

## Daniel Woodrell Puts Country Noir on the Map

David Rice

**I**n the fall of 2011, Missouri-based author Daniel Woodrell followed his breakout hit *Winter's Bone* (2006) with *The Outlaw Album*, his first collection of short stories. Although not his most gripping work, it successfully showcases the full spectrum of themes, scenarios, and styles that constitute "country noir," a term he coined with his 1996 novel *Give us a Kiss: A Country Noir*.

Because noir is a pervasive atmosphere and feeling about the world, not a set of specific ideas or plot devices, it has always welcomed fringe developments. Country noir started as just one more of these, but in recent years the growing ranks of its practitioners and the increasing quality of their output have etched it more vividly onto the literary map. The novels of *The Bayou Trilogy*, Woodrell's first project, dating back to 1986, were out of print until an omnibus edition came out in April 2011. This edition, along with *Winter's Bone* and *The Outlaw Album*, were his only books in print until, all at once, his novels *Tomato Red*, *Woe to Live On*, *Give us a Kiss*, and *The Death of Sweet Mister* returned to shelves in handsome reprints in the spring of 2012. With this windfall, Woodrell has emerged from the obscurity of the first two decades of his career to the point where we must now go beyond likening him to Faulkner and McCarthy and begin discussing his work in its own right, using his own term for it.

**A**fter the commercial disappointment of the Louisiana-set *Bayou Trilogy*, he returned to his native Missouri Ozarks, both in person and in print. Here, he found the voice and the gravity that would become the foundations of country noir's new brand of serious crime fiction.

This was a move deeper into his own heritage – he's had family in southern Missouri since before the Civil War – but country noir is bigger than one man's hometown mythology. In 2011, Donald Ray Pollock, author of 2009's excellent story collection, *Knockemstiff*, set in the real town of Knockemstiff, Ohio, published his first novel, *The Devil all the Time*, while Frank Bill published his debut story collection, *Crimes in Southern Indiana* (his debut novel comes out in 2013), both to much acclaim. Both of these authors have taken Woodrell's Midwestern menace and amped it up into a new zone of meth-driven anguish that's as relentlessly brutal as anything recently published by a major house (in this case, Doubleday and FSG). They go a fair piece beyond Woodrell into new realms of the American inferno, but his fingerprints are unmistakable on their style and attitude, to say nothing of their current success.

Across the Atlantic, British crime writer David Peace completed his *Red Riding* quartet in 2002. Based on true stories of semi-supernatural murders on the desolate Yorkshire moors in the 1970s and 80s, the quartet is country noir's most ambitious achievement to date, and the three *Red Riding* films, released in 2009 and 2010, have been widely hailed as modern masterpieces.

The smash success of the multi-Oscar nominated and Sundance-winning film version of *Winter's Bone* in 2010, combined with 2011's *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, about a young woman trying to parse what happened to her when she lived with a cult up in the Catskills, cement country noir's position in our cultural landscape. Both films have branded the genre with a set of actual locations, soundtracks, and actors (John Hawkes lends his emaciated and scraggly-bearded face to both features), proving, in the way that

only mainstream cinema can, that the genre is now recognizable as such, newly imbued with mass entertainment value (to say nothing at all of *Breaking Bad*'s incredibly exciting if morally questionable aestheticization of the meth trade). The age of country noir as an out of print fringe genre, buried in an unreachable rural dead zone, is over.

**Woodrell** didn't conjure country noir out of the Ozarks alone. He took Faulkner's obsession with heredity and degenerating family lines, fused it with the biblically fraught sagas of gun-wielding madmen haunting the hill country of Cormac McCarthy's early East Tennessee novels (*The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, and *Child of God*), and boiled it all down with Raymond Chandler's terseness and grim humor, James Ellroy's rapid-fire late night rants, and the schizophrenically mounting suspense of 50s small-town noir master Jim Thompson, best known for *The Killer Inside Me*, *Savage Night*, and *Pop. 1280*.

Since the Midwest never enjoyed the genteel plantation life, Faulkner's tragic air of great houses rotting away is absent in Woodrell, whose Ozarks are far colder and drier than Faulkner's rank, gothic Mississippi. The edges are sharper, the sentences shorter. His poor people have always been poor, so their only legacy is one of lowdown survival. A house in *Winter's Bone* was "built small but extra bedrooms and box windows and other ideas had been added on by different residents who'd had hammers and leftover wood. There always seemed to be walls covered by black tarpaper ... waiting for more walls and a roof ..."

