

THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

True to 'True Grit'

By Carlo Rotella

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Charles Portis, a novelist from Arkansas who politely declines to promote himself or his work, is best known as the author of “True Grit.” That’s mostly because John Wayne starred in the film adaptation, winning his only best actor Oscar for it in 1969. But there are passionate readers, among them the literary maestro Jonathan Lethem, the crime writer George Pelecanos and Ron Rosenbaum, that obsessive reporter on our obsessions, who regard Portis as a major figure in his own right: possessor of an original American literary voice comparable to Mark Twain’s.

It makes a certain sense that Wayne, playing the trigger-happy drunk Rooster Cogburn, finally got his Academy Award by delivering dialogue largely borrowed from Portis — most famously this exchange before a gunfight:

Rooster: “I mean to kill you in one minute, Ned, or see you hanged in Fort Smith at Judge Parker’s convenience. Which’ll it be?”

Ned: “I call that bold talk for a one-eyed fat man.”

Rooster: "Fill your hand, you son of a bitch."

Portis's characters have a self-conscious manner, a homespun formality of speech, that comes from the effort to inhabit grandiose roles: lone avenger on a quest; nefarious outlaw; besieged moral exemplar. If that sounds like a description of Cormac McCarthy's characters, the great difference is that Portis finds comedy in the aspiration to heroism, and his characters are forever plagued by a suspicion of their own ridiculousness. You can see why Joel and Ethan Coen, having adapted McCarthy's grim "No Country for Old Men," moved on to "True Grit," which opens this month. For one thing, they like to make funny movies.

Nomoco

“True Grit” has to be the great comic Western novel, but it’s the straightest and simplest of Portis’s books. His others — “Norwood,” “The Dog of the South,” “Masters of Atlantis” and “Gringos,” none of which rest neatly in any identifiable genre — are stranger, more loosely plotted and, often, funnier.

Ray Midge in “The Dog of the South,” who like all of Portis’s narrators combines eager fulsomeness on some subjects with tetchy reserve on others, explains the necessity of his heroic quest by summarizing the crimes of his rival, Dupree: “Here he was then, cruising the deserts of Mexico in my Ford Torino with my wife and my credit cards and his black-tongued dog. He had a chow dog that went everywhere with him, to the post office and ball games, and now that red beast was making free with his lion feet on my Torino seats.” Midge’s dwelling on the dog’s feet on his car seats, rather than Dupree’s hands on his wife, exemplifies a tendency common among Portis’s narrators to plumb the intimate workings of cars, guns and other semicomprehensible devices, rather than the vagaries of fate or human nature.

There’s a special challenge in adapting a writer like Portis for the screen, because so much of his craft lies in that combination of word-music and sensibility called literary voice. Borrowing his dialogue is a start, and the Coens have done that, as well as employing voice-over passages plucked from the novel. And the dialogue they have added sounds suitably Portisesque: “He has

abandoned me to a congress of louts,” for instance, and “I am a foolish old man who has been drawn into a wild-goose chase by a harpy in trousers and a nincompoop.”

But filmmakers have other ways to mimic the effect of literary voice. Think of film noir’s use of low-key lighting to express Chandler’s dark vision of his characters’ inner lives or how different directors try to catch Philip K. Dick’s signature feeling of creeping unreality with trippy special effects or extreme close-ups. And then there’s acting style. John Wayne’s mannered presence, his declamatory line readings and mincing he-man gait, suited him well to Portis’s mock-epic tone. Similarly, the actors in the Coens’ “True Grit” communicate a winning sort of self-importance by puffing themselves up, portentously matching words to actions (“I extend my hand”) and gnawing their lines as if extracting tobacco juice from them.

Source: The Nielsen Co. and The
Census Bureau.

Portis says he’ll see the new movie, but he won’t have anything to do with publicizing it, and he has never taken any part in adapting his novels for the screen. He’s not trying to affect a reclusive

literary persona, nor does he resent the popularity of film adaptations. Rather, he seems to have the old-fashioned notion that he said what he had to say on the page.

In November, I met him in a bar beside the Arkansas River in Little Rock. Portis, a hardy-looking fellow of 76, wearing jeans and a tan Members Only jacket, seemed ill at ease — not his normal state, especially in a saloon. A veteran of the Korean War and the newspaper trade in Arkansas, New York and London, he has long enjoyed a reputation in newsrooms and barrooms as a world-class raconteur and collector of characters, and he was described by Tom Wolfe (who worked with him at The New York Herald-Tribune in the 1960s) as “the original laconic cutup,” but this time he appeared to be torn between the wish to be present and the wish to be elsewhere. It occurred to me that he did not want to turn into one of his own characters, making himself ridiculous by trying to perform the role of Big-Deal Southern Littérateur.

Portis kept his eyes on the river or the college football game on TV as he told stories about visiting the set of the first film adaptation of “True Grit.” He marveled at the way that Wayne and Robert Duvall blew up and stormed off, only to return a few hours later as if nothing had happened. But actors are like that, he supposed; always making scenes.

Sometime between the first and second beers, Portis took a five-dollar bill out of his pocket. He kept it in his hand for another half-hour as we talked, then finally dropped the bill on the table and declared that his health wasn't what it had been and he had to be getting home. I'd had a taste of his voice in person, but he had mostly withheld it. (He had stipulated that our meeting was not an interview and I could not quote him directly, and he confessed to the mutual friend who put us in touch that it pained him to impose such conditions, because he didn't want to be the kind of guy who imposes conditions.)

He has not published a book since 1991, and since then only a handful of short stories and bits of memoir. It would be a shame to hear no more from him in print. Among his many accomplishments, Portis is the author of the most perfect chapter opening I know of, in "Gringos": "You put things off and then one morning you wake up and say — today I will change the oil in my truck."

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