

# WORLD WAR 1.5: A TRUE STORY

Treatment by JONATHAN HERRICK

**LOGLINE:** At twenty-one, Billy Redman was the ultimate hero until he was given a choice that haunted him for the rest of his life: murder a heroic young couple or take an assassin's bullet.

An idealistic American who was one of the first to fight Fascism in Europe, Redman, aka William Herrick, journeyed with the Abraham Lincoln Battalion to Madrid in 1936, was almost murdered three times, fell in love, and became one of the first Leftists to denounce Communism.

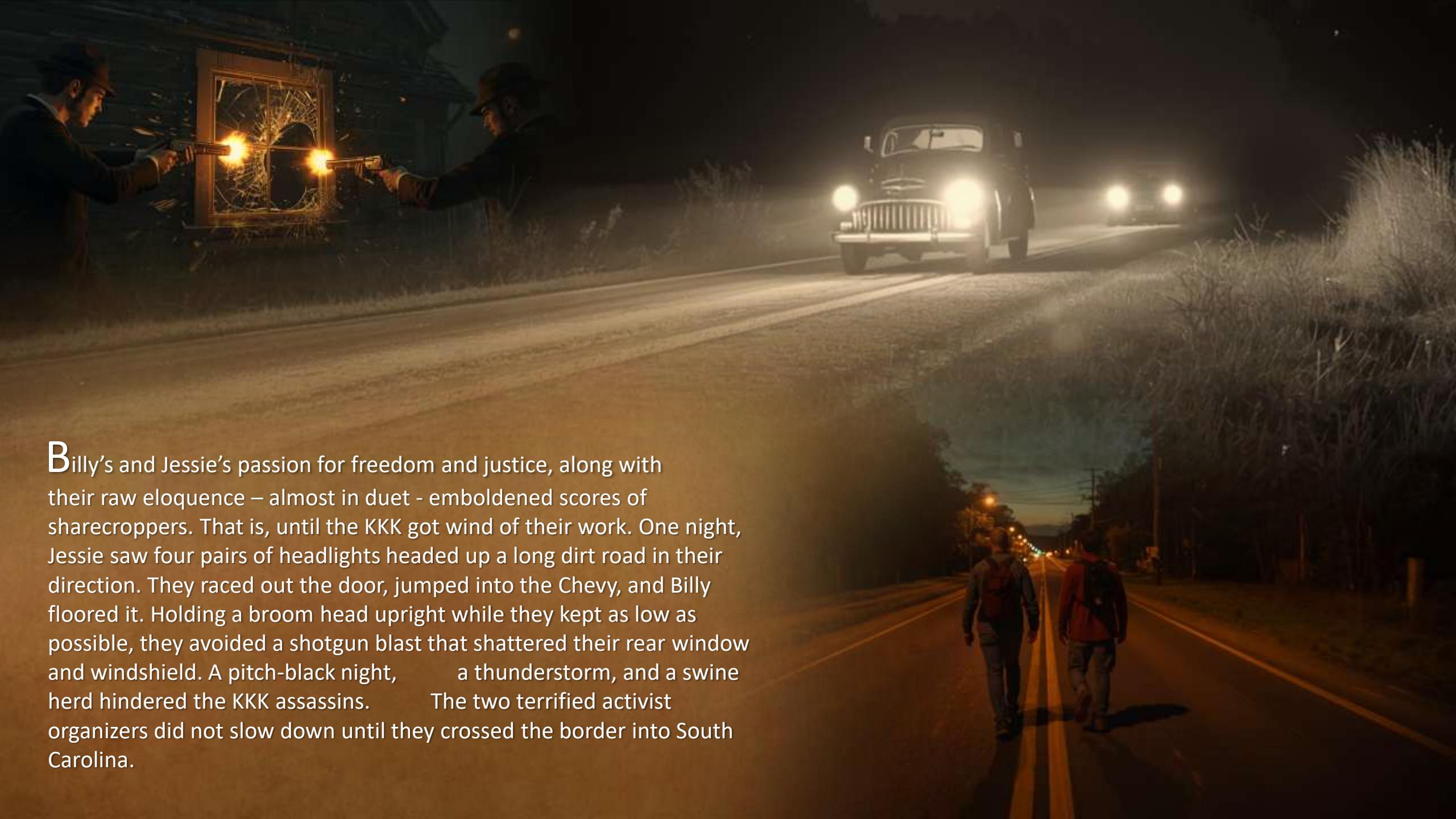
Called "America's George Orwell," William Herrick was Jonathan's father. His novel, *Hermanos*, was published in 1968 to critical and commercial success. Otto Preminger purchased the movie rights, Reginald Rose wrote a 3-hour war epic, but the large budget was not obtained, and the movie rights reverted to Jonathan. He also owns the rights to *Jumping the Line*, his father's memoir.

