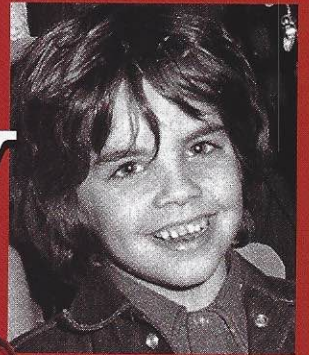


ANNA PAQUIN TOM SELLECK MICHAEL CAINE O. HENRY

Every life has a story.

Biography



Who Am I?

See page 18

Our **50**
Favorite People

Beck Weathers
Left for Dead on Mt. Everest

**Best-Dressed
Stars of the Year**

Stress Doc:
'Tis the season to relax

Great Scot!
Ewan McGregor

What

EXCLUSIVE!

Mel Wants

The Unconventional
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BIOGRAPHY MAGAZINE

MEL GIBSON...50 FAVORITE PEOPLE...EMILY POST

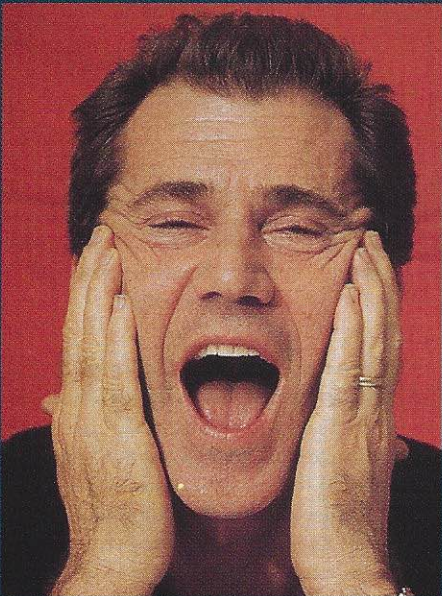
DECEMBER 2000



What Mel Wants

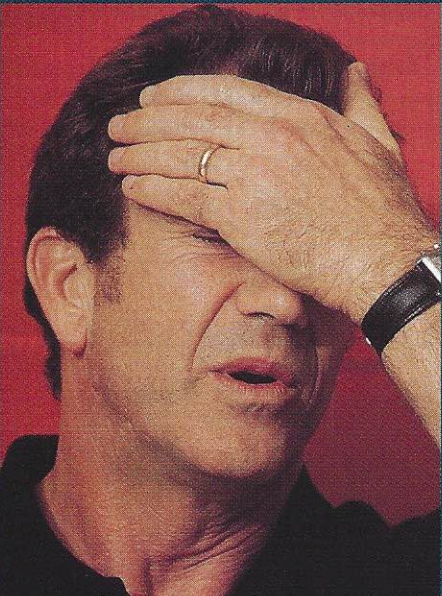
BY SHERYL BERK

Fame? Fortune? Women falling at his feet? Forget about it. The only thing on Mel Gibson's wish list these days is a little R&R—about a year's worth to be exact. "Projects? What projects? I'm done. I'm taking a break—a *long* one," the 44-year-old insists.



Since Gibson has a reputation for being quite the practical joker (he gives freeze-dried rats as gifts, breaks up tense emotional scenes by burping, and celebrates the first day on a film with a hired marching band), it's hard to gauge whether or not he's pulling your leg. His role models—he warns you—are the Three Stooges, and he likes to liven up a serious interview: "Just answer the questions? Well, it reduces my capacity for surprise..."

But in this instance, Gibson seems sincere. Unlike many actors these days, he doesn't feel compelled to work on back-to-back projects. It's a luxury he's earned after some 25 years in the business—and a paycheck rumored to be in the range of \$25 million per film. He took months off between making the revolutionary war epic *The Patriot* and his new romantic comedy, *What Women Want*, mainly to devote himself to diaper duty (his son, Thomas, was born a year and a half ago). Before that, he let 18 months lapse between jobs.



"I try not to get greedy with all the things that come along, because I could just keep working indefinitely," he says. "But that's really not what I want to do. I definitely enjoy working, but I think it's necessary to just walk away for a while to reevaluate and reconnect."

