

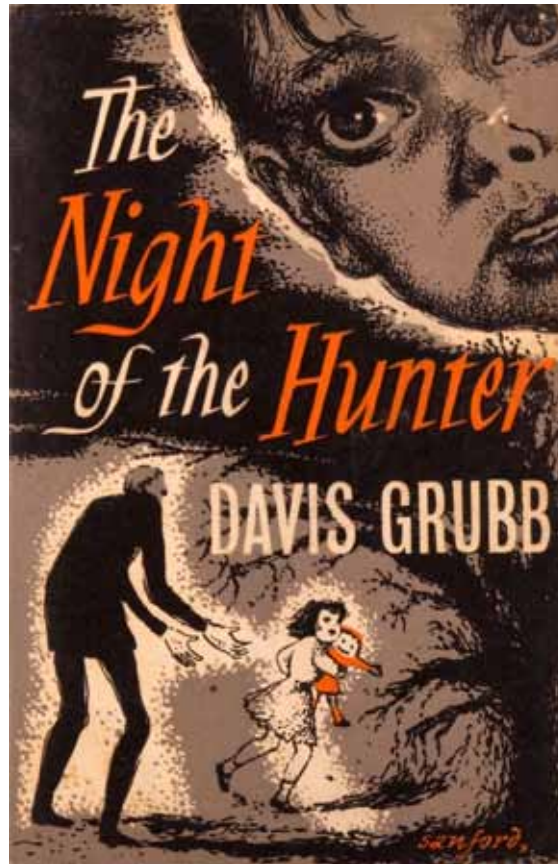
# THE LITTLE STORY OF RIGHT-HAND/LEFT-HAND

Davis Grubb, Charles Laughton, and *The Night of the Hunter*

**Jake Hinkson**

**D**avis Grubb was still an unknown copywriter living and working in Philadelphia when producer Paul Gregory came across the pre-publication galleys of Grubb's debut novel, *The Night of the Hunter*. Gregory scooped up the book for his business partner, Charles Laughton, who had been looking for a property to direct. After he read it, an excited Laughton told the producer, "You've got your finger right on my pulse. I would love to direct this."

What Laughton responded to so viscerally was Grubb's bizarre blend of Southern Gothic nightmare and children's fable. The book concerns a serial killer named Harry Powell—most often referred to simply as "Preacher"—who roams West Virginia during the Depression with LOVE and HATE tattooed on his knuckles, killing "unclean" women and pinching their money. While doing time for stealing a car, Preacher meets Ben Harper, a condemned man who has

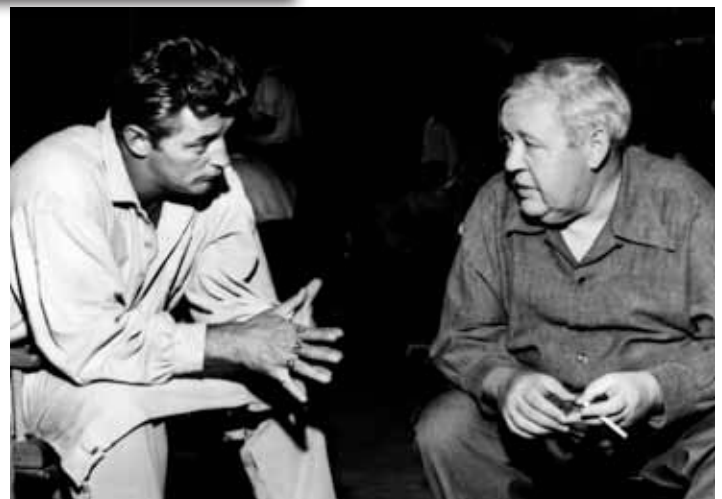


hidden \$10,000 from a bank heist. After Harper goes to the gallows, Preacher tracks down his widow, lonely Willa Harper, and her children, nine-year-old John and four-year-old Pearl. Preacher woos the grieving widow, marries her, and sets to work looking for the money, which he believes Ben Harper has entrusted with John. This leads to a battle of wills between the boy and the evil man of God.

Laughton and Gregory put together a talent-rich production team, and their adaptation of *The Night of the Hunter* is, above all, a triumph of collaboration. Laughton relied heavily on both his cinematographer, Stanley Cortez, and his art director, Hilyard Brown. He enlisted the writer James Agee to pen the screenplay. For the role of Preacher, he handpicked Robert Mitchum—an actor whose gifts were matched only by his indifference—and engaged him as perhaps no other director ever had, prompting the actor to become an active participant in the formation of scenes. In a practically unheard of



Robert Mitchum, Charles Laughton, and producer Paul Gregory, conferring for the cameras



Mitchum and Laughton collaborating on the set

gesture, Laughton even had the film's composer, Walter Schumann, on the set during filming. Perhaps no other collaborator, however, was as important to *The Night of the Hunter* as the author of the original novel.

