

Larry McMurtry Was One Lucky Bastard

The late Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist has Hollywood to thank for his biggest successes

📅 March 29, 2021 👤 Michael Giltz

When it came to Hollywood, the late writer Larry McMurtry was one lucky bastard. Yes, he was a talented writer. Yes, Hollywood was smart to mine his source material for movies and TV. And yes, you make your own luck.

But given Hollywood's track record of chewing writers up and spitting them out, the story of McMurtry and Hollywood is one of great good fortune. Whenever McMurtry's career seemed to be fading, Hollywood came to the rescue, just like the cavalry in a John Ford western.

Hud's up

Larry McMurtry's absurd good luck began right at the start. In 1961, he got nice reviews for a debut novel with the awkward title of *Horseman, Pass By*. That's what you get for quoting Yeats, I guess. Rising star Paul Newman and director Martin Ritt formed a production company, someone stumbled on the book in an airport, they turned a secondary character named Hud into the lead and doubled down on the anti-hero's brutal, amoral behavior. This is not typical Hollywood behavior, which normally softens up a character to make them more palatable.

The studio hated the film *Hud*, so naturally audiences loved it. Newman went from a pretty face to a hell of an actor and the film became the first of many Larry McMurtry adaptations to score big at the Oscars *and* the box office. The man's lucky streak was off and running.

The first picture show

His third novel is the sort authors usually begin with. 1966's *The Last Picture Show* is an autobiographical coming of age tale that captures a fading small Texas town like the one McMurtry grew up in.

Director Peter Bogdanovich was a nobody with two unknown movies to his credit and a knack for befriending Hollywood legends. He optioned the novel and with his then creative partner Polly Platt turned it into the best film of 1971. Just like *Hud*, it was a big critical and commercial success. Bogdanovich dumped Platt for the movie's star Cybill Shepherd, yet he and Platt still made two more great films together, namely *Paper Moon* and *What's Up, Doc?*

Platt moved on to TV genius James L. Brooks, a man responsible for some of the best sitcoms of all time. While McMurtry spent much of the 1970s writing a series of interconnected novels set in Houston, Texas, few paid much attention. But Platt and Brooks did. They snapped up the third one in the series—a novel called *Terms Of Endearment*—and turned that into a blockbuster that dwarfed the box office success of McMurtry's first two hits and needless to say won more Oscars.

Now that's luck! Peter Bogdanovich made just three great films and spent the rest of his career desperately trying to capture past glory. James L. Brooks made just two great films, since he followed *Terms of Endearment* with *Broadcast News*. (If you're going to argue for *As Good As It Gets*, don't.) But both of them were redhot talents just when they tackled a novel by Larry McMurtry.

High lonesome

The dumb luck doesn't stop there. McMurtry and Bogdanovich tried to follow up *The Last Picture Show* with an elegiac Western. The studio loved the screenplay the two delivered but the stars they wanted did not. Instead of Jimmy Stewart, Henry Fonda and John Wayne, McMurtry faced a dozen years of development hell. Eventually he bought back the rights to the story and turned it into a novel called *Lonesome Dove*.

That won the Pulitzer Prize and sold copies by the truckload. Everyone read it and everyone loved it. Oh but his luck hadn't run out yet. On a hot streak, McMurtry wrote the story that became a two-part TV movie called *The Murder Of Mary Phagan*. A vehicle for Jack Lemmon, it was of course a massive success. Instead of big box office and Oscar glory, it scored the TV equivalent: huge ratings and Emmy awards. He could do no wrong.

Back to *Lonesome Dove*. The movie that wasn't became a huge novel, one that was too big for the movies. So it too headed to TV. Robert Duvall and Tommy Lee Jones took over for those Hollywood legends and enjoyed the roles of a lifetime. Calling it a hit doesn't quite capture the earthquake that was *Lonesome Dove*. It proved one of the most popular miniseries of all time, spinning off multiple sequels and not one but two attempts at an ongoing TV drama.

The *Lonesome Dove* franchise wouldn't quit. McMurtry wrote novels serving as sequels and prequels, as well as picaresque westerns like the *Berrybender Narratives* and one-offs like *Buffalo Girls*. This tried the patience of critics. Surely they were also befuddled to see an author suddenly collaborating with another writer after 30 years of solo success. McMurtry did just that with writer Diana Ossana, working together on screenplays and teleplays and novels from 1992 until the day he died.

We can't quit him

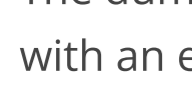
McMurtry's luck held out one last time. It was his new collaborator Ossana who read the E. Annie Proulx short story "Brokeback Mountain" in the *New Yorker* and convinced him to option it for the movies. A movie, said Proulx? Good luck with that! Indeed.

Only time will tell if McMurtry's stock as a novelist will rise again. Heck, even he dismissed *Lonesome Dove* as merely a *Gone With The Wind* of the West. That may be a preemptive strike against critics. Yet it also seems pretty darn accurate, right down to the book's questionable depiction of Native Americans.

Maybe Larry McMurtry was just a guy with a fertile imagination that sparked the best work of others. Maybe that reflected glory made him seem more talented as a writer than he deserved. Still, world-building is all the rage. If Trollope can enjoy acclaim for his entertaining series of connected tales, why not McMurtry? It would be just like the lucky bastard to get the last laugh.

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 Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the *New York Post*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Magazine*, *The Advocate*, *Out*, *Huffington Post*, *Premiere Magazine*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *BookFilter*, *USA Today* and the *Los Angeles Times*. He co-hosts the long-running podcast *Showbiz Sandbox*.

One thought on "Larry McMurtry Was One Lucky Bastard"

👤 Ken Kurson
 📅 March 29, 2021 at 1:36 pm
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What a wonderful perspective on a long and diverse career. I just want to add that I think you might have to throw *Mask* in there on Bogdanovich list of great films, and maybe the episode of the *Sopranos* he directed (not to mention his acting in it, as well). I don't know if this is an accurate quote but Jason Isbell attributed it to Larry McMurtry so it's worth sharing: "I don't want another drink, I want that last one again."

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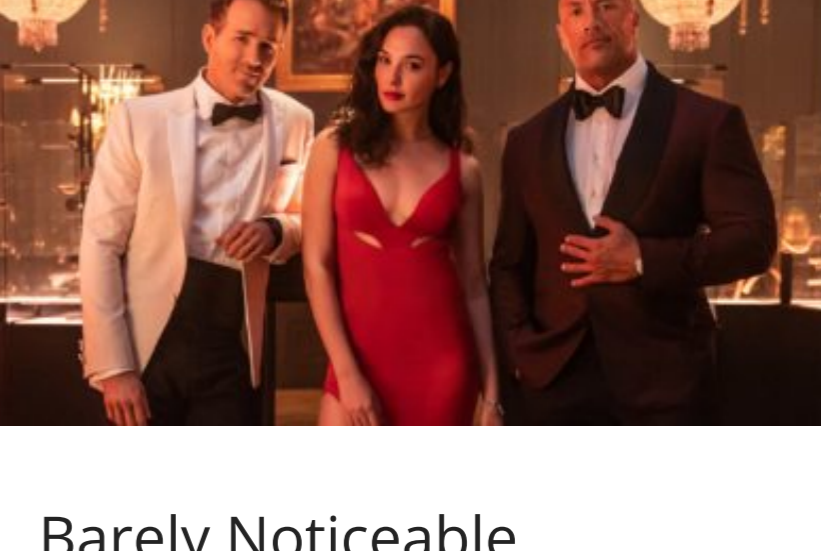
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