

THE NOVELS OF MELVIN LEVY

By Peter Donahue

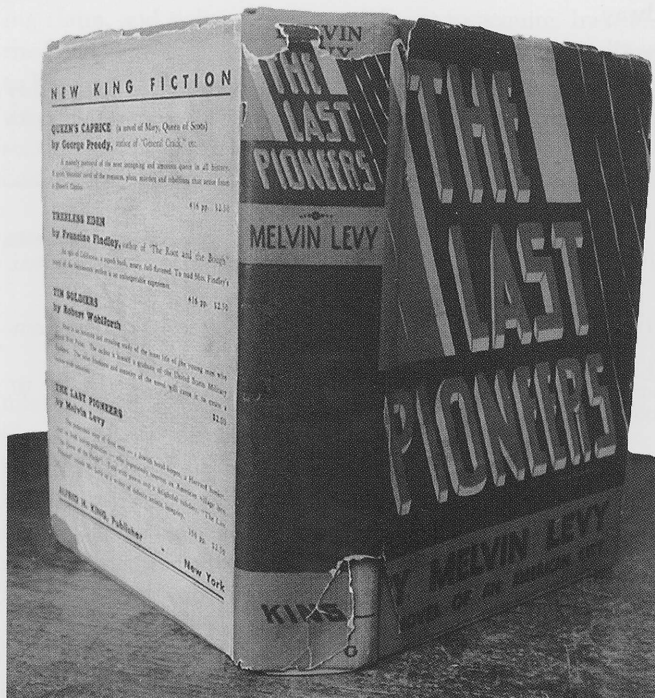


RETROSPECTIVE REVIEWS

From the 1920s to the 1970s Seattle son Melvin Levy fashioned a writing career like none other. From writing for the left-wing magazine *The Nation*, to writing for the TV series *Charlie's Angels*, he worked in nearly every genre—fiction, drama, journalism, screenplays, and teleplays. And among his body of work appears one of the most outlandish Seattle novels ever written, *The Last Pioneers*, which exposes the city's history for what he saw it to be—a vice- and scandal-ridden muddle.

Born in 1902, Levy taught at the Temple de Hirsch on Pike Street while earning his bachelor's and master's degrees in English at the University of Washington. After turning in his master's thesis, titled "Art and Anarchy," approved by legendary UW professor Frederick Morgan Padelford, Levy bolted for New York to seek his literary fortune.

In quick succession he published two novels, *Matrix* (1926) and *Wedding* (1927). Reviewers of *Matrix* pointed to Levy's youthful promise as a writer but found the novel formless. *Wedding* did not fare much better, though one reviewer complimented it for containing "the most carnal-minded writing I know of in American literature."



During the late 1920s Melvin Levy returned periodically to Seattle to visit his parents, who lived on Queen Anne Hill. This may be when he began to form the idea for his next novel. Levy had grown up in the heyday of the "Seattle Spirit," the era of the Golden Potlatch Parade, the Daughters of the Pioneers, and a series of popular Seattle histories written by descendants of pioneers.

In 1934 Levy published *The Last Pioneers*, which depicts the unflattering history of a city that had been whitewashed by the glorification of its pioneer past. In this wild, often unwieldy novel, Levy savages the men upon whom Seattle historian William C. Speidel based his book *Sons of the Profits*, the scheming, corruptible city leaders who marshaled Seattle into the 20th century (yesteryear's version of Fred Moody's *Seattle and the Demons of Ambition*).

To make his point, Levy takes liberties with the historical record that would make film director Oliver Stone blush. After one of the main characters, Herman Merro, makes his way from Poland to Nome, Alaska, he becomes a song-and-dance man, cheats miners of their gold poke, and hightails it down to Puget, the author's homologue for Seattle, at the time little more than a village. This is when Levy lets rip on Seattle history.

Through his fast-and-dirty land deals, Herman Merro befriends Paul Dexter (read Dexter Horton, Seattle's pioneer banker, as in *The Dexter Horton Building*). Paul Dexter's bank pits itself against the town's other major business interest, Drake Lumber Mill (read Yesler's Mill). In place of Asa Mercer and his Mercer Girls, Levy gives us Joe Sorrenson, who opens a brothel called Puget House with a shipload of prostitutes recruited from back east. In place of Doc Maynard, Seattle's first physician and friend to Chief Sealth, Levy offers up Doc Maxson, an abortionist.

