

January 2007

# Robert Penn Warren in the 21st Century: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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### Recommended Citation

Grimshaw, James A. Jr. (2007) "Robert Penn Warren in the 21st Century: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," *Robert Penn Warren Studies*: Vol. 7 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies/vol7/iss1/11>

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*ROBERT PENN WARREN IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY:  
The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly<sup>1</sup>*

JAMES A. GRIMSHAW, JR.

Critical book-length studies in English on the works of Robert Penn Warren in the last forty years of the twentieth century totaled approximately 52 volumes.

**BOOKS ABOUT RPW**

1960-1979	21
1980-1999	31
2000-2007	21

The first seven years of the twenty-first century (2000-2006) have seen 21 volumes (including *RWP: An Annual of Robert Penn Warren Studies*), which statistically represent 40.4% of the total output of the previous forty years. Mathematically expressed: 52 volumes are to 40 years what 21 volumes are to 7 years in Warren studies between the centuries.

52:40::21:7, that is 1.3::3.0 books/yr

which translates: book output per year has more than doubled in the 21<sup>st</sup> century from what it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In raw numbers that seems irrefutably *good*. That is the wonderful aspect of numbers: They are what they are. In the Realm of Letters, however, things are not always what they seem. As the persona in Wallace Stevens's poem, "The Emperor of Ice Cream," says: "Let be be finale of seem." Faced with the hard, cold facts, we find not everything in Warren studies is "hunky-dory." Along with the *good*, we have some *bad* and some *ugly*.

Some of you may remember the 1966 Clint Eastwood movie, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, starring Eastwood, as Blondie; Elv Wallach, as Tuco ; and Lee Van Cleef, as Angel Eyes Sentema. The *ugly* was sadistic, cruel, the *bad* selfish and hard. The *good* was no saint but, in that circle, fair. In my attempt to give an overall

assessment of Warren in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I have used those three categories with slightly modified definitions of the terms. In literary criticism, which I am regarding in the broadest way imaginable, the *ugly* is characterized by ignorant brutality and egregious omissions. Examples include some of the reviews of the restored edition of *All the King's Men*, most of the reviews of Steve Zaillian's 2006 remake of *All the King's Men*, Warren's omission from popular anthologies, the lack of any volumes in such series as the Library of America, and the lack of large-print editions and books-on-tape of his work. The *bad* exercises poor judgments and causes minor omissions. Examples in this category include omission from textbook anthologies, exclusion of Warren from curricula, and unconstructive negativism in critical studies. And the *good* brings forth serious studies, on-going efforts. Besides the 2:1 increase of critical books on Warren mentioned at the beginning of this recounting, places for Warren scholars to come to have improved; re-issues of his novels keep them alive; the Centennial celebration, with all its trappings, paid homage to Warren; the movie of *All the King's Men* was, after all, remade and released; and Warren is being included in such reference works as the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* documentary series and the *Encyclopedia of American Literature*.

By now, you have probably supplied your own examples to those categories. Certainly, I feel as if I am preaching to the choir, although we may disagree on the placement of a few items. Let us consider some selected specific findings, starting with the *ugly*.

### ***The Ugly***

1. **Popular Anthologies.** Imagine standing in one of the leading bookstore chains, pulling off the shelf Francine Prose's *Reading Like a Writer* (2006), and finding under "Books to Read Immediately" no Warren! When this happened to me, I quickly reshelfed that one and checked Harold Bloom's *The Best Poems of the English Language* (2004), only to discover no Warren. *Is there any hope?* I thought.

2. **Library of America.** Such discoveries led to reminiscences of my queries to the Library of America in the mid-1980s about a Warren volume, when I was told that they did not include living

authors. However, they reversed that rule before the end of the millennium with the publication of two Eudora Welty volumes.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent inquiries received a “form” response explaining that many other authors were ahead of Warren. Then, this past year, the Library of America announced that they would publish eight volumes containing Philip Roth’s works. Of course, one might attempt to find solace in the fact that they have not included Ernest Hemingway’s works either. Or not.

