

AARON GILBREATH

.....

## A String of Maybes: Speculating the Elusive Charles Portis

Despite his career-long aversion to publicity, in-depth interviews, and public appearances, novelist Charles Portis made a rare public appearance last April. On the night of April 3, the reclusive author arrived at the Capital Hotel in his hometown of Little Rock, Arkansas, to accept an award for lifetime achievement in Southern literature. The *Oxford American*, a long-running Southern magazine of literature and culture, organized a Best of the South Awards Gala and fundraiser. Attendees paid \$500 a ticket; all two hundred tickets were sold. Various Southern-born celebrities made appearances: actress Joey Lauren Adams; Oscar-winner Mary Steenburgen; the current American Idol, Kris Allen; and, most famous of all, actor Morgan Freeman. Like Portis, Freeman was there to accept an award for his contribution to Southern culture.

Many attendees wore ball gowns or tuxedos. Portis wore a dark suit and tie. Cameramen and onlookers lined the red carpet at the hotel entrance, and Portis snuck past them, settling quietly into the VIP reception area with little fanfare. So few photos of him are available, either in print or online; most of the cameramen didn't know how to locate him because they didn't know what he looked like. When one photographer finally identified the author, he followed Portis around the room, but the writer moved or turned his head whenever the man tried to snap a picture. "That son of a bitch took off every time he saw a camera," the photographer later said. "I got about a dozen shots of the side of his head."

By the time the four-course meal was served, Portis had disappeared. Questions circulated: Where was he? Why did he leave? Would he come back? People were nervous. Theories about the author's behavior were passed around like hors d'oeuvres. When he returned nearly two hours later, he entered the hotel through a rear hallway. Now dressed in a white, button-up shirt, light trousers, and a khaki, zip-up jacket, he stood beside a large column in the quiet rear of the lobby. Dapper men and women returned from dinner, trickling into the lobby before the award ceremony started. Seeing the source of party gossip, a few of them spoke to Portis, and he made excuses about his disappearance. "Well, I forgot all

THE GETTYSBURG REVIEW  
.....

about all this,” he said. “I was at home watching television and somebody called me.” Then he took a seat in the fourteenth row, the last row, as far from the stage as possible.

When Morgan Freeman stood at the lectern to accept his award, he cried. “This,” Freeman said, “is the best evening I’ve had in . . . memory.” When Portis accepted his award and the \$10,000 prize, he was grateful but said very little. Then he left the same way he arrived: through the back door, in an old pickup.

Anyone who is a fan of Portis’s work knows that this is just how he is—private, unpredictable—and that is just how he should be, himself. Yet, no matter how much one admires his fiction or respects his eccentricity, the quality that binds most Portis fans is a sense of bewilderment. How can the general public not recognize that it has a comic genius in its midst? The tragedy of this oversight never fails to confound. Most Americans don’t know Portis’s name, let alone the names of his five novels. Many may have heard of the John Wayne Western *True Grit*, but few will know that the film was based on a book by that title. This is Portis’s fate. He is a fringe author with a small but devoted cadre of admirers, often described as a “cult novelist” with a “cult following.” Being a member of this so-called cult myself, I know that being a fan of anything fringe means that popular taste relegates fans’ tastes to the fringe as well.

The feeling of marginalization is closely related to a feeling of privilege, and it is all too easy for fans to imagine themselves as members of an elite, fortunate band of insiders possessing special knowledge. In matters of artistic taste, as with culinary and musical preferences, those people holding a minority opinion may often consider themselves as having not an odd or eccentric taste so much as an advanced one, and assume that it is a discriminating palate that allows appreciation of the artistic qualities that the masses have overlooked. One sometimes senses this from people who “get” avant-garde jazz, or who prefer salty, smoky Scotches to light ones tasting of heather: “You might understand the appeal one day,” the salty Scotch sipper’s eyes seem to say to people of opposing opinions, “if you’re lucky.” However haughty or humble Portis fans might be, we know that the masses are missing out. Some of us are haunted by that essential question: why is this great artist so underappreciated? I certainly wonder this. Taking the author’s character into consideration, I also wonder: does Portis even care?

