

Blues Stories:

“Poker With Nellie”

by Michael “Hawkeye” Herman

The University of Iowa Writers' Workshop was the first creative writing degree program in the United States, and since its founding in 1936, the program has been home to thousands of remarkable writers. The program claims among its graduates winners of virtually every major literary award, including seventeen winners of the Pulitzer Prize, six recent U.S. Poets Laureate, and numerous winners of the National Book Award, MacArthur Foundation Fellowships, and other major honors. For many years it was the only college/university that had a writers' workshop or serious literary curriculum, and most important, that paid published authors/poets to teach (1.).

In 1964, when I was an undergraduate at the Univ. of Iowa, a college buddy of mine from New York who was a hustler/gambler/superstitious-type guy participated in a weekly “off campus”/“select group” poker game that included a very few students and was primarily made up of professors and instructors in the arts & literary departments of the university.

One weeknight evening my classmate/gambler/friend asked me to accompany him to the ‘exclusive invite’ poker game which was held in the basement of one of the professors. I wasn’t a poker player, no money for such risks, but my gambler friend asked me to accompany him to the poker game to “bring him luck.” So I agreed to tag along and attend the poker game with him.

The game was held in the basement of a professor’s home. It was played at a real “professional” poker table that accommodated the 6 to 8 players. All the seats at the table were taken by poker players, and a couple of invited ‘schmoozers-kibitzers,’ like me, sat in folding chairs behind the active player(s) of whom we were who the guest. Most of the players were middle-aged ‘artsy-related’ bearded and/or mustachioed ‘professor-looking’ guys.

I sat in a chair behind my buddy and watched the cordial chat, but serious poker action. I noticed one of these guys kept his cash in an old ‘Robert Burns’ cigar box in his lap, only opening it if/when he needed to buy more chips from the ‘banker’, which he did more often than the other players. In other words, he was losing. He kept a pint bottle of Irish Whiskey in the inside breast pocket of his wool/tweed sports coat. He periodically ‘spiked’ the mug of coffee that he kept on the table next to his poker chips. He sipped at the coffee in between poker hands. A large aluminum electric coffee-maker sat on a small nearby table along with a supply of clean coffee mugs, and a large pitcher of drinking water. Most of the the poker players and the observers periodically availed themselves of the fresh coffee. A few of the “regulars” also brought a half-pint or pint bottle of their chosen alcohol to either ‘spike’ their coffee or drink ‘on the side.’ My poker-playing friend and I helped ourselves to the coffee and the water.

After about an hour of poker playing, my buddy and I excused ourselves to take a break, get some air, smoke a cigarette in the backyard, as was the habit with the players. Outside, in the fresh air, smoking our cigarettes, I asked my friend, “Hey, who’s the guy who keeps his cash in the old cigar box in his lap, only opening it if/when he needs to buy more chips from the ‘banker’, which he’s doing more often than the other players?”

My friend responded without hesitation, “Oh, yeah, that’s Nellie. He usually loses.”

Me: “Nellie?”

My friend, matter-of-factly: “Yeah, Nelson Algren, he teaches in the writers’ workshop.

Me: “Nelson Algren!! Holy shit! Nelson Algren! He wrote the novel “The Man With The Golden Arm”. It’s an award winning book (1.) and if I’m not mistaken, the first American novel to ‘deal’ with and detail the underground poker/gambling scene in the US and also the first American novel to deal with/detail drug/heroin addiction! It was a hit Hollywood film with Frank Sinatra and Kim Novak! (2.) His novel “A Walk On The Wild Side” (3.) was also a Hollywood film (4.).

THAT guy is Nelson Algren?!”

My buddy: "Yup. That's Nelson Algren, we call him 'Nellie.'

Me after a long pause to 'soak in' and think about the information: "Well, for the guy who 'wrote the book' on underground poker in America he's not a very good bluffer!"

We shared a laugh at my ironic humor.

My buddy with a smile: "Oh, so you noticed. Yeah, he's a "fish." Let's go back inside and I'll try to clean out the contents of his cigar box."

Back inside at the poker game my friend won a few hands, lost a few, and after an hour or more of poker we decided to depart, my friend feeling 'lucky' to 'break even' after a couple hours of poker play in the 'artsy underground' U. of Iowa poker scene. I never had occasion or an invitation from my friend to attend the poker game again. I can only assume it was because I failed to bring my friend any luck, beyond his breaking even/not losing any money.

Yup. THAT was 'Nellie,' award-winning American novelist Nelson Algren. Certainly a great writer of fiction, but not a great bluffer in poker.

