

# THE WARRIORS

**Sol Yurick** was born in 1925 in New York. The son of Eastern European Jewish immigrant parents living in the Bronx, he grew up in a family of active trade unionists and committed communists. In 1944, at the age of nineteen, he enlisted in the US Army. After the Second World War he studied literature at New York University before working for many years as a social investigator in New York City's welfare department, an experience which formed the basis for *The Warriors*. Originally published in 1965, it was the first of his novels to be published and remains the best known; in 1979 it was adapted for screen by Walter Hill and became a celebrated cult movie. Yurick is also known for his later novels *Fertig* and *The Bag*, and published a further five books. He was a lifelong social activist and took part in the anti-war movement. He lived his whole life in New York, where he died in 2013.

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Published in Great Britain in 2020 by  
Serpent's Tail,  
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd  
29 Cloth Fair  
London  
EC1A 7JQ  
*www.serpentstail.com*

This edition first published in Great Britain in 2014 by  
Souvenir Press Ltd, an imprint of Profile Books Ltd

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 433 7  
eISBN 978 0 28564 282 9

Typeset by M Rules



“Soldiers, you must not be downhearted because of recent events. I can assure you that there are as many advantages as disadvantages in what has happened.”

“My friends, these people whom you see are the last obstacle which stops us from being where we have so long struggled to be. We ought, if we could, to eat them up alive.”

—from *Anabasis* by Xenophon

## July 4th, 11:10 P.M.

Six warriors crouched in the shadow of a tomb. They were panting after their long run. The moon was shining above them; all the spaces between the gravestones and the tombs were bright but the shadows were hard and deep. Embracing cherubs, smiled down on them from the eaves of the tomb, fat-faced and benevolent. Far off, starting from the south and running to the northwest, a solid bank of moonlit cloud looked like a range of mountains. The cemetery was on a hill. Below them were clusters of tombstones, an iron spike fence, a highway, a narrow river gleaming, a long stretch of lawn sloping upward, a line of apartment houses a half mile away, and, between the houses, elevated tracks on which a string of brightly lit trains rattled festively.

They listened. They heard nothing but the rumble of the train across the valley. They heard their own gasping breaths mixed with the sounds of rustling leaves.

“All here?” one of the warriors whispered.

The others hissed, “Shh, shh.”

They looked at one another suspiciously and shifted a little, all except Hinton who had found a spot in the darkest doorway shadow of the tomb. He sat there, his feet up against one side, his bent back supported by the other.

“What do we do now?”

They cooled it for a while; looked around, recovered from their run. They listened for any strange sound and tried to guess what it meant. Were there other warriors here? Were the police around? They wondered how they could get across the valley to the train.

“All here?”

“Cool it, cool it.” There might be a watchman.

Hinton curled further into the shadow. It wasn't so bad here, he thought. He felt almost sleepy, protected because the others were between him and the outside. He was tired. The run had knocked everything out of him. He hadn't slept well for two days—the tension. Now if he could only sleep for awhile. Why couldn't they stay here? It was restful. There was a cool breeze and the grass smelled nice.

From behind the bank of apartment houses a line of fire climbed slowly into the sky and burst into a shimmering American flag. The smiling stone cherubs changed into something malevolent in the spangled light. The whole dragging place spooked them. Illuminated, they shifted positions, milling, bumping, pressing back against the tomb, pushing into the deeper shadows. The flag hovered for a second, was caught by the wind, and began to drift lazily south until it dissolved in a shower of three-colored sparks. In this final burst they saw that Papa Arnold was missing. Someone groaned. They began to count off.

“Me.”

“Lunkface.”

“Bimbo.”

“The Junior.”

“Dewey.”

“Where's Hinton? They get Hinton too?”

“I'm here.” His knees drew up to almost touch his chin; his lips were on his knuckles.

“Look at that Hinton; he almost asleep. Man, cool,” The Junior said.

That Hinton, he could sleep anywhere. Lunkface tried to look sleepy because it would show how cool *he* was. He reached to shift his hat down over his eyes, but the hat was gone. Lunkface cursed and started to move out into the moonlight to look for it. He was hissed back into place. A series of little explosions sounded off in the distance—firecrackers like the rattle of machine guns. Where was the sound coming from? Hinton closed his eyes tighter; his chin pressed on his knees; his thumb was going to his mouth, but he scratched his nose with his thumbnail instead. Something rustled in the grass. They froze it. Nothing happened. An animal, a rat maybe. Rats eat corpses. That made them feel better; they all knew and understood rats.