This is the story of a young man's profound commitment to democracy and justice, with his life challenged by personal betrayal and international treachery.

Herrick exuded a physical energy that made him seem much larger than his 5 feet 9. A man of contrasts, he acted with both fierce kindness and passionate rage. Despite a lack of classical good looks, his charm and virility made him a magnet for women. And despite lacking formal education, he was better read than most PhDs.

In 1934, William Herrick, who had renamed himself Billy Redman, dropped out of the University of Wisconsin to join a socialist farm commune. Before long impatient to change the world, he convinced a friend, Jessie Truesdale, to walk away with him. One of the few African Americans to graduate from Harvard (the previous year), Jessie was more erudite than Billy and loved to tease by correcting his grammar. Together, they played a confidence trick on a petty gangster, lifted his '26 Chevy, and drove south to Georgia to inspire uneducated Black men and women to vote. This was in the heart of Georgia, in the 30's, hot nights in small, dark, rural cabins.





Billy's and Jessie's passion for freedom and justice, along with their raw eloquence – almost in duet – emboldened scores of sharecroppers. That is, until the KKK got wind of their work. One night, Jessie saw four pairs of headlights headed up a long dirt road in their direction. They raced out the door, jumped into the Chevy, and Billy floored it. Holding a broom head upright while they kept as low as possible, they avoided a shotgun blast that shattered their rear window and windshield. A pitch-black night, a thunderstorm, and a swine herd hindered the KKK assassins. The two terrified activist organizers did not slow down until they crossed the border into South Carolina.



