



Warlock

Oakley Hall , Robert Stone (Introduction)

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Oakley Hall's legendary *Warlock* revisits and reworks the traditional conventions of the Western to present a raw, funny, hypnotic, ultimately devastating picture of American unreality. First published in the 1950s, at the height of the McCarthy era, *Warlock* is not only one of the most original and entertaining of modern American novels but a lasting contribution to American fiction.

"Tombstone, Arizona, during the 1880's is, in ways, our national Camelot: a never-never land where American virtues are embodied in the Earps, and the opposite evils in the Clanton gang; where the confrontation at the OK Corral takes on some of the dry purity of the Arthurian joust. Oakley Hall, in his very fine novel *Warlock* has restored to the myth of Tombstone its full, mortal, blooded humanity. Wyatt Earp is transmogrified into a gunfighter named Blaisdell who . . . is summoned to the embattled town of *Warlock* by a committee of nervous citizens expressly to be a hero, but finds that he cannot, at last, live up to his image; that there is a flaw not only in him, but also, we feel, in the entire set of assumptions that have allowed the image to exist. . . . Before the agonized epic of *Warlock* is over with--the rebellion of the proto-Wobblies working in the mines, the struggling for political control of the area, the gunfighting, mob violence, the personal crises of those in power--the collective awareness that is *Warlock* must face its own inescapable Horror: that what is called society, with its law and order, is as frail, as precarious, as flesh and can be snuffed out and assimilated back into the desert as easily as a corpse can. It is the deep sensitivity to abysses that makes *Warlock* one of our best American novels. For we are a nation that can, many of us, toss with all aplomb our candy wrapper into the Grand Canyon itself, snap a color shot and drive away; and we need voices like Oakley Hall's to remind us how far that piece of paper, still fluttering brightly behind us, has to fall." --Thomas Pynchon

Warlock Details

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From Reader Review Warlock for online ebook

Madeleine says

The venerable Thomas Pynchon wrote a laudatory back-cover blurb for *Warlock*, a book that he indirectly directed me to via his introduction to Richard Fariña's *Been Down So Long it Looks Like Up to Me*, wherein he details its prominent role in the pair's Cornell days and how their own whole sick crew adopted the vernacular of the beleaguered characters making their ways through this novel. I'm not even going to pretend like I have any business treading terrain already traversed and thoroughly owned by T. Ruggs but I was so blown away by this tome that I can't pass up an opportunity to add my surprised (and, at the time of this review's final revision process, somewhere in the hazy middle ground between wine-soaked and week-day hungover) admiration to the mix.

The Western is a genre that I find as dry and dusty as the landscape its tales so often play out against. I don't much care for the setting -- both in the geographic sense and the era itself -- nor do I have any pressing need to watch gun-battle climax after gun-battle climax (the heavy-handedness of such symbolism not even withstanding). While there are a few notable exceptions (I did love *High Noon*, which I only watched for the sake of a grade, as well as the veritable classic that is *Back to the Future III*), they are but a scant few oases in the vast wasteland of a genre that has offered little to hold my interest.

So even with Pynchon's literary ardor in mind, my interest in this book took a nosedive when I realized that it was a Western. Visions of whiskey-soaked tempers, petulant saloon girls and gun-totin' outlaws passed across my judgmental regard with the enthusiastic reception of a tumbleweed rolling along an abandoned mining town's long-forgotten roads.

Thankfully, 2013 is turning out to be the year of misguided misgivings, as various volumes have shattered my lukewarm (if that) expectations; *Warlock* proved to be no exception. It turned so many stale conventions on their heads that I had no choice but to take notice of how masterfully it asserted its claim on a bygone and often cliched era. The early-1880's peculiar zeitgeist became an effective vehicle for illustrating how times may have changed but the nature of man knows no chronological boundaries.

Pretty early in the book (like, the second page) comes a roll call of sorts introducing the cowboy outlaws comprising the San Pablo gang who are regarded, to varying degrees, as a united threat to the delicately balanced society of Warlock, a town that's a sort of reimagined Tombstone. But close on its heels (like, the next sentence) is the admission that "[t]here is no unanimity of opinion even now amongst those of us who believe them at least to be a regrettable element," allowing that only one of nearly a dozen named men is truly a menace to humanity and the rest are at the mercy of temperament, opinion and sobriety (or the lack thereof). The duality of the human animal is the most dominant force of this novel: There is no such thing as a "good" or "bad" man, just circumstances that bring out one side more than the other. Nary a character escapes a full examination of his or her integrity's strength, either through the (admittedly biased) eyes of others or by betraying the full range of their personalities in reaction to a host of dire situations, and it allows for Warlock to become populated by a hot-blooded, fully realized cast, each of whom has a specific role to serve in a unique capacity.

Because this book is also about perception and loyalty and how easily those two seemingly cut-and-dry ideals can be skewed according to circumstance and motivation, the reader is called to question even the most well-meaning of characters who let themselves fall victim to the simple human failing of being swayed by either public opinion or the limited view of a much bigger picture. One of the town's shopkeepers, for example, keeps a journal that allows for the novel's lone first-person perspective and, despite his determination to be as objective as possible, finds himself regarding other characters' well-intentioned

actions with an increasing, though reluctant, distaste because he simply doesn't know the full story: The reader knows him to be a rational man and is forced to reconcile his mistakenly waning respect for admirable characters when the shopkeeper has proven himself to be an otherwise reasonable voice. It is no fault of his own, as he is operating with insight to only a small portion of a much more complicated story, but it forces the reader to consider just how difficult it is to remain untainted by faulty information and the powerful lure of partiality.

