

Gladiator Philip Wylie

by
Philip Wylie

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First
Published

1930

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By

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Philip Wylie

12 May 1902 - 25 October 1971

Nicholas Laudadio

University of North Carolina at Wilmington

Science Fiction Works

Novels

Gladiator (1930)

The Murderer Invisible (1931)

When Worlds Collide (with Edwin Balmer) (1933)

After Worlds Collide (with Edwin Balmer) (1934)

Finnley Wren (1934)

Blunder: The Story of the End of the World (1946)

The Disappearance (1951)

The Smuggled Atomic Bomb (1951 *Saturday Evening Post*)

Tomorrow! (1954)

The Answer (1955)

Triumph (1963)

The End of the Dream (1972)

Short Stories

"The Paradise Crater" (October 1945 *Blue Book*)

Screenplays and Teleplays

The Island of Lost Souls (with Waldemar Young) (1932)

The King of the Jungle (with Fred Niblo, Jr. and Max Marcin) (1933)

Murders in the Zoo (with Seton I. Miller and Milton Herbert Gropper) (1933)

Los Angeles: A.D. 2017 (1971)

Other Works

"Science Fiction and Sanity in an Age of Crisis" (1953 *Modern Science Fiction Anthology*)

In the preface to his most well known work, *Generation of Vipers* (1942), American author Philip Wylie writes, "I have written largely for entertainment. That is a euphemism for saying I have written for money... But commercial glibness, such as I have practiced, is one thing; life is another." For much of his creative life, Wylie struggled with the desire to be a successful writer as well as an important one, a distinction that consistently surfaces in his characters who, while wildly ambitious, often fail to affect the world around them. Though he wrote for many audiences and in many genres over the course of his massively prolific career, Wylie was a formidable contributor to science fiction in the twentieth century and he brought to the field an intellectual perspective and sharp wit that was more reminiscent of his European predecessors Jules Verne and H.G. Wells than his American contemporaries.

Born May 12, 1902 in North Beverly, Massachusetts to Reverend Edmund Melville and novelist and poet Edna Wylie, Philip Gordon Wylie was the oldest of four siblings in a family that counted Puritan Jonathan Edwards and Aaron Burr as distant relatives. After his mother's death in 1907, an event that greatly affected him as both a child and as an adult, Wylie's family

moved to Ohio where he became an intense and introspective child, spending much of his time developing his own storytelling talents through retellings and modifications of Wells's stories. But as he grew in his imaginative life, Wylie began to nurse a bitter animosity toward his father, an anger that intensified as his father remarried in 1911 and the family moved to Montclair, New Jersey. With a near-death experience and yearlong convalescence in 1912 due to a burst appendix misdiagnosed by his stepmother, Wylie retreated even further away from his family.

This growing isolation helped turn his storytelling into a desire to create his own narratives. As an adolescent, Wylie published verse in school and church magazines, and, by the time he went to Princeton in 1920, he was writing frequently as a columnist (under the name Philip Speyce) in the *Princetonian*. In 1923 he published his first book, a privately printed collection of poetry called *Dormitory Ditties*. But despite these achievements, Wylie's time at Princeton was not an academically successful one. His contempt for what he saw as ineffectual instructors and incompetent (and over-privileged) fellow students helped keep his college career short; he was suspended in 1922 due to poor grades and he left Princeton for good the following year. Wylie's experience with academia was to haunt his writings for much of his life, most notably surfacing in the scathing attacks that make up *Generation of Vipers*.

After leaving Princeton, Wylie worked in a public relations firm in New York and he went on to join the first staff of Harold Ross's new magazine the *New Yorker*. During this period, Wylie worked in all aspects of the magazine's publication, from writing poetry to working on layouts, while outside of work he was becoming acquainted with the artists and writers of the New York scene, including Theodore Dreiser, Dorothy Parker and James Thurber, Wylie didn't care for the modern art and literature championed by what he called the "Liberal Intellectual Establishment" or "LIE" and, though he too desired recognition, he found himself growing to distrust and detest those he saw as shallow and effete.