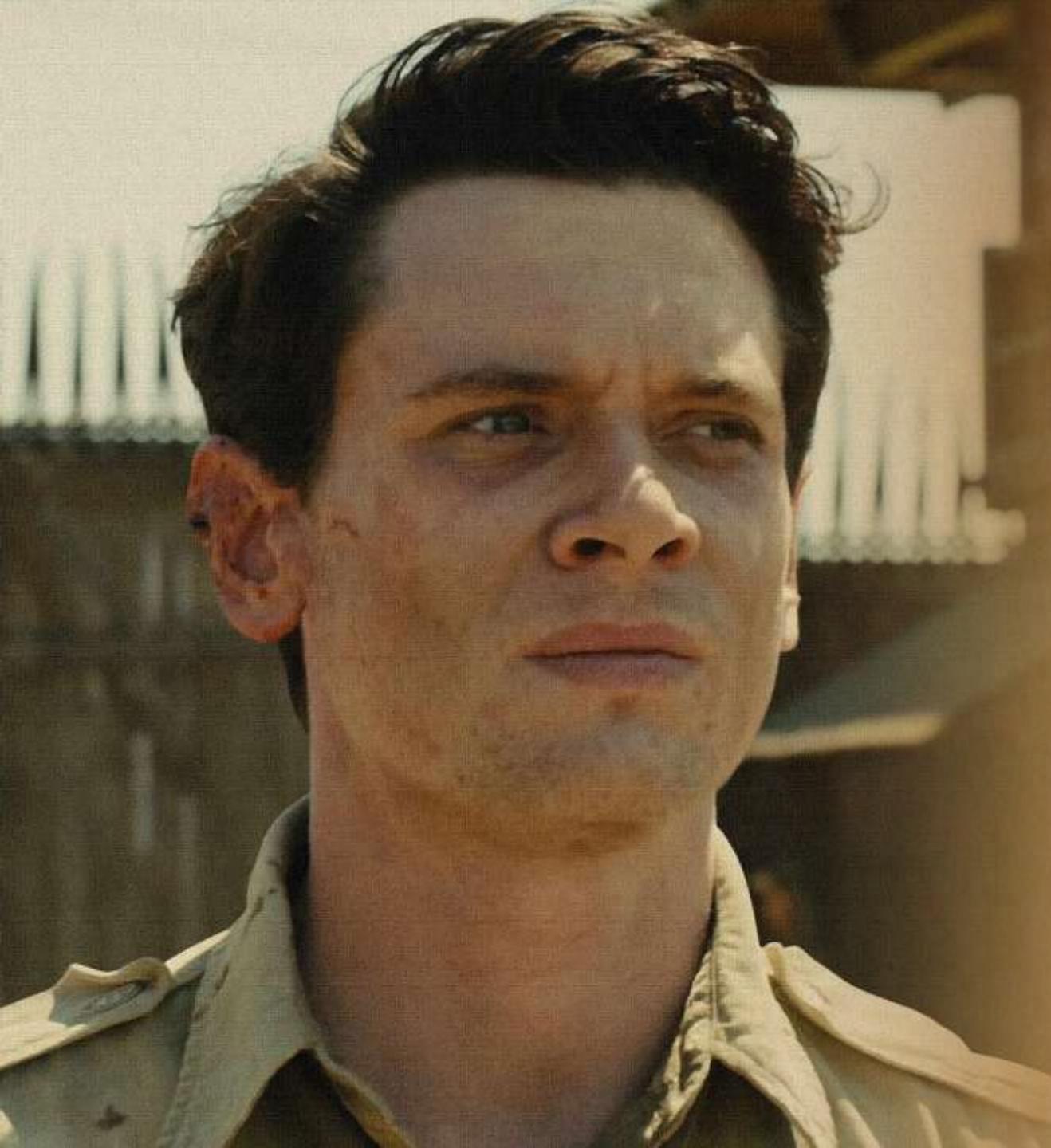
Billy made his way to his mother's home in Brooklyn, where he spent several weeks recharging. His mother, who had inspired his righteousness, was a devoted Communist. She owned a millinery shop, where she crafted fancy hats for wealthy women, including Mrs. Andrew Carnegie.

Most nights, Billy and Jessie took the subway up to Harlem, where they danced with panache with some of the most beautiful young women in Manhattan. One night, Billy's partner might be a Jewish Barnard girl, another night a Black female singer. The friends competed on the dance floor as they swung to Duke Ellington at the Savoy Ballroom, Lester Young at Minton's Playhouse, and Billy Holiday at the Cotton Club.

However, when General Franco, a charismatic strongman, began to challenge Spain's fragile democracy, Billy's passion for justice exploded. Half the American press, as well as the Catholic Church, supported and even cheered on Franco as a restorer of law and order. Liberal and Left-wing Americans complained about the authoritarian threat, debated what to do, prayed it would disappear, and sometimes joined anti-Fascist demonstrations. Billy was ready to risk arrest by violating U.S. neutrality law and to sacrifice his own life. He quickly joined the newly formed Abraham Lincoln Battalion, the first hundred young American men and women to ship out to Spain to fight Franco and Fascism.

In 1936, the world's fastest, most luxurious ocean liner, the S.S. Normandie, crossed from Manhattan to Le Havre, France, in four days, while Billy, Jessie, and the other untrained, young soldiers drilled on deck with broomsticks and slept ten in a cabin. (The Battalion could take no arms or weapons aboard because they had illegally joined a foreign war.) In Le Havre, the men found themselves in a new world of food, drinks, and whores' tricks.