The result of all these dueling forces, both internal and external, is that heroes of this book aren't regarded by the lowly populous as heroes for very long, as the very human compulsion to aggrandize an extraordinary man to superhuman proportions is only rivaled in its desperate intensity by the cynical satisfaction of witnessing a revered figure plummet just as swiftly to reviled depths. Not that a modern-day audience can draw any contemporary parallels to such flagrant displays of schadenfreude, eh?

David says

Feeling barfy and delirious this past weekend finally gave me the necessary downtime to finish this book—which isn't meant to imply that *Warlock* is a chore to read, but only that I had developed a sudden distaste for reading itself and preferred to while away my hours watching bad television with my hand down my pants. (By the way, from the mouthbreathing vantage of my sofa, all of you nerds mooning over Bolaño and Pynchon look like Urkel.) Anyway, even though this western novel has a lot of insightful things to say about the precariousness of law and order in civilized society, you can forget all that if you're not into intellectually redeeming qualities—because it's just a good old-fashioned matinee yarn. *Warlock* (played by Julian Sands in the film adaptation) is actually a dusty, blink-and-you-miss-it mining town in the Old West that hasn't been officially recognized as governmental entity by the Powers That Be, leaving it in a hybrid state of lawlessness and makeshift authority that doesn't seem to be working very well. (Suddenly, while typing the previous sentence, I've lost interest in writing this review—mainly because it's 4:30 AM and I'm hungry—but I want to tell you that you should read it because it's really, really good. Or don't read it. It's your life.)

Dax says

Impressive for a number of reasons. "Warlock" is an old school shootout western with a rich cast of characters. Despite the significant amount of gunfire that takes place, this is a character driven novel. As Pynchon noted in his fantastic review, Hall's novel illustrates the fragility of human society, and the quality of Hall's writing and the depth of his characters separate this novel from your standard western fare. "Warlock" is deserving of its inclusion as a Pulitzer Prize finalist.

I admit that it takes awhile for the novel to pick up steam (there are, after all, about 15-20 central characters that have to be developed), but once the stage is set, this novel is excellent. I have no idea if this is a 4 star or 5 star book, but I recommend it without hesitation.

Another note: The best character in the whole book is also the most amoral. Tom Morgan is such a rewarding character to read about and he alone might be the reason I feel the need to give this five stars.

Jim says

Nicely written but a bit drawn out; I think the book could have been 50 pages shorter and possibly been more effective. I wouldn't give Mr Hall full points for originality, however - his gunfight at the Acme corral is practically a carbon copy of the OK Corral shootout, right down to what were reported to be direct quotes from the principals involved in the latter gunfight. The Rattlesnake Canyon massacres were obviously derived from the historical Skeleton Canyon and Guadalupe Canyon massacres. I suppose that Hall's drawing so much of the story from actual events would almost justify shelving this book in the historical fiction section.

Tony says

. . . heat-hazed, blurred out of focus. That's Warlock. . . . a place where passions in all things run high, and men go armed as they wear hats against the sun, and where a large proportion of the inhabitants is of the ignorant and unwashed class, if not actual renegades from the law elsewhere. It's a place where the dust itself is a character. Where a mountain range looms off a ways, called The Dinosaurs, a constant presence. As if human struggle and the violence that men bear within them ever go extinct.

This is not just some rootin'-tootin' Western. There are twenty or more fully, if subtly, drawn characters. Like the judge:

"Some men drink to warm themselves," he said. "I drink to cool the brain. I drink to get the people out."

Or, like one of the great, complicated female characters, Kate Dollar:

She turned a little to watch him; one side of her face was rosy from the lamp and the other half in shadow, so that it looked like only half a face. "I'm leaving tomorrow," she said.

The storyline, which will keep your attention, weaves in such a way as to take in notions of government, of justice, of class struggle. Johnny Gannon alone will encounter a dozen or more existential moments of choice. Heroes and villains appear, and switch roles:

We are a race of tradition-lovers in a new land, of king-reverers in a Republic, of hero-worshippers in a society of mundane get-and-spend. It is a Country and a Time where any bank clerk or common laborer can become a famous outlaw, where an outlaw can in a very short time be sainted in song and story into a Robin Hood . . .

If you read this -- and you should read this -- I believe that you, like me, will feel an immediacy to the story. For Right and Wrong shouldn't change, should they? And yet, *what are Right and Wrong in the end, but opinion held to?*

tim says

Maybe I wasn't entirely in the mood for an existential moral western, or maybe I just don't know enough about frontier history and ensuing mythologies to completely appreciate the subtleties of reference and jumping-off framework for the larger themes at play here, but nonetheless, this is a damn fine book.

The plot is as convoluted and unguessable as good vintage noir. And almost every character is constantly shown from conflicting sides, like a Janus coin flipping in the hot, dry, dusty desert air into a blur of both evil and good. In fact, the bad guys often do good, the good guys sometimes do bad, and the top dog no longer knows his boots from his mustache.

But one thing is for certain within this large cast of characters full of cattle-rustling cowboys, self-righteous marshals, back-shooting outlaws, striking miners, apprenticed deputies, cunning gamblers, laudanum-imbibing doctors, boardinghouse angels, cowardly sheriffs, insane Apache-murdering generals, moralistic shopkeepers, whores, and every other citizen of Warlock not to be left out--they are *all* a bunch of Drama Queens, every last one of them.