Follow that rebuff with Modern Library (Random House) dropping *All the King’s Men* from its list, no Warren on the Everyman editions list, Random House’s abandoning Warren trade editions—except for the two paperback anthologies that Warren and Albert Erskine edited, *Short Story Masterpieces* and *Six Centuries of Great Poetry*—and Warrenites might start to despair. **U ge-ly, u-ge-ly, u-ge-ly.** But wait! There’s more! I have not found any large-print editions of Warren’s work, nor any of his works of fiction on audiotape/CD. At least a portion of his audience has reached the age in which such amenities are more than nice; they are necessary.<sup>3</sup>

3. ***All the King’s Men* (Restored edition).** Noel Polk edited the restored edition; but before that project reached fruition, he had consulted with several Warren scholars: Joesph Blotner, William Bedford Clark, James Justus, James A. Perkins, and me, among others. I cannot speak with certainty about what the others advised, other than guess that Polk did not receive overwhelmingly negative criticism, but I was pro-restored edition, even down to the name Talos, which was, as an aside, not the first name for the character who became Willie Stark: the name Willie Strong appeared in the first version of *Proud Flesh*. Nonetheless, literary critics were not enthralled with the restored edition. Joyce Carol Oates wrote an inflammatory review in the *New York Review of Books*, 28 March 2002, in which she said: “... that this text should be published to compete with the author-approved text, is unconscionable, unethical, and indefensible.” Polk responded well in the 27 June 2002 *NYRB*, but obviously the damage was done.<sup>4</sup>

4. ***All the King’s Men* (movie).** Then, after a year’s delay, the remake of the movie, *All the King’s Men*, was released, and the

critical reviews were released with the fury of hurricane Katrina. So devastating were the blasts that the movie did not remain in most theaters for any length of time. The first review I read was Philip Wunch's "Willie Nilly" in the *Dallas Morning News*: "It's overacted, over-directed, overwritten, over-photographed, musically over-scored. And, oh yes, it's overwrought" (22 Sep 06: 1G-2G). Wunch gave it a grade of "D+." Why the plus? New York film critic, Ethan Alter, wrote: "This is a misfire of almost epic proportions, a lavishly produced but wholly hollow and nonsensical adaptation of a magnificently constructed novel." At least Alter claims to have read the novel. Two more quick references: John Beifuss, *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis) criticizes Zaillian's directing; and Matt Brunson, *Creative Loafing*, calls it "an unmitigated disaster."

### ***The Bad***

Because people seem to have either a love or a hate reaction to Warren's work, the second category, the *bad*, is not as lengthy. Three areas strike me as signs of the *bad* in Warren studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: textbook omissions, unconstructive negative critical studies, and exclusion curricula.

1. **Textbook Omissions.** Victor Strandberg reported on his research into the inclusion Warren's works in textbook anthologies and the lack thereof at the Legacy of Robert Penn Warren Symposium in 1995; and he discusses specifically the irresponsible scholarship displayed in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1994) in "Robert Penn Warren and the 'New Paradigm': A Case Study of the Birds" in *The Legacy of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. David Madden (2000). In my recent checks, I have found little or no improvement in representative textbook anthologies.<sup>5</sup>

2. **Negative Critical Studies and Reviews.** Besides other less inflammatory reviews of *All the King's Men* (Restored Edition) and of the 2006 movie *All the King's Men*, a few critical studies have missed their mark. Perhaps they were "deconstructing." Oops! Sorry for the redundancy.<sup>6</sup>

3. **Exclusion from Curricula.** In the winter 2003 issue of *Vanderbilt Magazine*, Paul Kingsbury published a piece with the

title, “The Thorny Legacy of Vanderbilt’s Fugitives and Agrarians,” in which he points out that the “new generation of English professors of Vanderbilt” began questioning Vanderbilt’s long held reverence for the Fugitives and Agrarians. Michael Kreyling, for example, found real problems with their political views regarding women; Kate Daniels praises Robert Penn Warren but not the other Fugitives and Agrarians; John Lowe, professor at L.S.U. whose criticism of both groups is also mentioned, leans toward African-American and women authors. And why not? If the new generation—now, however, not so new—does not discredit the Fugitives and the Agrarians, then they can only be, at best, in second place. Their efforts to take the lead have, in the interim, led to the omission of the Fugitives and the Agrarians in their courses. And this trend is not limited to Vanderbilt.

4. **Miscellaneous Items.** Two random items are worth noting in this category. First, none of the reissued Robert Penn Warren novels promoted his Centennial year, as did Penguin in including on the cover of *The Quiet American* “Graham Greene Centennial 1904-2004”—a nice touch. Second, Norton has never issued a Robert Penn Warren novel in the Norton Critical Editions series, even after several queries and proposals.<sup>7</sup> Sad.

### ***The Good***

Every cloud has a silver lining, though. And I would certainly be remiss if I did not share with you some of the *good* that I have found in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Signs of hope, books by Warren, books about Warren, places of note, and the Centennial of RPW’s Birth have started the 21<sup>st</sup> century on the right foot.