Judging from the nearly forty years he has spent avoiding bookstore readings, TV and radio appearances, and other forms of self-promotion, I have to assume that Charles Portis doesn’t mind his status as a cult novelist; if he loathed his limited recognition, wouldn’t he have made himself more visible in order to sell

Aaron Gilbreath  
.....

his wares? Granted, he can afford to be aloof. His second novel, *True Grit*, has sold over fourteen million copies, and the 1969 screen adaptation generated so much money—\$14.25 million at the box office—that he is probably still subsisting from some of the revenue. The issue of money aside, maybe he values his privacy so much that he doesn't mind sacrificing further popular and commercial success in order to maintain that privacy. It seems an error of logic to assume that just because I, a fan, want Portis's books to be better known, Portis wants his books to be better known too. Then again, maybe I am wrong. Maybe he secretly wishes that a wider audience recognized his talent. Or maybe he wishes that his four other novels sold not only as well as *True Grit*, but as well as certain John Grisham or Stephen King novels. Some Portis fans consider him a modern Mark Twain, but does he wish that his name was as recognizable as Twain's? Or even as recognizable as Kent Haruf's and Tom Perrotta's? Portis's feelings on the subject of his literary obscurity might, like him, remain forever hidden from us, because he won't surface long enough to let reporters ask him about it.

Collecting all the information about his personal life, from all the available articles, book reviews, and columns, here is the thin portrait:

Charles Portis lives alone in Little Rock, a bachelor. He writes during the day. At night or in the afternoon, he sometimes enjoys a few drinks with friends at local taverns. He is seventy-seven years old. He drives an old pickup. He did, and possibly still does, vacation in Mexico.

Some of this is hearsay. Whatever the truth about his private life or his feelings about his limited recognition, his nature seems so much like the position his books hold in the American literary canon. It is as if his books themselves were extensions of his personality: quiet, humble creatures, comfortable inhabiting the edge of the literary world and drawing as little attention to themselves as possible.

Here is what is known about him for sure:

Charles McColl Portis was born in 1933 in El Dorado, Arkansas, and grew up in various southern Arkansas towns, primarily Hamburg. After high school, he enlisted in the Marine Corps and served in the Korean War. Following his discharge in 1955, he studied journalism at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, figuring that journalism would be easy, maybe even fun. He ended up reporting for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* in Memphis, then for the *Arkansas Gazette* in Little Rock. In 1960 the *New York Herald Tribune* hired him as a general assignment reporter, and he moved to Manhattan. Three years later

THE GETTYSBURG REVIEW  
.....

he moved to London, working as the *Herald Tribune's* London bureau chief. In 1964, after one year in England, he quit journalism entirely and moved back to Arkansas to try writing fiction. He labored in a fishing shack, a two-finger typist, and two years later, his first novel, *Norwood*, was published by Simon and Schuster. He wrote it in six months.

Which is all well and good—the facts, the dates, the biographical details. But most readers of literary fiction are interested in character, in motivation, in the interior worlds of the human heart and mind, so facts alone won't satisfy curiosity about this elusive author. I, for one, want to know *why* he left reporting, what he was thinking and feeling when he decided to write fiction.

I tried to contact him through his agent so I could ask him myself. I didn't even request an interview, only the opportunity to ask him one simple question with no possibility of a follow-up: what made him decide to try fiction? A month passed with no response. Then two months. Finally I received an e-mail from his agent's assistant. Mr. Portis had answered my question in a single sentence: "I simply wanted to try my hand at fiction, and if it hadn't worked out I would have gone back to journalism." "Try his hand"—it was the exact same phrase he had used in the interview he had given in 2001 to a man at the *Arkansas Gazette*. I knew no more than when I had started.

It seemed a simple question at the time, but the more I parsed it out while awaiting a reply, the more I realized it wasn't a single question so much as a single topic composed of many component questions. For instance, why did he quit his job to write fiction? Was he afraid of getting stuck in reporting for the rest of his life? Did he have a promising idea for a book but no time to write it while he worked in London? Clearly he must have had great confidence in his abilities since his fiction experiment risked everything, but wasn't he afraid of failure, about what would happen to him professionally if he couldn't write a decent novel? He was abandoning not simply his post, but his career, the trade he had studied in college, with which he earned a living for six years. Or maybe the risk wasn't as high as it seems: if he failed at the novel, he could always try to get another reporting job in Arkansas. Part of me wonders if someone suggested that he try writing fiction, that a coworker might once have said something such as, "You'd be great at it," but, of course, Portis could just as easily have come up with the idea himself. Maybe he wanted a line of work that rewarded him for being funny, or craved a literary form where his sense of humor could take center stage. Maybe he knew his true talent lay in the invented rather than the reported tale,

Aaron Gilbreath  
.....

and he had grown tired of being shackled to a profession that required little of the imagination and narrative skill that he possessed. Or was the attraction to fiction a byproduct of the era?