Ben Loory says

every now and then while i was reading this, i'd stop and close it and sort of look at it in my hands, first front cover, then back, then top and bottom, then side and spine, trying to figure out how so many people, places, and events could be held inside it. this book is like a world. a really small world, in that it all takes place within one tiny western frontier town, but by the time it ends it's like you know every inch of the place and every corner of every townspeople's soul and understand everything about the whole entire world, except somehow it's all still a wonderful, terrible mystery. anyway, this book is amazing. 500 pages and not a word too few or too many. not a missed beat or a flubbed line. it's just perfect. if there's a reason this book isn't famouser than famous, i don't know what it is. except i suppose, the fact that it's a western. oh no, horses! run away!

Drew says

If you haven't already read Pynchon's encyclopedic blurb above, let me direct your attention to it right now.

Done? Well, let me assure you that every bold claim Pynchon makes about this book is true. And the beauty of it is that Warlock may be a novel of ideas, as he argues, but it is not *primarily* that. It's primarily a thinking man's Western, a history of authority, a gritty tale of revenge and strife. If that sounds roughly the same, there's a good reason for that: that all of the preaching or philosophizing is intricately interwoven with the story in a way that can only be described as organic, in a sharp contrast to any number of other novels that are slaves to their own philosophies.* Or another way to put it would be that with other literary novels, the story serves the philosophy, whereas in *Warlock*, the philosophy is firmly in the service of the story.

I'm shocked that none of my GR friends have read this book yet, since I think it's a natural book to encounter after one's read *Against the Day*, which is *Warlock*'s spiritual successor. Although even knowing about it

seems to require that one has read the intro to *Been Down So Long it Looks Like Up to Me*, which is where Pynchon mentions *Warlock*. Oddly, I haven't gotten to that one yet, but it'll have to happen soon, because Pynchon is 2 for 2 with 5-star recs for me.

At any rate, the aforementioned blurb was so jaw-droppingly apt that it took all the thunder out of any real review I might have written, so I'll have to be satisfied with a blanket recommendation: everybody read this!

*I've written about this in my reviews for *The Recognitions* and *Men In Space*.

Zach says

An existential western, I suppose? A story of humanity forcing some meaning into (or out of) their lives, contending all the while with the madness of crowds, political reputations, and expectations both internal and external. I can't really think of a way to explain it without sounding kind of hokey, but it doesn't come across that way in the book at all.

But anyway, it IS a western, and so you have the outlaws, and the new marshal and his friend the saloon owner, and the concerned townfolk, and a lot of showdowns. Only this book is concerned with the source of Order and Right (*Men are wild, not wicked, said Rousseau, who knew not Warlock*) and so, as it turns out, some people are more satisfied with the chief outlaw keeping order among his men than with the new marshal imposing the law. Only the marshal isn't actually the Law—he has been hired by the Citizens' Committee of shop-owners. The Law, such as it is in the unincorporated West (*Possibly she came, too, because this is the Frontier, which term I understand is a romantic one to those not there residing*), rests with a string of deputies, the last of whom is determined to make something honorable of the position. Only he used to ride with the outlaws, so no one in town trusts him. Meanwhile there's also a mining strike (again, who maintains Order, the workers or the company?), a romantic interest for the marshal who is more concerned with his ideal than with the man himself, businessmen seeking a town charter, an insane cavalry general, a drunken judge who occasionally presents the moral foundations of the book, and a woman with a mysterious past involving the marshal and the saloon owner (a strong female character from a western written more than 50 years ago!).

All of this in deceptively simple prose that manages to be ornate without stooping to floridity. Incredible.

Ah, the pure shine of a few moments of heroism, high courage and derring-do! In its light we genuflect before the Hero, we bask in the warmth of his Deeds, we tout him, shout his praises, deify him, and, in short, make of him what no mortal man could ever be. We are a race of tradition-lovers in a new land, of king-reverers in a Republic, of hero-worshipers in a society of mundane get-and-spend. It is a Country and a Time where any bank clerk or common laborer can become a famous outlaw, where an outlaw can in a very short time be sainted in song and story into a Robin Hood, where a Frontier Model Excalibur can be drawn from the block at any gunshop for twenty dollars.

Yet it is only one side of us, and we are cynical and envious too. As one half of our nature seeks to create heroes to worship, the other must ceaselessly attempt to cast them down and discover evidence of feet of clay, in order to label them as mere lucky fellows, or as villains-were-the-facts-but-known, and the eminent and great are ground between the millstones of envy, and reduced again to common size.

SCARABOOKS says

Come “Lonesome Dove”, un bel romanzo sulla Nuova Frontiera, sul West insomma e quindi sulle fondamenta degli Stati Uniti. Un libro del '58, che è, anche questo, già revisionista. Perché guarda al fenomeno storico per quello che fu e non si allinea alla mitizzazione cinematografica con i suoi manicheismi. Gli ingredienti (il pistolero, il duello, il cow boy, il saloon, la prostituta, il whisky, lo sceriffo e via dicendo) ci sono tutti, ma riportati ai loro chiaroscuri autentici e soprattutto alla loro realtà storica. Sottoscrivo in grassetto quando l'autore dice che “il compito della letteratura romanzesca è la ricerca della verità, non dei fatti”. Ed alla verità di quella storia questo romanzo dà un contributo importante.