The troupe then traveled by train, via Paris, to the Spanish border, where they marched up the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route and crossed the Pyrenees to northern Spain. In Barcelona, they celebrated with their “brothers” from across Spain and fifty other countries, a vast consortium of international solidarity, joining to rescue democracy and freedom from Fascism and monarchism. Together, they were called the Republicans and Loyalists. They ultimately fought on the front outside Madrid.

This was the first racially integrated military unit in United States' history. Black and white Americans fought side by side on an equal basis, and for the first time in history, an African American commanded white American combat troops. Women also risked their lives on the front lines as nurses and ambulance drivers. Future eminences were also present. A young Ernest Hemingway was an EMT. George Orwell saw front-line combat.

The Battalion fought hard and had early victories, but good intentions were not enough. The Lincoln Battalion and Republicans in general had almost no training, were rife with internal divisions among their various factions (e.g., communists, anarchists, and socialists), and were firing World War I weapons. Franco's Nationalist army was well-trained and well-armed with tanks and bullets supplied by Hitler. As a result, the Battalion suffered high casualty rates.

On the front lines outside Madrid, a machine gun bullet struck Billy in the neck. He heard, “Herrick’s been killed,” then saw himself speeding towards a transcendent, brilliant light. This was the first time an experience contradicted a fundamental belief, in this case, materialistic atheism. When he regained consciousness, Billy found himself in a World War I ambulance with blood and other liquids dripping on him from another wounded soldier bunked above. The careening vehicle and bumpy road amplified his excruciating pain. The bullet lay a bare fraction of an inch from his spine; hospital surgeons believed it safer to leave it than remove it. (It remained there for sixty-five years, until his death. His wife rescued the bullet from his ashes, encased it in gold, and wore it around her neck until her death, years later, at 95.)

Herrick’s adventures had just begun. During his month in a Communist hospital, in classic soldier fashion, he fell for his hospital nurse. One day, he told her a joke about “Uncle Joe” Stalin, about the Assassins’ Queue at the Kremlin being so long that prospective assassins gave up and went for a drink. Stalin, being his hero, did not impair his sense of humor. His nurse-lover shared the joke with her superior, also her lover. The next day, a guard escorted Billy to a dark basement room in a small church, where one wall was splattered with blood. This was where good Communists executed anyone who disagreed with them – or joked about Comrade Stalin.





Billy saw a teenage couple, both lovers of freedom and fighters against Fascism, standing against the wall. He recognized them from a chat they had had on their way to the front. Terrified, the girl fainted, and the boy peed himself. Though allied with the Communists against the Fascists, they were anarchists, which Uncle Joe could not tolerate. Another guard joined them and asked Billy to share the joke. He did, the guards laughed, then one handed him a revolver and gave him a choice: kill the anarchists or kill himself. Billy decided to shoot the guards, but anxiously fumbled and dropped the gun. One guard picked it up and shot the young couple. Devastated, Billy slumped to the floor. The guards dragged him out feet-first through the blood of his murdered comrades.

For the second time, Billy's experience contradicted his beliefs. The noble brotherhood he had committed his life to was turned on its head by Stalin's ruthlessness and Communism's empty promise. Confused and heart sick, Billy escaped Barcelona and Spain, past Loyalist police and Fascist guards, to France.

Then he returned home to America, where his disillusionment turned to rage. In the mid-30s, New York City found Billy in Union Square on a soapbox denouncing Stalin as being as monstrous as Franco and Hitler. The clarity of his speech and the legitimacy of his rage attracted first a few, then crowds of workers. He was one of the first on the American Left to denounce Stalin publicly. One day, Communist goons beat him almost unconscious until several cops chased them away. A few days later, battered and bandaged, Billy returned to the soapbox, protected by the cops.

For the rest of his life, he was haunted by his failure to kill the Communist guards and rescue the innocent young couple. He wished he had recognized the evil at the heart of Communism earlier on, and he spent much of his life committed to making amends.

It was a pleasure for me to revisit my father's life in his early twenties. He came alive as I wrote this treatment.