At that time in the early sixties, despite the effect Truman Capote's "nonfiction novel" *In Cold Blood* would soon have on the literary world, novel writing was still de rigueur for a writer. Tom Wolfe worked with Portis in the *Herald Tribune's* Manhattan office; Portis's desk sat right behind Wolfe's. In his introduction to the book *The New Journalism*, Wolfe says that the novel then still seemed like one of the last ways in which "an American could, overnight, in a flash, utterly transform his destiny." So many other successful authors had changed their fortunes by writing novels, quickly morphing themselves from blue-collar laborers into wealthy socialites. Portis might have hoped to do the same. Richard Wright had done it; he had been a bellboy. John Steinbeck had done it too; he had once been employed as a hod carrier. William Faulkner, who had famously been a postmaster, and even washed dishes in a Greek restaurant in Connecticut for his meals, came to own a sprawling Mississippi estate. Still, fortunes might have had nothing to do with Portis's decision to write fiction. Maybe he was just homesick for green, wooded Arkansas. Certainly his protagonists yearn for the familiarity and comfort of home, and, like so many of them, the restlessness and ambitions of Portis's youth might have yielded to an unbearable alienation, stuck out there all alone in dank, dark England. Whatever his motivation, his career change proved a fruitful one.

When *Norwood* came out in 1966, it received rave reviews. The *Boston Globe* described it as "Exaggerated naturalism in the tradition of *Huckleberry Finn*." The *New York Times Book Review* called it "Delightfully original. . . . *Norwood* travels the same territory as Humbert Humbert: the neon desert invested with totems of mid-century America." The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* said *Norwood* was "a thing to be remembered for a long, long time."

The book is short, more character than plot driven, and it contains a string of comic interactions masquerading as its deceptively simple plot. Yet, as unusual as the book might have appeared compared to the well-regarded, more traditionally plotted novels of that era (*In the Heat of the Night*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Valley of the Dolls*), *Norwood* was funny and odd, and critics appreciated its charms. *Texas Monthly* called Portis "the contemporary heir to the tradition of Mark Twain." *Newsday* called him "the funniest writer publishing today. He also has the finest ear for dialogue."

His second novel fared even better. *True Grit* was a bestseller. One reviewer at

the *Nation* said Mr. Portis “is what they used to call a natural, but there’s more to it than that. *True Grit* is surely some kind of classic; readers of William Eastlake might appreciate it best, but only a mean person won’t enjoy it.” The *Washington Post* said, “Portis has made an epic and a legend. Mattie Ross should soon join the pantheon of America’s legendary figures such as Kit Carson, Wyatt Earp and Jesse James.”

The book sold over sixty thousand hardback copies in its twenty-one-week run on the bestseller list. The movie version, starring John Wayne and Glen Campbell, remains one of the most famous Westerns of all time. The screen adaptation’s success further fueled book sales, and *True Grit* sold over 1.5 million paperback copies. John Wayne won an Academy Award and a Golden Globe for Best Actor for his performance as character Rooster Cogburn; this later proved to be the only Oscar of Wayne’s long career. The great irony, of course, is that an author can remain unknown after this sort of success.

Still wondering why Portis turned to fiction, I searched available articles for insight but found no answers. The most detailed treatment of the subject appeared in a rare Q&A Portis participated in at the University of Arkansas in 2001 concerning the *Arkansas Gazette*. In it, Portis describes his decision to leave journalism for fiction: “As I say, the *Tribune* people had always treated me very well, but I wanted to try my hand at fiction, so I gave notice and went home.” He just decided and went? Just like that? No, I think, rereading that, *nothing is that simple*. Whatever his feelings at the time, he seemed to have shared none of them with his fellow reporters.

As Wolfe writes in *The New Journalism*:

One day [Portis] suddenly quit as London correspondent for the *Herald Tribune*. That was generally regarded as a very choice job in the newspaper business. Portis quit cold one day, just like that, without a warning. [And, after writing his first two novels, Portis] actually went on to live out the fantasy . . . in a way that was so much like the way it happens in the dream, it was unbelievable. . . . He sold both books to the movies. . . . He made a fortune. . . . A *fishing* shack! In *Arkansas*! It was too goddamned perfect to be true, and yet there it was. Which is to say that the old dream, The Novel, has never died.