Hector said, “Man, we have to cool it here for a while. Maybe Papa Arnold will make it here . . .”

“How’s he going to know we’re here?” Bimbo asked.

“If he don’t come, we move out to where that train is and go home.”

The Junior shifted his position and stuck his hand out into the moonlight and looked down at his wrist; he was the only one who owned a watch. “This brother doesn’t think it’s a good idea. It’s going to be midnight soon.”

“So?”

“So man, you can’t stay in a graveyard after midnight,” The Junior said and his voice was hysterical.

They all knew about what might happen in a graveyard after midnight. Some of them believed it; some didn’t. But it disturbed them all; all except Hinton who buried his face tighter into his thighs which were drawing up. It would be good to just stay here, he thought. It was cool, probably the only cool spot in the whole city now. Just too much trouble to get up

and go climbing fences and walk all that open distance to that train across the valley. A few dull explosions sounded.

“We got to get out of here. They come and get you,” The Junior said.

That was silly, Hinton thought.

“Man, I got to find my hat,” Lunkface said. “That cost.”

“We got to get out. They come out of their graves. Everyone know that.”

“We stay here a while,” Hector said.

“No one elected you Father.” The Junior was shrill now.

“You want to tangle about it?” Hector asked. No answer. “Someone has got to be the Father till we get back home. You listen to me. We’ll move out before twelve. We have plenty of time.”

They waited. They listened. They looked out for the cops, the other gangs, the watchman, while Hector made the plan for getting all the way home.

## July 4th, 3:00–4:30 P.M.

It began that afternoon.

Six Delancey Thrones were intent on playing a card game in their clubroom. They were in summer uniform—tight ice-cream pants and red T-shirts. It was very hot. It looked like any other summer day, except that it was the Fourth of July. When they were like this—reduced to boredom, cardplaying—the police were jumpy and the Youth Board Workers were talky, because things broke out of place and rumbled. Outside, in the street, the punks and tots were beginning to blast away with firecrackers. The men looked as if they had always been in that position, nor could they ever move again, except to put down a card, ask for a little luck, curse, or mutter “Man!” as they did again and again. Standing behind them, their bellies pressed against their boy friends’ hard shoulders, a few girls watched the play; they rubbed up slowly so that no one should see, or know. Everyone was hard up because Ismael, the Presidente, had forbidden sex for a week. He always barred sex before a rumble; he wanted everyone mean. A transistor radio blasted out rock-’n’roll, wailed of lost love, broken dates, betrayal, heartbreak. They welcomed the disk jockey’s hopped-up voice biting off the wail-edge of each record because it moved the time along.

The clubhouse had once been a ballroom. A chandelier hung overhead, the revolving kind that used to throw romantic, spangled lights on dancing couples. Toward the back of the room, a three-seat shoeshine stand was mounted on a plywood pedestal. Sitting in the right-hand chair, next to the wall-sized window, his sunglasses looking down over the whole hot and noisy street, was Ismael Rivera. Ismael had the impassive face of a Spanish grandee, the purple-black color of an uncontaminated African, and the dreams of an Alexander, a Cyrus, a Napoleon. He permitted himself no thought—only a vacant, motionless waiting, watching the chill reflection of his own eyes in the blue lenses.

Someone played a card; a chair creaked; the card slapped to the table. One of the girls cursed and was elbowed in her thigh by her boy friend; she had given away the weakness of his hand. Seated on the pedestal at Ismael's right foot, War-Counselor fidgeted. He twitched before any action, but no one in the city was cooler once it started. Secretary, Ismael's man, kept looking at his black-faced Swiss watch again and again, muttering, jittering up and down in beat-time. There was a noise outside; they stopped and looked at the door. A runner came in and walked down the long room to War-Counselor, who leaned forward. The others turned back to their cards again, making it a point to look cool. Squatting, the runner reported. The sound was drowned in the wailing pulsations of the radio. War-Counselor nodded and looked up at Ismael, who might or might not have looked back. The runner left.

