

In Contention

3:10 to Yuma began as a 15-page Elmore Leonard short story, as bare and uninflected as an early Hemingway narrative. Unlike Hemingway, however, Leonard wasn't crafting a literary iceberg. There's no seven-eighths of meaning beneath his visible one-eighth of narration. What you saw is what you got. Not that this is a flaw. There is something to be said for a narrative that simply means what it says, no more, no less.

On the page, the story efficiently pits two characters against each other: an outlaw in his early 20's and a marshal a few years older. The kid has no responsibilities other than to the gang he rides with; the marshal has a wife and three children, and a code of honor. The two men come together when the marshal is given the assignment to transport the outlaw to the town of Contention, Arizona. His mission is to put the criminal convicted of robbery and murder on the train that will take him to his just deserts in the Yuma Territorial Prison. After reaching the wonderfully named Contention, they must spend a couple of hours in a hotel room waiting on the train. During that time, the marshal protects the outlaw from the brother of a man he may have killed. Impressed by the marshal's willingness to risk his life defending him, the younger man seems to return the favor by passing up a chance to get the drop on his captor. Or is he merely playing it safe? The narrator doesn't say, so we are allowed to believe that the outlaw would have thought it dishonorable to shoot the man who just saved his life.

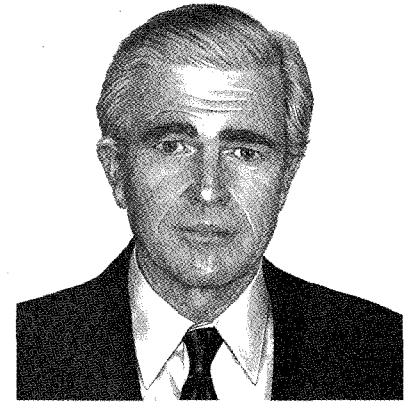
In 1957, the heyday of Hollywood's psychological western, Leonard's story had to be a screenwriter's dream. It offered ample opportunity to explore the inner selves of two characters in moral contention with each other. It didn't matter that Leonard had abjured such psychological probing on the grounds that it would give way to easy sentimentality. Sentimentality is just what many a screenwriter hankers for. To be fair, director Delmer Daves and writer Halsted Welles didn't slather it on too thickly in 1957. They did make changes, though. In place of the duty-bound marshal, we get Dan Evans, a debt-ridden rancher desperate for

money played by Van Heflin, who had done similar duty in *Shane* three years earlier. The outlaw becomes Ben Wade (played by 40-year-old Glen Ford), who is the gang's leader rather than a recent recruit and a man with enough rueful self-awareness to empathize with others. For most of the film's 90 minutes, Heflin and Ford engage in verbal sparring over questions of obligation and honor. The story becomes a Jekyll-and-Hyde variant. Evans is the glum Jekyll, determined to fulfill his duty, regardless of how foolhardy. Wade is the heedless Hyde, a law unto himself who mocks the social order on principle. The film's interest derives from the dawning respect each man—to his surprise—develops for the other.

In remaking this low-budget film, director James Mangold has been overly ambitious. He has opened it up, giving it more characters, more locales, and more action. And he has shot it in wide-screen color. This last decision is most unfortunate. If ever a film called for black-and-white images projected within the narrow confines of a traditional 4:3 screen, this is it. By widening his film's scope, Mangold has sacrificed the original's cramped intensity.

It seems odd to say, but I could have wished for a more formulaic approach to the material. Or, perhaps, a more thoroughly literary crafting that would have given the dialogue a more ambiguous cast. But Mangold and his writer, Michael Brandt, like the original film's Halsted Welles, have not resisted overplaying the Jekyll-and-Hyde hand.

The film opens with a shot of Evans' two sons in their bedroom. The older is reading a dime novel about the exploits of a gallant outlaw. The next day, Evans (Christian Bale) and the boys come upon a real outlaw in the person of Ben Wade (Russell Crowe). He and his gang have been holding up a stagecoach, and the ground is now littered with the bodies of several guards and two of his own men. When the outlaws spot the rancher and his boys, Wade talks to them with seeming kindness, promising not to steal any of their cattle. He insists on taking their horses, however, so they can't follow him, assuring Evans that he will get



3:10 to Yuma

Produced by Tree Line Films
Directed by James Mangold
Screenplay by Michael Brandt
and Halsted Welles
Distributed by Lionsgate

The Nanny Diaries

Produced and distributed by
The Weinstein Company
Directed and written by Shari Springer
Berman and Robert Pulcini

them back. The father doesn't object. Good to his word, Wade sets their horses loose a few miles later on his journey into Contention.

The older son's reactions indicate he finds Wade's daring and self-confidence more inspiring than his father's prudence and self-doubt. Evans is a loser; Wade, a winner. Among the things Evans has lost is a foot. It was shot off accidentally by one of his own soldiers while he served the Union in the Civil War. How, he wonders, can I tell my son that? Evans has become an embarrassed, fearful man. The only thing he knows to do is hold on to the little that he has. When the railroad company tries to buy out his ranch, he refuses. Yet he doesn't fight back when they send thugs to set fire to his barn by way of encouragement. As a result, his 14-year-old son has become contemptuous of him.

