

Arts & Letters

FAREWELL:

A Memoir of a Texas Childhood.

By Horton Foote. Scribner. 287 pp. \$24

Foote tells his memoir of youthful days in Texas the same way he has presented the material in his many plays, movies, and other books: deliberately, in detail, and unhurriedly. The man refuses to be rushed. But, in time, one realizes that his wanderings are not without purpose, and that he has achieved a surprising economy of words.

Foote reveals the deep threshings of sharks beneath the placid waters of his native Texas village, Wharton, the “Harrison” of his fictional works. Perhaps no other American writer so consistently depicts small-town virtues or convivialities being gnawed away by man’s inherent greed or anger or foolishness or fears—yet he comes off more as a casual reporter than as one sitting in hard-eyed judgment.

Even as a boy working in his father’s dry goods store, Foote had an eye for people and their conduct. He would listen to the yarns of old men in the local spit-and-whittle club: “Each of the men then began to tell their own stories of the past. The scandals, private or public, and the deaths by drowning in the river, the tales of gamblers, and drunks, and murderers, and of the ones murdered, of adulterers and adulteresses, of when this brother did that, and no it was the other brother, hour after hour.” There is so much evidence in this memoir of Foote’s living a life of professional observation early on—and as much a life of the mind as his cultural circumstance permitted—that one wonders why it took him so long to see himself for the writer he became rather than the actor he first aspired to be.

An editor hoping to make me a “commercial” writer at the outset of my career, 30-odd years ago, said, “Don’t write like Horton Foote. He’s good to read, but he won’t make a quarter for himself or his publisher.” Well, I gladly would have written like Horton Foote if I could have. And while his sales figures may never have rivaled those of Tom Clancy or Jackie Collins, they will not have to hold any benefits for this 83-year-old, the winner of a Pulitzer Prize and two Oscars, the author of *The Young Man from Atlanta*, *The Trip to Bountiful*, *Tender*

Mercies, *The Orphans’ Home Cycle*, and many other original stage plays and screenplays, plus such screen adaptations as Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The title of this memoir in no way indicates that Horton Foote is hanging up his pen. It was chosen because, in heading out to the Pasadena Playhouse at age 17 to study acting, he was bidding farewell to the old hometown—or so he thought. He moved back again after many years of meandering, though his life’s work makes clear that Wharton and its people never once left his mind.

—Larry L. King

SIN IN SOFT FOCUS:

Pre-Code Hollywood.

By Mark A. Vieira.

Harry N. Abrams. 240 pp. \$39.95

PRE-CODE HOLLYWOOD:

Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930–1934.

By Thomas Doherty.

Columbia Univ. Press. 430 pp. \$49.50 cloth, \$19.50 paper

In 1999—“the summer of the dirty joke,” as the *New York Times* dubbed it—65 seconds of orgy in Stanley Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut* were digitally altered to satisfy the Motion Picture Association of America’s rating board. In a rare show of unanimity, film critics in Los Angeles and New York condemned the board for “trampling the freedom of American filmmakers.” Those critics—and members of the ratings board, too—will find valuable perspective in