Steinbeck wrote about this kind of white lower class squalor, but in a more sentimental mode, searching for its inner poetry through a logic of opposites – the more degraded the reality, the more exalted the description. Woodrell turns sharply away from this, letting his characters speak in their own broken diction, rising and falling with the cadences of their "old blood ... set firm long before hotshot baby Jesus ever even burped milk'n shit yellow." So country noir is defiantly lowbrow – even the term "country noir," rather than, say, "rural noir," has a lowbrow ring to it. It's literature to be taken seriously, but never soberly.

Both in tone and content, Woodrell draws as much from campfire stories, murder ballads, and the swaggering story-songs of southern rock bands like the Drive-by Truckers (whom he cites as an influence), as from his literary forebears. His narrators speak in conspiratorial whispers, like they've taken you aside and chosen to make you the keeper of a dangerous secret in a place where secrets are always dangerous. In *Winter's Bone*, a man is dead because "either he stole or he told. Those are the things they kill you for."

Woodrell describes the inhabitants of his Ozarks as people who have been "groomed to live outside square law and abide by the remorseless blood-soaked commandments that governed lives led outside square law." He takes you into this profoundly private society, entrenched in the dead center of the map, and makes you feel the weight of a lifetime lived there.

**If** urban noir is about what happens when so many people crowd into one place that the forces passing among them ignite into sudden violence, country noir is about what happens when there are too few people to fill a place, and the forces binding them together become unbearably intense. In urban noir, people disappear into a mystery at the heart of civilization. In country noir they disappear into a mystery beyond its outer edges.

Before returning to the Ozarks, Woodrell paid tribute to classic urban noir in *The Bayou Trilogy*. The trilogy follows prizefighter-turned-policeman Rene Shade through mazes of corruption in the fictional Louisiana town of St. Bruno. A kid from the wrong side of the tracks, most of the criminals he hunts down were at one point his friends. The way in which warring factions share the same roots reaches all the way through Woodrell's oeuvre. St. Bruno is big enough to incorporate the tropes of urban noir, but it's also small enough to ensure that no one involved is a stranger. Ree Dolly, the teenaged heroine of *Winter's Bone*, "decided to name all the Miltons: Thump, Blond, Catfish, Spider, Whoop, Rooster, Scrap ... Lefty, Dog, Punch, Pinkeye, Momsy ... Cotton, Hog-jaw, Ten Penny ... at least two dozen Miltons moved about in Ree's world." Already in *The Bayou Trilogy*, Woodrell is beginning to shy away from the anonymous dealings of the big city and toward country noir's extreme intimacy.

Stylistically, however, these novels remain busy riffing on urban noir: "The archaic angle of his sideburns and the dead-end-kid swoop of his long brown hair raised some upfront doubts about his good citizenship that his face did nothing to allay;" "He tended to scowl by reflex and grunt in response. His neck was a holdover from normal-necked person's nightmare, and when he crossed his arms it looked like two large snakes procreating a third." Sentences like these are nowhere to be found in Woodrell's later work.

**A**t the very end of *The Outlaw Album*, two brothers sit "studying the woods, looking for paths" while the police approach to take one of them away. As they study these paths, they realize that they "remembered them all from before [they] were born." From 1996 on, Woodrell has been going down these paths, steadily dredging up pre-birth memories.

In *The Bayou Trilogy*, a traveling killer thinks about the ghosts of "... bottom-born, forceful types ... Their criminal actions, and the still remembered drama of their bloody lives, spooked feelings awake and made them flit about in [his] deeper parts." This could well serve as an epigraph for *The Outlaw Album*.

The twelve stories in this collection really do function as an album, melding the general aura of the American outlaw with detailed accounts of shootings, stabbings, rape, and arson in the southern Missouri of today. Like Faulkner's vision of the Old Testament's begats stretching unbroken into the present, Woodrell's stories espouse a belief that, for better or worse, the legacy of the American Outlaw is not over. Even though only one story – "Woe to Live On," about marauders during the Civil War – is set in the distant past, all convey the feeling that life is predetermined by felt but unseen myths. The facts of history may be unknown, or untrue, but history itself issues palpably from the earth.

