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## Why We Need More in Life Than Movie Screens



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By **PETER TONGUETTE**

August 31, 2024 6:30 AM

A review of *Walker Percy: The Moviegoer & Other Novels, 1961–1971*.

*Walker Percy: The Moviegoer & Other Novels, 1961–1971*, edited by Paul Elie (Library of America, 983 pp., \$45)

**I**N Walker Percy's 1961 debut novel, *The Moviegoer*, John Bickerson "Binx" Bolling is a cinephile, a cinéaste, a fan of the flickers, and, above all, a man who reckons that the silver screen is preferable to this vale of tears. Binx has the outward characteristics of a well-rounded, well-functioning citizen — he served in the Korean War, now resides in the pleasant environs of Gentilly, a suburban neighborhood of New Orleans, and makes an honorable living as a stock

and bond broker — but, inwardly, his life is defined by his liberal partaking in the disposable and expendable, including going to the movies.



“Other people, so I have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives: the time one climbed the Parthenon at sunrise, the summer night one met a lonely girl in Central Park and achieved with her a sweet and natural relationship, as they say in books,” Binx says. “What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in *The Third Man*.”

Alas, I would have said the same about myself in my early twenties, when I first encountered *The Moviegoer*. That Binx was in his late twenties and a resident of Louisiana (where I lived for much of my youth) sealed my identification with Percy’s protagonist. As far as I was concerned, real life, both in its pleasant tedium and periodic discomforts, was a poor substitute for the richly imagined fantasy world projected at 24 frames per second at a theater near you. Let’s face it: Your next-door neighbor likely isn’t as kindly as Jimmy Stewart, your uncle as tough as John Wayne, or your date as fetching as Myrna Loy. People dressed better in the Astaire and Rogers musicals, were more gallant in Howard Hawks’s adventure films, and were less beholden to political correctness in the hedonistic comedies of the ’70s and ’80s, like *Animal House*. Life gets weirder and woker, but old movies stay the same.

Even as I found myself identifying with Binx, however, I realized I was telling only half the tale: Percy does not present Binx’s single-minded substitution of real life with a simulacrum as laudatory but as woefully deficient. When Binx describes himself as keeping “a Gregory Peckish sort of distance,” or says that he is “no do-gooding José Ferrer going around with a little whistle to make people happy,” or compares a dear friend to “a character played by Eva Marie Saint,” we understand that he is leaning on fantasy figures to understand human behavior. When Binx observes that it is difficult for a person to embrace any place he might happen to be living in until he sees it reproduced in film (“If he sees a movie which shows his very neighborhood, it becomes possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere”), we understand that he himself is relying on stardust to validate his existence. Over the course of the novel, Percy details the way in which Binx ceases to define himself as a moviegoer.

Confident in the contours of my own enthusiasm for the book, I ignored this aspect of it until I no longer could. Last year, after my mother died, I realized that, much as I loved *The 39 Steps*, *Bringing Up Baby*, and *The Magnificent Ambersons*, they were small comfort during a time of real pain; they offered no road map to understanding. In fact, I found myself so unprepared for the depths of my grief that I came to see that I had made the same error as Binx: In seeking to inoculate myself against the inevitable tragedies of life, I had made a false idol out of celluloid. For years, I had willfully misperceived the meaning of Percy’s masterpiece.

This became all the clearer to me as I was recently rereading *The Moviegoer*, which is the most famous work in a new three-novel compendium of Percy’s work. Percy is a nonpareil figure in American letters. Born in 1916 in Birmingham, Ala., he entered orphanhood in his teens: In 1929, his father committed suicide, and in 1932 his mother perished in an auto accident — and Percy seems to have tended to that absence by looking for big answers, first in the medical profession, then in Catholicism. After earning a degree in chemistry from the University of North Carolina, he entered Columbia University’s College of Physicians and Surgeons. That career was derailed after he came down with tuberculosis, but the downtime led him to reconsider medicine in favor of writing and to formalize his growing religious convictions. In 1947, he was baptized in the Catholic Church.