After being dismissed from the *New Yorker* in 1927, Wylie hired an agent and tried to make a living on his writing. During this financially difficult period, he began writing science fiction for pulp magazines such as *Black Mask*, *Zest*, and *Live Girl Stories*, work that would inspire his first real successes. His first novel accepted for publication by Knopf was a science fiction tale called *Titan*. Wylie, however, wanted his first novel to be a "serious" work, so he wrote a fictionalized biography of his father called *Heavy Laden* (1928) and, shortly thereafter, a gender study called *Babes and Sucklings* (1929). Though both novels received praise from the "establishment" (Dreiser lauded *Heavy Laden* and wrote the advertisements for Knopf), neither sold very well.

For his third novel, *Gladiator* (1930), Wylie returned to the manuscript for *Titan* and, because Knopf was not fond of the novel's style (it was significantly influenced by Laurence Sterne, author of *Tristram Shandy* (1760)), rewrote it in its entirety. *Gladiator* is the story of Hugo Danner, a man born with incredible strength and resilience due to his father's experiments on his mother with a human-tissue altering "plasma." Danner is raised as an idealistic and restrained man, instructed to "use his powers for good." After college, his idealism leads him to join the French army in WWI and later work in every way he can to curb the misery and greed of human existence. When his attempts are thwarted, Danner decides to eschew sympathy and pity and harness pure reason to help cure society's ills. He joins with an ambitious scientist to create a race of titans, just like him, that will work (through force) to control and correct humankind, or destroy it if that fails. In the end, Danner rejects this plan as well and his dashed hopes for humanity lead him to the top of a mountain where he curses God asking, "are You, like all mankind, impotent?" only to be answered by a "bolt of lightning stabbed earthward" that killed him instantly.

While the hero of *Gladiator* is, in many ways, a direct descendant of Frankenstein's monster, he is probably best remembered as the inspiration for the comic book hero Superman that debuted in *Action Comics* in 1938 (a claim that some deny). Regardless of its purported influence, at the time of its publication *Gladiator* did not fare well financially, selling around 2500 copies and marking the end of Wylie's relationship with Knopf.

Following *Gladiator*, Wylie continued his steady output and slowly began to garner financial and artistic credentials. In 1930, Wyle became acquainted with Edwin Balmer, the editor of *Redbook*, a publication that would later feature a number of Wylie's stories and serialized novels. In addition to finding a collaborator, this same year Wylie also found a new publisher, Farrar and Rinehart, with whom he would work with for the next thirty years.

Wylie's first novel for Farrar was *The Murderer Invisible* (1931), a tale inspired by Well's *Invisible Man*. He then went on to write a few "serious" novels and worked through a series of quite successful murder mysteries with Balmer. Next, Wylie and Balmer wrote *When Worlds Collide* (1932), a retelling of the Noah's ark tale in which humankind struggles to build a giant spacecraft to help save earth's creatures and cultures from a wandering planet on a collision course with earth. In contrast to Balmer's wild disregard for scientific verisimilitude—an issue that would often emerge in the course of their partnership—Wylie insisted on getting the science of the novel "right" and thus he consulted with astronomers on the novel's various astrophysical details. *When Worlds Collide* was slated to be made into a film directed by Cecil B. DeMille, but a suitable screenplay couldn't be found, and the idea was shelved for twenty years. (In 1951 Rudolph Maté a version approved by Wylie starring Richard Derr and Barbara Rush that received much praise.) When the novel first appeared in serial form in *Bluebook*, it was greeted with tremendous sales and has remained in print since, becoming one of the most successful science fiction stories of the period.

Following the success of *When Worlds Collide*, Balmer and Wylie set out to write a sequel logically titled *After Worlds Collide* where the survivors of earth's destruction colonize a distant planet and struggle to maintain their ideals about humanity. By 1932, Wylie had moved to Hollywood to work as a writer for Paramount studios where he wrote the script for *The Island of Lost Souls*, a screenplay in the spirit of *Robinson Crusoe* or Verne's *The Mysterious Island* and adapted from Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and *The Savage Gentleman*. At Paramount he also wrote two other science fiction scripts, *The King of the Jungle* (1933) and *Murders in the Zoo* (1933). It was also during this period that he composed his most critically acclaimed work *Finnley Wren*, a vaguely autobiographical and remarkably sophisticated story about a 48 hour period wherein a novelist named Philip Wylie listens to stories of the title character's life. A wildly verbose book, *Finnley Wren* is rife with Wylie's scathing commentary on everything from education to gender to politics, but embedded in the sprawling book are individual tales that reflect Wylie's interest in science fiction narrative.

