

Walter Tevis

1928-1984

Famed crime writer and literary critic James Sallis wrote in the *Boston Globe* that Walter Tevis' *The Man Who Fell to Earth* was "among the finest science fiction novels..." He labeled it as a Christian parable and a portrait of the artist, describing it as one of the most heartbreaking books he had encountered. He called it "...a threnody on great ambition and terrible failure, and an evocation of man's absolute, unabridgeable [sic] aloneness."

Walter Tevis was born in San Francisco in 1928 and lived there for the first ten years of his life. Tevis developed a rheumatic heart condition, so his parents placed him in the Stanford Children's Convalescent home for a year during which time they returned to Kentucky, where the Tevis family had been given an early land grant in Madison County. Walter traveled across country alone by train at age eleven to rejoin his family in Kentucky. He made friends with Toby Kavanaugh, a fellow student at the Lexington High School. He learned to shoot pool in the recreation room of the Rhoda Kavanaugh Mansion in Lawrenceburg, Kentucky and to read science fiction books for the first time in the library there. They remained lifelong friends. Toby later became the owner of a pool room in Lexington which would have an impact on Tevis' writing.

At the age of seventeen, Walter became a carpenter's mate in the Navy, serving on board the USS Hamil in Okinawa. After his discharge, he attended the University of Kentucky where he studied with the Pulitzer Prize winner A. B. Guthrie, author of *The Big Sky* and received B.A. (1949) and M.A. (1954) degrees in English Literature. While a student there, Tevis worked in his friend Toby's pool hall, wrote his first "pool hall" story "The Big Hustle" in Guthrie's class, and had it published in the August 5, 1955 issue of *Collier's*.

Upon graduation, he taught everything from the sciences and English to physical education in small-town Kentucky high schools, including Science Hill, Hawesville, Irvine and Carlisle. He also taught at Northern Kentucky University, the University of Kentucky, and Southern Connecticut State University. He later attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he received a M.F.A. in creative writing in 1960.

He published his first science fiction short story "The Ifth of Oofth" in *Galaxy Science Fiction* in 1957. He also married Jamie Griggs the same year and they remained together for 27 years. They had a son, William Thomas, and a daughter, Julia Ann. He continued to publish, placing short stories in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Esquire*, *Redbook*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy*. His first novel *The Hustler* was published in 1959 with Harper & Row, followed by *The Man Who Fell to Earth* in 1963 with Gold Medal Books.

He taught English Literature and Creative Writing at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio for fourteen years, but he published very little while there. He left that post in 1978 to come to New York and resume writing. He wrote four more novels-- *Mockingbird*, *The Steps of the Sun*, *The Queen's Gambit* and *The Color of Money*. Additionally, he published *Far From Home* (1981), a collection of short stories. His popular works were translated into nearly twenty languages, among those were French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Danish, Swedish, Greek, Israeli, and Japanese. *The Man Who Fell to Earth* was named the best science fiction novel for 1963. Tevis was also a nominee for the Nebula Award for Best Novel in 1980 for *Mockingbird*.

Three of Tevis' six novels were the basis for major motion pictures. *The Hustler* (1961) and *The Color of Money* (1984) followed the escapades of fictional pool hustler "Fast Eddie" Felson. *The Man Who Fell to Earth* was released in 1976 and subsequently re-made in 1987 as a TV film.

Tevis spent his last years in New York City where he died of lung cancer in 1984. He is buried in the Richmond Cemetery at Richmond, Kentucky.