Later, when Evans learns that the same railroad agents will pay him \$200 to help escort the now captured Wade to Yuma, he fobblishly agrees. He attempts to placate his wife's misgivings with a fatalistic rationalization. "I've been standing on one leg for three years waiting for God to do me a favor." His impatience with Providence turns out to be imprudent.

He finds himself in the escort party alternately under assault by angry Apaches and Wade's gang. Then, to add to his chagrin, his son shows up along the way. Needless to say, the boy is just in time to prevent Wade from killing his father. When Evans asks him if he can keep Wade covered, the boy answers, "Better'n you." It was just here that I lost any lingering hope for this beautifully made movie. Despite its lovely landscapes and superior acting, it's a crock.

In a scene neither in Leonard's story nor the 1957 film, Wade kills the railroad goon who had torched Evans' barn. When Wade is pulled off the body, he turns to Evans and says, "Well, you wanted him dead, too." Evans replies, "Wishing him dead is one thing, killing him is another." This is, of course, the Jekyll-and-Hyde conceit. Evans nurses grievances; Wade acts on them. One thinks; the other pounces. OK, but what then? Having been jammed into the film, the allusion is barely developed. There's a pass at having the characters come to terms, but it's forced and unconvincing.

The principle performances give the film whatever interest it has. In the more charismatic role, Crowe uses his now patented ironic persona. He is a man who has seen most of the world's stupidities, yet his eyes can still twinkle at the sight of whatever new fooleries come along. He even quotes Scripture to sardonic advantage, having, as he explains, read the Bible cover to cover in three days when his mother left him alone at eight years of age, never to return. Cover to cover. Really? His refined interest in the feminine form suggests he may not have gotten beyond the Song of Songs. At one point he makes a very competent pencil rendering of the naked barmaid with whom he's just slept.

Wade is also a wit. After gunning down most of the stagecoach guards, he remarks to their wounded leader, "I gotta say it's probably cheaper just to let me rob the damn thing." He's so charming that even Evans' wife is taken with him. When he is brought to the Evans' ranch under guard, she nearly swoons at his compliments on her cooking and beauty. Evans must pointedly remind her that she's talking to a killer. Crowe almost pulls this off with his quiet, gravelly voice and engaging, insinuating smile. Almost, but not quite. I found it difficult to believe a mother of two young sons living on a failing ranch in nowhere Arizona wouldn't have laughed in his face. Nor does Wade's growing re-

gard for Evans later in the film seem at all likely, given his heightened sense of self-preservation.

As Evans, Bale has a role that asks for an unselfish performance, and that's just what he gives. Hidden between his ever-slouched hat and his downturned mustache, we can barely see his cavernous eyes. He's a furtive, wounded man who always expects, and frequently gets, the worst. Yet, despite his lumbering gait and choking, hesitant voice, despite his thoroughly downtrodden nature, he finally rises—as we've been conditioned to expect by less pretentious oat-burners—to the occasion. But the occasion is so awfully corny that it is difficult to suppress a sigh of recognition.

The Nanny Diaries also deals with contention—class contention. Based on the novel by Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus, both former nannies, the film satirizes the marital and childrearing practices of the wealthy. Annie Braddock (Scarlett Johansson), a recent graduate in anthropology, finds herself scooped up by a certain Mrs. X (the incomparable Laura Linney playing a woman who remains nameless, the better to fend off litigation) in Central Park one afternoon after saving her son from being run down by a cyclist. Upon introduction, Mrs. X mistakes Annie's name for *nanny* and instantly offers her a position in her floor-through Park Avenue apartment. The mistake is not surprising. Mrs. X is one of those proper ladies who instinctively assume the outside world conforms to her every thought, and her most immediate thought is her need to replace the nanny who has just left her employ.

Annie accepts and quickly finds herself in a habitat as exotic as any Amazonian village. The film makes clever use of Annie's anthropological interests, punctuating its narrative with imagined dioramas in the well-known Childrearing Around the World Wing of the American Museum of Natural History. The exhibits include not only loin-clothed natives sitting outside their mud huts but also Manhattan socialites walking Fifth Avenue or lounging at home in their 95th-floor duplexes watching their 70-inch plasma televisions or having young ladies like Annie drag their foot-stamping, name-calling brats to astronomically expensive private schools, the kind for which four- and five-year-olds must be tutored if they are to have any hope of gaining entry.

Mrs. X proves a monstrous harri-dan who unhesitatingly takes out her marital problems on the baffled Annie. Mr. X, played to porcine perfection by Paul Giamatti, is her swinish Wall Street husband, who casually cheats on her and exercises his childrearing duties by giving his boy his business card to hold during his frequent absences. The boy, whose name is all-too-probably Greyer, clings to this talisman as if it were his security blanket.

