature of the art which he was complicit in creating.

The story of these writers in Hollywood plays out like a minor tragedy. They thought that they would be treated as authors; the studio executives, essentially part of a monopolistic structure, treated them as workers, expendable and interchangeable at a whim. Fitzgerald was fired from a job before his own novels began to become films in their own right. Parker and West, victims to similar indignities, were instrumental in instituting the Screen Writers Guild.

The story doesn't end with the authors being Hollywood's chattels, however. Before

West's untimely death in 1940, he wrote a highly praised novel, *Day of the Locust*, which dealt with film as a form of escapism, and those particular escapists, while Fitzgerald, in the late 1930s, was working on a novel that was going to illuminate the film industry from the inside. The authors ended up using Hollywood as source material rather than getting swallowed up by the machine.

This is author Cerasulo's first book; he teaches English and humanities at Elms College in Massachusetts. He does an excellent job of telling the story of how these authors became screenwriters, and this book is essential for anyone who is curious about the history of the novel/film partnership. (April 2010)

Dan Coffey