Il West fu anche quello di una umanità che smetteva di cavalcare e tentava di strutturarsi in società ; che a un certo punto passava dalla predazione all'allevamento, all'agricoltura o come in questo caso allo sfruttamento delle miniere. E quindi dal nomadismo alla stanzialità, dalla vita nelle praterie alla città. Se Lonesome Dove raccontava di un piccolo gruppo di uomini e donne in movimento dal Texas al Montana, qui si racconta di un paese (Warlock appunto) che tenta di organizzarsi in comunità. Al centro c'è il grande tema americano (e non solo ovviamente) del confine mobile e guerreggiato tra libertà individuale e convivenza sociale. Perché non appena gli uomini si fermano più o meno stabilmente dentro a quattro mura che si affacciano su una strada si pone il problema delle regole: di chi le stabilisce e di chi ne garantisce il rispetto. In poche letture si vede così bene la fatica e la sofferenza che costa tentare di garantire sicurezza, pace sociale, giustizia ad un costo tollerabile e accettato di limitazione della libertà individuale. E quanto resistente sia la mente degli uomini e delle donne a faticare per riportare sotto un qualche controllo il calderone che gli ribolle dentro. C'è sempre qualcuno a cui sembra che farlo ribollire liberamente sia l'unico modo per affermare di esistere, per rivendicare la propria identità, il proprio orgoglio, la propria libertà di individui. Gli esiti possono essere imprevedibili. Come a Warlock.

Dunque, non certamente un romanzo solo di genere. Anche per qualità di scrittura (i dialoghi in particolare sono cesellati), scavo psicologico dei protagonisti, capacità di rendere un mondo, con tutte le sue colorazioni ambientali e sociali. Due difettucci marginali a volerli trovare ci sono. Il primo è il numero eccessivo di personaggi che restano solo abbozzati. Molti sembrano figure di cartone messe lì a riempire la scena. Il secondo è un qualche calo della tensione narrativa qui e là. Si riprende subito però e sono difetti che si possono anche accettare, perché la storia è bella, con sfumature di senso e alternative aperte di interpretazione che catturano. In ogni caso il risultato finale è più che buono.

Matthew Quann says

YEE-HAW, IT'S A LITERARY WESTERN

Warlock was as fine a book as any to read on vacation in the city in which I grew up. Within this daunting tome are the tensions between good and evil, right and wrong, the law and the lawless. It was appropriate to return to this subject matter in the place in which I first came to terms with my own understanding of justice, right, and wrong.

The other reason it is appropriate is that this book felt a lot like school, both the good and the bad.

The Good

Back in high school I remember having to slog through books that were required reading. You know them, you've probably read them, or at least had to visit a summary website to get you through the test. Books like

To Kill a Mockingbird that set my brain on a search for more great works of literature, or *Lord of the Flies* which I didn't love, but appreciated the craft and message. These books challenged me, and I was always rewarded with knowledge about literature, how to spot a well crafted novel, or just to bask in the radiant literary light of a beautifully wrought story.

Warlock, then, follows in the vein of those books: it was a challenge to read, but it was also rewarding and extremely well-written. In fact, it is my understanding that **The New York Review Books (NYRB) Classics** imprint aims to provide these sorts of experiences to an all-ages market: the joy of a really good book.

Warlock is a character study of Bud Gannon, Clay Blaisdell, The Black Rattlesnake of Warlock, and many of the other denizens of the eponymous town in the wild west. It is a snapshot of a town in an unruly time that isn't too far removed from our own history. More than any of that, *Warlock* is a meditation on justice, pride, duty, vengeance, and the price of establishing order.

In *Warlock*, men run wild, drinking whiskey, taking down those who cross them, causing mayhem, and sowing carefully crafted plans to suit their own needs. Into this town comes Clay Blaisdell, the marshal, to establish order where a group of rowdy cowboys have brought havoc. At the same time, Bud Gannon returns to town with the aim of turning over a new leaf and joining the law in Warlock. It all becomes complicated when Bud's brother, who runs with the crew of miscreants, comes against Blaisdell for murder.

The Bad

So, the only thing about that exciting sounding premise is that it takes a while to get there. Bear with me as we make another foray into my high school days. While the schoolbooks were good, there were too many good books out there for me to wait for school to serve me up something stellar. But, books were time consuming, and I wasn't quite the reader I am today. So I made a rule: I would read at least 100 pages of a book before I gave up on it. Though I've stretched that rule more in recent times, it has been a good rule of thumb that has led me to some really excellent reads.

As for *Warlock*, it took closer to 180 pages before I was really interested in what was going on. I went through a lot of confusion during the book's opening as I tried to wrap my head around the various characters, their names, nicknames, and role within the story. By the time that was all established, there's a lot of building that goes into place for the rest of the novel. Just like many books I've read in school, this stuff can be a real slog to get through, but it is often necessary for what comes after.

I'm just not entirely certain that the opening had to be so rocky. Certainly, Hall's writing, which netted him a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize in 1958, holds aloft the book, but it could have done with some trimming. The novel is divided into three books, each of which follows a particular arc but contributes to the overall arc of the novel. It really took a while to get into the moral quandaries that slowly build in this novel, and to be impressed by their climaxes as the book went on. Indeed, by the time the second book came around, I was more used to Hall's writing and better understood his aim.

Also, there happened to be a lot more shootings, drama, violence, and backstabbing. All the good stuff you'd want from this type of book.

The Ugly?

Well, there isn't much ugly to be had, but I kind of had a thing going with the headings.

So, the book ends up being quite an interesting and extensive look at the characters of *Warlock* and how the choices they make shape, bend, and break their moral fiber. Men are brought low by their pride, suffer for what is truly right, and are exalted for wrongdoings. Justice isn't always appropriate in the lawless world of

Warlock, but Gannon's pursuit of it is truly noble and endearing. The characters, after I had them all sorted, were interesting and I enjoyed having read their stories.