The electric wall-clock's second hand swept around slowly, urged on through the heat by the radio rhythms. No one looked at it; it was a point of honor not to look. They knew it was still hours and hours from The Time. More of Ismael's men came in and sat around the edge of the clubroom. Someone picked up a set of bongos and began to flutter

rhythms out with his fingers, not loud enough to draw the radio but faster, to help time along, bouncy enough to make everyone feel a little easier. More girls came in and sat near their boy friends. No one said anything. They were hot, trying to look bored, like on any ordinary afternoon. Now there were about thirty Thrones in the big room and it became hotter. Slowly, the day turned into late afternoon. More heat poured down while the tempo of the explosions outside increased.

There was a knock. It was their Youth Board Worker, Mannie Bernstein. No one wanted him here but they knew he would come; they had planned against it. Mannie's round face looked around the edge of the door. He waited there because even though he had gotten them the clubhouse through the local Merchant's Association, even though he had done so much for them, protocol was still touchy. He had to wait till he was invited in. It was not only a matter of friendliness, he was sure he had won that—but the boys must call the play. Infringement led to resentment: their manhood was delicate and easily wounded. Mannie waited the long seconds—a half minute. They did that to him sometimes; it maintained their identity. Mannie smiled; let them ventilate their hostility. They didn't know what to do and waited for Ismael to give them a sign. Mannie's smile stiffened. As Mannie was about to turn away someone said, "Well, man, come in." The Worker didn't know how Ismael gave the sign. He had been watching Ismael all the while and saw nothing, yet the word had gone out from the right-hand shoeshine chair on the plywood pedestal, flowed down through the whole chain of command till it reached the door. Sweat sogged his shirt. He came in, trying to grin.

The chain of command had to be reversed in greeting the boys. Mannie walked through the room, hellowing all the boys and their girls till he came to the throne. But when he reached

the Presidente, he saw something was wrong. A tiny gold earring glistened pleasantly against his smooth, black skin and made him exotic, dangerous in spite of the expensive Ivy League summer wear.

“Well, how, like, are we making it, man?” Mannie asked.

The Man didn’t answer immediately; further proof that something was wrong. But again, protocol forbade; Mannie didn’t ask.

He looked around and recognized the signs: the prerumble card game, the forced coolness, the acted-out boredom, the yawning, the clinging girls showing their anxious sexuality, the bongos muttering like war drums. He turned back to Ismael. Secretary waved his hand, inviting Mannie to sit. Mannie pulled up a chair near the pedestal and tilted back so he could look up at Ismael’s idol-face. He began to make conversation to break the coolness, and let him know what was happening. Ismael continued to stare down to the street, but that meant nothing; Ismael never focussed on anything. Someone turned up the radio. The bongos were banging louder. War-Counselor raised his voice to answer Mannie.

Mannie took a special pride in Ismael, who was the jewel of his career, the best and greatest result of some six years of social work with delinquents. But then, how often did one come across an Ismael? If he could keep Ismael straight for another year or so, the boy would be finished with high school, possibly even interested in college. For Ismael had been the brightest star in the firmament of P.S. 42, the rebellious genius of Baruch Laporte Jr. H.S., and, in his two years of high school, he had been the talk, the despair, and the hatred of every teacher. Slowly, Mannie had redeemed Ismael, introducing him to the better things of life—interest in a job, books, a future—and even had Ismael over to his own house. Mannie had channeled Ismael’s ego-drives into socially acceptable patterns. Of course,

Ismael held tight to the leadership of the Delancey Thrones; the power was too sweet to let go. But the Delancey Thrones were almost a social club now. Time, Mannie thought, give him time. He hoped Ismael wouldn't regress and spoil everything now.

The Worker probed delicately, as delicately as he could without asking directly. Everything pointed to a rumble. But there was no open conflict with any other army. Nothing had shattered this year's truce, even though some newspapers tried to start something by printing false, insulting gossip. No one fell for it. Mannie exhausted the conventional talk about weather, sports, dances, the Fourth. He could have been talking to a mute, or to an idol's stone face. He recognized this role too. It angered him and he fought to maintain his sense of empathy. Patience, he thought . . . Ismael's thin lips didn't move. Preserving his strength against the heat, Mannie thought.

At ten to four the girls began to drift out. By four o'clock only the men were left. The radio announced, in that frenzied, jivy way, ". . . and now, for all the boys and girls of the Paradise Social and Athletic Club, these grooves . . . it's *los* Beatles, boys and girls, banging out' . . ."