Given its wild ambition and unflinching critical stance, it is no surprise that *Finnley* was a commercial failure. Wylie's success with scripts and genre fiction, when coupled with the failure of his "serious" work only fanned the flames of his burgeoning alcoholism and bitterness. As the 30s ended, Wylie found began to redirect his energies as he discovered the teachings of Carl Jung (Wylie met Jung in 1937) and, after a visit to the Soviet Union, he became a staunch anti-communist (as evidenced in *Smoke Across the Moon* (1937)).

In 1942 Wylie composed the work for which he is best known, the Swiftian jeremiad *Generation of Vipers*. Wielding Jung and two decades of accumulated bitterness, Wylie attempts to eviscerate all the sacred cows of American life and culture—most infamously the scourge of "momism", the product of that self-centered and useless creature that Cinderella becomes after marriage. The book was tremendously popular and, within a decade, sold almost two-hundred

thousand copies and through conflict and controversy, made Wylie and momism household words. In the wake of *Vipers*'s success, Wylie continued elaborating on the various subjects that had earned him his notoriety and during the war wrote radio scripts and manuals for the armed forces and even flew training missions in B-29 bombers for the Air Force.

Wylie's work with civil defense and the war effort eventually led him into the congressional battle to create the Atomic Energy Commission. He gained top-secret security clearance, working with Truman's advisors and even visiting atomic tests in the Nevada desert. Not surprisingly, Wylie's fiction began to confront the various circumstances of atomic destruction, beginning with the story "The Paradise Crater," which depicted a Nazi plot to control the world using atomic weaponry, *Blunder: A Story of the End of the World* (1946) and the essay "Science Fiction and Sanity in an Age of Crisis" in *Modern Science Fiction* (1953). Wylie continued on the subject of civil defense in *The Smuggled Atomic Bomb* (1951); *Tomorrow!* (1954), a tale about a Russian attack on American soil; *The Answer* (1955), a story about an atomic bomb that kills a guardian angel; and *Triumph* (1963), a novel that tells about the destruction of the northern hemisphere by nuclear weapon and the creation of a new world order.

In the midst of this run of atomic destruction tales, Wylie returned to his investigation of gender politics in America with the oddly engagingly *The Disappearance* (1951). His last major critical and financial success, the novel begins on Valentine's Day, 1950, when every female human being simultaneously disappears from earth and re-emerges in a parallel world. In the wake of this abrupt separation, cultures then disintegrate as people begin to learn that their lives were predicated upon foolish and shortsighted sets of gender expectations and demands.

By the 1960s, Wylie's remarkable pace began to slacken as many of the magazines he wrote for struggled to compete with television and, as a result, his celebrity began to decline. But ever in tune with the times, in 1970 Wylie turned from nuclear destruction to environmental destruction, writing the script "Los Angeles: A.D. 2017" for the television series *The Name of the Game*. The story imagines the protagonist is poisoned by carbon monoxide whilst driving on the LA freeway and dreams of a dystopic future where everyone must live underground to avoid the lethal smog. Continuing this theme is his unfinished novel *The End of the Dream* (1972) (some claim this novel is co-authored with John Brunner) in which humankind, by attempting to use technology to control the earth's environment, succeeds in destroying it utterly.

According to his biography, Wylie estimated in his last years that he had written around forty-eight million words and published one third of them. He truly wanted to believe that the import of his millions of words would not be simply "literary", but something so grandiose as the attempt to save the human race from its own destruction. For Wylie, science fiction presented a real opportunity to not only speculate on the disasters created by the unfortunate confluence of ignorance and arrogance and power, but it afforded him a venue in which to present possibilities for change—ways to avert the catastrophes that, in his mind, were the necessary result of humanity's technological and cultural impulses. But despite his belief in his work, he remained realistic in his expectations. He remarked in *Vipers* that, "while I wrote about hundreds of worlds and solved all the problems they presented to all the characters I colonized them with, my own world remained perplexing." Now, as many of Wylie's works come back into print to join the others that have never fallen out, it seems that these narratives still hold weight for both the vividness of their fictional imaginings as well as for the sincerity of their attempts to solve the problems of the all-too-perplexing world that inspired them.

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Some of Philip Wylie's papers are available in the Princeton University Library; letters to Max Wylie are available in the Boston University Library.