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NOVELIST NELSON ALGREN, perhaps one of the most consistently underrated of major American writers, died in 1981 of a heart attack at the age of 72. Although born in Detroit, Algren* spent most of his life in Chicago, the locale of many of his works. Among the better-known books graced by the richly poetic cadences of his prose style are a collection of short stories entitled *The Neon Wilderness* (1947), the National Book Award-winning novel *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949), and *Chicago: City on the Make* (1951), a brief yet deeply insightful volume of essays and prose poems about his adopted city.

The following informal interview came to pass rather by chance on April 4, 1957 in Champaign, Illinois, as I was visiting my former roommate at the University of Illinois, journalist/lawyer and now Circuit Court Judge Warren Wolfson. Algren had just arrived from Chicago for a speaking engagement at the University that evening. The versatile Wolfson—who was also a broadcaster for the University radio station (WILL)—and I met him at the Illinois Central railroad station, where we ate a leisurely breakfast before proceeding in Wolfson's car to the English Department and various other points on campus, including the WILL studio, where Wolfson interviewed Algren on the air. I tagged along, asking Algren some questions of my own, with the results recorded here.

Interviewer: Do you agree with most critics that *The Man with the Golden Arm* is your best work?

Algren: I suppose I do—though, in lots of ways, the new one (*A Walk on the Wild Side*, 1956) has more vitality.

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*Real name: Nelson Ahlgren Abraham.

Int: Would you change anything in *The Man with the Golden Arm* if you could rewrite it?

Algren: Certain things. For one thing, I wouldn't have had Frankie Machine commit suicide. A more tragic ending would have been for him to go into isolation—cut himself off from people—as many addicts do.

Int: What did you think of the movie version of your book?

Algren: The book, after all, was a tragedy. There is no easy solution to the problems I wrote about. I didn't recognize any of the people in the movie as the people I had in the book. The names were the same, but that was all. That ending [in which Frankie kicks the habit and gets the girl] was just ridiculous, though. But then, I wrote the book before I saw Kim Novak [who played Molly]. Who knows?

Int: What did you think of the way they had Frankie Machine [played by Frank Sinatra] kick the habit?

Algren: You mean that business where Kim Novak goes around gathering up all the silverware?

Int: Yes, that part.

Algren: You know, when an addict's sick like that, he becomes almost totally helpless. He couldn't hurt anybody even if he wanted to. It's hard work for a guy like that just to tie his shoelaces. Yet they gave the impression that a sick addict becomes some sort of raving, foaming-at-the-mouth monster.

Int: Do you think there's been anything lately, in the movies or on the stage, that treats narcoticism in a true manner?

Algren: There certainly hasn't been much. Jack Kirkland, I thought, did a nice job with the play version of my book. But the play didn't make it. The movie made all the dough.

Int: Did you see *Hatful of Rain*?

Algren: Yes; I went with a friend of mine. We had to leave in the middle of the second act.

Int: Not long ago, in *Time* magazine, there was an article telling how certain writers get in the mood to write. Faulkner takes a shot or two of whiskey, Hemingway sharpens pencils. Do you have a device of this sort?

Algren: Yes, as a matter of fact. You might laugh, but sometimes I go over to the gym and work out on a punching bag. It loosens me up.

Int: Incidentally, have you ever met Hemingway?

Algren: Yes, a couple of years ago. It was a Christmas Eve, and I had been bumming around Key West and Havana for a while. I was drinking in Havana, and I decided to call his house. At first, I couldn't get to talk to anyone. But I left my number with one of the servants, and later on his wife called back. She said he wasn't well, he was in bed, but that I should come up. I told her if he was sick, maybe I shouldn't come. But she said it would be all right. She said one of her duties was keeping people away and if he didn't want to see me, she wouldn't be inviting me. Well, I went on up. Hemingway was in bed. It was a strange sight: he looked something like a professorial Santa Claus, with this white beard of his, and his steel-rim glasses. He was lying there, with a baseball cap on, to keep the light out of his eyes. He looked a lot older than I thought he would. You know, his belly was swollen from injuries from that crash in Africa. He still hadn't recovered from that. Well, I saw he wasn't feeling too good, so I thought I'd do most of the talking. The doctor had limited him to one scotch an hour, but he kept telling me to have as much as I wanted. Well, you see, I had just seen this Walt Disney technicolor picture, *The African Lion*, which I thought was a great movie. Some of the shots they had were magnificent—you know, with these lions sticking their paws out like this for these impala that were leaping over them, reaching out and snagging the things as they jumped past, like a damn outfielder grabbing a fly ball or something. Well, I told him all about how great this picture was, and all the while he kept giving me this funny look. Here he had these gigantic stuffed heads hanging in the front room—rhinos, lions, deer, everything—and there I was, telling him how it was in the movie. I caught myself before filling him in on what it was really like in the First World War. But it was very interesting, meeting him.

Int: What did Hemingway talk about?

Algren: As I said, he didn't talk much about anything. When he *did* talk though, it wasn't easy to follow him; he'd go from one subject to another, a phrase about this, a phrase about that, like something from James Joyce. After a while, though, you saw how it all tied together. He's really very complicated, and always on the alert. He watches you like a hawk, digs everything you say. It's almost like he's waiting for you to say something that doesn't ring true, something that isn't straight. Really, he's a very sharp old man.

Int: Last year, in an editorial, *Life* magazine called on contemporary

American authors to use the “raw stuff of saga” provided by advances in research and industry. It urged the “bad boys” of American literature to “look the industrialist in the eye without spitting in it.” What is your comment on this?