Were this to become a mini-series or multi-season show, themes of violence, love, restitution, and justice would permeate the sweep of the epic, from one generation to the next.



# FUTURE SEASONS

## SEASON TWO

Mid-1890s to early 1930s. The prequel begins in Ukraine, where Billy's young parents are almost murdered by Cossacks, and continues into a new century and country. In NYC, the father dies in the 1917 flu epidemic, and Billy is thrown into foster care, then, as a teenager, is mentored by a brilliant psychiatrist who treats Billy Holiday, often has Billy and Henry Miller over for dinner, and introduces Billy to radical politics.



## SEASON THREE

1945. At thirty, Billy falls in love with twenty-two-year-old Jenny, who begins work with 30-year-old Orson Welles. When Welles comes on to her, Billy takes her place and lives for a very intimate, wild year with the impresario, who is producing *The Lady from Shanghai* starring his wife, Rita Hayworth, in Hollywood, and *Around the World in Eighty Days* with Cole Porter on Broadway.

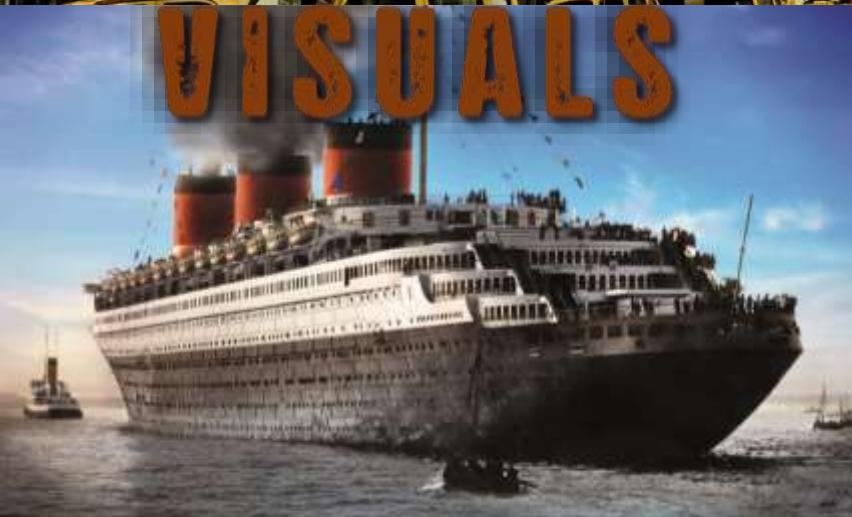
## SEASON FOUR

1949 - 1954. Billy and Jenny are part of the Greenwich Village bohemian life, then struggle as part of the exodus from NYC to Westchester and the transition to family, bourgeois, suburban life. And Billy must deal with HUAC.



## SEASON FIVE

1956 – 68, focuses on Billy's fiery, almost murderous, relationship with his wild teenage son, as well as with the Vietnam War, rock 'n roll, drugs, and assassinations.



