



Wanderer

Sterling Hayden

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Since its publication in 1963, Sterling Hayden's autobiography, *Wanderer*, has been surrounded by controversy. The author was at the peak of his earning power as a movie star when he suddenly quit. He walked out on Hollywood, walked out of a shattered marriage, defied the courts, broke as an outlaw, set sail with his four children in the schooner *Wanderer*--bound for the South Seas. His attempt to escape launched his autobiography. It is the candid, sometimes painfully revealing confession of a man who scrutinized his every self-defeat and self-betrayal in the unblinking light of conscience.

Wanderer Details

Date : Published January 25th 1998 by Sheridan House (first published 1963)

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Author : Sterling Hayden

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From Reader Review *Wanderer* for online ebook

Gabriel Valjan says

“Shortly after midnight she came to the end of the road and, with Venus Point Light bearing due south, three miles distant, we hove her to till dawn. And the ship slept under a blanket of stars and so did most of her crew. But not the one in command. He paced alone, alone and lost in memories of the time...” *Wanderer*, page 247.

Hayden wrote *The Wanderer* (1963) and then *Voyage* (1976). Both books read like Conrad and Melville with Hayden living the life of an adventurer before and after Hollywood. He is both Melville and a character from Melville. Hayden ran away from home at fifteen to sail the Great Banks of Newfoundland: sailed around the world the first time at twenty-one, captained a square-rigger from Gloucester to Tahiti at twenty-two, and he was the navigator for the schooner *Gertrude L. Thebaud* in the Fisherman’s Cup the following year. News coverage of the race had led to Hollywood calling the sailor west, but he refused initially. He would sail around the world a second time before he reported to Paramount Studios in 1941. He married and seemed to settle down to a staid but secure income and life. Paramount awarded him a seven-year contract starting at \$250 a week, which was very good money then. He would break his contract in less than a year. He felt the wind and left the shore. *Wanderer*.

Hayden was not a man easy to miss in the crowd: at six-five, with rugged good looks that earned him the moniker “The Beautiful Blond Viking God,” he managed to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps, see action, earn both the Silver Star and Bronze Star and other combat decorations, get on a first-name basis with “Wild Bill” Donovan of the OSS, precursor to the CIA, and run numerous covert gun-running and rescue operations into Yugoslavia before it had become known that he was some two-bit actor from Hollywood. In other words, Hayden had enlisted using a false name. He had dined with FDR as John Hamilton. That’s acting. Hayden’s missions for the nascent CIA were not declassified until 2008.

Hayden was an interesting man. As an author he, like another actor who loved the sea, Humphrey Bogart, knew his Conrad, London, Melville, and Stevenson inside and out. *Wanderer*, in typical Hayden-esque style, began as an open act of defiance. Defying a court order, he took his four children and sailed for the South Seas. He set sail with no radio. *Wanderer* is not a celebrity rendition of life on the lam with all the posh accoutrements; it is literary fiction drawn from living the hard life at sea with children; and Hayden demonstrates the breadth of his maritime knowledge and the depth of his reading, for the book opens with a pivotal incipit from Walter de la Mare. Substitute *Wanderer* for ‘Traveler’ and you see Sterling Hayden, the author and man, who loved his children and the sea. He was both Ishmael and Ahab.

Karen says

I loved this book....what thought, poetry and romance with life & the sea!! Includes the reality of the real world of 1959.

Cian Clarke says

Vastly overrated, incoherent, rambling timeline, self-indulgent and egotistic..

Brian says

Always dug this guy's on-screen presence, and then accidentally saw a review on GoodReads of this book. Had NO idea this back story. Fully inspiring, and surprisingly exciting.

Find this book and read it. But don't ask for mine - it is now one of the select books in my permanent collection.

Greg says

a great book. well worth a read for anyone that enjoys a horizon.

Jordan Gum says

fan-damn-tastic. one of the most honest self-examinations ever.