No one called an end to the play; the game stopped. Some of the boys got up. They left in little groups, trying to look casual. By four-fifteen no one was left in the clubhouse but Ismael, War-Counselor, Ismael's man, Secretary, and a burly guard who lounged against a wall.

Ismael stood up. Secretary told Mannie, "Like we have to cut. Hot. Movies."

"Well now, man, I understand that, man. Where, like, else can you cool off?" Mannie told Secretary and waited to be invited along. No one said anything. "Man, I have an idea about a boat ride we, like, could take in a few weeks," he said to Ismael.

"Later, man," War-Counselor said.

Ismael walked down the length of the room followed by his escort and went out, leaving Mannie alone. He hadn't found out anything. Ismael hadn't even talked to him. He went to the local candy store, looking for some of the boys, anyone from whom he could find out what was happening. None between the ages of fourteen and twenty were around. He got a supply of dimes in the candy store to call up Youth Workers from neighboring armies, and Youth Board headquarters. Maybe they knew what was happening. A kid set off a firecracker right behind him as he went into the booth.

## July 4th, 7:00–10:30 P.M.

When Arnold formed his Family, the Coney Island Dominators, he had two mottoes in mind. He had taken them from subway posters. One was, “When family life stops, delinquency begins”; the other was, “Be a brother to him.” If they were a family, Arnold reasoned, then they couldn’t be delinquents; so he became the Father to all of them. The second in command was the Uncle; the others became brothers. They were closer to one another than to their families; *this* family freed them. Where they happened to live with their parents was always The Prison. Arnold’s woman became the Mother, and the other women in the inner circle were daughter-sisters. Members of the outer circle were cousins, nieces, and nephews. When they were taken into the Family, they all swore oaths of belonging.

Arnold told his Family not to hang around the meeting place at the candy store today. Only those who were going as plenipos—he, Hector the Uncle, Bimbo the bearer, Lunkface for strength, Hinton the artist, Dewey, and The Junior—should be there. But the Family insisted on seeing them off. He hadn’t whipped them into shape yet; they didn’t listen to him the way they should to a father.

When it was time, they cut out, leaving the candy-store

owner relieved. His fear amused the men. They always threatened to mess things up because they could sense his fright; it made them feel big. Everyone should fear them; everyone would. The chosen seven had liquored up—two drinks a man—for spirit. The radio brought the word—the Beatles record. It was on.

They moved out, a company of about twenty: Papa, Momma, Uncles and Aunts, Sons, Daughters, Cousins, walking their street. The men wore blue, paisley-print, button-down-collar shirts and too-tight black chino pants, high-crowned narrow-brimmed straw hats with their signs: cracked-off Mercedes-Benz hub-cap ornaments—hard to come by—with safety pins soldered in the school shop to the three-ray halo-stars. The appointed mission carried jackets, except for Bimbo, who carried a raincoat in which were strapped two Seagram's pint bottles to keep the men edged. Pedestrians, the Other, quailed before the march of the Family and gave them the wide pass. Arnold's children were hard and held their territory against one and all Other, coolie, fuzz, or gang. They weren't often out in force this early in the day. They swaggered, weaving, prancing, inviting any Other to come on, man. The family band, two cousins, with transistor radios blasting, came along for march music.

They reached the end of their turf and stopped. No one had lined it, like on school maps, and there were no *visible* border guards. The only sign of permanent divisiveness was the usual scum of oily motor leakings, dirty paper, white crossing lines, but the frontier was there, good as any little newsreel guard-house with a striped swinging gate. The eyes of the Colonial Lord were hard and hostile, even though they were allowed free passage today. They couldn't help feeling that old pre-battle nervousness. Their backs prickled; their shoulders went into that old hard-man, can't-put-me-down-man hunch; their

stomachs fluttered; they perspired, plucking the tight pants away from their crotches. Bricks might come raining down from the roofs, chains could lash out from doorways as they passed, baseball bats would crack their heads, and knives were whickering.

The delegates put on their jackets; they were the new short ones, buttoning up to the neck and monkey-jacket tight. They fussed, twitching their shoulders, pulling down on the jacket skirts to make them lie better, flicking spots of dust, pulling up on their shirt collars, checking to see if every button was buttoned and every buckle was tight and gleaming while their women fidgeted, helping. Bimbo made sure that the bottles were strapped in well. Their uncomfortable ankle-high, elastic-sided boots were glossed. Their hats sat cocky, high on their heads.