Even Portis’s direct quotes generate more questions than answers. He once told a *Newsweek* reporter about how a friend’s car was vandalized in Arkansas. The thieves took everything inside it, from a busted screwdriver to old envelopes, but they left the copy of Portis’s third novel, *The Dog of the South*. “They were

Aaron Gilbreath  
.....

probably right,” the author said. “If they hadn’t heard of it, what were the chances it was any good?” Is this comment evidence of low self-esteem? Is it an expression of disappointment over the nature of his career? Or is it precisely the sort of droll self-effacement that has endeared the comic author to his fans?

In an *Esquire* article in 1998, “Our Least-Known Great Novelist,” journalist Ron Rosenbaum writes about the incongruity between Portis’s skill and obscurity. Portis, he says is

the most original, indescribable sui generis talent over-looked by literary culture in America, . . . who—if there’s any justice in literary history as opposed to literary celebrity—will come to be regarded as the author of classics on the order of a twentieth-century Mark Twain.

Reading this, anyone might wonder if Rosenbaum is a lone, frothing wolf, a devotee so fervent that his fandom has made him unable to see the very artistic weaknesses that have denied Portis wider appreciation. The thing is, Rosenbaum is not alone in his adoration.

As the *Esquire* article reports, “Portis has become the subject of a kind of secret society, a small but extremely elite . . . group of admirers among other writers who consider him perhaps the least-known great writer in America.” Among Portis’s admirers are movie producer, director, and screenwriter Nora Ephron, who compared Portis to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and writer and humorist Roy Blount, Jr., who considers Portis a writer whose books should be in every American home. “*Norwood* is my favorite book,” Blount said in one blurb—not just his favorite book by Portis, but his favorite of all time. Larry McMurtry called Portis “original, quirky, exciting.”

Following *True Grit*’s popularity, *Norwood* was made into a movie in 1970. Commercially, it didn’t earn as well as its predecessor. After that, Portis went underground. As a *Newsweek* reporter said in 1985, despite Portis’s financial success

very few people at the Little Rock taverns where he enjoys the occasional late-afternoon libation recognize [him as] one of America’s finest comic writers. A bachelor, Portis is a famous raconteur among his circle of old friends but shuns publicity and refuses to be cast in the role of the artist as seer.

Maybe Portis’s own solitary, misunderstood nature explains why his fiction treats eccentrics, innocents, and loners with such compassion.

THE GETTYSBURG REVIEW  
.....

While each novel's storyline varies wildly, all but one of Portis's novels are built around a journey. In *Norwood*, the title character travels from his native Texas to Manhattan to collect a measly seventy-dollar debt owed to him by a marine buddy. In *True Grit*, the protagonist Mattie Ross travels through Indian Territory to track down her father's killer. In *Gringos*, Jimmy Burns travels to what he hopes will be a respectable job at a small Mayan ruin in the jungles of southern Mexico. In *The Dog of the South*, Ray Midge drives through Mexico, into Honduras, in order to retrieve his wife, Norma, along with the Texaco and American Express credit cards and Ford Torino that Norma's ex-husband took from him.

Like Portis himself, all of his protagonists are Southerners, hailing either from east Texas or Arkansas, and their departure from home creates the dramatic fish-out-of-water conditions from which the books' humor and action derive. Reviewing for *Newsweek* in 1979, Walter Clemons said reading *The Dog of the South* "is like being held down and tickled." Many elements make these books funny. Portis's sly wit is one. His reserved, almost droll delivery is another. His dialogue generates huge laughs, as do his strange inventions (a college-educated chicken; a dog trained to play songs on harmonicas) and minute observations of advertisements and road signs, to descriptions of sandwich meats. The primary source of each novel's high humor, though, comes from the way each protagonist's culture and expectations clash with the cultural realities of their new, foreign location. One of Portis's great talents is his ability to locate both the pathos and comedy in clashes of culture, and to then use these cultural collisions to generate action and drive the plot. Whether a naive car mechanic navigates a crowded, disinterested New York City, or an Arkansas native finds himself alone in Honduras, the ways in which representatives of these different regions interact—and often the way people subsequently misunderstand each other—produce the narrative drama and humor. Portis builds entire books around these exchanges.

