

## The Curious Wallace Stegner Oversight

Wallace Stegner has received well-deserved attention for his nonfiction, novels and essays, but little for what could be thought of as a ground breaking 1950 biographical novel, *The Preacher and the Slave*. Truman Capote wrote the true crime novel *In Cold Blood* in 1965—he labeled it a “nonfiction novel”—and is credited with establishing the literary genre that depicts real historical figures and actual events woven together with fictitious conversations. This literary form is recognized in the writing of Hunter S. Thompson (*Hell’s Angels*, 1966), Norman Mailer (*Armies in the Night*, 1968), Tom Wolfe (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 1968), Alex Haley (*Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, 1976), and Mailer again with *Executioner’s Song* in 1979—all of them presumably following Capote’s lead.

In the recent collection of his nonfiction, *My Generation*, William Styron refers to *In Cold Blood* as Capote’s “landmark...innovative achievement.” Although literary scholars acknowledge that Capote was not the first to use the technique, he is clearly the first to be seriously recognized for nonfiction novel writing. Argentine author and journalist Rodolfo Walsh is credited for writing the first nonfiction novel, *Operación Massacre*, in 1957, nine years before *In Cold Blood*. However, written before either Walsh’s or Capote’s books and ignored as the novelized account of a true life character or event is Wallace Stegner’s *The Preacher and the Slave*, republished under the title of *Joe Hill* in 1969.

In a curious twist of literary fate, *The Preacher and the Slave* was a failure, yet, when it was reissued 19 years later under the title of *Joe Hill*, the re-named book was

well received and earned the Irving and Jean Stone Award for best biographical novel of 1969.

Joe Hill was a legendary Swedish-American immigrant, itinerant laborer and activist in the radical International Workers of the World at the height of its power in the early part of the twentieth century. Known as Wobblies, the union's members broadcast its message across America with song and literature; the union's most prolific songwriter was Joe Hill. His songs and their revolutionary message and the union's direct-action template created hostility with local governments and newspaper editors throughout the country. Hill saw his music as a weapon in a class conflict, the long war between capital and labor. He was active in free speech protests in Fresno and San Diego, California, in a strike of railroad construction workers in British Columbia, as well as fighting for six weeks in the spring of 1911 for rebel troops in the Mexican Revolution.

In 1914, Hill was arrested in Salt Lake City, Utah, for the double-murder of a grocer and his son and became another Wobbly among many who were wrongly charged, often beaten, run out of town and sometimes even lynched. Union members and others long-considered Hill's arrest a frame-up. Whether stubborn or principled to the point of recklessness, Hill stood on his right to remain silent, and, despite implausible evidence, he was convicted and in 1915, executed by a Utah firing squad. Shortly before his death, Hill wrote to a union colleague saying, "Good bye Bill [Haywood]. I will die like a true blue rebel. Don't waste any time in mourning. Organize... Could you arrange to have my body hauled to the state line to be buried? I don't want to be found dead in Utah."

The conviction remained controversial, and although Stegner wrote a 1948 *New Republic* article in which he said Hill was "probably guilty," he never sounded

convincing, recognizing that Hill was found guilty on flimsy evidence. Unknown to Stegner, the recent discovery by William M. Adler, author of a 2011 biography of Hill, persuasively maintains that he was wrongly convicted and that his death was the result of a deadly combination of factors, including Hill's desire to protect the identity of his sweetheart, the possibility that he came to believe the union could benefit from a martyr, local anti-union bias and other factors.

The most important evidence uncovered by Adler is his discovery of a 1949 letter written by the girlfriend, Hilda Erickson, in which she wrote that Hill told her that her former fiancé, Otto Appelquist—a friend of Hill's with whom he had shared a tarpaper shack on the docks of the Los Angeles Harbor—shot him. The gunshot wound was at the heart of the case; was Hill shot by the grocer's son as the prosecution argued, or, as Hill disclosed that night to his treating physician, did an unnamed rival suitor shoot him? Erickson wrote the letter to professor Aubrey Haan, who was researching a book on Hill that was never published. Haan was deceased and Adler found the letter in papers stored in the attic of Haan's daughter.

Adler's biography offers convincing evidence of the longstanding suspicion that Hill was referring to Appelquist when he was treated for the bullet wound and also details persuasive evidence that one Frank Z. Wilson is likely one of the two grocery store shooters. Wilson was a career criminal, ex-con with 16 aliases who served time in no fewer than nine states and committed a good many crimes throughout the lower 48-states. Wilson was immediately detained in the neighborhood of the killings but inexplicably released the very day of Hill's preliminary hearing.

The Union and Hill supporters long maintained Hill was railroaded due to his affiliation with the union, inequities of the Utah justice system and the state's tightly interwoven political, corporate mining and Mormon Church leadership interests. The Utah governor twice rebuffed President Woodrow Wilson's pleas for mercy, telling him to "Mind your own business, you are interfering with justice."

Stegner was a meticulous researcher; he even met with the prison warden—he had earlier dated the warden's daughter—and retraced the same steps Hill took on his walk to the firing squad. Stegner, Hann (unpublished), Joseph A. Curtis (unpublished nonfiction book) and Barrie Stavis (play) were all writing about Hill at the same time. One must wonder how is it that Stegner either didn't know about Haan's research, or, if he did, why is it that Haan's materials were not looked into when *Preacher and the Slave* was re-issued almost two decades later as *Joe Hill*. In any event, now that Joe Hill has at long last received his due, it's time for this literary oversight to be recognized and Wallace Stegner receive the attention he deserves for being the among first American novelist to fictionalize an historical event or character.