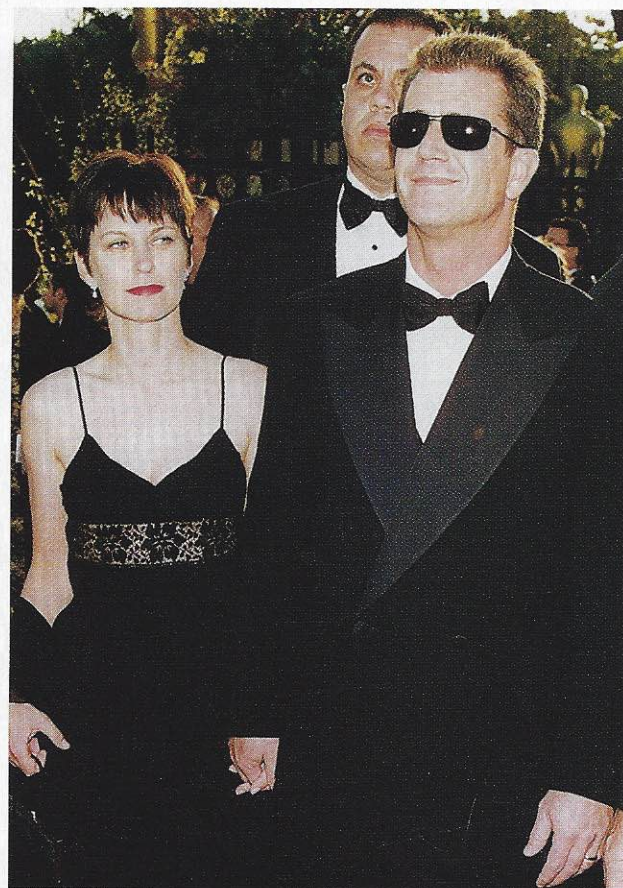
CELEBRITY DOSSIER

NAME: Mel Columcille Gerard Gibson**DATE OF BIRTH:** January 3, 1956**PLACE OF BIRTH:** Peekskill, New York; moved to Sydney, Australia, at age 12**PARENTS:** Hutton and Anne**MARRIAGE:** Wed Robyn Moore, 1980**CHILDREN:** Hannah, Edward and Christian (twins), William, Louis, Milo, Thomas**FACT:** While filming the 1996 movie *Ransom* in New York City, the cast and crew encountered one of the worst snowstorms in years. Everyone came down with a cold; Gibson came down with appendicitis. "That's just like Mel," joked director Ron Howard. "He loves to one-up ya."

He likes his life this way: a delicate balance between career and kids (he and his wife, Robyn, have seven, ranging in age from 18 months to 19 years). He's also pretty confident (truth be told, almost cocky) that his star won't fade should he disappear for a while to "just practice the ol' golf swing." Nor does he worry about taking on projects that might call into question his rugged sex-symbol status: While he's been *Mad Max* and *Maverick*, he's also played Hamlet, given voice to a claymation rooster in this year's *Chicken Run*, and played *The Man Without a Face*. Ask him to name his favorite role and he hems and haws. "That's like asking you to pick your favorite child," he says. "You love each and every one of them for lots of different reasons." He pauses, then adds in his most-serious monotone: "I do, however, think *Bird on a Wire* was one of my finest works. Oscar caliber."

And yes, he's kidding.

Most people assume he's an Aussie (the accent probably has a lot to do with it), but he was actually born Mel Columcille Gerard Gibson



Gibson and wife Robyn at the 1997 Academy Awards; he calls the mother of his seven children his "Rock of Gibraltar"



At the European premiere of *Braveheart*, 1995

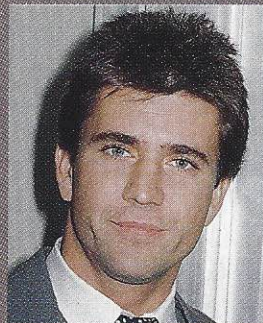
(named for three Catholic saints) on January 3, 1956, in Peekskill, New York, to Anne and Hutton Gibson. His father was a railroad brakeman who was injured on the job. "My parents were religious working-class people who at the same time were very well-educated—particularly my father—in literature, languages, and philosophy," Gibson says. "Philosophical and theological discussions [and] canon law were a part of our upbringing. My parents were smart people and they chose not to live in opulence. They shared all they had with a large family, and it was a loving one."

Mel was the sixth of 11 children (he has five brothers and five sisters), and a mischievous kid who—among other things—stole the family car and stapled a sister's head. "I wasn't a holy terror—it was more passive-aggressive," he explains. "Yet none of us could complain. Even with all those brothers and sisters, we each got tons of attention growing up. We attended to one another, and my parents never even went out to dinner—they were always there for us."

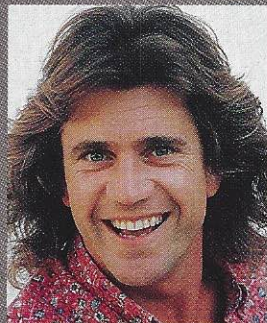
In 1968, Hutt Gibson got the chance to show off his academic knowledge on the TV quiz show *Jeopardy*. He won \$21,000, and im-

"Becoming a father helped me grow up a lot," admits the actor once known for his hard-drinking lifestyle.