In a review of *Gringos*, the *New York Times* characterized all of Portis's protagonists as "determined innocents." Mattie, Norwood, Ray—these characters "always set off on outlandish quests with an eye to winning a hostile world to their odd points of view." What the review doesn't mention is that they are also essentially good-natured people, with a strong sense of right and wrong, of justice and injustice, and ideas about the way things should and shouldn't be. On their journeys, the world directly challenges their hopes, innocence, and values. Despite their country wit or specialized knowledge (car repair, guitar strumming, Mayan artifacts), all are essentially naifs adrift in a world whose nature and disappointments they will never fully understand. And no matter how well they

Aaron Gilbreath  
.....

adapt or keenly navigate their new surroundings, being away from home casts them as outsiders, and thus they also yearn for home.

In his entry to *Contemporary Fiction Writers of the South: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, John L. Idol, Jr. says Portis's penchant for writing road novels places the author in

a tradition as old as the art of storytelling, the tradition followed by the poet of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, by Homer, by the author of the legends of Hercules and Jason, and by Torquato Tasso, Miguel de Cervantes, Edmund Spenser, Thomas Nashe, John Bunyan, Henry Fielding, Mark Twain and countless other writers—the tradition of putting a character on the road and recording what happens along the way.

In literature, character is largely revealed through action, and Portis's protagonists are not only tested, their true characters are revealed during their respective trips. "Portis's approach," Idol says, "is thus a time-tested method of seeing how a character develops in his or her confrontation with the world at large . . . [with the] protagonists discovering and measuring themselves in their travels." *True Grit* is the perfect example.

When Mattie Ross ventures into wild, dangerous Indian Territory to try to avenge her father's murder, myriad forces interfere with her plans. Vast distances, foul weather, finances—everything works against her, but her greatest obstacle is peoples' doubt. Mattie is fourteen years old, a child, and the adults she encounters question her abilities, meaning, they doubt her *grit*. As the title suggests, the obstacles that threaten to keep Mattie from achieving her goal also reveal the iron core of her dogged nature: she not only defines herself by her tenacity, but after she dies, and after readers finish the book, she will be remembered as one of a rare breed of people who refuse to fail. When a boatman won't carry her across the Arkansas River, she slaps him in the face a few times and races her horse through the turbulent water on her own. When the federal marshal, whom she paid to help find her father's killer, refuses to let her accompany him on the journey, she follows him anyway. Why? Because, as the marshal says in a later scene, Mattie didn't come to Indian Territory to run. She came to do what she came to do. Indian Territory may be a treacherous place, but her journey through it reveals her essence.

Sometimes the journey exposes as much about the book's theme as it does about its characters. *Norwood's* entire storyline is comic when summarized. The title character travels from Texas to Manhattan and back, and although he fails to collect his seventy dollars, he succeeds in getting himself into all sorts of trouble.

THE GETTYSBURG REVIEW  
.....

A naive, good-hearted folk singer and ex-marine, Norwood first drives east in a car. After discovering that the car was stolen, he ditches it to hop trains, hitchhike, and ride busses. Through the course of his adventure, he meets beatniks, a bread-delivery man, stern New Yorkers, a friendly, freeloading freelance writer, and Edmund B. Ratner, a British dwarf who claims to be the former “world’s smallest perfect fat man.” Later, on a bus, Norwood falls in love with the brunette Rita Lee, whom he later marries, and together they rescue “Joann the Wonder Hen, the College Educated Chicken” from a penny arcade. It is as funny a story as it is bizarre, but what really happens? Both Norwood’s nature and the nature of the human race is revealed.

When a freelance writer invites Norwood into his Lower East Side apartment for a cheap lunch of potted meat, not only does the novel’s theme emerge, but Portis divulges his belief about the character of all humanity: as diverse a species as we are, we are all more alike than we are different:

“This stuff is cheap but it’s very nutritious,” [the freelancer said]. He picked up the can and read from it. “Listen to this: ‘beef tripe, beef hearts, beef, pork, salt, vinegar, flavoring, sugar and sodium nitrate.’ Do you know what tripe is?”

“It’s the gut part.”

“That’s what I thought. I suspected it was something like that.”

“It’s all meat. Meat is meat. Have you ever eat any squirrel brains?”

“No, how are they?”

“About like calf brains. They’re not bad if you don’t think about it. The bad part is cracking them little skulls open. One thing I won’t eat is hog’s head cheese. My sister Vernell, you can turn her loose with a spoon and she’ll eat a pound of it before she gets up. Some people call it souse.”