But, the book is a large undertaking. It moves slow as cold molasses through some points, and I can imagine that some of you will find it difficult to get into this novel. On the off-chance you do take a stab at this novel, I hope that you too will have an experience that is not unlike the good and the bad of high school reading. Some of it will be tough sledding, but there'll be something worth taking from the experience.

APPENDIX: A BRIEF NOTE ON THE NYRB CLASSICS SERIES

I picked up a few of the series over the past couple months that I intend to read over the next year or so. I'm sure many of my fellow Goodreaders will be pleased to hear that *Stoner* by John Williams will be my next NYRB target. I enjoy the concept of the series, and that it has reprinted classics which may have gone out of print or highlights books that might have otherwise been left to perish in obscurity. Though I liked *Warlock*, I'm hoping that the next few books from the series will really excite me and bring the type of joy I experienced with books like *To Kill a Mockingbird* all those years ago. If not, there's nothing wrong with reading a few classics!

Steve says

Oakley Hall died this past Monday. A friend turned me on to his "Warlock" last year, a very good read. If you are even remotely a fan of HBO's "Deadwood", you'll love this book. Here's an article from the S.F. Chronicle about Hall's life:

Oakley Hall, a prolific author and influential writing teacher best known for the novels "The Downhill Racers" and "Warlock" - and as a founder of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers - died Monday night in Nevada City. He was 87.

His death was caused by cancer and kidney disease, said his daughter, Brett Hall Jones, executive director of the Community of Writers.

Mr. Hall was one of a handful of writers who helped to define and elevate California literature in the generation after John Steinbeck.

He was the author of more than 20 works of fiction and nonfiction, including two books on the art of fiction writing and the libretto for an opera based on Wallace Stegner's "Angle of Repose." Among the many honors Mr. Hall received were lifetime achievement awards from the PEN Center USA and the Cowboy Hall of Fame.

"Oakley Hall was a master storyteller who loved the West," said California poet laureate Al Young, who has known Mr. Hall for nearly three decades.

Pulitzer Prize finalist

Mr. Hall's novel "Warlock," a finalist for the 1958 Pulitzer Prize - and the first of a trilogy - was reissued in 2005 as part of the New York Review of Books Classics series with an introduction by Robert Stone.

Set in the fictional 19th century town of Warlock, it draws on the story of the OK Corral, said Edwin Frank, editor of the series.

"Oakley effectively rediscovered the Wild West for post-World War II America - not as the heroic proving ground of the nation, but as a weird dreamworld and tragically violent masquerade," Frank said. "It's a great book, and it blazed a path for fellow writers like Thomas Pynchon and Cormac McCarthy."

Author James D. Houston, a longtime friend and instructor at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, cites Mr. Hall's 1997 novel, "Separations," as a favorite. "It is about the discovery of the Colorado River, coming down through that canyon country on rafts in the 19th century," Houston said. "It is some of the most remarkable writing about the Western landscape that you'll ever see."

Mr. Hall was born in 1920 in San Diego and grew up in that city's Mission Hills district and in Honolulu. After graduating from UC Berkeley, he joined the Marines, serving in the Pacific during World War II. After the war, Mr. Hall studied in Europe on the GI Bill and went on to earn a master's of fine arts in creative writing from the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Mr. Hall's first book, published in 1949, was "Murder City," one of several mysteries he wrote in the early years. "His novels and stories reflect the landscapes that he inhabited most of his life," said Young, "the Pacific islands of his youth, the foothills and ski slopes of the Sierra and the streets and neighborhoods of San Francisco."

The skill for taut plotting and sharp characterizations, honed by mystery writing, never left him. And in 1998 he returned to the genre with a five-part series of historical mysteries with the legendary San Francisco newsman Ambrose Bierce as protagonist. In a 2001 review of "Ambrose Bierce and the Death of Kings," then Chronicle book critic David Kipen wrote: "Oakley Hall gives a master class every time he practices his craft."

For 20 years, Mr. Hall was director of the creative writing program at UC Irvine, which quickly became one of the best in the country. Among the writers who studied at Irvine and whose careers Mr. Hall helped to launch are Richard Ford and Michael Chabon.

Founded writers' group

In 1969, Mr. Hall co-founded the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, an annual summer writers' conference in the Sierra Nevada, where emerging writers gain world-class instruction from famous authors and mingle with literary agents and publishers in a beautiful setting. Mr. Hall and his wife of 65 years, the photographer Barbara Hall, lived half of each year in Squaw Valley and half in San Francisco.

Amy Tan credits the Squaw Valley Community of Writers with guiding her from fledgling writer to published author. "Oakley was the reason that I found my confidence as a writer," said Tan, who calls herself one of his "literary offspring." And, she adds, "the Halls are a remarkable family. They are deep-hearted and stalwart, generous and kind and giving."

In January, Mr. Hall read from his most recent novel, "Love and War in California" - published last year by St. Martin's Press - at the Moffitt Library at UC Berkeley. His former student, Michael Chabon, introduced him.

"That book is a perfect bookend to his first literary novel, 'Corpus of Joe Bailey,' " Chabon said. Both books are set in San Diego in the years leading up to World War II and feature a young man with literary ambitions.

"It is so interesting to see a writer return at the end of his career to the same material he was working with in the beginning - and to see the different approach he takes," said Chabon. "He brings himself full circle."

Mr. Hall is survived by his wife; their son, Oakley Hall III; their daughters, Sands Hall, Tracy Hall and Brett

Hall Jones; and seven grandchildren.

