

## THE CASE OF EARL THOMPSON

by Tom Page

Shunned by academic critics, the populist novelist from Wichita, Kansas, Earl Thompson, who published four novels between 1970 and 1981 (three before his death in 1978, the last posthumously), is still in print and continues to be read. Thompson was a novelist in the tradition of American naturalism who attempted to understand his world and times. In his trilogy of autobiographical novels, *A Garden of Sand*, *Tattoo*, and *The Devil to Pay*, Thompson analyzes his people and experiences from the point of view of Cat, Jack, or Jari—the various names given his central character: a thinly disguised Earl. In these novels Thompson relates the story of an incestuous relationship with his mother and his disgust of racism, homophobia, militarism, and imperialism. While *A Garden of Sand* has some rough spots, in *Tattoo*, *The Devil to Pay*, and *Caldo Largo*—the story of an alienated veteran who becomes a gun runner in the Caribbean—his novelistic skills are fully developed.

Who are Thompson's people? In an interview published in *Esquire* in 1970, Thompson said: "My persisting values are those of that class which is trapped between poverty that is a personal moral failure and the lure of material reward for citizenship they can never achieve. A class that is a persistent pain in the ass to all representative societies, whatever theirism. People who are so early frightened by violence anything short of death is a personal victory. And all have been wounded."

Jack, the protagonist of *A Garden of Sand*, is raised by his maternal grandparents in Wichita after his father's death. His grandfather is a proud, populist farmer on the outskirts of Wichita, who loses his farm in the depression of the 1930s and moves into the city. The grandfather, fiercely independent in the spirit of the old west that once prevailed in the city and the region, rails against all politicians and establishments. Not willing to humble himself by working on WPA projects, his family sinks ever lower on the social scale, to live in a plywood trailer off an alley in north Wichita, where the old man dies in the early 1950s. The grandmother takes in sewing and works odd jobs to keep the family together.

Jack's mother becomes a prostitute, and for a time, Jack, precocious and old beyond his years, enters into a sexual relationship with her. Although relatively young, she dies of leukemia during Jack's youth. He is emotionally marked by the image of his mother and himself having sex, and the women that Jack loves find him cold and insensitive. In the third novel of the trilogy, he remarks on his inability to experience love, as opposed to lust. When *A Garden of Sand* and *Tattoo* were published in 1970 and 1974 respectively, denial that incest ever occurred was the norm. Mother-son sexual relationships, if and when they happened, were strongly repressed, but Earl Thompson had the guts and the nerve to publish his account of sexual abuse at a time when discussion of such relationships was taboo.

At the age of fourteen, in the last months of WWII, Jack lies to a recruiting officer and joins the navy. He sees duty in China; the misery and violence he witnesses there will influence his later attitudes concerning racism, militarism, and imperialism. His sexual education continues in China. While a crewman on a hospital ship, he is involved in an orgy with a drunken nurse; on shore he visits prostitutes. At home again a few years later, Jack fails in marriage and work. He is involved with another woman, and his wife leaves him. He doesn't seem to fit in, although he works hard, is the judgment of one of his bosses. Unable to stand life in Wichita, Jack goes to California where he joins the Army. He falls in love with an American woman in Germany, but the affair ends when he is ordered to Korea. *Tattoo* ends with a scene from the retreat from the Yalu during the Korean War. Jack survives and is home on leave when his grandfather dies. He stays in the army and is promoted to the rank of Master Sergeant. As the youngest top sergeant in the army, Jack is courted by journalists and politicians. He realizes that it is his class, the poor, who are recruited to fight the cold war, and that America has come to depend on a military economy for its apparent prosperity. Deciding he wants an education and to become a journalist, Jack resigns from the army.

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*The Devil to Pay* finds Jack as a student journalist at the University of Missouri; he writes a story about the campus police watching for "queers" behind two-way mirrors in the men's rooms. Censured by the administration, Jack leaves the university in disgust. He pursues journalism and becomes a military analyst for a Chicago area newspaper. There he learns the cold war is taken for a patriotic given and the military-industrial complex is a sacred cow. He opens a small business in Brooklyn and writes part-time. After forty rejections, Jack's first novel is accepted for publication, mainly because his girlfriend is the wife of an editor. He is against the war in Vietnam and admires the youth who take a stand against it, but feels strangely left out of events and powerless to influence them.

According to the entry for him in *Contemporary Authors*, Earl Thompson's first novel was widely praised by critics and earned a National Book Award nomination. *Caldo Largo* received favorable reviews. Christopher Lehman-Haupt wrote that "he makes his Gulf waters seethe with wildlife, about which he has interesting lore to impart that even Melville forgot to mention." Thompson's social concerns are also noted by the same reviewer: "What saves *Caldo Largo* from being merely an exciting yarn—assuming that it has to be rescued from such a state at all—is Mr. Thompson's refreshingly skeptical view of the American system, which serves to make entirely plausible the desperate pitch of his character's behavior. It is by no means propagandistic social realism that Mr. Thompson serves up."