

Arts & Letters

FAREWELL:

A Memoir of a Texas Childhood.

By Horton Foote. Scribner. 287 pp. \$24

Foote tells his memoir of youthful days in Texas the same way he has presented the material in his many plays, movies, and other books: deliberately, in detail, and unhurriedly. The man refuses to be rushed. But, in time, one realizes that his wanderings are not without purpose, and that he has achieved a surprising economy of words.

Foote reveals the deep thrashings of sharks beneath the placid waters of his native Texas village, Wharton, the "Harrison" of his fictional works. Perhaps no other American writer so consistently depicts small-town virtues or convivialities being gnawed away by man's inherent greed or anger or foolishness or fears—yet he comes off more as a casual reporter than as one sitting in hard-eyed judgment.

Even as a boy working in his father's dry goods store, Foote had an eye for people and their conduct. He would listen to the yarns of old men in the local spit-and-whittle club: "Each of the men then began to tell their own stories of the past. The scandals, private or public, and the deaths by drowning in the river, the tales of gamblers, and drunks, and murderers, and of the ones murdered, of adulterers and adulteresses, of when this brother did that, and no it was the other brother, hour after hour." There is so much evidence in this memoir of Foote's living a life of professional observation early on—and as much a life of the mind as his cultural circumstance permitted—that one wonders why it took him so long to see himself for the writer he became rather than the actor he first aspired to be.

An editor hoping to make me a "commercial" writer at the outset of my career, 30-odd years ago, said, "Don't write like Horton Foote. He's good to read, but he won't make a quarter for himself or his publisher." Well, I gladly would have written like Horton Foote if I could have. And while his sales figures may never have rivaled those of Tom Clancy or Jackie Collins, they will not have to hold any benefits for this 83-year-old, the winner of a Pulitzer Prize and two Oscars, the author of *The Young Man from Atlanta*, *The Trip to Bountiful*, *Tender*

Mercies, *The Orphans' Home Cycle*, and many other original stage plays and screenplays, plus such screen adaptations as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The title of this memoir in no way indicates that Horton Foote is hanging up his pen. It was chosen because, in heading out to the Pasadena Playhouse at age 17 to study acting, he was bidding farewell to the old hometown—or so he thought. He moved back again after many years of meandering, though his life's work makes clear that Wharton and its people never once left his mind.

—Larry L. King

SIN IN SOFT FOCUS:

Pre-Code Hollywood.

By Mark A. Vieira.

Harry N. Abrams. 240 pp. \$39.95

PRE-CODE HOLLYWOOD:

Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930–1934.

By Thomas Doherty.

Columbia Univ. Press. 430 pp. \$49.50 cloth, \$19.50 paper

In 1999—"the summer of the dirty joke," as the *New York Times* dubbed it—65 seconds of orgy in Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* were digitally altered to satisfy the Motion Picture Association of America's rating board. In a rare show of unanimity, film critics in Los Angeles and New York condemned the board for "trampling the freedom of American filmmakers." Those critics—and members of the ratings board, too—will find valuable perspective in



two new books recalling the merry boom and dismal bust of “pre-Code Hollywood,” that all-but-unexamined period when American filmmakers operated free from official censorship.

The label “pre-Code” is something of a misnomer. The Production Code, setting rules for Hollywood’s purity, was adopted with lofty purpose in 1930—“correct entertainment raises the whole standard of a nation”—and widely flouted until 1934, when Joseph Breen became the enforcer of a new and more stringent Code.

Many films from the pre-Breen years no longer exist, at least in their original version. In order to secure reissue thereafter, films made before 1934 had to be submitted to the Code and—retroactively—to the Code’s splicer. This had irreversible results when the original negative was cut, as it often was. Among films that no longer exist in the form in which they were made, and in which they made film history, are *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *Mata Hari*, *Shanghai Express*, *King Kong*, *42nd Street*, *Frankenstein*, *Public Enemy*, *Tarzan and His Mate*, and *Animal Crackers*.

Making the pre-Code era doubly worth examining is that it coincides with the worst years of the Great Depression, a trauma that challenged the fundamental values and assumptions of American society. In his witty and weighty *Pre-Code Hollywood*, Doherty, who teaches at Brandeis University, traces Hollywood’s surprising and little-known response to the calamity. Such pictures as *Wild Boys of the Road* and *Heroes for Sale* told bitter, disillusioned stories in their titles alone, while others, such as *Gabriel over the White House*, flirted with what Doherty calls a “dictator craze.” Cinematic “insurrection”—a key word in the subtitle—would come to an end with the enforcement of the Code, as would Mae West’s suggestive sashays and any celluloid hints that the glamor of crime ended anywhere but the gutter or the hot seat.

Vieira’s *Sin in Soft Focus* details pre-Code history and its no-longer-available films in a clear and lively text that inevitably pales alongside the 275 photographs, many of them unfamiliar, all of them beautifully reproduced. They seductively evoke the period, shimmering with a black-and-white elegance so alluring, ironically, that it is easy to see what alarmed the bluestockings.

Vieira, a Los Angeles-based film historian

and photographer, writes with indignation of the mischief done by cardinals with scissors. The Code was almost entirely spearheaded by American Catholics, and the author quotes a Cleveland bishop exhorting parishioners, “Purify Hollywood or destroy Hollywood!” Vieira raises the question whether anti-Semitism underlay the Code, then lets Code czar Breen answer it. Describing Hollywood’s mogul class to a fellow Catholic, Breen said: “Ninety-five percent of the folks are Jews of an Eastern European lineage. They are, probably, the scum of the earth.”

Doherty, by contrast, defends Breen—who enforced the Code from 1934 until 1954 and wielded as much power over pictures as Louis B. Mayer or Jack Warner—as a virtuous aesthete who thought of himself as a “creative collaborator.” All he wanted for American cinema, writes Doherty, was “to imbue it with a transcendent sense of virtue and order,” and in doing so he came out “on the side of the angels.”

Really? They would strike Vieira as avenging angels, one suspects. And why do virtue and order, especially when “transcendent,” sound so like the professed goals of every reformer who ever sharpened the scissors, lit the bonfire, or—come to think of it—digitized the orgy?

—Steven Bach

THE BROKEN ESTATE: *Essays on Literature and Belief*

By James Wood. Random House. 272 pp. \$24

Wood, a young, Cambridge-educated Englishman who is now a senior editor at the *New Republic*, belongs to a critical tradition that has largely expired in the thin air of current academic practice. Learned, passionate, and judgmental, he recalls Lionel Trilling and Edmund Wilson, critics who believed that literature matters to the way we live and that its quality can be established through exegesis and argument. Wood’s grave and rather pretentious title sets the tone for this collection of 21 essays on 19th- and 20th-century writers of fiction and poetry, a span stretching from Austen and Melville to Pynchon and Updike, with a swipe at Thomas More and a wicked reduction of the critic George Steiner thrown in for good measure.

Wood is especially attracted to such writers as Melville, Gogol, Arnold, and Flaubert, who