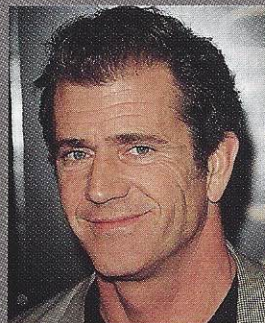
T I M E L I N E



1982



1987



2000

mediately took his prize money and relocated his family to Australia (where Anne's grandmother had been born). It was during the Vietnam War, and he worried that his sons would be drafted. "Australia seemed like a fresh start for my father," Gibson says. But for young Mel, it was much more nerve-racking. "I was the tender age of 12—on the eve of puberty—which is upheaval time anyway," he says. "To actually switch cultures...there was excitement and adventure but also trepidation. I remember those conflicting feelings very clearly."

He attended an all-boys Catholic school where he was teased for his American accent and called a "Yank." "I didn't like school—who does?" he recalls. "I got busted for smoking and wagging, which means you just leave, you go to a pool hall for the day. I was very good at that."

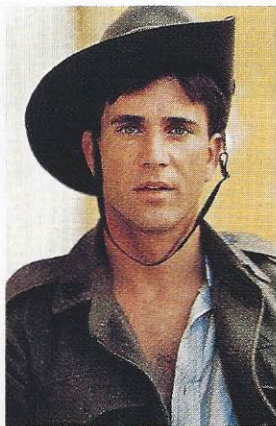
After graduating, he had jobs bagging groceries, waxing surfboards, and working in an orange juice factory. "I was killing time," he says. "I had no idea I was going to go into acting—my sister [Mary] really paved the way." She suggested he try out for the prestigious National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney. "She sprung for the audition fee, helped me to prepare for it," Gibson says. "And somehow, I made it in. But I didn't take to it right away—in fact, I felt kind of squirmy about it."

Luckily, he didn't look squirmy. He was cast as Romeo (opposite Judy Davis' Juliet) in an NIDA production and scored his first film role while only a sophomore, playing a shy surfer in 1977's *Summer City*. "I made 20 bucks—which I drank immediately," he says.

After several stage turns, including *Waiting for Godot*, starring opposite his then-roommate Geoffrey Rush—later of *Shine* fame—and a regular spot on the Aussie series *The Sullivans*, Gibson stumbled onto his first big break. Legend has it that he showed up for the *Mad Max* audition after starting a barroom brawl, and was immediately offered the role of the post-apocalyptic vigilante because of his battered face.

"Well, that's not really the *whole* truth," he insists, setting the record straight. "Yes, I had been in an altercation, and yes, there was drink involved...oh hell, these things happen! And I came out on the worst end of it for sure."

But the fact is Gibson never intended to audition at all. "I went in with a friend of mine who was auditioning—I just went along for the ride—and I sat in the waiting room. People were staring at me, asking,



Young and mesmerizing in an early film, 1981's *Gallipoli*



With Sigourney Weaver in 1983's *The Year of Living Dangerously*



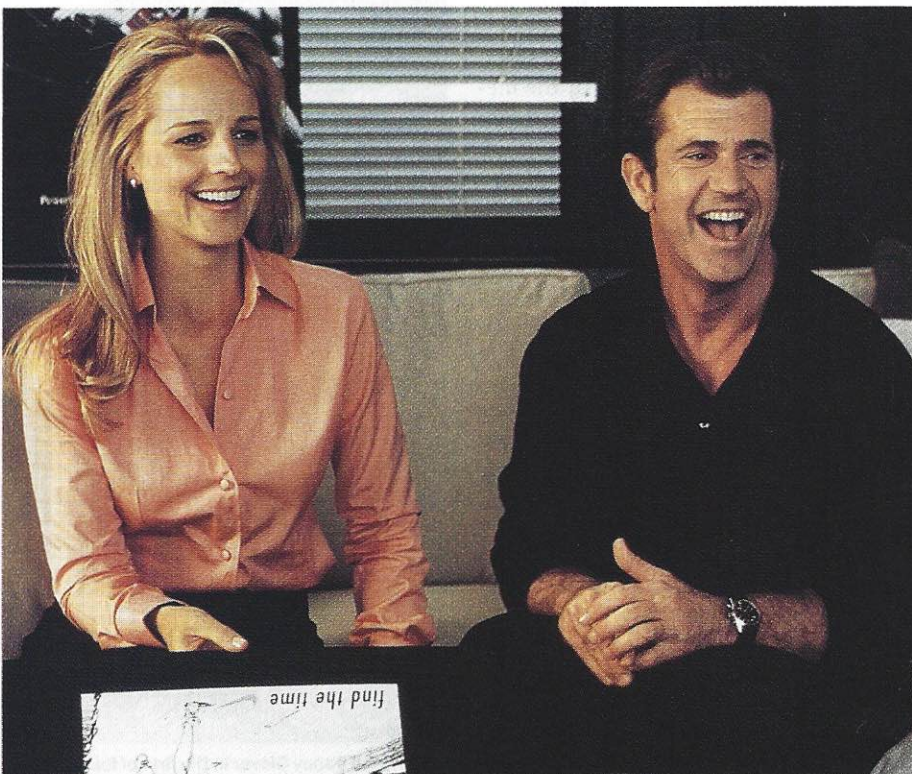
As Fletcher Christian in 1984's *The Bounty*