Kirk says

I came to *Wanderer* through *Leuchtturm des Chaos (Pharos of Chaos)*, the two-hour Hayden "documentary" which came twenty years after the autobiography. By the time of the film, Hayden was a rambling alcoholic who would subject the listener to incoherent tirades about his past, peppered with interrogatory grunts and repeated short phrases. And yet, when he would read from his writings, I had the sense that this was a man who had once been a great writer, or at least a man who wrote better than he spoke. The reality of the book, however, was disappointing.

Wanderer reads like it was written in frenzied bursts of activity on sleepless nights or as long as a bottle of booze lasted. I don't mind a disjointed chronology in a narrative, but Hayden is often ambiguous in his descriptions, to where I was routinely at a loss to say even the decade in which events were taking place. Apart from his marriage to Madeleine Carroll, Hayden refers to several other girlfriends, fiancees, and possibly even wives. Engagements are made and later broken off, and names are seldom used. There was Madeleine, a woman in Tahiti, some friend's daughter, and a slew of painfully-remembered sexual failings that reminded me of Joe Buck's hallucinatory flashbacks in *Midnight Cowboy*.

Hayden regularly switches his point of view from first-person to second- and third-person. At times, he argues with himself, calling himself a coward. Then, by the time of the war, he temporarily changes his name to John Hamilton, whom Hayden writes about as if he were a different person entirely. Hell, perhaps he was, in Hayden's mind. Hayden is certainly a tightly-wound psychological force, always at war with himself. There are more "front-line" stories of the psychological nature than from his time in the Marines and OSS. For more on the latter, I found Hayden's now-declassified personnel file in the National Archives. This file contains a 15-page "narrative," written by Hayden and detailing his military experience in a more clear

fashion than in the book, where he is too busy with attacking his own character.

What made the book worth reading, and why I saw it through to the end, were Hayden's descriptions of times and places with which I was unfamiliar: being at sea in the early 1900s, the darker side of Hollywood, his time in the OSS, and his early acting career. His persistence in the face of so much self-doubt makes for an entertaining pathos in the book. I just wish he had been able to communicate his life story a little bit more clearly.

Kurt Menke says

This was a special book for me. I discovered Sterling Hayden from film noir. I loved his movies *The Asphalt Jungle*, *The Killing*, *Dr. Strangelove* & *the Godfather*. He fascinated me in some way. So I discovered this book he authored in the 60's. Ironically I discovered that his acting career was the least important part of his life as far as he was concerned. It was a means of making a good living and that was about it. He hated Hollywood. Instead his true love was the sea and sailing. I have often felt like he was a long lost uncle. After reading this autobiography of sorts I found a deeper connection with the man. We have a lot in common in terms of our upbringing and associated issues. I'm not sure this book would be for everyone. However, if you like Sterling Hayden or sailing it is a fascinating read. He was apparently more proud of this book than any movie he ever made.

Karen Roberts says

Most excellent.

BA says

As a 20 yr. old I was smitten by Hayden, his book and the sea. I wanted to sail away with him from Sausalito. Later met someone who did. He was fleeing his wife.....

Marla Dudak says

The true account of a sailor turned Hollywood actor who gave up acting and sailed with his four kids to Tahiti. Painful to read. Choppy with detail in all the wrong places. Just say no.

brendan says

Powerful. Revealing.

Maddening. Oft times disheartening.

And finally, Honest!

This is a portrait of Man(the Dreamer) at his most stripped. I dare you to do better. I dare you to look. I expect you to ridicule.

Billy says

The pitfall of being a romantic is that's easy to romanticize yourself, not just Nature, Life, etc. But there are worse things.

Jim says

I first read this book in high school and it altered my life for the better in more ways than I can count. No, I never bought a schooner and sailed the South Seas. But I did become a writer, and a self-examining and (I hope) more honest one as a result of reading this book. But beyond that is the magic of a life adventurously lived and splendidly told. I have read *Wanderer* more times than I can count, and each time I am left in awe at Hayden's brutal and ferocious honesty about himself and at his magnificent way with words. It is my favorite book. I hope to read it again several times.

Katherine Leppek says

Best book all time for those dreaming to escape on an around the world sea adventure. True story too.

