



A BOOK vs. FILM COMPARISON

THE LOST WEEKEND

Ben Terrall

The *Lost Weekend* (1945) was a breakthrough novel for author Charles Jackson, who based protagonist Don Birnam's debilitating dipsomaniacal tendencies on his own personal history. Jackson also drew on his life experiences to portray Birnam's closeted homosexuality, though in the 1940s and 1950s, Jackson was coy about the autobiographical aspects of his hero's steady inebriation, not to mention his sexual orientation.

In a subsequent novel, *The Fall of Valor*, Jackson would tackle homoerotic material head-on but, in this book, gay themes are mostly limited to subtext. Birnam is bounced from a fraternity where he writes a mash note to an unappreciative upperclassman; later, homosexuality is referred to as "a blind alley, not shameful but useless, futile, vain, offering no attractions whatever, no hope, nowhere a chance to build."

The Lost Weekend was a runaway success, and one of the first novels to deal with the ravages of the hardcore boozehound. Within five years it had sold nearly half a million copies, including a Modern Library edition. Walter Winchell praised it as "the *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" of alcoholism. Malcolm Lowry's devastating "terminal drunk" novel *Under The Volcano* had not yet been published when Jackson's book hit the best-seller lists, and Charles Bukowski's "cult of blotto" literary personality was decades in the future.

Ironically, Jackson would later admit: "*The Lost Week-*

end was the only book, out of five books, that I wrote sober, without stimulus or sedative."

Billy Wilder's film adaptation of *The Lost Weekend* maintained enough fealty to the source material to inspire raves from Charles Jackson. Wilder's biographer Maurice Zolotow suggests that the great director was inspired to film the book as a way "to explain Raymond Chandler to himself" after the exhausting experience of dealing with the terminally self-destructive Chandler during the making of *Double Indemnity* (1944).

Wilder's co-writer Charles Brackett later claimed that the scenario was "the easiest script we wrote, thanks to the superb novel." Wilder agreed, saying that the more they took the book apart, the better it seemed. Wilder



Doris Dowling and Ray Milland in *The Lost Weekend*



An elaborate Times Square theater display for Billy Wilder's award-winning *The Lost Weekend*

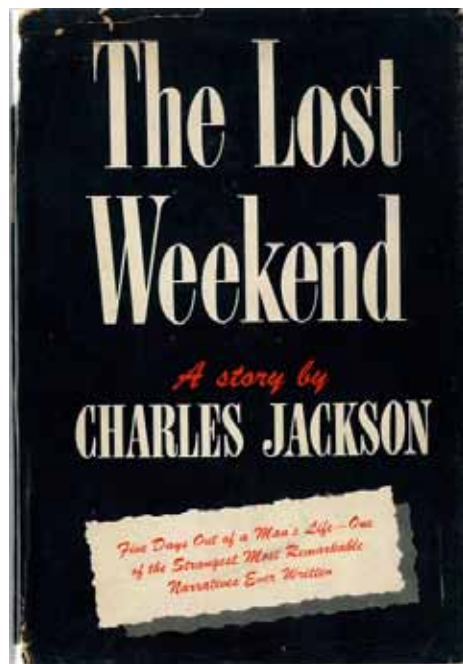
and Brackett consulted closely with Jackson, who advised the film's star Ray Milland on the finer points of a down-and-out drunkard's behavior. Milland skimped on food in preparation for the role, giving himself a haggard, beaten-down look.

Jackson was, for the most part, extremely pleased with the result of this Brackett-Wilder collaboration. He thought the script's opening was "brilliant" (zooming in on Don's apartment from blocks away, showing a liquor bottle hanging outside a window where Birnam stashed it) and that the initial meeting between Don and his love interest Helen (played by Jane Wyman) was "original and effective" (the two accidentally switch coats at the opera). "I believe it's the only movie adaptation of a novel which actually pleases the novelist," he commented after seeing the movie for the first time (many subsequent viewings followed) and he wrote a studio head: "To my dying day, I shall be enormously grateful to Paramount for handling my novel with such respect and for making such a big thing of it."

The liquor industry was less pleased, however. Several of Wilder's biographers report that gangster Frank Costello, representing distilleries concerned about negative publicity, offered to pay \$5 million to suppress the film.

Wilder told a journalist: "If they'd offered me the five million, I would have."

CHARLES JACKSON WAS probably not surprised that the novel's gay content was eliminated for Wilder's movie; certainly there is no record of any complaint on that



score in Blake Bailey's excellent, exhaustively researched biography *Farther and Wilder: The Lost Weekends and Literary Dreams of Charles Jackson*. But then again, Jackson didn't come out of the closet until the early 1960s, after divorcing his wife and moving into the Chelsea Hotel with a male lover. The one gay character in the movie (paralleling the same character from the book) is the alcoholic ward nurse Bim (played by Frank Faylen) who flirts with Don after he is committed for dry-out time.

Nor would Jackson have been shocked that his novel's prostitute would be transformed into a less-clearly hooking temptress in the movie. Played by an adorably spunky Doris Dowling, who'd had an affair with Wilder during filming (later becoming the fifth Mrs. Artie Shaw), the character Gloria is drenched in hepcat jargon, including "ridic" for "ridiculous."

Dowling's character probably would have appreciated the soundtrack music used for the film's preview screenings. That upbeat jazz, more appropriate for a screwball comedy, helped leave audiences perplexed by the film. Ultimately it was replaced by Miklos Rozsa's theremin-dominated score, which was a much more effective counterpoint to Birnam's grueling bender.

Wilder, ably assisted by ace cinematographer John F. Seitz, captured New York street scenes via a hidden camera in a vehicle that followed Ray Milland. Wilder and Seitz shot footage of Milland prowling for an open Third Avenue pawnshop and haunting Harlem sidewalks, and even gained access to Bellevue Hospital, where Milland spent a night in the psychiatric ward to get a feel for what Birnam went through. Wilder managed to finagle a permit to film in the ward, but only by submitting a completely different scene to Bellevue's administration than the one he would actually film.

Jackson's major problem with the film version of his novel was the happier ending that Billy Wilder and his co-writer Charles Brackett tacked on to appease Hays Office censors. The novel concludes with Birnam retreating into his apartment and planning his next binge. The film changes this scenario to Ray Milland pecking away at a typewriter, beginning the novel that presumably will redeem his suffering. Wilder denied that this was necessarily a happy ending, pointing out that writing often ends badly, and that there is virtually limitless potential for misery while slaving away at a typewriter. ■