

In the *Hudson Review* in 1975, William H. Pritchard, in a review essay of some fourteen novels, upholds Jamesian high art and pans *Tattoo*, although he admits it is "searingly honest." A reviewer of *The Devil to Pay*, in the *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, writing in 1982, fails in any meaningful sense to understand the novel: "It is like the fictionalized diary of a writer who appears to have had as much trouble dealing with success as with failure." Actually, this review says more about the reviewer than it does about Thompson, but suggests certain conclusions about the novelist's ability as a writer: "When you realize that Cat is white, the novel makes less sense, although it makes more sense if you read *A Garden of Sand*, an earlier Thompson novel."

Meridel LeSueur places Thompson in the tradition of Dreiser and the midwestern realists. His depiction of sex, violence, and the hypocrisy of American society as he experienced it, contribute to this view. Thompson's depiction of his coming of age in a family in Wichita, Kansas, during the 1930s and 40s speaks to the experience of the generation of GIs who struggled for an education and piece of the American Dream. His realistic treatment of his times is unrelieved by the usual epiphanies that would be understood by middle-class critics. The high points of Thompson's work, as it were, are the scenes in which his grandfather rants against the government and politicians, and where Thompson himself questions post-WWII, Madison-Avenue driven America.

Several weeks ago I bought a compendium entitled *399 Kansas Characters*. It is an interesting work, but in the section, "Authors, Artists, and Composers," there is no mention of Earl Thompson. Meanwhile, it would appear that the projected *Dictionary of Midwestern Literature*, planned by the Society for the Study of Midwest Literature, will omit any mention of Earl Thompson. What accounts for this neglect? Was Thompson a Kansan? Was he an important writer? Was he a national writer? The answer to these questions has to be a "yes, but."

As a Kansas writer, Thompson represents the underclass of urban, industrial Kansas. The factories and rail yards of Kansas City, Topeka, and Wichita, and smaller cities such as Pittsburg and Salina, are the Kansas places of his trilogy. The popular image of a bucolic Kansas of kindly farmers (there are very few left), small towns, and quilting bees is totally foreign to Thompson. He never experienced the small town world of a William Allen White and never bought into its mythology. But he does write, and write well, about his Kansas.

Was Thompson an important writer? Certainly he was, but a difficult one for readers with conventional attitudes. He makes them think! Nominated for a National Book Award and selected by the Book of the Month Club, he was difficult, recognized, and popular. Was Thompson a national writer? Yes, but an American writer with an international perspective. *Tattoo* deals in large part with Asia as seen through the eyes of young Jack. As he attempts to understand its problems, he

also learns about imperialism and militarism. For example, when in Korea, Jack "watched an old woman put a dog in a sack and methodically beat it to death to make it tender enough to eat...Jack thought she could have been his grandmother, if she had been Korean."

Earl Thompson died in 1978 at the age of forty-six after publishing three distinguished novels in eight years. He was a very promising writer who died at the peak of his career. His roots were his grandfather, a Kansas populist; his experience that of contemporary urban America; his vision that of a better life for the dispossessed. Three of his novels are still in print.

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#### "PEACE IN OUR SOULS" by David Shevin

Kim and Reggie Harris. *In the Heat of the Summer* (cassette). \$10 from Folk Era, 6 South 230 Cohasset Road, Naperville, IL 60540). "Wait," you think when that music title comes up. It's a distant bell that's ringing. "Didn't Phil Ochs write a song about race issues and the Newark riot back in the sixties called 'In the Heat of the Summer'?" Sure, you're right, and here it is dramatically rendered, updated, with verses added to apply the anger in Los Angeles after the first Rodney King decision in Simi Valley.

The song was a great song back then. It still is. Kim and Reggie Harris have found a contemporary folk style rooted in the best interpretive traditions of folk music's renaissance a generation ago. Phil's sharp analysis and poignant social commentary still rings true, and the rest of the compositions—all originals by this gifted and emotive Philadelphia couple—recall sounds heard a generation ago and made new for a new history. "After the Rain," for example, works with the bright, poetic discovery of Len Chandler's lyrics. "Travellers" is an anthem worthy of Tom Paxton's best writing.

"Come Closer" is musically complex and tense, with both music and metaphor about reconciling relationships. It's the sort of tune that asks to be played repeatedly; it's both moving and fascinating in its "how do they make that change work?" beauty.

A stirring interpretation of "Wade in the Water" places the spiritual in its movement context, and harkens to the artists' first album of songs interpreting African-American history. "Kim's Song," a meditation about intimacy, is as memorable a love song as you could ask for. The album's closing tune "All My Relations," completing this engaging mix of public and personal statement, is a driving appreciation of cultures and generations. "If we pray for peace in Jerusalem, we must work for peace in our souls," the song reminds us. "Grandfathers of the four directions, we are grateful for our lives and for all our directions," says the Lakota prayer framing the song.

Folk Era distributes fairly successfully through their catalog and independent distribution systems. This is one worth tracking down.

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