Papa gave the word: they took off the pins from their hats and put them into their inside pockets; there was no point in being antagonistic. Squatty Bimbo, the bearer, armorer, and treasurer, looked around and saw no blue fuzz and, half-surrounded by the Family, gave Papa A. the gift-wrapped package. It was their present to Ismael. Arnold put the small, irregular, brightly striped item into his pocket where it bulked. All the others—Mother, cousins, the sisters, the camp followers—scattered a short distance up and down the street so as not to look like a detachment, so as not to make any of the Colonial Lords, who might be a little funky, panic. The nearest insisted on touching Arnold and patting Uncle Hector, the war leader, on the back.

“Go, Father.”

“Uncle, keep it cool, man.”

“Don’t let them jap you, Brother. Don’t trust; don’t take no shit from them; don’t let them lip you down, you hear? Show them who we are, but good.”

They crossed the street. The turf felt different; it was Other

country. The sun shone as brightly, it was as hot on this side as on theirs. But the dirt fallout in the air smelled different, choky. The people were the same as those in their own land, but somehow not the same. The shadows cast by the hard beams of the late afternoon sun made them feel as if they had plunged into mysterious forest darkness; eyes peered at them from every strange place. They looked back, across the street, where their men were fanned out, looking cool for action. Some of them were rocking to the pocket-radio music; they watched for the enemy Lords, or for the patrol cars to come screaming down the street on them to call it off. But most of all the Dominators watched their own for the first mark of chicken-funk.

An emissary from the Colonial Lords came out of a store, walking carefully, openly, to show them that it was all dignified, friendly, as between equals. Some tot cracked off a string of pop-fire and both leaders jumped. Arnold smiled. The First of the Lords grinned back. They gave one another cigarettes and lit them for each other. Arnold pulled out Ismael's printed invitation, schedule, and through-pass and showed it to the First, who politely said that, man, he took Arnold's word. It wasn't always so. A few other Lords came around with their women and stood, watching. Arnold reached into his pocket and took out the bright package and gave it to Uncle Hector, investing him with the leadership, for the state was truce, yet war. Hector, who was ice-faced, slim, and wiry, took the package and nodded at Arnold. He decided to carry the package in the open.

One of the Colonial Lords, Willie, a little psycho, always pushing for a little fun, started to say "Mother"—a word to fight over. "Muh . . . Muh . . . Muh . . ." and grinned as Lunkface's fists balled automatically.

"Now man, ain't you got a little present for me?" he said, mock-whining. The girls shrieked and pointed. Lunkface's hair

prickled and his fists kept clenching and loosening and tightening. A lieutenant poked Willie hard.

“He don’t mean nothing by it. He only talking,” but trying to show that friendliness did not mean weakness.

Willie, still not content, said, “No, I don’t mean nothing by it. I’m only talking. You know what that guidance counselor say. She say Willie disturbed and we got to understand.” He was banged again. Lunkface, short-tempered and stupid, kept stiffening, the action agitating from his fists to his arms and shoulders. Hector tapped him with the brightly bound iron and Lunkface relaxed a little. Some of the Lord women, who always tended to troublemake, pointed them, sounded them, cackling like witches, their faces transformed by old-hag hate.

“Man, are you going to let them walk by like that?”

“Are you going to let them put you down like that?”

“Look at that; he queering you with a *look*.”

Obviously, they hadn’t been told anything. One of the Lords backhanded a girl across the face. “Cool it, woman.” And that satisfied them.

The First, looking bored, said, “Them women; they always troubling.”

The Junior nodded agreement; they couldn’t be much men not to be able to control the women, but he didn’t say so. The Dominators put down the Lords because they were poor fair-fighters; they had psychos and junkies in their rout, and their women were no better than camp followers. They all hung there for one second. Arnold’s family watched from across the street. The First nodded at them, but what did that mean? Go? Stay? Bop? Arnold decided that it must be *Go*, and that they would walk in peace for the first time in two years, since Arnold had formed his Family and hammered out his turf.

Uncle Hector began to march. His brothers and the Father followed. They walked it cool, showing they were friendly, but