It is taking nothing away from Laughton or his production team to say that much of what one loves about the movie has its genesis in Davis Grubb's book. Indeed, it shows how intelligent and perceptive Laughton was by his insistence that Agee hew so closely to the source material. Even the rhythms of Grubb's strange novel are echoed in the imagery of the film. Watch the scene of Preacher at the striptease, burning with righteous fury, his switchblade flicking phallically through his pocket, and then read Grubb's description:

*He would pay his money and go into a burlesque show and sit in the front row watching it all and rub the knife in his pocket with sweating fingers; seething in a quiet convulsion of outrage and nausea at all that ocean of undulating womanhood beyond the lights; his nose growing full of it: the choking miasma of girl smell and cheap perfume and stogie smoke and man smell and the breath of ten cent mountain corn liquor souring in the steamy air; and he would stumble out at last into the enchanted night, into the glitter and razzle-dazzle of the midnight April street, his whole spirit luminous with an enraptured and blessed fury at the world these whores had made.*

Laughton and his team translated not just the scene (with Agee adding the knife through the pocket bit) but also the simmering grotesquery of Grubb's West Virginian vision.

**D**AVIS ALEXANDER GRUBB was born on July 23, 1919 in Moundsville, WV, a town situated along the Ohio River and the setting for nearly all the author's work. For a time, Grubb's life seemed blessed. Since his grandfather William Davis Alexander had helped found the Mercantile Bank in Moundsville, his family was held in high regard in the community. The son of an architect father and a resolute child-welfare worker mother, Grubb was drawn at an early age to storytelling and

later claimed to have been primarily influenced by the old men of the town who sat around telling tales by the river.

There were other early, less idyllic, influences that would eventually find their way into Grubb's work. Moundsville was home to the West Virginia State Penitentiary, a hulking gray complex that Grubb passed every day on his walk to school. The daily reminder of hopeless men locked away in stone cells behind those high walls fixed an



Davis Grubb

image in the young boy's mind which would later resurface during his description of Ben Harper's imprisonment.

During this same period, Grubb's family became friendly with the evangelist Will Stidger, the famous radio preacher who, during the Depression, had a five-day-a-week broadcast. By that point, Stidger had already served as the inspiration for Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry*. Young Davis Grubb hovered under the stairs or at the back of the kitchen as the boisterous (and grossly opportunistic) preacher regaled listeners with tales of his travels. While Grubb was transfixed by Stidger's prowess as a raconteur, he also developed a distinct suspicion of organized religion and self-proclaimed men of god. "I had a chip on my shoulder about preachers," he would later recount "from childhood."

About this time, the family luck ran out. His father's business failed in the early

thirties, not long after the birth of Grubb's younger brother. The family was evicted from their home just before Christmas in 1934, a humiliation that stayed with Grubb the rest of his life. His father suffered a heart attack soon after and died. Still a teenager, Davis Grubb had seen his life come apart in the midst of the worst economic crisis in American history. His vision as a writer would be forever shaped by his perception of life's fragility.

Around the time he graduated high school and prepared to leave to study design in Philadelphia, Grubb had another pivotal experience. As his brother Louis would later tell the tale, Grubb stopped into a bar one day and sat down next to a man drinking a beer. "Dave looked over and saw that the man had LOVE tattooed on one hand, and HATE on the other. Dave was so horrified he got up and left." If this story is to be believed, then one can only assume Grubb's horror must have given way to elation when he realized what a great image the tattooed hands would make in a novel.

Grubb landed a job as a page at NBC in New York and worked for a time as a radio announcer and scriptwriter. While he'd been writing stories for a while—successfully placing pieces in *Good Housekeeping*, *Colliers*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and others—he knew he needed steady employment. He soon found his way into advertising in Philadelphia, working as both an artist and copywriter, and it was there, in a six-week fit of inspiration, that he wrote *The Night of the Hunter*.

His writing bore the marks of his literary influences: the lyrical Southern gothic of William Faulkner, the rich eye for landscape and regional detail of Rebecca West, and, perhaps most profoundly, the apocalyptic vision of poet William Blake. Yet Grubb's novel was distinctly his own creation. It combined his love of his native Ohio River region, along with his distrust of religious authority and a concern, inherited from his mother, for the well being of children. It also proved to be a good place to use those tattooed knuckles.

Grubb was stunned to learn that his unpublished manuscript had been discovered by the great Charles Laughton, of whom Grubb had long been a fan. Laughton travelled to Philadelphia, where Grubb still worked





Production photo of Mitchum as Harry Powell

his day job in advertising, and spent five days with the writer discussing the project. Laughton asked Grubb to draw sketches of characters and scenes; Grubb agreed, eventually completing 119 storyboard-like illustrations. Grubb would later argue that he was “not only the author of the novel from which the screenplay was adapted but was the actual scene designer as well.” This is a large claim, but looking at the sketches Grubb drew (some of which are collected on the recently released Criterion Collection edition of the film) it is difficult to deny that Grubb played an unusually large role in the visual conception of many scenes in the movie. For example: one of the film’s great arresting images, the ghostly vision of Willa Harper at the bottom of the Ohio River, is based on an eerily beautiful illustration by Grubb. (Grubb’s sketches were eventually purchased by director Martin Scorsese, who

has since donated them to the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences.)