As Hamlet (that's Glenn Close as Gertrude) in the 1990 film



Teaming with Tina Turner in 1985's *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*; it was his third time out as Mad Max



Gibson (here with co-star Helen Hunt) can read women's minds in this month's *What Women Want*

'What the hell happened to you?' because I looked so terrible. They took Polaroids of me and they said, 'Hey, we need freaks in the movie. When you heal up, come and see us, because you're still gonna be scarred.'" About two weeks later, he returned. "I had to reintroduce myself because they didn't recognize me. They ushered me in to see the director [George Miller], and he gave me a three-page scene to learn in five minutes. I did it on camera, and I guess they liked it because suddenly I was starring in this movie."

Max was Mel's entrée to American audiences. "It was an odd little film and nobody had ever seen anything quite like it," he says. "It was bleak and raw, but it had something that was kind of cool about it..." The movie became a cult classic and he went on to make two sequels—1981's *The Road Warrior* and 1985's *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* with Tina Turner.

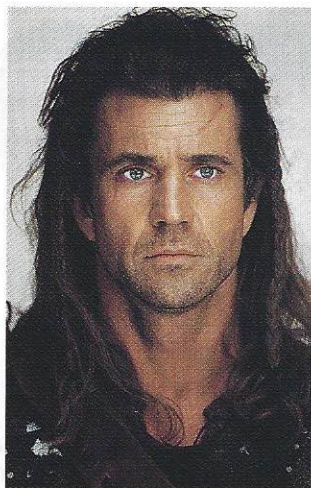
Around the same time as *Mad Max's* debut, Gibson met Robyn Moore, a dental nurse living in his boarding house in Adelaide, Australia. Their friendship slowly blossomed into a romance, and they wed, both at age 24, on June 7, 1980. "Only she could put up with me," Gibson has often commented. "She's my Rock of Gibraltar."

In the early '80s, Gibson's star began to rise—with meteoric speed. The *Max* movies, along with *Gallipoli* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*, helped earn him the title of *People* magazine's Sexiest Man Alive, but it was too much, too soon. Mel-mania was more than he could handle.

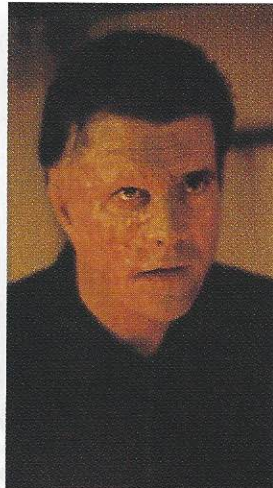
"Things got out of hand," he says, referring to the constant badgering by the media, as well as his way of coping with it. He was burned out—and alcohol seemed an easy answer. "I don't claim to be a saint," he says simply of that difficult time. His problem came to a head in 1983 when, while in Toronto filming *Mrs. Soffel* with Diane Keaton, he was arrested for drunk driving.

What he needed—he and Robyn both agreed—was a change of pace. He took a year off, bought a ranch in Australia, then teamed up with Danny Glover and director Richard Donner in the first of four *Lethal Weapon* movies. His character, Martin Riggs, was a slightly psychopathic undercover cop given to outbursts of violence and improvisation. Gibson felt right at home in the comic/action role. "Mel's like the class clown," remarks Rene Russo, his co-star in two *Lethal Weapon* films as well as *Ransom*. "He's like a hyperactive kid—you're constantly laughing when you're around him."

Yet despite the fun of working on the film, he was still drinking. In 1991, Robyn convinced him to enroll in Alcoholics



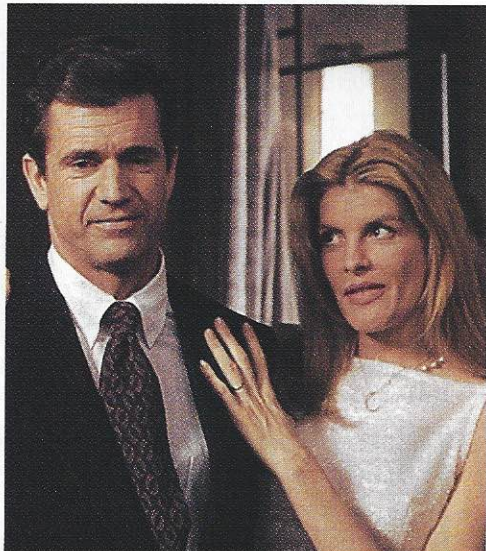
Mel starred in and directed *Braveheart* (1995)—and picked up two Oscars for his efforts