Algren: *Life* wants writing that’s so hygienicized and so cellophanized that it’s lost all its vitality. This kind of writing breeds a sort of spiritual isolationism. There is something more to our life . . . it shouldn’t be merely a collection of gadgets, two cars in a neat garage. So many lives are made up of gadgets and nothing more. There are all these myths, you know. Our society is full of them: the General Motors myth, the gray flannel suit myth. And the biggest myth of all is that of the gadget, gadgets everywhere, a collection of things: two Fords in the garage, a deep freeze in the basement, and an all-purpose wife in the kitchen. There was never a time when men lived more tidily in such disorder. There were never more analysts telling other analysts what to do. There was never a more rigid moral code adopted so flexibly . . . so much abundance with so little satisfaction. . . .

Int: You think, then, that Americans are deceiving themselves most of the time?

Algren: We live in an age where self-deception is at its height. Nowhere is there such discrepancy between people’s lives and what they hear every day about their lives. Magazines like *Life* exist by fostering this kind of self-deception.

Int: Well, *Life* feels that America’s virtues haven’t been extolled loudly enough.

Algren: That’s right, but hallowing institutions is not the writer’s job. There are professional hallowers, like Norman Vincent Peale. Writers like Herman Wouk and Sloan Wilson are cutting into his territory. They are the spokesmen for the whole gadget-infested middle class.

Int: What is the writer’s job?

Algren: To accuse, to play the wasp. Zola is a perfect example, by the way. For the novelist’s place has traditionally been on the side of the loser. I can see no purpose in writing about people who seem to have won everything. There’s no story there . . . nothing happens as far as I’m concerned. Most writers of the new school, and Wouk is the prize example, seem to be on the side of the winners. Nobody seems to want to defend the accused, the underprivileged. Why write about happiness, anyway? There’s nothing there . . . no conflict, no catalyst for discovering anything about humanity.

Int: What do you think is the relation of the church to the people you write about—the accused, the underprivileged?

Algren: I'd say the church does gently what the police do roughly.

Int: Some people, I think, feel that you take the side of the loser too readily, too completely. You've been criticized for wallowing in garbage, for making heroes of your vagrants and rumdums.

Algren: I think the critics have exaggerated the whole thing. I certainly did not set out to make "heroes" of these people. I do feel, however, that a thinker who wants to think justly must keep in touch with those who never think at all. There is no better way of recording the American saga than to study it from *behind* its billboards and comic strips, which tend to dwell more upon the American dream than upon the American reality.

Int: Who are these people "Who never think at all?"

Algren: They may be the people in Sandburg's *The People, Yes*. Or the girl in court I saw once who told the judge, "I know right from wrong but I can't get my feet on the ground either way." Or the boy who said of his life, "I just lean and dream and take a shot, and just lean and dream." Or the nineteen-year-old punk sentenced to the electric chair who said, "I knew I'd never get to be twenty-one anyhow." These people are a little less lucky than most of us, but they're just as human. One thing for sure, they'll never wind up in a Herman Wouk novel.

Int: I don't suppose you thought much of his *Marjorie Morningstar*.

Algren: My first feeling was, "Who cares?" And it's such *sterile* writing.

Int: In what way?

Algren: For instance, sex is a dirty word in the world of *Marjorie Morningstar* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. I can't see that, I can't see it at all. Sex is a natural thing, a good thing, and sometimes it becomes really humorous. After all, nothing is funnier than sex running wild.

Int: Some critics feel you're too outspoken about the subject.

Algren: It's never wise to take critics too seriously.

Int: Why?

Algren: You see, critics have patterns. I guess it helps them think better, having these patterns. When you write a book that doesn't fit into one of these patterns you hear shrieks, howls, all sorts of carryings-on. And, you know, critics are the hardest people in the world to please. All they want from an author is the cutting wit of an Evelyn Waugh, satire like Sinclair Lewis', the cosmopolitan tone of Henry

James, the scope and stamina of a Tolstoy, and local color like Mark Twain could do—and yet one mustn't get too provincial either. They get you both ways. First they tell you to write about what you know. Then they say, "Is that all you can tell us about—your own home street?"

Int: You sound a little bitter.

Algren: No, I'm really not. I used to be—when I still had illusions to lose. I remember when I got out of college they gave me a little graduate's card that said I could be whatever I wanted to be. I had tremendous faith in that card, carried it around everywhere, trying to get a job. The times were bad; I never got much of a job at all. After a while, I got to looking as tattered as the card had become.

Int: Do you think your journalism courses at the University of Illinois helped you in your writing?

Algren: As far as technique is concerned, yes. That's all you can get from schools—technique. They can make a reporter out of you. But with fiction you have to be more than just a reporter. I never had much faith in going down to West Madison Street with a notebook to put down ideas for a novel. A writer's got to live the situation out as much as possible, not just sit around watching, taking notes on everybody. But I got a kick out of journalism. I was on the school paper—*The Daily Illini*—on the city staff, and I always used to go down to the city jails and wait around for something to happen. It was a good time in my life.

Int: How long was it before you began doing fiction?

Algren: Well, right about that time, during the Depression, I had a job on a newspaper, but it only lasted three weeks, then I started drifting around the South, the Southwest. Wrote my first short story down there, in a gas station. I was broke at the time.

Int: A lot of people, I suppose, would be shocked to know a writer doesn't have to do a lot of research to get material for a book.

Algren: They would, wouldn't they? Yep, I guess I did a lot of "research" in my time, except at the time I was doing it, I didn't know it was research. Maybe if the cops who have picked me up in my time for vagrancy and such had told me I was doing research I wouldn't have felt so bad about it.