

Chicago Tribune Sept. 4, 1994

PRETTY BOY FLOYD

By Larry McMurtry & Diana Ossana
Simon & Schuster. 448 pp.

Perhaps the earliest blemish on Mark Twain's literary career was his larky decision over dinner to collaborate with his neighbor, Charles Dudley Warner, on his first novel, *The Gilded Age*. Immortal fiction seldom springs from collaborative effort.

Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana, however, quickly worked out a rhythm for co-creating an absorbing tale that freed rather than obstructed each other's talents. They talked aloud about their 1993 Warner Bros. screenplay, soon to be a film about the life of outlaw Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd. McMurtry would jot five pages of prose which Ossana then expanded into ten. The result is more seamless and arguably more readable than *The Gilded Age*.

Twain and Warner subtitled their satiric effort "A Tale of Today." McMurtry and Ossana have written a heroic romance of yesterday, the roaring-turned-destitute age gilded by memory. Their novel begins in 1925—with Floyd robbing the armored car carrying the payroll for the St. Louis Kroger Bakery where he worked—and ends in 1934, as Floyd is abundantly perforated by lawmen's bullets like Bonnie & Clyde and Dillinger before him.

This novel freely glamorizes its hero. Though he denies it, Floyd resembles Robin Hood, victimizing the banks that have victimized his native Oklahoma neighbors, leaving money for ailing acquaintances to pay doctors' bills, proving as faithful as one man can to several women who love him, never shooting anyone who wasn't trying to kill him, and always remaining a loving son, husband and father.

Which doesn't mean Floyd was particularly bright. Immediately after the Kroger job, he buys an elegant suit and Studebaker and heads home to Sallisaw, Okla. to see his 18 year-old wife Ruby and infant son Dempsey. As Floyd watches Ruby prepare supper, his boyhood friend Sheriff Bert Cotton spots the luxurious Studebaker parked out front, and by ten to five Floyd is looking at five to ten in the penitentiary.

After getting out a year early for good behavior in 1929, Floyd tries to go straight. But he exits prison into a hard world. Ruby, struggling to survive, has divorced him and married a baker. Floyd, now 25, tries to make an honest living working on an Oklahoma oil field, but when the foreman learns of Floyd's past he declares, "I don't employ no cons." Floyd's luck turns worse. He gets kicked out of Colorado and Texas as soon as he arrives. Only one career looks promising, so Floyd finds his St. Louis partner Billy "The Killer" Miller, visits his infatuated former landlady Lulu "Ma" Ash and even more infatuated old girlfriend Beulah Baird, and heads with Miller and Beulah and some

tommy guns for the banks of Ohio, where Miller kills a deputy and Floyd gets sentenced to 15 years, which he eludes by hopping off a train.

After a botched bank job in Bowling Green, Miller dies when a deputy fires several warning shots into his chest and Beulah takes a bullet in her cheek. Floyd brings Beulah to Oklahoma to convalesce, then heads for Ruby, who's been pining for him, and reclaims his wife and son. Until its inevitable end, Floyd's career winds from bank to bank through the heart of the country, spending time with Ruby, Dempsey, Beulah and Lulu whenever the heat on his trail permits.

Though now a novel, *Pretty Boy Floyd* still reads like a screenplay. Its straightforward prose emphasizes action and dialogue, with little description of the landscape Floyd speeds through. The co-authors evoke the period in diction ("Ma Ash had bought him a swell blue suit") and dialogue ("Yeah, what are you, soft?"), and bring even minor characters to vivid life. Floyd's penitentiary cellmate, for example, in the novel for barely a page, garners this poignant history: "Jerry's year-old daughter had drowned in only two inches of water. She had reached down in a bucket to retrieve her clothespin dolly, fell in, got caught, and was dead when her mama found her a few minutes later—her feet were sticking straight up out of the pail."

Floyd's partners, from the trigger-happy Miller to engaging cowboy George Birdwell to Floyd's quirky driver "Turnip Breath" Locust to meanspirited Adam Richetti, are vibrantly individualized, as are Floyd's many women. Beulah Baird, who first called Floyd "Pretty Boy," helps with robberies yet suffers perpetual heartbreak from Floyd's love for his wife. Ruby, part Cherokee, remains devoted and long-suffering, at one point supporting herself and Dempsey by going on stage in a squaw costume to preach about the anguish of the criminal life. Lulu Ash, more than twice Floyd's age when she first falls in love with him, keeps him at the center of her heart until the end. Even journalist Viv Brown, who interviews Floyd, depicts him as noble and sobs when he dies.

But it is Floyd himself who charms from first to last. He is a kindly thief. "You cold, sir?" he asks as he ties a victim up. He buys lollipops for scared children during a hold-up when he is already Public Enemy Number Two. He buys his son a pony and takes him fishing.

If this book has a villain, it is J. Edgar Hoover, the newly installed director of the F.B.I. The ambitious top cop whose four-decade career ended after helping a U.S. President compile a private enemies list spends the 1930s fanning flames of infamy with a Public Enemies list, on which, after Dillinger's death in Chicago, Floyd get promoted to Number One. When Viv Brown writes her sympathetic profile of Floyd, Hoover threatens her editor and tells Brown, "These are serious matters.... You should stick to writing up socials and leave serious reporting to men." It is Hoover who pins on Floyd a Kansas City massacre the co-authors insist he didn't commit, building the outlaw up so more glory and funding will come when he brings the outlaw down by gunfire. Even as Hoover moves Floyd up the List, federal agents think, "As menaces go, [Floyd] wasn't in the same league as a mean weasel like Dillinger, or crazy old Ma Barker and her boys, or

solomon/pretty boy floyd review

the vicious and sadistic Baby Face Nelson." It is the self-aggrandizing Hoover who orders, "If we don't eliminate [Floyd] now, he'll be more popular than *me*."

With its federal officials ulterior, with its career thief ennobled, perhaps this alternately comic and tragic romance novel really is a tale for our times.

It becomes increasingly easy to lionize our outlaws, especially from the 1920s and 1930s, who come in two types. There are the kings of organized crime, gaining power by outfoxing hugely unpopular prohibition laws, operating with twice the efficiency and none of the sham of our politicians and, unlike today's drive-by barbarians, possessing a code of honor and sense of deference. Even more attractive is the fearless loner, an American myth, who like Floyd brazenly skirts the rules confining our lives of quieter desperation.

When they are loving husbands and fathers, speak kindly to those they rob and never shoot unless being shot at, they can, as McMurtry and Ossana prove here, become so sympathetic that we cheer them on.