In 1958, having accumulated bylines in *America*, *Commonweal*, the *Partisan Review*, and other publications, Percy commenced work on a novel with the provisional title “Confessions of a Movie-goer.” Under the direction of Knopf editor Stanley Kauffmann, the manuscript was eventually revised and released to the world as *The Moviegoer* in 1961. The following year, emerging from a list of finalists that included Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, Bernard Malamud’s *A New Life*, and J. D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*, the novel was honored with the National Book Award.

“In short,” Percy said upon accepting the award, in remarks included in the present volume, “the book attempts a modest

restatement of the Judeo-Christian notion that man is more than an organism in an environment, more than an integrated personality, more even than a mature and creative individual, as the phrase goes. He is a wayfarer and a pilgrim.”

Indeed, when Binx Bolling makes a mark with his thumbnail on his seat in a movie theater while watching the Western *Red River* (“Where, I wondered, will this particular piece of wood be twenty years from now, 543 years from now?”), his impulse is shown to be that of a genuine seeker, but because he lives in a corrupt, decadent epoch, he channels his impulses into something insufficiently sacred. A movie theater can never be a church. There is nothing inherently wrong with the movies except to the extent that they have, in the world of the novel, replaced the eternal things; Binx might just as well be expending his energy on baseball-card-collecting, bird-watching, or romances with comely secretaries (the last of which is, in fact, among his vices). All fall short of humanity’s highest purpose.

Yet Binx perceives the inadequacy of his alternative theology of popular culture and free love. “What is the malaise? you ask. The malaise is the pain of loss,” he says. “The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo’s ghost.” The world (so to speak) is delivered to Binx in the improbable vessel of his cousin Kate, the mentally unwell, allegedly suicidal 25-year-old stepdaughter of his Aunt Emily. Virtually alone among her kith and kin, Binx tolerates Kate’s flaws and embraces her many qualities. Together, in the novel’s most brilliant section, they go AWOL to Chicago. This invites the wrath of Aunt Emily, a woman of no particular religious creed (she calls herself “an Episcopalian by emotion, a Greek by nature and a Buddhist by choice”) but of unassailable propriety. “I honestly don’t believe it occurred to you to let us know that you and Kate were leaving, even though you knew how desperately sick she was,” Aunt Emily scolds Binx.

For her part, Kate rightly understands that she is not lost but has been found. So has Binx, who, picking up the pieces of his mother’s devout Catholicism and his own iffy Catholicism, seems to be granted a moment of grace when he catches sight of an African-American man making his way out of church on Ash Wednesday. Binx speculates about the man’s motivations — are they a matter of keeping up appearances, or does he have genuine piety? “It is impossible to say why he is here,” Binx says. “Is it part and parcel of the complex business of coming up in the world? Or is it because he believes that God himself is present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants?” That Binx is even open to the latter possibility is a sign of his growth. His marriage to Kate would be the culmination of a more conventional novel, but Percy underscores that his protagonist’s setting aside of childish things involves more than simply choosing a wife: He forsakes his brokerage job for medical school, and in the epilogue, instead of referencing movie stars, he confesses his certainty in the resurrection of the dead when speaking about his gravely ill half-brother.

The other Percy novels included in this volume — 1966’s *The Last Gentleman* and 1971’s *Love in the Ruins* — are certainly substantial and provocative works, but neither is as plain, powerful, or persuasive as *The Moviegoer*. In the 1977 self-interview “Questions They Never Asked Me,” Percy described his belief in God this way: “I don’t see why anyone should settle for less than Jacob, who actually grabbed ahold of God and wouldn’t let go until God identified himself and blessed him.” In *The Moviegoer*, Binx Bolling finally realizes that going to the movies is settling for less than God, and in renewing my familiarity with this extraordinary novel, I have come to know that man cannot live by Alfred Hitchcock alone.

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Walker Percy's uncle William Alexander Percy was also an author. Walker lived with his uncle in Mississippi for a time after his parents died.

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To paraphrase Dorothy Parker, William Percy's LANTERNS ON THE LEVEE should not be taken up lightly -- it should be hurled with great force.

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This is a wonderfully perceptive piece of writing. Thank you!

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His articles are often featured at American Conservative. Compare this piece to what Rothman, Pino, or Nordlinger write.

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