A memorial will be held in August at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers conference; another is planned for San Francisco in autumn. In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be made to Doctors Without Borders, 333 Seventh Ave., Second Floor, New York, NY 10001-5004 or to the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, P.O. Box 1416, Nevada City CA 95959.

M.L. Rudolph says

1958. The 1881 shootout at the OK Corral.

I once lived in Arizona. I visited Tombstone and walked those mythic steps made memorable thanks to TV, movies, the generally accepted version of the settlement of the Wild West. Wyatt Earp. The tubercular Doc. The Clanton Gang.

As always, the physical reality of Tombstone and the Corral was a million times smaller than the version modeled on my imagination. Like Mount Rushmore: a miniature compared to what you expect.

Oakley Hall takes that mythic western moment and reduces it to its human elements, reduces the heroes to actors in a play not of their making, reduces every human actor to a slave of community.

Imagine the shootout as not the end of the story but the beginning. How did the showdown come about and then what did those sorry actors end up doing after those thirty seconds of gunplay? And what about the real power players, pulling the strings of those gun-toting marionettes?

Hall peoples this corner of the Wild West with characters that make you feel that if you were among them, you would have struggled to find your place. And probably with as little success as most of them had.

Just like today, we can only play the cards we're dealt, at the time they're dealt, for the stakes on offer by the other sharks at the table. We are all a bundle of strengths and weaknesses, of aces and twos, of hearts and clubs.

I don't know why this book doesn't get more attention. It's so much more than a Western. By exploring the human elements of the western myth, Hall creates a mythic tale.

Carl R. says

I don't know what took me so long to get around to this (probably) best-known of Oakley Hall's works. Maybe the title put me off because I thought I might be getting into an Ann Rice world of vampires. Not a worry. Writer Working readers know my admiration for Hall (see my obit piece, May 5, 2008), and Warlock has only increased the admiration.

The premise is pretty simple--there's a gunfight more or less modeled on the Tombstone Arizona event involving Wyatt Earp. But Hall is not writing a simple historical novel. He chooses the incident at his Acme Corral in a town named after a man they called a witch but who self-corrected to change the word to Warlock. So you have a historical event that's become an American myth peopled by legendary figures like the Earp brothers and Doc Holliday, which Oakley turns into a powerful story about mythmaking, justice, the fragility of society. Along the way, you get involved with the battle between unions and corporations as well as the why's and wherefores of government and the meaning of human existence itself.

It's just a scrawny little mining town, Warlock is, unincorporated, a place with a couple of saloons, a few whores, a few respectable businesses and no church where a few unlucky souls have wound up after misadventures elsewhere. There are a few civic-minded folks who have hopes for its future and are in a Babbit sort of mode. We find the stock western characters--gamblers, gunfighters, renegade cowhands, a cattle boss bent on running the town, a wannabe judge with a drinking problem, a virtuous young woman running a boarding house. The law-abiders and others with a stake in stability hire a gunfighter to put stop to the terror of rampaging cowhands, and things proceed from there. But not in your stock western way.

These hard-bitten people are soul-searchers, it turns out. And there's an educated storekeeper named Goodpasture who's keeping a diary which we glimpse from time to time. Even the best of these characters do ugly things from time to time. They are always worried about why they or anyone else is doing something, searching for motives, ascribing motives out of their own wishful thinking, just as we lay upon our public figures our own wishes and wants and get disappointed when they are unable to divine and carry out our aspirations.

The hired gun is named Blaisedale (Blaise for "blaze"? as you can see from Goodpasture, names mean something in this novel.) He does a great job at the Acme corral. However, much as they wanted the dead men to be dead, some begin to talk about the justice of it, whether he did it right, and for the right reasons. And they begin to fear and envy him, and they divide into camps of people who revere him and others who despise him. These camps divide and redivide like amoebas as the plot of the book proceeds, and we begin to understand that Warlock is as much about us, the public that invests its "heroes" with qualities they don't and can't possess as it is about the main characters. It's about people who hang around the mythic figures and how they try to assume roles that would have been impossible for them to imagine without them around--whether they fit the roles or not.

I could go on and on, for this is a complex book. But I'll end with a couple of passages:

"...people don't matter a damn. Men are like corn growing. The sun burns them up and the rain washes them out and the winter freezes them, and the cavalry tramps them down, but somehow they keep growing. And none of it matters a damn so long as the whisky holds out."

And

"I am the black rattlesnake of Warlock. My mother was a timber wolf and my daddy a mountain lion and I strangled them both the day I was born."

Those were the days. . .

Jim says

I've wanted to read this book since I spied Thomas Pynchon's endorsement in his introduction to Richard Farina's *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*, in which he reveals that he and Farina were fond of aping the book's peculiar dialect. "We set about getting others to read it too, and for a while had a micro-cult going," he writes. "Soon a number of us were talking in Warlock dialogue, a kind of thoughtful, stylized, Victorian Wild West diction." Pynchon's influences are encyclopaedic but this book seemed like an odd choice: a retelling of the story of Wyatt Earp versus the Clanton Gang in Tombstone, Arizona. This didn't resonate with my reading of Pynchon at all – until *Against the Day* came out.

I finally tucked into Warlock this year and finished it last night. It's an amazing work of fiction. The novel is set in Warlock but you can't really call it a town – there's no sheriff and every deputy who has pinned a star to his chest has either been run off or killed. It's a desolate, lawless outpost of humanity that wouldn't exist at all if it wasn't for the nearby mines. Every so often cattle rustlers led by a renegade named McQuown ride up from San Pablo six hours away to raise hell. When the barber is killed the citizens decide enough is enough and send for a hired gun – Clay Blaisedell – to serve as Marshall.