Levy's most historically accurate portrayal is of Mick Delea, the stand-in for Hiram C. Gill, legal counsel to Seattle prostitutes, city council member, and two-term mayor. Like "Hi" Gill, Delea is elected mayor on an "open-town" platform that allows unrestricted gambling, drinking, and prostitution. Along with his corrupt chief of police, he oversees the city's rampant vice. When a zealot preacher succeeds in having him recalled, Mick Delea retreats into seclusion, only to return six years later and win reelection on an anti-vice platform.

Throughout the Mick Delea episode, Levy makes clear that the real power resides with Paul Dexter, the philandering banker, and his long-time friend Herman Merro, the confidence-

man-turned-real-estate-magnate. To Dexter, the city is merely a means to exercise his crass ambition—"a new field, a new world...spread out before men like him. Men who could know it and take it."

As if to deflate the city of its prideful ways, Levy ruthlessly satirizes Seattle's pioneer legacy and the self-made men who became the city's leaders. The novel ends, however, with a hint of redemption for its two main characters. It is 1929. The stock market has crashed, and the Dexter Bank has gone bust. Workers rally in the streets to protest lost wages. When Herman Merro and Paul Dexter look out of Dexter's top-story office at the protesters below, they witness a girl being trampled by a mounted policeman's horse and are sickened by the sight. This, they seem to understand, is what their ambition has wrought.

Melvin Levy grew up in the era of radical labor in the Northwest as well. *The Last Pioneers* includes a version of the 1916 Everett massacre, when five IWW members supporting a mill strike were killed. As one reviewer remarked, the novel "points the moral of communism more convincingly than many avowed 'proletarian' novels." Yet, while *The Last Pioneers* fared better with reviewers than Levy's previous two novels, it did not gain a wide readership.

Seattle's labor legacy clearly left a deep impression on Levy. In 1934 Harold Clurman's Group Theatre produced

his play *Gold Eagle Guy*, a pro-labor drama, and in 1935 Levy signed the "Call for an American Writers Congress," which appeared in the communist-affiliated magazine *New Masses*. The call summoned writers who "do not need to be convinced of the decay of capitalism, (or) of the inevitability of revolution."

In the mid 1930s Levy moved to Hollywood and began writing for the movies. Though blacklisted in the late 1940s for his politics, he continued to work. Film critics Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner see a subversive streak in his screenplay about the bandit Joaquin Murrieta for the film *Robin Hood of El Dorado* (1936). Unfortunately, Levy's films are as forgotten as his novels. In a Google search, his name appears most often in reference to the handful of episodes he wrote for the TV series *The Lone Ranger*, *Bonanza*, and *Charlie's Angels*.

Melvin Levy, who died in 1980, never published another novel after *The Last Pioneers*. Nor did he write about Seattle again. Still, you can find a tattered copy of *The Last Pioneers* on the shelves of the flashy new downtown library. Melvin Levy probably would have found this fact as ludicrous and amusing as he did most of Seattle history.

Peter Donahue is the author of Madison House, a novel, and The Cornelius Arms, a collection of short stories. He is also coeditor of Reading Seattle: The City in Prose.



AWARDS PROGRAM CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

The Washington State Historical Society announces a call for nominations for awards to be presented at its annual membership meeting on June 17, 2006. Up to nine awards are presented each year to recognize excellence in advancing the field of history in the state of Washington through writing, teaching, historic projects, understanding cultural diversity, and for volunteerism at the Society's two museums. We encourage you to help us honor the work that advances the Society's mission, "to make the study of history in Washington illuminating and inspiring," by nominating candidates for the following awards: David Douglas Award, Governor's Award for Teaching History in Washington State, Peace and Friendship Awards, and the Robert Gray Medal.

Please visit us on the World Wide Web (<http://washingtonhistory.org/wshs/awards.htm>) for a description of the awards and information on the nominating process.



WASHINGTON STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY