

Fire Sermon

by Chris Houglum

I wish I had time and space to tell you what there is to know about Wright Morris. He is our most gifted neglected novelist, which is a left-handed way of saying he is one of the best living. Period. This seems ample reason for booklovers to flock to libraries and bookstores in search of his work, but as yet no stampede seems forthcoming, and a number of his earlier books remain out of print. Some intelligent, responsible, and respected writers have expressed their admiration for his work (which has been in evidence for more than a quarter of a century), likewise numerous academics and informed members of the reading public. He's been written up in prominent national magazines, and a Wright Morris Reader is out which makes much of his work accessible by placing representative selections from his books in one volume. Still, his name lacks the currency of Bellow's and Roth's and Pynchon's and Kesey's, and while recognition commensurate with his achievement may at last be on its way, it seems like a long, slow ride. "Fire Sermon," his fifteenth novel, should help things along, because it is brief and beautifully crafted and deeply alive to the estrangement everywhere evidenced in America today.

"Fire Sermon," like a number of Morris's novels, seeks to dramatize the problems of the past as it is manifested in the present. One of Morris's abiding concerns has been with "the forces that both salvage human life and destroy it; the pitiless compulsion that testifies, in its appalling way, to the spirit's devious ways of survival." For Morris, who is a real master at depicting the significance of the everyday, the critical forces which shape human life are often revealed in people and events of small moment, attempting, in that elusive, ambiguous second which is the present, to reconcile that which is receding with the possibilities which seem to emerge from the same instant. "Fire Sermon" dramatizes this problem by depicting the effect of a young hippie couple on a twelve-year-old orphan, Kermit Oelsligle, and his 82-year-old grand-uncle, Floyd Warner.

Kermit, recovered from injuries sustained in the auto accident which claimed his parents, moves into Floyd's trailer home in Rubio, California, where he is expected to help out around the place, attend school, and stay out of the way. For Floyd Warner proves to be a stubborn, taciturn, invective-spewing loner with an almost chromosomal disposition to privacy, silence, and hard work. Friendless and long a widower, he is accustomed to defining the world largely on his own terms. This produces an insulation from change which seems all the more effective for being largely unconscious. An encounter with a young black employee of a Rubio supermarket is instructive:

They both watch each item as the cashier, Miss Tomlin, rings it up. The young man who puts it in the brown bags is Skip Fletcher, a basketball star at Rubio High School. The boy is afraid to look for his face in the big muff of hair. The old man says, "Put all of that in three bags, will you, boy?" Kermit has been waiting for him to say that, and now that it is said he takes a grip on the cart. The old man holds up the line to open the sack of Hershey kisses, fish one out, and fumble with the foil wrapper. He pops in into his mouth and moves toward the door. In no way whatsoever does he show the faintest inkling that he has just escaped with his life. Skip Fletcher doesn't show it either stuffing his hand into a bag, but everybody else in the market knows it, and just waits for Floyd Warner to drop dead. The boy is so sure that one day he will—if first Skip Fletcher doesn't kill him—that he has a little speech that he plans to give when they ask him what in the world happened. This speech will explain, as most Rubio people know, that the old man calls people "boy" if they are younger than he is, which includes all but four or five people in the county. He says "boy" like other people say "Hi." He doesn't mean one thing or another by it, he likes white boys just as little as black boys, and possibly even less than people in general.

If this comfortable obtuseness seems absurd and offensive, Floyd is unaware of it. Kermit learns—partly from Floyd's fragmentary conversation, partly from the correspondence of Floyd's elder sister Viola—that when younger he appears to have travelled much of the

country, tried several occupations, been something of a lady's man. His advancing years have seen the deterioration of what was once a vital and adventurous spirit to its present circumscribed orbit. And although some of the worldliness and practicality of that buried life is communicated to the impressionable, ignorant and untravelled Kermit, Floyd's horizons crowd him, and his "violent streak" is directed almost reflexively against all potential agents of transformation: revealed religion, the "young heathen" members of a local hippie colony, the mindless bureaucracy of the postal service.

But with the death of the invalid Viola, the horizons of both Floyd and Kermit are pushed back. They decide to travel east to Chapman, Nebraska in Floyd's ancient Maxwell, intending to auction off Viola's belongings and move into the abandoned family residence. For Kermit, the excursion is to be an adventure, more travelling than he's done in his short life. For Floyd, the trip is a return to his original home, to its past with its abiding hatreds (for the memory of his father, loves (for Viola, despite her lifelong religiosity) and confusions. Kermit approaches the sojourn with the unschooled and therefore supremely pragmatic outlook of the very young. Floyd, his hopes colored by his history and the sense of place which is a vital part of it, is disturbed by this freedom:

...a new, wider freeway led into the mountains, and the old man called the boy's attention to the color of the leaves. Born and raised in California, as he had been, he had little or no idea of the change of the seasons, the whiteness of winter, or what it was like to look forward to spring. It led him to ask what, if anything, he looked forward to. Just as he feared, the boy didn't know. He looked forward, that's all. If it was evening, he looked forward to morning. If it was Monday, he looked forward to Saturday, and that sort of thing. He just looked forward. Where else was there to look?