So why didn’t Grubb write the screenplay? The answer is unclear. In later years, Grubb would blame himself for turning down the job. Producer Paul Gregory, in an interview with Mitchum biographer Lee

Server, remembered the writer as an unreliable eccentric, “an odd man, to say the least.” As Gregory remembered it, Grubb was incredibly difficult to talk to, a closed-mouth loner who couldn’t bring himself to leave Philadelphia.

Hiring James Agee (who’d written a draft of *The African Queen*) to adapt the screenplay seemed like a good idea, but when Agee turned in a script that was far too long, nearly twice as long as the eventual shooting script, Laughton went to work whittling it down to a manageable length. In a letter Agee would later write to Gregory arguing that Laughton should take sole screenwriting credit on the picture, he added “I fully concur with Charles’ suggestion; that in all reference to the initial novel we give maximal credit to Davis Grubb—who after all furnished much more of a movie story than



is ordinarily done by a novelist.” Tellingly, Laughton’s final script is a remarkably close adaptation of Grubb’s novel.

As Laughton’s biographer Simon Calow has noted, “It’s as if the novel had been written for Charles Laughton because it concerned everything which inspired him.” Laughton was simpatico not only with Grubb’s disdain for religious hypocrisy but also his concern for the lives of children. Both novel and film derive much of their power from being situated in the point of view of their young protagonists. Laughton said he read the novel, and envisioned the film, as a “nightmarish Mother Goose story.”

To that end, Laughton grasped that the figure of Rachel Cooper, played in the film with grit and vigor by Lillian Gish, was pivotal to the story. She is the counterbalance to Preacher, the Love that overcomes Hate. Doubtless, many filmmakers would have cut her role, or switched it to a more conventional hero, or perhaps sexed it up by making Rachel a young woman. But as Paul Gregory later told Preston Neal Jones, author of the indispensable *Heaven & Hell to Play With: The Filming of The Night of the Hunter*, Laughton felt that adapting the novel “was a marvelous opportunity to show that God’s glory was really in the little old farm woman, and not in the Bible-totin’ son of a bitch.”

Laughton’s crucial contribution to the movie, besides the sheer skill he exhibited in bringing Grubb’s vision to the screen, was to extrapolate from the material a distinctly comic element. The *grotesque*, in both literature and film, is a mishmash of horror and absurdity. The audience isn’t sure whether to cringe or laugh. To this end, Laughton and Mitchum turn Preacher into a comic ghoul (something of a staple in children’s literature). If the image of Preacher chasing the children up the stairs looks like a still from a Wile E. Coyote cartoon, it is because Laughton masterfully interpreted the scene with the absurdist flair of a child’s imagination. Mitchum, the great jazzman of cinematic

insolence, plays Preacher with all the smarmy charm of the Big Bad Wolf knocking at the door. The actor’s palpable delight in satirizing authority and piety gives the character an almost giddy quality that isn’t present in the book.

Though the filming process was largely a time of happy collaboration, everyone involved was disappointed by the reception the film received. The studio had no idea what to do with Laughton’s weird children’s nightmare and tried to sell it as a sexy thriller (because nothing says sexy like a psychopathic preacher). Audiences stayed away and critics largely ignored it. Laughton, crushed, never directed another film.

Grubb seemed to shake off the disappointment and turned again to his writing. Over the next twenty-five years, he published nine more novels (all very different, most very good), as well as numerous short stories. A few of his stories were adapted for television—for shows such as *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* and *Rod Serling’s Night Gallery*—and one novel, *Fools’ Parade*, concerning a trio of ex-convicts in Depression-era West Virginia, was made into a movie with Jimmy Stewart in 1971. Though he was never to crack into the public consciousness

in the same way again, Grubb made a living as a working writer the rest of his life.

By the end of his life, though, he was virtually forgotten, living in the Hotel Gore in Clarksburg, West Virginia, dying of lung cancer and forever clacking away on a new book. He was something of the town eccentric, a shaggy-haired philosopher dressed in a white three-piece suit, waiting impatiently for the world to catch up to his greatness. He was a sick man, however, and he spent his last year in a race to finish a final novel, *Ancient Lights*. He completed it just before his death on July 24, 1980.

Since he was an endless experimenter, Davis Grubb remains hard to pin down, but as studies of Appalachian culture have grown over the years, the reputation of this odd, idiosyncratic writer has stayed alive. It doesn’t hurt that, after its initial commercial failure, the film version of *The Night of the Hunter* has finally gained the reputation and standing it deserves. Hailed now as a masterpiece, it was placed on the National Film Registry in 1992. Critics, filmmakers, and audiences have continued to discover and rediscover this magnificent and strange little film—a testament to, among other things, the power of a strange and magnificent little book. ■

