

'Sundog': great reading, serious theme

"Sundog," Jim Harrison; Dutton/
Seymour Lawrence, \$15.95
By Donna Glendort
Special writer

You don't have to know that Jim Harrison lives up north to figure out that he comes from Michigan. His new novel, "Sundog," captures the ambience of the U.P. with a precision that marks him a native.

It's not just his knowledge of the people up there, it's his understanding of the physical territory — the shrinking pine forests, the salmon and fish, and, most of all, the field, frigid rivers —

that makes his rendering authentic.

"Sundog" is the kind of novel Henry David Thoreau might have written if, instead of "Walden," he had written a novel.

It addresses the same "quiet lives of desperation" that troubled Thoreau. Only in this book, the problem is tackled by Robert Corvus Strang, the "Sundog" of the title and Harrison's protagonist.

A CURIOUS man in an incurious world, he laments that "most people never know more than vaguely where they are either in time or in the scheme of things."

review

It is a serious theme in an earnest book, but Harrison is too good a craftsman to let his message interfere with his story. Like the best of novels, "Sundog" entertains as it informs, drawing strength from Harrison's narrative skills, his poet's gift for words, and his biting, self-deprecating humor.

The book is written in the "as told to" form, with Strang — a maverick American foreman who engineers dam projects all over the world — telling his life story to a novelist, identified in the frontpiece as Jim Harrison.

Because Harrison introduces his real name into his fictional world, the reader can't help but wonder if the story is autobiographical. Certainly, salient features of the flesh-and-blood Harrison and the fictional Harrison are the same — their physical build, their tro-

ic view of life, their affinity for good cooking.

Where the reality stops and the fiction begins is impossible to say — and probably immaterial.

Still, it's safe to assume that Harrison's recent brush with fortune and fame (an experience that left him enervated and deeply in debt) had a lot to do with the novel's creation. This character is overweight and into pills, more insecure than an orphaned child, and desperate for commitment to something.

When he hears about a self-reliant foreman who's gone home to Michigan to recover from a 300-foot fall down the side of a dam, he decides to pursue the story.

THE FOREMAN is a misfit, self-educated, unconcerned with material wealth, deeply committed to his work. He is also an epileptic, afflicted during a U.P. thunderstorm when his fishing boat was struck by lightning.

With medication, Strang's seizures

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are under control, but toward the end of a Venezuelan project his medication runs out and — rather than miss work — he takes a dangerous medicinal herb, prescribed by a native.

The herb triggers an attack of vertigo that catapults Strang over the side of the dam. Later he learns that the remedy induces mental confusion, varying degrees of paralysis, and, sometimes, even death. In combination with his epilepsy and his injuries from the fall, it leaves Strang a physical wreck, a man who looks "totally 'used' by life," according to the novelist.

When the two men meet, Strang can't even stand without a walker and his speech is sometimes scrambled. Amazingly, he is optimistic about returning to his work. With his stepdaughter Eulla's help, he goes swimming in the river and crawling through the woods in hopes that he can reassert his brain for walking.

"I do the crawling because it's the only work at hand," Strang explains, "and I'm a worker and it's my only chance to get back to my real work."

In the face of such commitment, the novelist takes a closer look at his life and begins his own healing process. In his long journey back to mental health, the novelist recaptures the "fluidity and grace" of fully realized existence.

Since the novelist was born in Marquette, his journey to Strang's cabin in the U.P. is also a return to his boyhood territory. The real Harrison makes the most of his circumstance, hinting obliquely that the two main characters' lives may already have been linked without them ever knowing it.

It is the kind of unanswerable question Harrison likes to raise. Similar, in fact, to the story's ending. As the novelist confesses at the start of the book, he doesn't know whether or not Strang is still alive.

AFRAID of being hospitalized, the foreman — a night-swimmer since his youth — has slipped into the river and disappeared into the darkness. There are indications that he swam to a truck that Eulla had waiting for him, but we never find out for certain if that happened. What we do know is the ending the novelist imagines for Strang and that is indeed victorious.

As in most good stories, there's a romantic interest as well. When the novelist meets Eulla — an exotic Costa Rican with plenty of Latin charm — he won't let himself fall in love, remembering the year he wasted on an affair with another Latina.

But instead of settling for what she can get (in this case, recreational sex), Eulla calls his bluff and makes him humble. The scenes between these lovers are some of the most comical in the book, but they are also the most dense with meaning.

Harrison cuts to the heart of the tension between women and men. And if the writing is masculine, it is not the macho propaganda of which he has been accused. Eulla is recognized as an independent force, probably as strong as the men she encounters.

When a story works on as many levels as this one does, it's hard to cover all the bases. I leave it to scholars to discuss the symbolism of the water that "never stops" and provides Strang, a preacher's son, the "incredible sweet feeling I once got from religion."

They too can tackle the Oedipal conflict that reverberates between the lines, an accomplished ending of a primal desire that lends credence to Harrison's reputation as a mythmaker.

Fortunately, you don't have to plumb those depths to appreciate "Sundog." It's not just good art — it's great reading.

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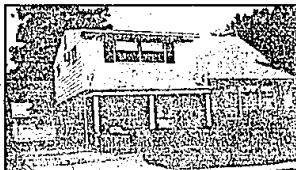
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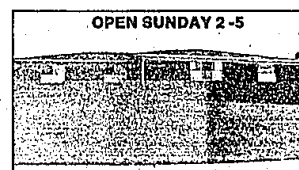
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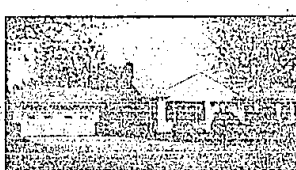


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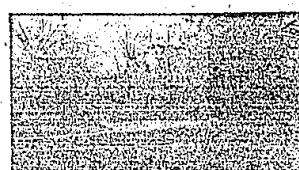
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GRAB VALUE

- 4 bedrooms, formal dining room
- Living room with fireplace
- Finished recreation room with wet bar
- Especially maintained home, Over-sized lot

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BIRMINGHAM FRONT

- Spectacular view of rolling woods lot
- 4 bedrooms, family room with built-in BBQ
- 2 decks, separate levels, 2 fireplaces
- Property runs on both sides of river

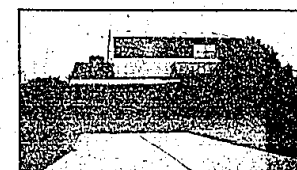
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