

On “River of No Return”

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This past week, I read a biography of the bad-boy-but-talented actor Robert Mitchum (1917-1997). The book held my attention, though you wouldn't be missing anything much if you passed on it: Lee Server, *Baby I Don't Care* (St. Martin's, 2002). Server's book discussed a movie Mitchum made in 1954 with Marilyn Monroe directed by Otto Preminger called “River of No Return.” It hit me that I had seen that movie with my parents in Milwaukee, Wisconsin when it first came out. I would have been fourteen at the time.

Mother, Dad and I were in Milwaukee on the very first trip of any kind we had taken when I was growing up. My much-older brother and sister had early in my life married and left home, so it was just the three of us. The Milwaukee trip was not only my first trip it was my only trip until I enlisted the army at seventeen and flew to Fort Carson, Colorado (of course, my first plane ride).

Over the years, I've occasionally noted our, call it, geographical immobility as a family--and individually; none of us went anywhere by ourselves either--but I've never tried to discern its significance for my life back then and later on, generalize about it, anything like that. Prompted by the Mitchum biography recollection--plus a superb memoir on her childhood by the novelist Joyce Carol Oates I'm currently reading and highly recommend (*The Lost Landscape*, Ecco, 2015)--I've reflected on it some. This is a report on what's come out of that. I'll be using movie metaphors to get my points across.

Dad and Mother were older when I was growing up--Dad was in his fifties and sixties and Mother in her forties and fifties. (Writing this last sentence, I made note that Mother was always Mother, not Mom.) Dad was a barber

who worked alone in his own shop in space he rented. Six days a week, Sundays off, 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., he stood on his feet with his arms raised cutting people's hair (his feet hurt and his upper shoulders ached in his later years). At the end of the day, after he straightened things up so the shop would be in top shape the next morning and turned off the spinning barber pole out front, he locked the door and rode the streetcar home. It was streetcars in Saint Paul, Minnesota in those years; buses came along later.

Dad and Mother ate the dinner Mother had prepared around 7:00---I had been given something to eat earlier---and then stayed up for another couple of hours before going to bed. I can't remember what they did after dinner, but whatever it was it wasn't with me. I watched television and read sport magazines and went to bed whenever I chose, which often was late, eleven-thirty, twelve. The "Tonight Show" on NBC with Steve Allen was an hour and forty-five minutes starting at 10:30 in the Midwest in those years, and I often watched the whole show.

Back to Robert Mitchum and "River of No Return." For our first vacation, if you could call it that, it was just for a couple days, we took a train from Saint Paul to Milwaukee to see the Milwaukee Braves major league baseball team---they are now the Atlanta Braves---play a game. I don't remember who the opponent was. Or I should say, who the opponent was supposed to be, because the game rained out. There we were, Mother, Dad, and I, the rain pouring down on us, standing in a virtually empty baseball stadium. I remember Mother crying and Dad trying to comfort her while I stood silently to the side. I spent my childhood, now that I think about it, silently off to the side.

Mother and Dad had to decide what we were going to do now that there's no game to watch--I wasn't included in

deliberations. Evidently their decision was to take a bus to downtown Milwaukee, because the next image I have in my head now is the three of us, still wet from the rain, which had subsided to a drizzle, walking along a downtown street. Dad was walking about ten feet ahead of Mother and me, I guess kind of scouting out what we were could do with the time we had on our hands. As we were walking along, Mother commented to me about the way Dad's wet pants hung straight down in the back—look at him, he has no rear end at all. Per usual, I didn't say anything.

Dad stopped in front of a movie theater and said in an upbeat way, let's see this movie, this looks good. This will be fine, Mother said almost under her breath. Mostly she indicated her affirmation to Dad's suggestion with a nod of her head and shrug of her shoulders. Anything at that point would have been OK with Mother. Or well, not OK really, but she'd do it--soberly, unenthusiastically, even a bit resentfully, she'd acquiesce to it, whatever it was. This was a pattern with her.

I paid no attention to the title of the movie. I waited with Mother in the lobby while Dad bought the tickets. I glanced at the still picture in the lobby (which was reproduced in the Mitchum biography), but I didn't know, and wouldn't have cared if I had known, that that was Robert Mitchum, who was a big name movie actor in those years, or even that that was Marilyn Monroe. I didn't know about Marilyn Monroe—who could have been bigger than Marilyn Monroe at that time? And most certainly I had never heard of the director Otto Preminger, whom I now know was very prominent back then. For that matter, I didn't even know there was such thing as a director. What really strikes me now, though, is that, sitting on the right—Dad, Mother, and then me--in the darkened theater in front of the huge screen, I didn't take in the film at all. I didn't--or was it I couldn't?--follow the plot. I had no connection or investment in what was

happening on the screen. I notice that I can rent “River of No Return” from Amazon. Right after I finish writing this, I’m going to watch the film and see what I missed.

After the movie ended, Mother and Dad didn’t talk about it with each other, and they didn’t ask me what I thought about it—I wouldn’t have expected that. We went for dinner at a cafe nearby where you slide your tray along some railings and ask for what you want—I’ll have the meat loaf and the mashed potatoes with gravy or something of the sort. And then it was to our hotel room and bed and onto the train the next morning for the trip back home. I looked out the window.

As far as I can remember, and I know this sounds grim, Mother and Dad never spoke with me the entire trip. Mother’s comment about Dad’s pants hanging down was spoken *at* me; she wasn’t looking for a reply. They weren’t hostile or abrupt with me. They weren’t trying to do me in, anything like that. They simply had no business to conduct with me. I wasn’t on their agendas.

It strikes me now that to a large extent my life, which is near its end, has been a series of Milwaukee trips, as it were. Being peripheral and, really, unnecessary to the central action, rained out games, afternoons spent watching “River of No Return” (non-award winners, if you know what I mean), and getting myself through the rest of the day until I decide to go to bed, who cares. And, now that I think about it, pitching my wares to women as Dad did with Mother: “Let’s go to this movie, it looks good.” “Yeah, OK, anything . . . do you realize your pants hang straight down in the back?”

In a significant way, has my adult life been shaped by what it was like for me in my childhood (the Milwaukee trip was far from an exception)? I think the answer is yes. I believe that early in life we get cast in a movie, so to speak, and that, consciously and unconsciously, we keep playing our part in this same

movie—or perhaps better, its sequels—in adulthood, and that that’s the case even if it is a bad movie and we have been miscast in it or given a minor role, one beneath our capabilities and possibilities. For a great many children, I’m afraid, their life’s movie could be titled “River of No Escape.”

It’s a complicated matter, but in this brief thought I’ll leave it with the suggestion that anyone around a child—parents, teachers, siblings, relatives, friends—do their best to assure that this precious little human being feels loved, safe, respected, and included in the scheme of things, and supported in becoming the best version of the person he or she truly is. Staying with the movie metaphor, the ideal is that later on as an adult he or she will have developed the impulse and wherewithal necessary to write, direct, and act in the highest quality, most honest, most honorable, and most personally gratifying movies (it doesn’t have to be just one) possible and show them to the world.