# DREAM CAST

**BILLY REDMAN**



Timothée  
Chalamet



Kit  
Connor



Jack Champion

**JESSIE TRUESDALE**



Chosen Jacobs

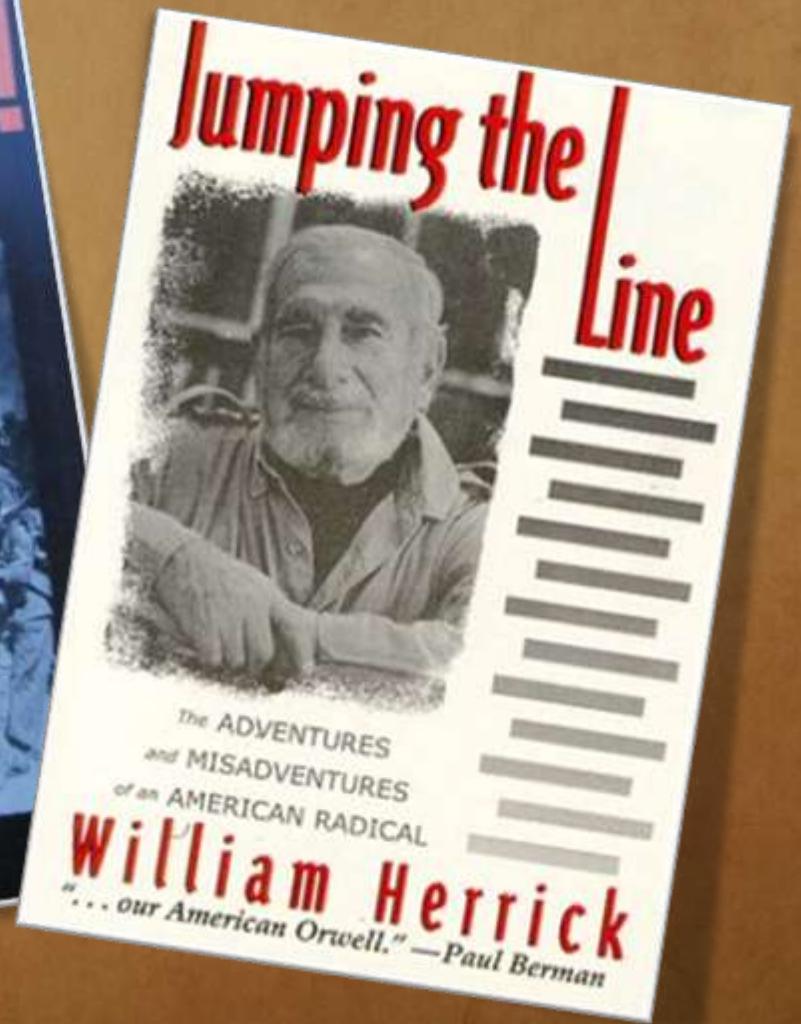
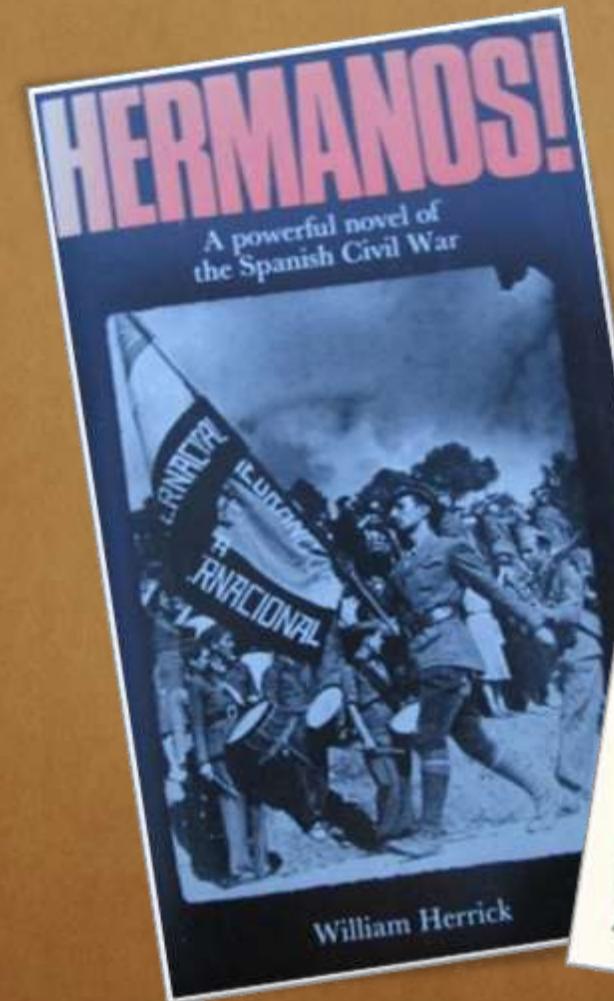
**NURSE-LOVER-SPY**



Zendaya

The Story is based on  
“Hermanos” and  
“Jumping the Line,”  
both written by

**WILLIAM HERRICK**



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