In "Twin Forks," a man works at a store where "the locals who came in were often people of a kind he hadn't truly believed still existed ... pioneer-lean old men who poached deer whenever hungry and wouldn't pay taxes ... with the beards of prophets who read the Bible at a certain slant ... living hidden in the hills." People like this are distributed throughout Woodrell's writing, and the land and its outlaw heritage speaks through them.

When it comes to the violence from which country noir derives its life energy, Woodrell has found a voice that makes it real and irrevocable, departing significantly from the crackerjack splatter of *The Bayou Trilogy*, and of urban noir in general. In "Night Stand," a man finds a disturbed younger man standing over his bed in the middle of the night, and instinctively stabs him: "A popping sound came from inside the man's ribs ...

that plonk sound of striking a knothole hammering a nail ... hot flung blood in the eyes blinded [him] ... [his] bare feet were slapping the wood floor, slapping down hard like he was clambering to the crest of a hill that wasn't there ..."

The glamour of violence isn't forgotten, but it doesn't come as cheap as it used to, and all of Woodrell's outlaws know its price. The conviction that life and death are real, and that the progression from one into the other cannot be reversed, is unmistakable in these stories.

Most evocative of the claustrophobic communities in which these brutal acts occur is "Florianne," where a father whose daughter has disappeared realizes that, if they ever find who took her, "I'll probably know him. Maybe I've known him all my life ... I might have given him credit at the store, let his tab ride till next Friday." There are so few people that everyone has to play both friend and foe to everyone else.

As *Winter's Bone's* Ree Dolly walks through her family's cemetery plot, she looks at "the headstones ... gray-green with time ... the name Dolly was in big letters on so many that Ree's skin spooked." In that novel, as in *The Outlaw Album*, there is zero breathing room among those who live together. This tightness lends real weight to the violence that occurs, because its shock waves cannot escape, as they can in the city. In the country, there aren't enough minds around to absorb them, so they compound over time, seeping into the ground, and then seeping back out into the people who tread upon it.

These stories exist in a middle place between the real and the imaginary, where Iraq vets and meth chefs meld into the Americana of Paul Bunyan and Davy Crocket. You have to believe that you could turn off of any highway in Middle America and find this place, and yet you remain forever on the cusp, unsure whether or not such a place is really on the map.

**The** classic urban noir of the 20s-50s belonged to LA. It saw in California the place where the dream of riding off into the sunset ends, and the reality of stagnation and decay begins. What is California, after all, if not hard proof that the West does not go on forever? If you want the ride to keep going, you have to plunge into cinema or turn back into the heartland. For the first time since the advent of the Western, a literary and cinematic genre is doing just this. Country noir has reopened the closed frontier, where outlaws operate unencumbered, and dragged it into the present era.

Unlike the tabloid-noir of James Ellroy's *LA Quartet*, country noir does not feed on a glut of sensationalized information. Rather, this is a world where people die for letting a single word slip, and others pay dearly to find out a fragment of the truth.

So country noir teases out a fundamental mystery about people, one whose power grows when there's nothing around to hem it in. In "Trespassing Between Heaven and Hell," Frank Bill writes, "They's evils in people that make little if any sense, and trying to figure them out does a person little to no good." Every one of Woodrell's stories attests to the truth of this.

Woodrell, Pollock, Frank Bill, and David Peace all succeed at conjuring this mystery out of their stretches of countryside and those few people who inhabit them. Their characters are as close to one another and to the land as it is possible to get. Right up against the mystery, they're forced to stare straight into it. They know the places where they live down to every last shack, shed, and rotting vehicle, and yet there is so little to know compared to the vastness of the unknown that their knowledge flirts with nothingness, like a campfire in a clearing at night, with the woods spreading out infinitely into the dark.

This paradox breeds constant violence, as if there were no other way to keep that campfire flickering. Violence rears up from the dark reaches of time and space, and then recedes back where it came from, to be preserved forever as a story to tell or a secret to keep (and an ever-fertile source of more of itself). It melds the real and the magical, the brute and the ethereal, the past and the present, gluing these opposites together and letting them vibrate with ferocious intensity. David Peace's Yorkshire Ripper chops the wings off of swans and sews them onto the backs of murdered girls, to make them into angels: herein lies violence's ability to force the imaginary into contact with cold spilled blood.

