

Ralph Meeker, or Why I Like James Brooks as Much as de Kooning

BY PETER PLAGENS

My father always liked the off-brand, the second-rank, the runner-up, the lower-priced slightly funky diner down the street that fewer people went to. It was the same with movies; he liked the guys down the list from such stars as John Wayne or Clark Gable. My father favored guys with something funny or strange or something, well, just not-quite about them.

Ralph Meeker, who played Mickey Spillane's private eye Mike Hammer in the 1955 movie *Kiss Me Deadly*, was like that: passably handsome and self-assured, but a bit chipmunky in the cheeks and soft in the hands, with a strained, breathy, not really tough-guy voice that sounded more like an overworked cabbie than a vengeful PI. Meeker did look pretty good in a suit and tie, though, but unconvincing as the hardboiled protagonist: he seemed locked in that suit and tie like the Man in the Iron Mask was locked in an iron mask. Meeker also had a tiny, but quite irritating once you noticed it, parakeet's ruffle at the crown of his smooth haircut. It bored a hole right through his character's street cred.

But those little flaws must have been precisely the things my father liked about Ralph Meeker, although he never told me so outright. He probably never told me so

because he wasn't quite conscious of his preference for the B-list in practically all things. My father also had a lot of little things wrong with him and he ended up a not-quite guy, too. He was 6 feet tall, mustachioed and square-jaw handsome, but he let his teeth go to hell and was shy about smiling. Ralph Meeker was his soul brother: Meeker in the leading man business, my father in the minor-league advertising art business.

My parents were from Cleveland, a Ralph Meeker of cities. My mother's family consisted of smoking, drinking, laughing, truant Irish Catholics with a lot of hanging flesh above their elbows. My father's parents were pious, abstemious descendents of German Lutheran clerics. Their bodies were as spare as their appetites. Somewhere along the line, my paternal grandfather converted to Christian Science and became a practitioner. My father followed in the faith, although only as an off-and-on churchgoer and bedtime reader of *Science and Health, with Key to the Scriptures*. It was enough, however, to make him something of a dreamy amateur philosopher and—I see so clearly in retrospect—terribly unsuited for the sharky business in which he unadvisedly chose to try to make his living.

During World War II, when I was a toddler, my father—too old to be

drafted—was sent to southern California to help make instructional films for the Army Air Corps. At the end of my fifth-grade year, however, he lost yet another small ad agency job, and we had to sell our little mint-green stucco house for a pittance and scuttle back to Cleveland to move in with the Irish grandparents.

The man who'd forced my family to return to Cleveland by shutting down his advertising agency, called one day and said he was back in business. He persuaded my father to move us yet again to southern California. Alas, the man soon folded his business once more. My father more or less spun his wheels the rest of his working life, bouncing from one small advertising agency to another, for lower and lower pay. During his descent, my mother saved the family's bacon by getting a job as a clerk-typist with the Board of Education, and ended up, 20 years later, retiring as assistant registrar at Los Angeles City College.

My father turned out to be not all that unhappy with being relegated to a distant second in the moneymaking category. "Freelancing" (his euphemism for hanging around the house and doing a little layout work in a back room) gave him more time not only to delve deeper into Mary Baker Eddy, but also to read the stacks of books he liked to bring home from the Echo Park and Hollywood branches of the L.A. Public Library. His unerring attraction to the off-brand, the modest achievement, worked best with books: fiction and science-fiction in his case. Instead of Hemingway or Faulkner, or Ray Bradbury or Robert A. Heinlein, he

would bring home Richard Hughes and Vercors, Alfred Chester and A. E. van Vogt. And not Hughes's relatively popular *A High Wind in Jamaica*, either, but the lesser-known *In Hazard*. He'd pass these books on to me, saying, "If you want to read a *real* writer, read this."

No surprise, I'm a lot like he was. I tend to pull back and crankily see myself more as a midlist anti-hero, an honorable runner-up done in by fashion-followers, instead of reflexively assuming I'm hot shit and going for the gold. But I keep asking myself: Do we inherit this sort of stuff from our fathers because we hang around it all the time growing up, or is it a real gene deal? Is it Pavlov or DNA that constantly delivers me to the underdog, the off-brand banana-pineapple soda pop in the cooler, talky noir movies, or a nice show of James Brooks instead of Willem de Kooning, or a Sidney Nolan exhibition instead one of Lucien Freud?

Immodestly, I'll propose that there are some virtues in this: it takes a certain art-critical grit, especially in these days of hyper-hype, not to slide down the sluice of received wisdom about the textbook greats, and instead do some hard looking at the likes of Brooks or Nolan. Brooks (1906-1992) was a first-generation Abstract Expressionist who combined a talent for composition that was on a level with such de Kooning masterpieces as *Ashville* (1948), and a sensitivity to paint surface that ranged from Jackson Pollock's enamel "skeins" to Helen Frankenthaler's early stains. His color—solid and knowing while not quite Hans Hofmann—was more eccentric in his

Hamptons house, where the furniture was white and the ceiling beams were painted yellow. Nolan's personal life was as fraught if not as fertile as Freud's, who fathered 11 kids, maybe more, by several different women. Nolan (1917-1992) was an army deserter during World War II and carried on a decade-long affair with the wife of his principle patron. But his greasy, rainbow-hued series of pictures on the story of Ned Kelly, Australia's Jesse James, is as quirkily profound as modernist figurative painting gets. While the art of Brooks and Nolan is hardly B-list in itself, Brooks's living and working in the shadow of such scenery-chewers as Pollock and de Kooning, and Nolan's simply working in Australia (although he did live in the U.S. for a couple of years on a fellowship) before the onset of globalism in art, kept each from the big-time reputation he deserved.

And while Meeker, Brooks and Nolan never deliberately shied away from the spotlight, aficionados of the off-brand and the mid-list tend to. Instead of clawing our ways to the top, we'd rather stand a bit off to the side and think about things. If we're *literateurs*, we want to write for a smaller, more thoughtful audience rather than for movers or shakers and trendspotters. If we're artists, we cling (perhaps a little too much) to the old delayed-discovery, "for posterity" thought always rattling around in the backs of our heads. And if we're critics, we'd rather look back and write about the likes of Brooks and Nolan, instead of adding more laurel wreaths to the already over-laureled, or touting the next art star in waiting.

None of this is meant to diss Brooks—one of the very best AbExers—or Nolan, whose main debility was geographic, or even Ralph Meeker, who enjoyed a long and full career as an actor. Meeker was even married for a couple of years to the very sexy actress Salome Jens, who became an item of controversy when she starred in *Angel Baby*, a 1961 movie about religious huckstering that had more lust (a near-rape scene with Burt Reynolds) than *Elmer Gantry*. (The rights to *Angel Baby*, originally scheduled for release in 1960, were purchased by Columbia Pictures so that a lower-budget picture, with Reynolds being a kind of younger, Meekeresque version of Burt Lancaster, wouldn't steal any of the sensation thunder from *Elmer Gantry*.)

No, this is about my wondering why I, too, am drawn to the off-brand diner down the street and why, with a raft of big-budget new releases preening like peacocks on the DVD shelves of my local video store, my gaze zooms right to the re-issues from the "Noir Collection" and spots *Kiss Me Deadly*. Maybe after I watch it, I'll start rereading *In Hazard*. And after that, I'll go up to the Whitney Museum or over to the Brooklyn Museum to see if I can find one of their James Brooks paintings to admire.