As a disfigured teacher in 1993's *The Man Without a Face*, which he also directed



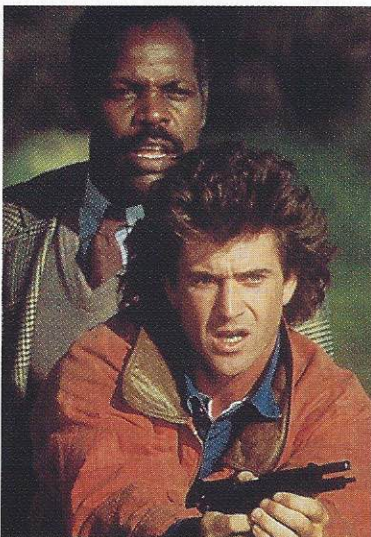
Trying his hand at a comic western: as Bret Maverick in 1994's *Maverick*



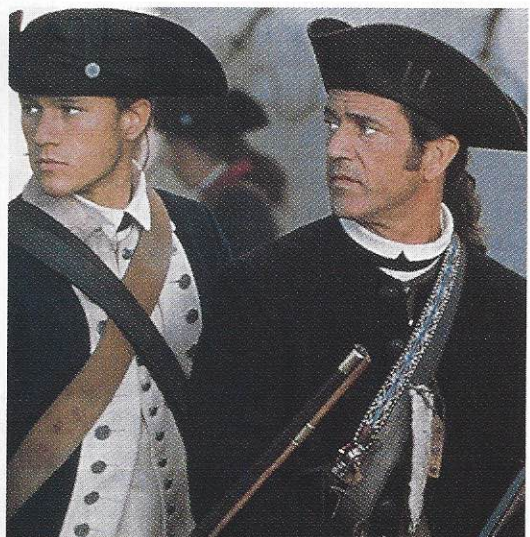
Mel Gibson and Rene Russo (here in 1996's *Ransom*) have starred together in three films



Mel has joked that 1990's *Bird on a Wire* (with Goldie Hawn) was "Oscar caliber"



Gibson and Danny Glover in the first of four *Lethal Weapon* movies they made together



With young Australian actor Heath Ledger (who played his son) in last summer's *The Patriot*

Anonymous. He's since sobered up, given up smoking (off and on), and ceased his wild ways—all for the good of his family. "Becoming a father helped me grow up a lot," he admits. "You have to do the best job you can do—there's no way out if it. I'm not saying I'm the perfect dad; I'm far from it. But the simple fact of the matter is there are sacrifices to be made, big decisions to be made—any parent knows that.

"For me, it was, 'Hey, you can't just pick up and make that film you want to make in Tunisia. You can't just leave,'" he continues. "You have to think about what's right and what the priorities are, and you have to take better care of yourself so you're around when they need you. It's not just all about you anymore—there are people who depend on you. So it was a wake-up call of sorts."

Gibson also decided it was time to change his image a bit. "I think people had preconceptions," he says. "I'm not a guy who runs around shooting wild boar with crossbows! An actress once said I was 'right of Attila the Hun.' I just laughed about that, because that's just so wrong. I'm more suited to certain types of archetypal characters—the hero/leader-guy—and therefore I was typecast into that role. And that's okay. But it's good to depart from it, for your own sanity. Otherwise it's like being on a merry-go-round: You keep going in circles, never getting anywhere."

So he tried new things, among them, a 1990 screen version of *Hamlet*. "Was I nervous? You better believe it. Who wouldn't be? It's probably the most difficult Shakespeare play. But that's what I used to do before I got into film—Shakespeare was my thing. I didn't always dress up in black leather and shoot somebody off the back of a truck like I did in *Road Warrior*."

While the reviews were very positive—he even received the 1992 Shakespeare Theater's Will Award—not everyone was a fan. At the time, Gibson made a few derogatory remarks about homosexuals to a Spanish magazine, and a gay rights group picketed an event that he was attending. He insisted he was just "horsing around" and that his comments were misconstrued entirely. (He has since sponsored and participated in a filmmakers' seminar with GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation).

Nonetheless, Gibson is not afraid of a little controversy. "The term 'politically correct' scares the **** out of me," he once told *The Washington Post*. He stands up for what he believes in—even if it's a project that no one else wants to do. He was deter-

Handsome and Then Some

Mel Gibson, consistently considered one of the sexiest men alive, first won attention as a young, astonishingly handsome, and virile actor. Here are a dozen other Hollywood men who smoldered in their time and can still make hearts beat a little faster.