Blood, going back to Faulkner's obsession with the intermixing of white and black blood, is the vessel of country noir's mystery. It's the substance of both life and death, depending only on if it's inside or outside of the body. Spilling it is the only way to find the truth about a person's inner nature, but, as soon as it's been spilled, it returns into abstraction, ceasing to tell any truth at all as soon as the person whose secret it kept dies. As Ree Dolly searches for her father's body, blood is the only tool she has: asking for an audience with the one man who may know what happened, she insists to his wife that "some of the same blood runs through us ... that's gotta mean something, don't it?"

**In** the way that it hinges on something violent and unknown that happened in the countryside, *Winter's Bone* is the prototypical country noir story. As Ree Dolly tries to find proof that her father really is dead, she departs the human realm and presses nearer to the heart of the mystery. This human realm – the town, the trailer, the house – is the point of departure, and also the place for thinking about and remembering what happened, like waking up in bed and trying to recall a dream. The stories start and end in this human realm, but their climaxes happen much farther out.

Out there, the unknowability of what happened is inseparable from the unknowability of where it happened: in the woods, in a cornfield, in a body of water. From Ree Dolly's hunt for her missing father to the lapses in the title character's memory about her time with the cult in *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, the countryside becomes a deadly and irresistibly attractive void. It's a point of transition between the community and its trove of stories, on the one hand, and the silent unknown of the Great Beyond, on the other. At its best, country noir evokes some of "that pious shade and silence pines create ... low limbs spread over fresh snow ... a stronger vault for the spirit than pews and pulpits ..."

After driving her out to the lake where her father's body resides, one of the women from a rival clan takes a sack off Ree Dolly's head and tells her, "Don't try'n guess where this is, or ever come back here." When she finds the corpse on the bottom, she saws off its hands to bring back to town: "Flecks of meat and wet bone hit Ree in the face and she closed her eyes and felt patters on her eyelids. When the blade cut through, Dad's body sank away from her grasp." This is all the closure Woodrell gives her. The rest of her father, and the real facts of his death, will stay forever on the bottom of the lake, embedded in nature and in a story never to be told, or written.

Down on this bottom, far from the reach of time, mystery breaks down into myth. It's the myth of some *presence* out there in the dark, not a beast with a body, but something that preys on people, and makes people prey on one another. It's something that cannot be known, but neither can it be ignored. You can feel it stirring in the best moments of a really good country noir story.

**I**n this light, Woodrell's distance from the literary mainstream starts to look deliberate, an extension of his choice to live in the same remoteness he writes about. His writing derives its ring of truth by issuing straight out of the unknown, and pulling the reader in, offering a particular feeling about the dark without any illumination of it.

From a reader's perspective, country noir began as a form of outsider art, coined by an unknown author writing about unknown places. But the characters in these places view themselves as insiders and all others as outsiders. They live according to fiercely guarded inner ways, resentful of observation. Now that mainstream America is prying ever more intently into these inner ways, some shock to the genre's fundamental mystery and integrity is inevitable. It may not be a betrayal on the authors' parts to tell the stories of places and people that do not want their stories told, but you can feel the tension mounting as they tell it to an audience that keeps getting bigger.

It's hard to predict how the renegade myth of white trash violence in the Midwest will fare if it becomes a stock myth in our culture, like that of the alcoholic LA detective or the Man With No Name, riding across the desert. From the vantage point of right now, all you can see is the genre's star rising. Even as the stories grow increasingly bleak and misanthropic, more and more people are lining up to hear them.

Now that Woodrell has encapsulated his career with *The Outlaw Album*, perhaps he'll turn in a new direction. But I doubt it. I think he'll keep going farther down the same paths, deeper into the land's memories of former lives and deaths.

As he does, I wonder what will happen to the actual tenuous reality of the places he goes to. Their mythic element will either fade entirely or increase to the point where it dwarfs the fact that they actually exist. On the literary map, there's no question that country noir is taking up ever more space. But on the map of America, the mystery reasserts itself: do these places still exist, or don't they? Is something really out there, or isn't it?