

shoots up in the same Chicago neighborhood, on the same Chicago street – Division Street – as *Never Come Morning*.<sup>2</sup> The same El trains chunter overhead, the same shadows spread beneath the tracks. But in *The Man with the Golden Arm* Algren’s vision grows larger and sharper than in his previous work.

The novel tells the story of Frankie Majcinek: war veteran, petty criminal, backroom poker dealer, would-be jazz drummer, morphine addict. Really, though, the novel is about the whole neighborhood, and a wide cast of the downest and outtest down-and-out characters you’re likely to find in literature: Sophie, Sparrow, Molly Novotny, Vi, Old Stash, Zero Schwiefka, Antek the Owner, Drunkie John, Blind Pig, Louie Fomorowski, Record Head Bednar – to name some of them. Algren’s characters are – Algren’s neighborhood is – driven by what he calls the “great, secret and special American guilt of owning nothing, nothing at all, in the one land where ownership and virtue are one.”<sup>3</sup> I use the passive voice in that previous sentence because these characters don’t actively seek much of anything at all, apart, maybe, from their own obliteration.

Algren commits himself fully to the task of writing these passive, degraded American lives that have “emerged from behind its billboards” by taking their attitudes seriously on their own terms,<sup>4</sup> whether those attitudes are right, wrong, noble, or depraved – and mostly they’re wrong and depraved. That seriousness manifests as empathy, and Algren transforms his empathy into literature through prose that lends his characters’ attitudes dignity that in front of the billboards America won’t give them, nor they give themselves. Sentence by sentence, Algren insists on the poetry of these not so much forgotten as ignored lives, and in so doing he turns that poetry into a question both literary and political: where lies the moral center of a society that refuses even to look – not even in horror – at the least of its citizens?

This question and others that arise from Algren’s work and life sit at the heart of my reading and thinking and teaching and writing. Algren transformed my ideas of what literature could be, of how literature can be, and of what literature can achieve.

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### STUDS TERKEL’S *HARD TIMES: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION*

Explaining how a book redirected my work, my career, and my life is best done through stories.

My history dissertation involved nineteenth-century American urban history, the field for which I was hired by the State University of New York at Buffalo, a once-private university incorporated in a new state university, becoming the system’s

<sup>2</sup> Nelson Algren, *Never Come Morning* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1996; first published 1942).

<sup>3</sup> Nelson Algren, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, fiftieth-anniversary critical edn, ed. William J. Savage and Daniel Simon (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999; first published 1949), 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

flagship research university. The expanding History Department placed my office in an annex on the campus border. Next door was a new American Studies program grounded in cultural anthropology rather than the usual history–literature combination. There I met a remarkable cohort of graduate students, most involved in cultural/political activism, who started a radical journal of American studies. They secured funding, a printer, and an agent obtaining subscriptions from around the world before there was a first issue.

Each issue was to be thematic. The first theme was Native Americans, a defining axis of the new AMS program. To honor that focus, the Buffalo setting and, not incidentally their far-left politics, they named the journal *Red Buffalo*, and planned a second issue on oral history. (It turned out to be the last: for years, letters arrived from subscribing libraries in New Zealand asking when they'd get their remaining issues.)

As a professor connected to the program, I was asked if I couldn't write something for the issue. I didn't know much about oral history, but I was then reading, for my American History survey course, Studs Terkel's book about the Depression.<sup>1</sup> I said, Well, I'm reading *Hard Times*, it's an oral history of the Depression, so I could write a review essay about that.

I knew what I might say for an article about the 1930s – but not for an oral-history journal. I remember looking at the “blurbs” on my paperback's cover: “This is the voice of the people, it's an anthem in praise of the American Spirit, it's Carl Sandburg and the nobility of the ordinary, just listen to these voices – this is the way it really was.” I thought, that's not the book I just read, which seemed darker and more complicated. I noticed Terkel's very first line: “This is a memory book.” My review essay ended up focussing on what a “memory book” might mean – and what Terkel was saying through his oral history.

*Hard Times* is a mosaic of over 150 interviews about American lives in the 1930s, collected and mediated by Studs Terkel, a Chicago radio interviewer with a gift for careful listening. I was struck by how the book conveyed pain and lost dreams, and how people felt that *they* had failed rather than something failing them in society. My essay explored how these sensibilities informed Terkel's selection, editing, and presentation – offering oral histories as primary sources *and* as a historian's interpretation.

Side note: the *Red Buffalo* editors commissioned an introduction, which saw oral history as a way for the memories of ordinary people to guide us – a left-populist version of the paperback blurbs. The editors thought it was terrible and so the issue appeared with two intros – one as commissioned, the other their own left-theoretical hegemonic critique of false consciousness.

My review essay didn't have that tonality but it did explore the complexity of memory – given and received – as a source of history. This seemed to strike a chord with readers similarly looking beyond the romantic “blurbosphere,” and that was the beginning of oral and public history as an emerging, ongoing focus of my work, in both theory and practice. I joke with friends that a great way to get known is to write a pretty good article that nobody can find: Well, there's this interesting

<sup>1</sup> Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon, 1970).

article in *Red Buffalo*. What is *Red Buffalo*? Does anybody know where I can find *Red Buffalo*?<sup>2</sup>

A follow-up story involves Terkel himself. Ronald Grele's 1975 *Envelopes of Sound* presented a panel with several leading oral historians ... and Studs Terkel.<sup>3</sup> At one point, Terkel said something to the effect of, "Well that kid, what's his name, Buffalo Red, he made a good point." Years later, the Oral History Association honored Terkel at a 1990s annual meeting in Milwaukee, a controversial step upsetting some who felt that a best-selling popular author could not really be a legitimate, respectable oral historian. I had never met Terkel, but an elevator door opened and there he was, in his trademark knit tie and checkered shirt. I was starstruck, but managed to say, "Mr. Terkel – Great to meet you, I'm ... Buffalo Red." He broke into a grin, gave me a big hug, and we talked about the essay.

I continued to follow Studs Terkel's work, and after his 2008 death I was invited to provide a commentary for *History Workshop Journal*.<sup>4</sup> My reflections responded to a severe obituary by a *New York Times* critic offended by discovering that Terkel's oral histories embodied an interpretive point of view. I accepted the observation but reversed the conclusion, arguing that in his conducting, editing, and presenting oral history, Terkel functions as a historian like any other – as an active, shaping historical intelligence in dialogue with his sources. This is the broader point I had been exploring since *Red Buffalo*: working with and presenting oral history needs to be understood as involving, by definition, *both* documentation and historical construction.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Frisch, "Oral History and *Hard Times*: A Review Essay," *Red Buffalo: A Journal of American Studies*, 1, 2 (1972), 217–31. The essay was republished in *Oral History Reviews* in 1979, and then, more conveniently, as the first chapter in Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 5–13.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: Six Practitioners Discuss the Method, Theory, and Practice of Oral History and Oral Testimony* (Chicago: Precedent, 1975). Second edition: Ronald J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Frisch, "Studs Terkel, Historian," *History Workshop Journal*, 69, 1 (2010), 189–98.