Clint Eastwood



Denzel Washington



Richard Gere



Gregory Peck



Marlon Brando



Steve McQueen



Montgomery Clift



Paul Newman



Robert Redford



Sean Connery



Tommy Lee Jones



Cary Grant

mined to make 1993's *The Man Without a Face*, despite the fact that many actors declined to star in it. So besides directing, Gibson also found himself playing the lead character, a disfigured Latin teacher who befriends a troubled boy. "I was my fourth choice for the role," he says, laughing. His face had always been his fortune, but this part required him to mask it with hideous latex scars. "It was a big undertaking, daunting, and I was really proud of it, especially that I stepped up to the plate [to direct]."

He likens the process of directing a picture to "flying blind. You kind of know where you want it to go but you're not sure the direction to take that will get you there.

But if you work with enough great directors, guys like Dick Donner, you learn from them. I'm like Mr. Sponge Boy—I try to absorb everything."

When it came to directing his second film, 1995's *Braveheart*, the epic tale of 13th-century Scottish rebel William Wallace, he was more focused and accomplished—and Hollywood took note. He was showered with awards for his effort, among them a Golden Globe (for Best Director) and two Academy Awards, for Best Director and Best Picture. "That directing statue was just such a kick," he says. "I was really in the novice camp, and it was invaluable feedback. One

(Continued on page 124)

was his kind of town. He found ideas for stories in every bar and restaurant, in the lives of every impoverished shop girl and broken-down beggar. He entered the most prolific period of his writing life. His first book, *Cabbages and Kings*, based on his adventures in Honduras, was published in 1904. By 1905 he was earning \$15,000 a year, his work was being translated into many languages, and was being adapted for the stage.

Yet he had few friends. People who met him almost always commented on his detachment. He liked to drink alone, typically ordering a whiskey for himself "and one for my [invisible] crew." He was making a huge amount of money for the time, but was always short of funds—often tipping double the check in restaurants, handing out cash to every bum who asked, lavishly tipping ladies of the night simply for sitting with him for a few minutes, and treating every down-and-out chorus girl he met to opulent lobster dinners. He lived as an observer, and from his distant observations, he painted a picture of life in turn-of-the-century New York—a picture of impoverished working girls looking for love and of starving artists made rich through their friendships, a picture of warm-hearted cops and feckless philanthropists—that is unsurpassed. And he drank.

THE LAST TWIST OF FATE

But then, for a while, it looked like Will Porter was going to get a final shot at happiness. The mother of "Sall" Coleman—the very same Sall Coleman that he had shyly courted as a young boy—visited New York and heard rumors that the wildly popular O. Henry was none other than Will Porter. She went back to North Carolina and told her daughter, who wrote O. Henry, saying, "If you are not Will Porter, don't bother to answer."

Will answered and a highly romantic correspondence ensued, with O. Henry finally writing: "Now I'll tell you what to do. Kick the mountains over and pack a kimono and a lead pencil in a suitcase and hurry to New York." She did, he proposed, and O. Henry lived out his boyhood dream of marrying Sall.

But by then he was too far gone. He was drinking much too much and giving away his money so quickly that he never had any for himself. There were rumors that he was being blackmailed. He took to spending more and more time in bed. Sall went back to her home in North Carolina. He tried to join her in Asheville, but complained that there was far too much scenery there. "What I need is a steam-heated flat with no ventila-

tion or exercise," he noted.

He returned to New York and simply stopped leaving his room. On June 3, 1910, he summoned one of his editors for help. He was found in bed surrounded by eight empty whiskey bottles and was taken to New York Polyclinic Hospital. On the morning of June 5, just as the sun was rising, he stirred, said, "Turn up the lights. I don't want to go home in the dark," and died. His total net worth on that day was 23 cents, found in the bottom of his pocket. He was 47 years old. ●

MELISSA BURDICK HARMON OFTEN WRITES ABOUT WRITERS FOR *BIOGRAPHY MAGAZINE*.

Beck Weathers from page 99

to tie a pork chop around my neck to get the dog to play with me."

He learned to adapt to what he calls "Roboarm"—a prosthetic device that uses electrical currents from his right forearm muscles to control motors that open and close a claw. In January 1997, Beck was able to return to his job in the pathology department at Medical City Dallas Hospital—adding a foot pedal on his microscope and hiring a full-time assistant for duties that require the dexterity of fingers.

But even more important, he "returned" to his marriage. Peach gave her husband a year to prove that he was, as he claimed, a changed man. Says Beck, "Peach and I were both undergoing a huge amount of stress when I first got back, and also dealing with the anger that she had." They saw a counselor for several months, and Beck finally began taking medication for his depression and facing up to it. "Part of that has been accepting the fact that it is an illness, not a character flaw," he says. "For the first time in my life, I'm comfortable inside my own skin."