Nanny wimps out and goes soft in the end, but, until then, it is a trenchant, hilarious satire on how wealth and power can deform people. I don't doubt its accuracy for a moment. I know a young lady who recently escaped from the clutches of one of Manhattan's wealthiest families. After nannying their two children for a lavishly paid year, she decided no amount of money was enough to endure the parents' ogreish pathology. ◊



At Home Abroad

The Eternal City is home to many eternal things—or, rather, their representatives, among them St. Peter's, the Castel Sant'Angelo, the Capitoline Hill, and the Forum. Nevertheless, on recent travels to Rome, my wife's and my first visit has been to none of these things, but, instead, to our good friends Asha and Bellamy, who reside on the north side of the Villa Borghese gardens two streets over from Il Ristorante The Meeting—an establishment which, though heavily patronized by Americans and Britons on account of its proximity to the U.S. Embassy on Via Veneto, offers a superb Italian menu and wine list. Our friends are hardly Roman notables or intellectuals, and this estimable restaurant in an upper-middle-class residential neighborhood is not listed in any guidebook I know of. Rather, they belong to the quotidian society of the great city they inhabit, away from the worn track beaten by the paparazzi and the guidebooks, in which the foreign and the familiar merge invitingly. In such company, we experience Rome as living Romans experience it—as a vital modern metropolis, not a dead historical one. The Eternal City can wait 24 hours. Our first day in Rome, we are more than content with the contemporary one.

My fundamental inability to regard a foreign capital as either a gigantic museum or a superuniversity is related no doubt to my having grown up in a great American city, New York. Residing in Manhattan, my family, and our friends and acquaintances, were scarcely in awe of the place in its aspect as a cornucopia of learning and culture. My sister, brother, and I received our educations from the Spence, Buckley, and Trinity Schools, not from the School of New York, the metropolis itself. While retaining the impression of having grown up at the Metropolitan Opera to which my parents had subscription tickets, I have probably visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art no more than a dozen times in my life, and the Museum of Modern Art perhaps once (and that once was more than enough). I was up in the Statue of Liberty on one occasion; the Empire State Building, once also. Fortunately, New York is not rich in histor-

ic buildings, or, indeed, in any architecture worthy of the name, so there were no great cultural opportunities missed in that respect. Most Saturdays when we remained in town over the weekend, my father and I taxied to the North River Piers and went through one of the berthed North Atlantic liners for several hours before sailing time. Afterward, we watched from pier's end as she was nudged into the river and headed downstream by tugs. (Thanks to my father's passion for ships and the sea, I have been aboard all the great liners of the middle part of the 20th century, including the old *Europa*—a German ship confiscated by the French after the war and rechristened *Liberté*—the first *Queen Mary* and *Queen Elizabeth*, *Mauretania*, *America*, *Andrea Doria*, *Cristoforo Colombo*, *Ile de France*, *United States*, and *France*. And most of them were architecture, incidentally.)

My experience of London was quite different, the year I spent in England with my family when in my middle teens. My father, an Anglophile who was doing research at the British Museum at the time and for many years taught a two-semester graduate-level course on the history of the British Empire at Columbia, ruthlessly dragged my sister and me (and my mother and infant brother) around the city and its environs each weekend on what he, mischievously, called "culture tours." We greatly resented these "CTs" (or thought we did, or maybe just pretended to) but we saw a prodigious number of marvelous things in a year and learned a great deal as well—mostly from my father but also, of course, from the various professional tour guides who took us about the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, Hampton Court Palace, Chiswick House, the Tate Gallery, and the rest.

Unfortunately, Trinity did not offer a course in British history until the following year, so that much of what my father taught fell into no comprehensive context and was, therefore, to some extent wasted; had we visited England two years later, all of what I saw and learned would have had far more meaning for me. As it was, my memories of London (and of Cornwall, where we rented an 11th-cen-



tury farmhouse near the hamlet of Marhamchurch for two weeks in April and, later, the month of August) remain, more than four decades afterward, intense and indelible. And yet the basis of memory is less—far less—of the monuments, the cathedrals, the paintings, the formal 18th-century gardens than of the homely reality of English town and country life. My sister and I went every day to school in London (she, to St. Paul's Girls' School in Hammersmith; I, to a tutorial establishment based in Knightsbridge, since Trinity perversely refused credit for a year at the Haberdasher School where I had been admitted), and otherwise made ourselves as free of the place as we had of New York. London, to us, was not a monument to the past but a living city—the more so since my grandfather Philpotts, a native-born Londoner, was still around in those days. I think I should have been thrilled far more to see Evelyn Waugh (who died only four years later) emerge unsteadily from White's than by a view of the Tower room in which St. Thomas More was imprisoned.

Still, background aside, it seems to me that my approach to foreign travel would be fundamentally different were I less of a novelist and narrative writer and more of a scholar and critic. My immediate interest, as I have said, in traveling abroad is to observe how foreign peoples live today and to share their experience insofar as I am capable of doing (which, of course, is ridiculously little). The history—political, social, religious, and cultural—behind that experience is not so much secondary in value as it is in the temporal sense: I am too impatient to hold back from seizing immediately on what is directly apprehensible, while understanding that the past usually means more to me when fixed in the context of the known and felt present; and so I prefer