

THE BIG FIX -- AFTERWORD

by Roger L. Simon

"The Big Fix" was an accident.

The year was 1972. I was nearly broke, living in a rickety house in L. A.'s Echo Park District with my then-wife and two baby boys and I had just written a "serious" novel. Called "The Return," it was a grim affair about a Cuban veteran of the Bay of Pigs who, on the tenth anniversary of that failed invasion, kidnapped the son of the radical lawyer who lived across the street and then proceeded to have a nervous breakdown for the next one hundred and fifty pages.

Not surprisingly, no one wanted to publish it -- or at least no one my agent could locate on the planet Manhattan -- and as a last act of desperation I gave it personally to my old editor Alan Rinzler. He had just come West to start Straight Arrow Books, "Rolling Stone" magazine's new book publishing wing. Alan liked the novel, or claimed he did, but said he had to ask his financial guy to run his eyes over it, "just to be sure."

A few years later in Hollywood I would have known instantly what that meant, but I was gullible enough then to live with hope for a few days. The following week, Alan dashed it. We were sitting in my back yard, sharing the obligatory early-Seventies bomber, and he allowed as how things weren't going to work out for "The Return." But he really wanted me to do something for his new company. Didn't I have any ideas that were 'more "Rolling Stone"'? Given my financial status, I knew I had to come up with something fast or my brilliant literary career was going to have a quick ending. So I started to improvise. I'd recently been reading a number of Raymond Chandler and Ross MacDonald detective thrillers, half for escapism and half because I thought they were the purest aesthetic expression of California life. Maybe I should do one of those but with a new twist, a hero who was more like Alan and me, a long-haired, draft-dodging, pot-smoking, man of our crazy times. No one had done that before and it was definitely "Rolling Stone."

Perhaps it was the flattery -- who wouldn't want to see himself as a shamus? Will Bogart be playing me? -- but Alan went for it. He asked me what I wanted to call my Philip Marlowe. "Moses Wine," I shot back without thinking because that was the hero of an autobiographical novel I had recently abandoned on page forty liking nothing other than the name of the protagonist. He liked it too.

And that was that. We made a contract and I just sat down and wrote. I had no idea what I was doing. I had never plotted a mystery before and hated

doing detailed outlines. So I picked a crime based on people I knew like Abby Hoffman and placed them in a familiar situation (At that point I was walking precincts for McGovern) and off I went without any real guide posts. Three months later I had a manuscript. A month later, thanks to an old college professor of mine, Ross MacDonald read it and called it a "landmark" in detective fiction, comparing it to Chandler's "The Big Sleep." Shortly after that, Twentieth Century Fox optioned the book to be directed by that hot young director Marty Scorsese (this, of course, never happened.) The novel was translated in a dozen countries. It won prizes in the U. S. and the U. K. I was in fat city. And all by accident.

Actually, I'm being somewhat disingenuous about the outlining. I did make a few cryptic notes to myself that barely took more than a page. Sort of like dots to connect. That was my method then and I've never been able to change it. This has caused me some embarrassment over the years when, as a panelist at mystery conventions, I was asked how I wrote my outlines. I usually looked down and mumbled, hoping that no one heard me, that I really didn't do them. Fortunately, I appeared one time with Tony Hillerman, a true master of the form, who was honest enough to admit in public he didn't make outlines either. From then on, I was saved. As for the film version, "The Big Fix" took over half a decade to reach the screen. I had already written the sequel novel "Wild Turkey" which had been optioned by Warner Brothers. I wrote a script of that novel that that studio allegedly quite liked and they were about to offer it to a rising young star named Richard Dreyfuss when the head of production changed his mind at the last minute and the offer was never made. Richard and I became friends, however, and it was through his instigation and the help of the legendary film editor Verna Fields that the movie of "The Big Fix" was made at Universal. The studio did not interfere very much in the production, not the way they do now, and the film came out more or less as we designed it. Its faults and successes are pretty much ours.

The book and the film, which already had to treat the Sixties as a receding era, have several differences. The principal one is that in the film Howard Eppis (the Abby Hoffman-like character) is still alive, hiding in plain sight as an adman in an LA suburb, nostalgically singing old Movement songs by the swimming pool. The audience found this amusing, but a couple of years later I learned that it didn't work as well for Abby. I was sitting by myself in a darkened Universal screening room watching a Lubitsch film when the door cracked open. It was Abby, his wife and their child America. Although he was underground at the time, a wanted man, he had stopped by the screening room to tell me he thought his characterization in "The Big Fix" was unfair. I didn't bother to tell him how ironic I thought that was given the purpose of his clandestine visit to the studio that day -- to sell the movie rights to his own "Steal this Book."

As with many other cultural phenomena of the decade we call the Sixties (actually 1965-1975), both book and movie created a fair amount of controversy when they came out. They were loved and reviled. Some people called me a communist, others a sexist. Some said I desecrated the detective form, that Moses Wine wasn't sufficiently "hard-boiled." Others wanted to be Moses Wine. (One guy, a union organizer, even changed his life because of the book and became a private investigator. Still is.) Some preferred the movie, others thought I sold out my own novel. And so it went. All this seems quaint in the present era when the most important thing about a book is its ranking on Amazon.Com. But then a lot of things have changed -- and I hope I don't sound too curmudgeonly when I say that not all of them are for the better.

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The paperback edition of THE BIG FIX will be published by [ibooks, inc.](#) in April 2000.