As good as advertised with a pair of gold handled pistols given to him by a writer of cheap Western novelettes, Blaisedell restores order to Warlock, but it's a species of order that is compromised by Blaisedell's ruthlessly short-tempered companion, Tom Morgan, and complicated by Warlock's newest deputy, John Gannon, a former member of the McQuown Gang.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. The cast of characters in what Pynchon refers to in the jacket copy as an "agonized epic" is amazing: a one-legged alcoholic judge, a laudanum-taking doctor, a bad guy (a composite of Doc Holliday and Morgan Earp, Wyatt's brother) who is a genuine sociopath, whores learning new tricks, anarchic miners, ruthless rustlers, lynch mobs out for rope justice, Apaches on the warpath, a piano player cut down in his prime, and an insane Cavalry officer who keeps the shaft of an arrow he was shot with in a leather case.

Hall's masterstroke is the presentation of Blaisedell and Gannon: men who are neither good nor evil, but whose behavior vacillates between the two. These characters are incredibly complex, which puts Warlock head and shoulders above horse operas where the sheriff wears white and the bad guys always end up on Boot Hill. William S. Burroughs, no stranger to oaters, writes: "Some's bastards, some's ain't. That's the score." Not in Warlock. This multiplicity of morals reflects the strange career of Wyatt Earp who was a champion to some and a villain to others, depending on where he was and when you happened to meet him. In other words, a true American hero.

This brings me back to Pynchon; I'd like to point out some of the aspects of Warlock that might have influenced him:

1) CAST OF THOUSANDS: Warlock, we're told, is sparsely populated, but in the course of the novel it feels like we meet every blessed citizen. When we're in the company of McQuown's gang or a congregation of striking miners, everyone is listed by name. Pynchon and Hall were both in the military and servicemen turned writers understand the lie of an intimate cast of characters who are together from boot camp until they die in each other's arms on the field of battle. The real world, especially the military, doesn't work that way. The bane of your existence during 90 days of basic training may never be seen or heard from again and the guy you served with in Japan might suddenly pop up in San Diego ten years down the road. Compression is essential in movies, which get their structure from the stage, but Pynchon sees no need for compressing characters in his sprawling novels and he seems to have gotten that from Hall. In Warlock's defense you need a big cast when dozens get planted in the ground.

2) ON-THE-NOSE NAMES: From V's Benny Profane to Against the Day's Mia Culpepper (I didn't catch the pun until I started listening to the audio book), Pynchon has never been afraid to saddle his characters with preposterous names. Some =times the names are clues, other times ciphers, and much of the time they are jokes – both of the practical and private variety. The first person we meet in Warlock is Henry Holmes Goodpasture, who minds the general store and serves as Warlock's moral compass. We meet men with colorful names like Curley Burne, Peter Bacon, Pike Skinner, and so forth. And can there be any doubt that the affections of a lady less than virtuous named Kate Dollar will come at a steep price?

3) "WARLOCK TALK": Here's a sample of the "thoughtful, stylized, Victorian Wild West diction" that fired Pynchon's imagination. "I am not going to see him choused and badgered and false-sworn and yawped at fit to puke by a one-legged old son of a bitch like you!" Warlock is full of talk of "burned up peace officers" and "San Pablo hardcases." I never thought of Pynchon as a writer who engaged in much regional (or temporal) vernacular, but it's all over Against the Day. Again, this could be the result of listening to the audio book version, but the frequency and ease with which he slips into "thoughtful, stylized, Victorian Wild West" diction is startling. Pynchon pulls it all off because he uses dialogue sparingly and his narrators frequently end up sounding like Goodpasture:

"The earth is an ugly place, senseless, brutal, cruel, and ruthlessly bent only upon the destruction of men's souls. The God of the Old Testament rules a world not worth His trouble, and He is more violent, more jealous, more terrible with the years. We are only those poor, bare, forked animals Lear saw upon this dismal heath, in pursuit of death, pursued by death."

Sounds downright Pynchonese, doesn't it? It's almost as if Hall is channeling Pynchon's Puritan forebears. I'm probably guilty of drinking the Kool-Aid of the micro-cult; nevertheless, Warlock is a fascinating read, if a bit on the long side, but worthy of your attention all the same.

Guille says

Warlock no es solo una novela del oeste y la película en ella basada no le hace justicia (El hombre de las pistolas de oro se tituló por aquí). Warlock es una novela épica y mítica donde los dioses y demonios creados por el populacho devienen en demasiado humanos, como todos los dioses, por otra parte. Los buenos no lo son tanto o no lo son o no lo han sido siempre y los malos, pues tienen sus cosas, sus formas de hacer, de pensar, con lealtades que están por encima de otras consideraciones, aunque también los hay hijos de puta, dignos seguidores de una larga saga de hijos de puta.

Si en otro sitio dije que Germinal era las uvas de la ira francesa, este otro puede ser en algunos aspectos el germinal del oeste americano: hay mineros, sindicalistas -trepas e idealistas-, también está el patrón sin entrañas, problemas laborales, huelgas. Y sí, por supuesto, también hay pistoleros, sheriffs, jugadores de cartas, vaqueros, cuatreros, diligencias, saloones, la puta, la santa, poca ley y menos justicia. Indios no, esos ya eran casi pasado en esta historia, aunque sus fantasmas todavía estén muy presentes. Pero lo que no es pasado son los temas que en este libro se tratan.