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1.) The University of Iowa Writers' Workshop:
<https://writersworkshop.uiowa.edu/about>

2.) ***The Man with the Golden Arm*** is a novel by Nelson Algren, published by Doubleday in November 1949. One of the seminal novels of post-World War II American letters, *The Man with the Golden Arm* is widely considered Algren's greatest and most enduring work. It won the National Book Award in 1950. The novel details the trials and hardships of illicit card dealer "Frankie Machine", along with an assortment of colorful characters, on Chicago's Near Northwest Side. A veteran of World War II, Frankie struggles to stabilize his personal life while trying to make ends meet and fight a growing addiction to morphine. Much of the story takes place during the immediate postwar period along Division Street and Milwaukee Avenue in the old Polish Downtown.

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Man_with_the_Golden_Arm_\(novel\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Man_with_the_Golden_Arm_(novel))

3.) ***The Man with the Golden Arm*** (film)

Produced & Directed by Otto Preminger

Screenplay by Walter Newman, Lewis Meltzer, Ben Hecht (uncredited)

Based on *The Man with the Golden Arm* 1949 novel by Nelson Algren

Release date December 15, 1955.

The Man with the Golden Arm is a 1955 American drama film with elements of film noir, based on the novel of the same name by Nelson Algren. It recounts the story of a drug addict who gets clean while in prison, but struggles to stay that way in the outside world. Although the addictive drug is never identified in the film, according to the American Film Institute "most contemporary and modern sources assume that it is heroin", in contrast to Algren's book which named the drug as morphine. The film stars Frank Sinatra, Eleanor Parker, Kim Novak, Arnold Stang and Darren McGavin. It was adapted for the screen by Walter Newman, Lewis Meltzer and Ben Hecht (uncredited), and directed by Otto Preminger. The film's initial release was controversial for its treatment of the then-taboo subject of drug addiction. Although the novel's author, Nelson Algren, was initially brought to Hollywood to work on the screenplay, he and Preminger were incompatible from the start and the situation did not improve. Algren was quickly replaced by Walter Newman. Preminger and Newman made significant changes to Algren's original story.

It was nominated for three Academy Awards: Sinatra for Best Actor in a Leading Role, Joseph C. Wright and Darrell Silvera for Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Black-and-White and Elmer Bernstein for Best Music, Scoring of a Dramatic or Comedy Picture. Sinatra was also nominated for best actor awards by the BAFTAs and The New York Film Critics. The film is in the public domain, and in 2020 was added into the National Film Registry.

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Man_with_the_Golden_Arm

4.) ***A Walk on the Wild Side*** is a 1956 novel by Nelson Algren, also adapted into the 1962 film of the same name. Set in Depression era, it is "the tragi-comedy of Dove Linkhorn", a naive Texan drifting from his hometown to New Orleans. Algren noted, "The book asks why lost people sometimes develop into greater human beings than those who have never been lost in their whole lives. Why men who have suffered at the hands of other men are the natural believers in humanity, while those whose part has been simply to acquire, to take all and give nothing, are the most contemptuous of mankind." It is most often quoted for Algren's "three rules of life": "Never play cards with a man called Doc. Never eat at a place called Mom's. Never sleep with a woman whose troubles are worse than your own."

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According to Algren, the title refers to the 1952 C&W hit song "The Wild Side of Life," recorded by Hank Thompson & His Brazos Valley Boys, and was written by Arlie Carter and William Warren.

In 1970, Lou Reed was approached about a project to turn *A Walk on the Wild Side* into a musical, a story he tells during his song of the same name on his 1978 *Live: Take No Prisoners* album. The project never materialized, but he used the title for his song, "Walk on the Wild Side", describing the lives of Warhol superstars he saw at The Factory.

It is referred to in Hunter S. Thompson's *Hells Angels* (1966) in the context of the mobility of certain elements of society, like the main characters, and how the Angels are a manifestation of that principle.

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Walk_on_the_Wild_Side

5.) ***A Walk on the Wild Side*** (film) is a 1962 American drama film directed by Edward Dmytryk and starring Laurence Harvey, Capucine, Jane Fonda, Anne Baxter, and Barbara Stanwyck. It was adapted from the 1956 novel *A Walk on the Wild Side* by American author Nelson Algren. The film was scripted by John Fante. It was not well received at the time; Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* described it as a "lurid, tawdry, and sleazy melodrama". While it passed its censors, it was an adult film noir with quite explicit overtones and subject matter. It walks its audience through the lives and relationships between adults (mostly women) engaged in the "business" of commercial prostitution at a stylish New Orleans brothel. The "boss" is Madam Jo (Stanwyck), who combines toughness with a motherly tenderness toward her "girls." The film's title song, "Walk on the Wild Side", was nominated for an Academy Award in the category of Best Music, Original Song. Elmer Bernstein, composer, and Mack David, lyricist, shared the nomination.

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walk_on_the_Wild_Side_\(film\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walk_on_the_Wild_Side_(film))

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