Steve Anderson says

I enjoyed this read a while back more than I expected, and the fact that I'm adding my thoughts now is probably testament to its odd haunting power. Actor Sterling Hayden, best known (to me) as Gen. Jack Ripper in Kubrick's classic *Dr. Strangelove*, put all he had into this memoir of his lifelong wanderings aboard various sea vessels he obtained at any and all cost whenever the world became too much for him.

Hayden never felt comfortable in his skin as a hunky actor, and some of the best passages come when he comments on the fast-paced world of Hollywood and mid-century America in general. Another great section follows his exploits during WW2 as an OSS agent named John Hamilton running guns to Yugoslav partisans, a bold and heroic effort he surprisingly plays down—and I would like to know more about. He doesn't always come off so well. He sold out friends who had dabbled in communist/socialist circles to the House Un-American Activities Committee, and later, defying a court order, basically absconded with his children on a sailing boat in one famously irresponsible incident. But Hayden owns up to all his flaws and to the society that formed him. Some brief passages are downright poetic. For me, this beats *On the Road* for its criticism of a culture of the sheep and the Man, a troubled cry from the dark side of 1950s America.

David Shalleck says

This is an outstanding memoir. True, honest, up front... perfectly salty and a bit rough but that's part of the allure since it gets into the persona of the author. Better yet, here is a story about Mr. Hayden and Wanderer:

Years ago, I was given a short passage (page 24) from this book. It speaks to not going through life saying/feeling "I wish I could..." and not looking back in life with "could have, would have, should have." It starts with, "Little has been said or written about the ways a man may blast himself free."

At that time, I was fixing on going on a sojourn abroad and this passage pretty much pushed me to pursue my idea. So I left. What I thought was going to be six or eight months turned into five years. I went to France. Then to Italy. During the summers I was the chef on a private yacht for an Italian family.

Years after my return, I finally decided to read Wanderer. One night, after one of those "I don't want to do this anymore" work days, I was reading a chapter that's deep into the story... only to learn Mr. Hayden, sixty-five years earlier- was the original captain on the exact yacht I worked on!

If that wasn't a testament for "glad I did it" with a full-circle conclusion I'd be hard pressed to argue the point.

Read this book.

Kevin says

This is a read that will make you question your decisions in life. In ways he is an irresponsible oaf, but in other ways he understands our reality like nobody else.

Beth says

steer, g-ddamn it, steer

Graham P says

'You're homeward bound, and you'll never come back. And if you do, it won't be the same.'

That quote from sea captain, actor, author and lumbering Yankee, Sterling Hayden, pretty much typifies the gritty melancholia that pervades this voluminous autobiography -- a brave and eloquent piece of self reflection. Hayden is one of those fractured hard-guys who really can't find himself -- not even when he's at peace on the open ocean, one in which he traversed at a very young age out of Boston and Gloucester,

Massachusetts. He was grizzled and weathered, cut from the oilskin cloth of Melville and Conrad, but blazing through this calloused exterior, he exposes all the insecurities of a man hopelessly trying to find himself.

Hollywood gave him little comfort. The booze did its trick but only weighed him down come sunrise. Communism ruffled his feathers but brought him no justice. His stint with the OSS during WW2 tarnished his patriotism. Intensive psychotherapy only added more dismay to the bubbling cauldron of self-doubt. Wine, women and song - take it or leave it. NYC, Jersey, Boston, Maine, Tahiti, France, Yugoslavia - there are places to go but no place to call home.

We all know Hayden from 'Dr. Strangelove' and 'The Killing' but to witness his performance in Altman's 'Long Goodbye' may have touched upon the real Hayden, who we get to know in this book. This was a sad, rebellious man. And what makes this book so damn good is his honesty to admit it, almost flourish in it with literary license.

This book is for Wanderers, or better yet, those who seek to wander. It is also for those in love with schooners, starlit skies and the hardened men of the ocean. And no mistaking, Hayden can write. His brevity, eloquence and naturalistic skill at painting scenes make his prose sing and cadence into one of the finest books about self the latter half of the 20th century. Don't go into this one expecting him to gossip about the women he slept with and the celebrities with their share of skeletons in the closet. It has to do with so much more than that.