“Why do they call it that?”

“I don’t know. You got to have a name for everything.”

“Yes, I hadn’t thought of that. Well, they’re both good names. *Tripe. Souse.*”

In the context of the book, with its large cast of characters, the list of ingredients becomes a commentary on the eclectic nature of the human race and, in a narrower sense, a symbol of the oddballs that Norwood encounters on his trip.

In *Contemporary Fiction Writers of the South*, John L. Idol, Jr. summarizes a few of Portis’s themes:

The tug between being on the road to somewhere and wanting to be at home doing everyday things in normal routines underlies all of Portis’ novels and

Aaron Gilbreath  
.....

gives rise to his chief themes: Restlessness and the desire to plant roots. . . . Portis sees restlessness everywhere, both as a part of man's nature and as a result of some triggering event that puts homebodies on the road, where some of them may have events swirling to meet them as fast as Huck Finn found them confronting him as he rafted down the Mississippi. . . . Just as writers from Françoise-Marie Voltaire, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson, and Thomas Wolfe, among others, have been able to do in staging comic and tragic events for their characters, Portis shows that restlessness has its moments of both high humor and profound sadness. He presents this restlessness as a trait of Americans, as well as a universal fact of man's existence.

Restlessness may not be Portis's chief theme, though it certainly is one of them. I believe that the theme in *Norwood* is tolerance. In some ways, all of Portis's road novels are about acceptance: his heroes venture into foreign lands where they are either accepted or rejected for their outsider status. If Portis's novels are built upon any sort of blueprint, then the journey of the hopeful outsider is it. The desire for some measure of social acceptance is a universal human trait, but maybe this thematic interest stems from Portis's own desire for acceptance, a need that springs from being unconventional and reclusive himself. Or maybe this thematic interest is a byproduct of the author's life in Manhattan, Korea, and London, the experience of having been the outsider himself, the foreigner with the funny accent and "strange" ways that might have caused certain people to question his intelligence. Or maybe it is simpler than that: maybe he has felt like an outsider his whole life, quiet, solitary, an artist among blue-collar workers, relatively outcast even at home. Whatever the origin of Portis's empathy and themes, his road novels certainly have something to offer those who speculate about his personality and the way he has spent the last four decades.

The last four decades of the Portis biography are littered with holes. Although *True Grit* came out a mere two years after *Norwood*, eleven years lapsed between *True Grit* and Portis's third novel, *The Dog of the South*. Six years passed between his third and fourth books, and six more passed until he released his fourth and then *Gringos*, his fifth. Since *Gringos* appeared in 1991, he has published two short stories in the *Atlantic* (in 1992 and 1996), two pieces of nonfiction (in 1999 and 2003) and a piece of satire (2005), but those are hardly enough to satisfy the hunger of fans who have been waiting nineteen years to read a new Portis book. As Ed Park says in his article "Like Cormac McCarthy, but Funny" in the *Believer*,

THE GETTYSBURG REVIEW  
.....

“Silence, with side orders of cunning and exile, can lend luster to a writer’s work.” Adding to Portis’s mystique is the fact that he hasn’t published a new novel since 1991. Whether he has spent any part of this period writing a sixth novel is anyone’s guess.

The *New York Sun* once speculated about the cause of Portis’s marginal status:

There is usually a reason why an author has been overlooked, not always just, but explanatory all the same. In Mr. Portis’s case, it may simply be that he hasn’t taken himself seriously in the way Thomas Pynchon or William Gaddis has; it may also be that his work too quickly calls up the names of so many other writers. But it’s most likely that *True Grit* the novel (1968) was fatally overshadowed by *True Grit* the Oscar-winning John Wayne movie (1969), and that John Wayne’s portrayal has soured and sucked the color out of Charles Portis’s reputation.

I don’t buy that. It seems far more likely that Portis’s novels would be better known had he more actively promoted them by thrusting himself into the public eye. Or, there is always the very real possibility that the American reading public just doesn’t favor the guy’s writing. The overzealous fan in me wants to throw up my hands and say that the reason Portis is overlooked is because the general public’s taste is crap. They like the *Twilight* series and *Harry Potter*, and prefer watching movies and reality TV shows to reading books. Of course they cannot appreciate Portis! But to say this would be unfair, and, as much as I hate to admit it, untrue. Taste is personal, not objective, and therefore taste cannot be judged. Also, anyone with half an opinion can name what they think are the great underappreciated novels of the twentieth century. Don Carpenter’s *Hard Rain Falling*, or John Williams’s *Stoner*, maybe Barry Hannah’s *Geronimo Rex*—I have heard all mentioned in such lists, and all are great books, but in the end it is all relative, because taste is relative, so what is overappreciated versus underappreciated is not truly up for debate.