El autor parte de una sociedad en ciernes, donde confluyen multitud de personajes con estados de evolución social muy distintos y con concepciones de la justicia y del orden muy dispares. Una novela coral en la que los personajes principales, retratados maravillosamente en sus miedos, debilidades, inseguridades, aspiraciones, pecados y problemas morales y de identidad, se encuentran envueltos en una sociedad que los encumbra con la misma rapidez que los derrumba, como una gran marea atizada por vientos/rumores que nadie sabe de donde parten (interesante como el autor va intercalando en el relato del narrador las

consideraciones que uno de los comerciantes del pueblo recoge en forma de diario).

Todo eso y además contado con una intensidad que te engancha desde el comienzo y no te suelta hasta el desenlace final. Una gozada de libro.

Brian says

Is not the history of the world no more than a record of violence and death cut in stone?

There's a lot to love in *Warlock* for fans of American westward expansion, gritty Manifest Destiny narratives with well-drawn morally ambiguous characters. At every turn in the story Hall reminds the reader that frontier life was forever covered in blood and dust, and when humanity works hard to create a hero out of a human, the best that can happen is that person will fail miserably. Hall writes the story showing the worst that comes from hero worship.

Right carries the seeds of Wrong within it ... For what is Right & Wrong in the end, but opinion held to?

This novel was short-listed for the Pulitzer in 1958, and it was a Pynchon review of the book that pointed me to it. His eloquence on why this is an important novel and should be read is much better than mine, so I'll close this review by quoting a portion of his thoughts on the book:

Before the agonized epic of Warlock is over with -- the collective awareness that is Warlock must face its own inescapable Horror: that what is called society, with its law and order, is as frail, as precarious, as flesh and can be snuffed out and assimilated back into the desert as easily as a corpse can. It is the deep sensitivity to abysses that makes Warlock one of our best American novels.

For we are a nation that can, many of us, toss with all aplomb our candy wrapper into the Grand Canyon itself, snap a color shot and drive away; and we need voices like Oakley Hall's to remind us how far that piece of paper, still fluttering brightly behind us, has to fall.

Laura Pergreffi says

Amarezza, polvere e cieli tersi.

“La storia del mondo è forse qualcosa di più di una documentazione di violenza e morte scolpita nella pietra? È una cosa terribile, triste e crudele da capire, come lo è lo scoprire che l'unica giustificazione consiste nel tentativo, non nella conquista, giacché non vi è nessuna conquista; sapere che ogni giorno può nascere con auspici migliori del precedente e terminare in maniera altrettanto orribile, se non peggiore. Potranno mai placarsi le forze che conducono gli uomini alla loro fine, o seguiranno a crescere e prosperare, pur scontrandosi orribilmente tra loro, finché a placarsi non sarà l'uomo stesso? Posso guardare le fredde stelle di questo cielo nero e credere con tutto il mio cuore che lo stesso firmamento si stendeva sopra Betlemme, e che una stella simile a queste abbia scintillato in quel cielo perché il cuore degli uomini cullasse in eterno false speranze?

Questo è il cielo di Getsemani. Quello di Betlemme è svanito insieme alla sua stella.” – p. 669.

Joaco says

I can understand why this book is regarded a classic of the Western genre. It took me some time to understand this since I am a bit culturally far away from it, but when I finally did and started researching the references every piece fell into place.

Hall uses some of the most cherished characters from the American mythos retells and humanizes the events of Tombstone, Arizona. That is, the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral and the characters of Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, and Big Nose Kate, placed on the fictitious town of Warlock. This in itself was really entertaining to read, as I had always encounter the Hollywood version of the accounts.

However, the book proved to have much more depth than that. The reason for it is that Hall not only messes with the mythical Doc (Morgan), Wyatt (Blaisedell) and Kate (Miss Dollar), but also performs an open heart surgery on American society and institutions. The expansion to the west and the cowboys and gunfighters proving to love a lawless society where might is right but being honest and truthful men; the ineptitude of the military embodied in a senile General Peach which would only concern himself with the destruction of the Apache; the uncommitted attitude from law enforcement through Sheriff Keller; the exuberant power of mine owners and the other face of the coin: the helplessness of the miners; the ruminations of the judge on acceptance which led to being despised by everybody (me as a reader included) and then redeeming him through the acts of Deputy Gannon, a character that tried to do right but was unable due to the circumstances.

While doing the above, Hall provides a detailed description of society's frailty and the inner workings of human beings, never losing a bet with his descriptions that make you feel you are one more of the townsfolk.

This was an excellent book to kick start the year.

Nazzarena says

Tanto di cappello! (*pun intended*)

Talmente cliché da essere meraviglioso, questo libro è un concentrato del mito del vecchio west: sole a picco, scalpiccio di zoccoli e tintinnio di speroni, folate di polvere, porte a vento, whisky, cespuglio di salsola* che rotola su una Main Street improvvisamente deserta perché “There’s a new kid in town” e l'alba è l'ora dei duelli.

Cowboy, sceriffi, pellirosse, banditi, bari, pionieri, fuorilegge, prostitute, cavalleggeri, barbieri e pianisti che rischiano la pelle. Lupi solitari dotati di colt, chaps e bandana d’ordinanza e che sotto la scorza del duro e cattivo hanno un cuore tenero.

Questo è il vecchio west. Questa è Warlock.

Menzione d'onore per Tom Morgan.

*non sto scherzando: a un certo punto...