1. **Signs of Hope.** Little things may indicate a turnaround in favor of Warren studies. For example, in popular anthologies, David Lehman, editor of *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* (2006), included five poems by Warren; Nancy Pearl, Seattle librarian, included *All the King’s Men* in her *Booklust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason* (2003), under “Politics of Fiction,” stating that, “Despite its age, the novel hasn’t an ounce of mustiness” (189); and Shirley Hazzard quotes Warren’s poem, “Tiberius on Capri,” in *Greene on Capri: A Memoir*. She and her husband, Francis Steegmuller—a scholar of French culture and

Flaubert—were friends of the Warrens.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Jay Parini’s piece, “A Portrait of the Artist as Apprentice,” in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (18 May 2001), reflects on Warren as a friend and mentor. Bedford Clark wrote about another, similar friendship with Pier Pasinetti for the *South Carolina Review* spring 2006 issue. H. R. Stoneback published *Homage: A Letter to Robert Penn Warren* (2005). And one more example, Dan Anderson’s “Robert Penn Warren” article in *English at Minnesota* (6, no. 2, summer 2005: 4-5) offers a nostalgic reflection of Warren’s days at the University of Minnesota.

2. **Books by Warren.** And while Random House has discontinued their reprints of Warren’s works, university presses have picked them up: University Press of Kentucky, Louisiana State University Press, and University of Tennessee Press. Happily, New Directions still reissues *At Heaven’s Gate*; and, of course, Harcourt maintains *All the King’s Men*.<sup>9</sup> Easton Press offered a Collector’s Edition of *All the King’s Men* in 2000. A list including both books by and books about Warren shows something related to Warren published each year in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Encouraging.

3. **Books about Warren.** The figures I gave at the beginning of this talk indicate the increase of work in this area—21 books thus far. We have now in print three of the plays that were previously unavailable; *Selected Poems*, edited by John Burt, suitable as a classroom text; the on-going editions of Warren’s selected letters; another collection of interviews with Warren; critical studies on specific aspects of Warren’s works; inclusion of Warren in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* documentary series and forthcoming entries in the *Encyclopedia of American Literature*. Matthew Bruccoli has been a big supporter in ensuring that Warren is included in the various Thomson/Gale series. And, we have *RWP: An Annual of Robert Penn Warren Studies*—six years strong.

4. **Places of Note.** Although they were not started in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they continue and seem to prosper. They include the RPW Birthplace and Museum in Guthrie; the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities at Vanderbilt University; the Robert Penn Warren Seminar Room with the Robert Penn Warren Professorship at LSU; the Center for Robert Penn Warren Studies (Cherry Hall) with the Robert Penn Warren Scholar and the Warren/Brooks Award; the

Robert Penn Warren Room in the library at Western Kentucky University; and though not a place per se, the Robert Penn Warren Circle. And lest we have a senior moment and forget, Robert Penn Warren collections worth traveling to are located in several places now: Yale, Western Kentucky University, University of Kentucky, the Birthplace, Louisiana State University, Vanderbilt, Emory University—and they are adding to their holdings.

5. **A Potpourri of some good.** Not all reviews of the restored edition of *All the King's Men* were ugly. For example, J. Peder Zame wrote in the *Raleigh News and Observer*: “Warren’s artistry is unimpeachable. The meticulously crafted book, with sentences, paragraphs, and chapters resonating with all that came before them and all that will follow, is a literary tour de force” (1G, 5G). However, if we dwell too much on the positive reviews, we must also pay more attention to the ugly reviews. Two sessions at the 2006 Louisiana Book Festival were devoted to Warren. The fact that a re-make of the *All the King's Men* movie was produced was a good.<sup>10</sup>

A Parenthetical Moment: I personally gave the movie a B+ and think that Steve Zaillian accomplished quite a bit in the 128-minute screen time. He introduced more of the Jack Burden story. Although Jude Law did not have a great number of lines, his facial expression and body language spoke tomes; Anthony Hopkins was excellent as Judge Irwin; and Kate Winslet’s portrayal of Anne Stanton and Patricia Clarkson’s role as Sadie Burke were clear enough, given their relatively limited amount of time on the screen. Sean Penn was the disappointment to me. I left the theater feeling that the only thing Penn knew about the character Willie Stark was what he read in the script. His gestures, dialogue, and action did not capture Warren’s character.<sup>11</sup> Dustin Hoffman was able to give a fine performance as Willy Lohman in the remake of *Death of a Salesman* for television; Sean Penn did not quite pull it off. But, then, Broderick Crawford is a hard act to follow.

