

SOUL OF A PEOPLE

Writing America's Story

Author-filmmaker Q&A

David A. Taylor writes for *Smithsonian*, *The Village Voice*, *Outside*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*. Besides the Smithsonian ChannelHD, his documentaries have appeared on PBS, National Geographic, and the Discovery Channel. In addition to *Soul of*

a People, he is also author of the award-winning books *Ginseng*, *the Divine Root* (2006) and a collection of short fiction, *Success: Stories* (2008).

Q: Why did you get interested in this topic?

A: I had just returned from living overseas for several years and was planning a trip across America to get re-acquainted with it, when a friend lent me her father's copy of the *WPA Guide to New Orleans*. When my wife Lisa and I reached New Orleans I was struck by how that 1938 guide showed how people lived, not just tourist landmarks. And it didn't sugarcoat anything. These old books hold surprises, even about places you think you know.

Q: How long did it take to research the project?

A: I did initial research for the *Smithsonian* article in a couple of months. But it became clear that there was a much larger story. In 2002 we started research for the film, funded by a grant from NEH. With interviews with Studs Terkel and others, research into private collections for letters the WPA writers left behind, and historical context it took seven years.

Q: *Soul of a People* takes viewers behind-the-scenes of the Federal Writers' Project, following some writers who will be well-known to readers today: John Cheever, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Jim Thompson, to name a few. Did a large percentage of WPA writers later become successful writers? What about those who put down their pens or maybe never considered themselves writers at all?

A: That is hard to calculate. Working at a local paper, writing book reviews for the *Kansas City Star* as Rudolph Umland did, could count as success, though he held himself to a tougher standard. Many WPA writers who had never thought of themselves as writers went on to publish books about historical figures (as Ruby Wilson did in Nebraska), memoirs (as Hilda Polacheck did in Chicago), or historical investigations like Juanita Brooks's book *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, in Utah. Jon Krakauer called her book "an extraordinary work of history" that shaped every other book about the Mormons in 1800s Utah, including his *Under the Banner of Heaven*. I loved those stories because they showed passion for the work – they weren't getting famous from it.

Q: The music in the film is wonderful. Who chose it?

A: We thought a lot about making the music reflect the regional flavors that the WPA writers themselves aimed to capture, including the field recordings that **Zora Neale Hurston** and others made. We had an intern who had previously interned with Smithsonian Folkways, so he knew the range of music from the period. I made suggestions, and



Andrea Kalin, who directed the film, made the final decisions of what worked best with the picture.

Q: The film's interview with Studs Terkel is fascinating. How did that happen? What got left out?

A: I first interviewed Studs in 1999, so when we got funding to do a film, I contacted him again to see if he'd give us an interview about his experiences on the Writers' Project in Chicago. This guy in his mid-90s was busier than anyone I knew! We struggled to pin a time between his planned trip to South Africa for his book event there and Germany for another tour. When we did visit him at his home in Chicago, he was incredibly gracious (despite the fact I had to ring the doorbell and rouse him from a comfortable nap on his sofa). He talked with us for more than two hours and then made martinis for the film crew. My main regret was that more of his time in the radio division, and his friendships with people like Nelson Algren, didn't make it into the film. But it's there and we plan to include it with web content going up in the coming months.

Q: Were there many communists among American writers of that period?

A: Communism had a more idealistic appeal in the 1930s, before the understanding of Stalin's oppression became widely known. It was seen as a way to leaven the inequities of the Depression, and there were slogans like "Communism is 20th-century Americanism." John Reed



Clubs were youth clubs with a focus on arts and writing; they acted as feeders for the American Communist Party. Furthermore the League American Writers, begun in 1935, had a wide array of leading American writers, from a young **Nelson Algren** to a grizzled Dashiell Hammett. Ernest Hemingway spoke at their 1938 conference. Yet the League had ties to the Communist Party.

Q: Are the WPA guides still available? Which is your favorite?

A: Very hard question. I like the Oklahoma, Wisconsin and New York guides. But there are two books that gather gems from all the WPA guides. Bernard Weisberger rounded up many bright nuggets in his *WPA Guide to America*. The other is *Remembering America*, edited by Archie Hobson; his selection highlights local stories from all the guides – many very funny.

Q: Where can I learn more about these writers?

A: One starting point is the film's website at www.smithsonianchannel.com, which has brief bios for the main characters. Another is the *Soul of a People* book, which shows more about the writers and how their lives intersected. It includes a section with suggestions for further reading, and your local library will have books by a number of them. Several brochure pdfs and other resources are also available at the website of the American Library Association, at www.ala.org/soulofapeople.