For Peach, the proof she needed came with her husband's response to a second family crisis. In August 1996, her 56-year-old brother was diagnosed with liver cancer. Still recovering himself, Beck gave Howard his all-out support—he accompanied him to doctor visits, researched experimental treatments, even fought with Howard's recalcitrant HMO. "In the past, I would have left everything to Peach," Beck admits. "Now I became viscerally engaged; I did not want to stand by and watch." Howard died four months later, and Beck gave the eulogy at his funeral. Despite her grief, Peach saw the silver lining: For Beck, family now came first. "What we do, where we are, and what we think is very important to Beck," says Peach. "I believe we are at the center of his universe."

Today, the man who once "could not enjoy the little things" thrills to the wonderful ordinariness of life: going to the movies, listen-

ing to music, reading after dinner with Peach, playing with their two dogs and four cats. A backyard swim or neighborhood walk has replaced the tough workouts. Their happy companionship came in the nick of time, as today they are mostly home alone: Bub is a senior at Duke University, Meg a freshman at Harvard. And when Beck travels around the country to speak, he wants his wife with him. "I don't have any grand interest in doing something unless Peach and I are going to do it together," he says.

Four years later, the former Dead Man Walking says he has no cosmic wonderings whether he was saved for any purpose other than simply being a better man. But he does feel a value in sharing his epiphany on the mountain with his audiences, hoping to reach others who still have a lack of balance in their lives. "Changing your priorities sometimes requires nothing more than the willingness to stop for one moment and actually *think* about them, but most of the time we never stop to do that," says Beck. "People see themselves in my story, and it has nothing to do with mountaineering. They relate to the emotional parts of the event, and they can realize it's never too late to change."

Given his own second chance at life, Beck Weathers is making the most of it, and wastes no time with regrets. "That day on the mountain I traded my hands for my family and for my future," he says. "It is a bargain I readily accept." ●

LINDA PETERSON IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF THIS MAGAZINE.

Mel Gibson from page 57

doesn't know how you're doing—it's like you're a scientist experimenting, trying to do the best you can, trying to throw it all together and make something cohesive come of it. The award was a great signpost for me to tell me I was traveling in the right direction. Many, many people do high caliber work and are never recognized for it."

Since that big prize, he has acted in several more movies—among them *Ransom*, *Payback*, *Conspiracy Theory*, and a fourth *Lethal Weapon*. Throughout his career, Gibson has always been on the lookout for projects that will challenge him. "I've been known to err in judgment now and then," he reflects. "Occasionally, one looks back and says, 'What the hell was I thinking?' but you know, it's a 10-year-old choice or a 20-year-old choice, and maybe it was right for that time. Hopefully, with time and maturation, one gets better. I know that's not always the case, but you try to make sure that if you take a step backward, you take two forward."

Moviegoers seem to respond ardently to

his work—and to his sheer personal magnetism. (Said *Maverick* co-star Jodie Foster, “He can so elegantly make an audience relax.”)

Gibson also is happy about his recent films. “I think *The Patriot* is a really superior film,” he says of last summer’s release. In it, he plays Benjamin Martin, a man whose peaceful family life is suddenly shattered by the Revolutionary War. His role as the reluctant leader of a rebel militia is already generating Golden Globe and Oscar buzz.

And if early audience reaction is any indication, *What Women Want* will have them rolling in the aisles. “I play this guy—he’s very much a man’s man,” Gibson says. “He’s into sports and the odd-shot of vodka. He thinks he’s God’s gift to women, but he learns he’s not when he can suddenly read women’s minds.” That includes the lusty thoughts of Helen Hunt, who plays his boss. “He’s brilliant,” Hunt declares. “Anyone who’s worked with him will tell you he’s the best. I think it’s genuinely possible that he’s an angel.”

High praise indeed—which seems to embarrass Gibson, despite the previous bravado. “I beg your pardon?” he gasps. “Well, hey, that’s great. Wow!”

As for the future, Gibson says, “An Oscar would be great, very gratifying, but that’s not the point of doing work.” What is the point then? Gibson struggles for a way to phrase it: “It’s hard to explain, but you know when you watch an old Humphrey Bogart movie, that feeling you get? It’s a Bogart film—just the connotation of quality with the name? I want to be like that. I want to be associated with good work. I’d like people to say, ‘It’s a Gibson? Then it’s gotta be good.’”

He is quite certain that one day he will give up acting altogether and just direct, like his close friend Ron Howard. “Oh, I know that will happen, I just don’t know when,” he says. “Then that’ll be it—you won’t see me up on the screen anymore.”

But fans can take heart: He’s been known to change his mind now and then. While promoting *Braveheart*, he swore he’d never make a fourth *Lethal Weapon* movie. “Did I really say that?” he laughs. “Yeah, well, what can I tell ya? I must have been kidding.” ●

SHERYL BERK IS SENIOR ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR OF THIS MAGAZINE.