And the *South Carolina Review* has two issues (spring 2006 and spring 2007) of articles about Warren and his friends/associates. Critical works have appeared in other journals and as parts of larger works. And though we cannot count them yet, we know of other works-in-progress about Warren.

6. **The Centennial of RPW's Birth, 2005.** Postage stamp, souvenirs, special celebrations, tributes—all too many to list, let alone discuss, here. The events in Guthrie and Bowling Green were well-attended.<sup>12</sup>

7. **Twentieth Anniversary of the Center for RPW Studies.** A vision that lives on.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, then, we may conclude that Robert Penn Warren's works in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are still a valued part of the Realm of Letters. Notwithstanding various trends and fads that would remove Warren, and others, from the literary scene, his works are still read and appreciated—as the *RWP* selected bibliography for 2005-2006 attests—because of the participants at occasions such as the annual symposium in Bowling Green and those who sponsor and support such events. Literary cycles ebb and flow. Warren's work caught my attention almost half a century ago, and I still learn from his writing every time I reread it, each time I teach it. He was a profound writer, the depth of whose works has not yet been plumbed.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this talk was read at the Center for Robert Penn Warren Studies Twentieth Annual Salute to Robert Penn Warren program at Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, 21 April 2007. It is a selective sampling of examples to illustrate a broad view of the state of Warren studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The audience response was particularly informative, and I thank those listeners who provided references to sources not included in this talk. Those references appear in footnotes in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Please note that I do not begrudge Eudora Welty's inclusion in that series. Warren's omission, though, is unconscionable.

<sup>3</sup> I was mistaken. The following had eluded me: Michael Emerson, narrator, *All the King's Men* (1946), 21 hours, 18 CD's (New York: Recorded Books Publications, LLC, 2005), was released in November 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Even before Oates's review hit the stands, Chris Caldwell sent an e-mail review to Erik Tarloff [www.slate.com](http://www.slate.com), The Book Club, voicing a vehement reaction: "Noel Polk's new edition of Warren's novel is a fool's errand" ... and attacks with emotional language the "close pairing of bloodless pedantry and scatological obsession"; "sloppy, metaphor-mad over-exuberance peculiar to Warren"; he continued, "the characters are ... empty vessels into which Burden/Warren pours his Purty language." Tarloff's response was at least more reasoned and civil.

<sup>5</sup> After the meeting in Bowling Green, Professor Jonathan R. Eller and Dr. Robin Condon, Indiana University-Indianapolis, brought to my attention that the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (2005) does include a few poems by Warren, as does Mark Strand's *One Hundred Great Poems of the Twentieth Century* (Norton, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> This category is, in itself, a topic suitable for a separate essay and, I felt, too much for the time allotted in a conference session. The same feeling carries over to this paper, the purpose of which is an overall assessment of Warren studies in this century. In total numbers, however, the amount of Warren criticism (chapters of books, articles and notes in professional journals, and theses/dissertations) would seem to be encouraging; we have, however, noted earlier that numbers can give a false sense of comfort.

<sup>7</sup> Copyright permission is clearly a factor at times. Notwithstanding *All the King's Men* as an obvious choice, I had suggested two other novels as possibilities for the Norton Critical Series: *World Enough and Time* and *Flood*. Since then, I would add *A Place to Come To* as a third alternative.

<sup>8</sup> One might ask at this seemingly minor discovery whether Steegmuller's work had any influence on Warren's poem, "Flaubert in Egypt," which was first published in 1974.

<sup>9</sup> I have wondered whether Harcourt would consider issuing a boxed set of *All the King's Men*—1946 and the restored editions.

<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the 1949 version of *All the King's Men*, directed by Robert Rossen, was released by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, digital videodisc format, in 2006; and *Band of Angels* directed by Raoul Walsh, was released on digital videodisc, in 2007.

<sup>11</sup> The gestures were closer to the gestures used in the portrayal of A. Hitler in the television mini-series, *War and Remembrance*, based on Herman Wouk's novel.

<sup>12</sup> According to Robin Condon, the following related to the centennial is available in the special collections: "Robert Penn Warren 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Miscellany, 2005" (clippings), Charlottesville: University of Virginia Library, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Readers who are not familiar with the Center at Western Kentucky University are encouraged to order a copy of *κWP: An Annual of Robert Penn Warren Studies*, which provides notes about the Center, as well as the Birthplace and the Circle.