Of course, many fans, including Ron Rosenbaum, still carry secret hopes that their author will get his due. As Jeff Baker points out in an article in the *Oregonian* in 1999, “I Want to Be Alone,” a “funny thing happened” as Portis stayed underground and four of his novels fell out of print:

His books were attracting a loyal following of writers and serious readers who thought it was a shame that someone so original and quirky should be known only for a Western, even a great Western like *True Grit*.

Aaron Gilbreath  
.....

Rosenbaum's public outcry led to Portis's books being reprinted. As he wrote in his *Esquire* piece:

It is a crime and a scandal, it's virtually clinically insane, that Portis' last three books are out of print and not in paperback. . . . Some smart publisher will earn an honored place in literary history and the hearts of his countrymen by bringing out a complete and accessible edition—now.

After reading one of Rosenbaum's columns in the *New York Observer*, Tracy Carns, the publishing director at Overlook Press, went to the Strand bookstore in Manhattan, located a few used Portis novels, and became an instant devotee. Heeding Rosenbaum's advice, Carns acquired the rights to Portis's four out-of-print books and, starting in 1999, began publishing them in new paperback editions. Considering Portis's legacy of neglect, a press named Overlook sounds like the ideal publisher for him. And now, further opportunities for a possible "rebirth" keep occurring.

In an interesting twist of fate, the Coen Brothers released a remake of *True Grit* on December 25, 2010. It seems fitting for directors of cult films to revitalize a cult novelist's most accomplished story. But still, no matter how many times the Coens might mention him in TV interviews and press, too few people will have heard the name Charles Portis to satisfy many fans.

Whether this satisfies or irritates Portis is another story. Why should he care? He has money, friends, (maybe) a house, time that he is truly free to fill as he pleases, and, unlike most of us, he has a group of passionate admirers. Aren't these many of the things that most people yearn for? Maybe this makes me a lesser fan, but I don't really care whether or not Rosenbaum's hopes are realized—that justice one day vindicates Portis and literary history eventually regards his works as classics on par with Twain's. Not because I don't think Portis deserving. Not that I am not privately rooting for him or constantly preaching the gospel of Portis to any fellow reader who will listen to my impassioned sermons. It is simply that the subject of recognition seems beside the point, because we of the Portis cult have his books *now*, and now is all we can know. What books compose the future canon is for the future to decide. As much as I respect Rosenbaum's fervor and thank him for getting the books back into print, the idea that justice has anything to do with determining which books are well regarded, or even recognized by history, goes beyond idealism into the realm of wishful thinking; on a bad day, I would go so far as to say that it is even proof that he doesn't truly understand the way the world works. This is America. Like it or not, what is

THE GETTYSBURG REVIEW  
.....

popular isn't necessarily what is good. Some of the best jazz musicians of the late fifties and early sixties died before their performances and compositions were recognized as the brilliant, heartfelt outpourings that they were. If you want recognition, you can't rely on justice. You have to promote. Good luck getting Portis to do that. Or maybe that is part of the reason Rosenbaum was so vocal in the first place: he was promoting what Portis would not. Maybe, maybe . . . everything I say about Portis seems to begin with *maybe*. Discussing him feels like using translucent paint to compose a portrait of an invisible man.

Even if silence and exile add luster to a writer's work, I will grant that people shouldn't like things simply because they are obscure. That seems a predilection best left to trend-conscious and rebellious adolescents. Still, if mystique helps fuel Portis's fandom, even in the slightest way, my gut tells me it is better to have an obscure artist admired by a few people than for such a talent to remain completely neglected. Obscurity draws fans to artists the way light draws gnats.

While milling around the Capital Hotel lobby last month before the *Oxford American* award ceremony, someone asked Portis if he would like to grace the cover of a local society magazine when the new version of *True Grit* came out. The author said, "I don't think it would be a big seller for you." Another interested bystander asked Portis if he liked the Coen Brothers remake of *True Grit*. Portis said, "I'm all for it, as long as the checks don't bounce."