The Maxwell primed for action and the trailer house hitched to the back, the unlikely pair begin their stubborn crawl eastward, and have their first chance encounter with the hitchhiking freak couple who are to figure so prominently in later developments as they cross Nevada. Floyd passes them up, but on two later occasions they sight the same young couple, still hitchhiking and making better time than the Maxwell.

For maybe four or five seconds, it might have been longer, the old man let his foot ease up on the pedal—then he saw who they were and pushed it flat to the floor. The girl waved both her arms and threw the boy a kiss as they went by. It didn't seem to bother her at all that they didn't stop. They were going up an incline, with the road so straight he could see them in the rear-view mirror for miles, the sun gleaming on her yellow hair. How did the pair of them always end up ahead, although the old man and the boy always passed them? Where were they going? Was it some sort of game?

These questions are characteristic of much of Morris's work, particularly with regard to his preoccupation with artifacts. The Maxwell could easily have been sold by Floyd as a well-preserved antique for better than three grand, but its link with his past makes it an invaluable sentimental object for him and he proceeds to approach the future in it at little better than a crawl, effectively allowing the material, as well as psychic clutter of the past to slow him. The hitchhikers, free of such attachments, make better time, and seem happier. Kermit, who harbors a secret attachment to aspects of the life-style of the Rubio freak community, is sensitive to this contrast, and when a third encounter on the road finds Floyd amenable to picking the couple up because of the lateness of the hour, the insidious influence of an alien culture has already made the youngster receptive to the two young strangers.

Their names are Joy and Stanley, and when Floyd lets them ride in the trailer while he and Kermit split the driving, the two start copulating. Floyd catches them in the act when he makes a rest stop, and their abundant cool in the face of his rage and indignation impresses Kermit. You CAN get away with it, be open about it, put aside the climate of shame and ignorance fostered (as Stanley later points out) by non-fornicators like Floyd. Just a question of knowing who your friends are, as Kermit's two new friends put it. This is cause for wonder and an escalation of the young people's tentative attachment. It is made bald, which is to say cruelly manifest, when the four stop at a roadside diner, and Floyd is late following the young people in. They are already seated when he enters, and the disposition of circumstances at this moment, although it seems a small thing unless you really look at it, gives Floyd pause.

Uncle Floyd just stood there in the aisle, winding his watch.

"Sit down, Dad," said Stanley, but the boy knew he would not sit down, and dimly understood why. It was not because of Stanley, or because of the girl, or even whatever it was they had been doing, but that the three of them were now seated in the booth. They were all young, and he was old. They were on the one side, and he was on the other. The boy knew that on the instant. He knew it better than anything else.

Joy and Stanley ride with them into Chapman, where much of the past appears to be buried as deep as the town's cemetery population, which has come to far exceed the number of surviving citizenry. Kermit reflects on this as he watches Floyd view the town from the cemetery road:

With all of them here in the cemetery, what was there left to see? One grain elevator, two or three houses, a barn with a MAIL POUCH sign on the roof, all of it in what might have been a grove in the summer but the trees were now either dry or leafless. The old man in the road would see what he remembered, but the boy's squinting eyes saw only what was there. He didn't think it much.

Nor is the family house much, he thinks, littered as it proves to be with the derelict articles of the family's generations. No ghosts: merely clutter removed from the context which made it meaningful, the artifacts outlasting their possessors in a jumbled, idiotic benignity.

These things, many of them useless, had survived. Into his pocket the boy had slipped a coin found in the pocket of a coat, that had survived all the people that had spent or saved it since 1879. The meaning of this escaped him in a manner he found satisfying. Already he was old enough to gaze in wonder at life.

These successive apprehensions, which find only the present abiding and are free of Floyd's mythical dream-bridges of nostalgia and desire, are what serve to convince the old man and the boy of the unbridgeable rift sprung up between them—the youngster immersed in the present, the grand-uncle little more than a dream, an apparition, so wholly is he the victim of his past. Hence, when an argument between Floyd and Stanley starts afire that burns the house to the ground, it's unimportant whether Floyd upsets the lamp intentionally or not; the end result is the same—the ruin of the past's edifice, and a vacuum looming up for him as he takes off on his own in the Maxwell. "Where did he go?" Kermit asks Stanley, and Stanley rightly replies "Maybe up in smoke."

Joy ends the book by assuring Kermit of fires' capacity for purifying and transforming, and this seems one of the deepest statements of the book. Fire took Kermit from his family in a smoking auto wreck, fire releases him to himself and the moment with Floyd's departure. And the fire which destroys the house releases Floyd from his past while offering him room for the literal death which is the only comfort the present holds out for him. What else is there to look for? Where else is there to look?