New York from page 117

From the Empire State Building, make a one-block detour to 36th and Madison, where, in the Morgan Library, you can see Charles Dickens’ original manuscript of *A Christmas Carol*. The Morgan’s other exhibits change regularly—but whatever they have on at the time will be worth seeing, and its sunny atrium is a beautiful spot for lunch.

Back on Fifth, you’ll soon encounter the two stone lions that guard the front of the New York Public Library—Patience and Fortitude. They’re all decked out in 60-pound, light-studded Christmas wreaths. The library shop offers interesting little gifts for book lovers, too.

One of the best things about Christmas in New York is that you don’t have to choose between glamour and piety. Fifth Avenue gives you both. First see Saks Fifth Avenue’s window displays, which tend to be très chic, even during the holidays. (“We’re in the glamour business, not the amusement business,” an employee once said.) Right next door is glorious St. Patrick’s Cathedral, open all day (unfortunately, its 2,500 seats for Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve are all distributed months in advance). Soon you’ll come to Cartier—always gift-wrapped for Christmas—and Tiffany & Co., where all of the oh-so-proper employees gather on the first floor at closing time on Christmas Eve and applaud as those heavy stainless steel doors slowly swing closed. For those drawn to the not-as-tasteful, Trump Tower at 725 Fifth Avenue is a lesson in just how many Christmas decorations it is humanly possible to cram onto one edifice. But the real pleasure palace lies at 58th Street. FAO Schwarz, home of gargantuan stuffed animals, exclusive-to-FAO’s Barbies, and 22 different colors of M&Ms. It is a fun place to visit, even if you’re not in the market for toys. Finish your Fifth Avenue tour with afternoon tea at the Palm Court in the Plaza Hotel. That’s one place that looked and felt exactly the same during O. Henry’s day.

Songs and Shows

Then there’s the music. I began the day with a Harlem Spirituals Gospel and Jazz Tour, which takes groups—composed almost entirely of European tourists—on fascinating visits in Harlem. We rode past the former homes of Lionel Hampton and Duke Ellington, of Joe Louis and Count Basie and Paul Robeson. We explored the handsome buildings of City College, which has educated generations of New York’s immigrant poor, including such luminaries as Henry Kissinger. We walked along Sugar Hill and Strivers’ Row, long home to New York’s African-American elite and today equally divided between Christmas and Kwanzaa decorations. And then we went to church.

That Sunday the chosen house of worship was the Kelly Temple Church of God in Christ on East 130th Street, although the tour visits a variety of Harlem houses of worship. From the moment the huge gospel choir rocked its way down the aisle belting

out “Go Tell It On the Mountain” until they really let loose on “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” I was totally entranced. It was impossible to leave there feeling anything but wonderful.

Still high from the Pentecostals, I caught a cab to the Cloisters, New York’s little jewel of a medieval museum, where I attended an afternoon concert by the Waverly Consort. Sitting in the museum’s Romanesque Fuentidueña Chapel, as the thin winter afternoon sunlight poked through the church’s narrow slit windows, I listened to the group perform “The Christmas Story as Told in the Music of the Middle Ages.” They sang a cappella, in Latin, accompanying themselves from time to time on medieval instruments. It was ethereal and elegant and extraordinarily serious. I could not possibly have found two more divergent celebrations of the very same event—the birth of Christ—if I had spent a lifetime searching.

That night I did my last piece of Christmas research, taking my goddaughter Emma Sadler to see the over-produced, over-the-top-but-really-fun annual production of *A Christmas Carol* at Madison Square Garden. She had never seen a play before. When fake snow fell on her, she was thrilled. When one of the actors presented her with a gold candy coin, she beamed. She nearly applauded her hands off during the curtain call. Emma had discovered the miracle of the theater. In fact, as we were making our way out she turned to me and said, “That was great! Do you think I could see it again?”

“Well, maybe someday,” I replied.

And that, I reflected, is about as close to the simple pleasures of an O. Henry Christmas as you can get. Giving a gift, and realizing that gift has been very much appreciated. ●

MELISSA BURDICK HARMON HAS CELEBRATED HER LAST 30 CHRISTMASSES IN NEW YORK CITY.

Letters from page 14

The Pope and Christina Noble

What a truly impressive article on Pope John Paul II [September]. Thank you for sharing his life story with us. You clearly showed that he has gone through many of life’s struggles.

Ruth Yeomans

La Habra, California

Each month, your magazine has so many great articles. I was impressed by both your stories on the Pope and Christina Noble [September], who should be considered a saint in my opinion. Both Christina and Pope John Paul II suffered during childhood, saw horrors beyond what some of us can imagine, and yet each has made this