

The Outsiders (1983) *They grew up on the outside of society. They weren't looking for a fight. They were looking to belong.*

The Outsiders comes to the screen through school petition.

Chance plays a significant part in the genesis of many movies, but *The Outsiders* was surely the first to spring to life because a group of schoolchildren wanted it to happen.

In the spring of 1980, a librarian at Lone Star Jr. High School in Fresno, California, took courage in hand and wrote to Francis Coppola. She told him that the students and faculty of her school wanted him to make a movie from a book they all loved very much, *The Outsiders*, by S. E. Hinton. She sent the letter, along with a copy of the book and a petition signed by the youngsters, to the New York offices of Paramount Pictures. This was the studio that had produced two of Coppola's best-known films, *The Godfather* and its sequel.

Missives such as this often get lost, but this one didn't. It was forwarded to Coppola's Zoetrope Studios in Los Angeles and actually read. Not only read, but investigated by the director's long-time associate Fred Roos. Mr. Roos learned that the book was a bestseller in the field of adolescent literature and was taught in school systems throughout the country.

One thing led inevitably to another, and two years later Francis Coppola began filming *The Outsiders* in Tulsa, Oklahoma. A long talent search had preceded the selection of a cast he considered one of his finest ever, and all, with one exception, under twenty years of age. The best known were Matt Dillon and Leif Garrett, who played poor boy and rich boy respectively, and Diane Lane, who took the only substantive role for a girl. Seventeen-year-old Darren

Dalton, from Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Michelle Meyrink of Vancouver, British Columbia, made their professional debuts, but all of the others were experienced: C. Thomas Howell, Ralph Macchio, Patrick Swayze, Rob Lowe, Emilio Estevez and Tom Cruise.

The Outsiders production information

Once upon a time, back in 1965 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a teenage boy got beat up on his way home from school. A fairly common occurrence, but with one difference: this boy had a friend named Susie with a penchant for writing, and the incident made her mad. She started a short story which quickly ballooned to forty pages as she shared her work-in-progress with classmates. When she got stuck, they'd make suggestions like "why don't you burn the church down?" And so she did. The story blossomed into a novel entitled *The Outsiders*, published, as if by unspoken teenage fiat, in 1967 by Viking Press. It was about teenagers growing up both "tuff" and tough, and the story told about poor boys without families called "greasers" in tragic conflict with kids from affluent backgrounds called "socs" (pronounced "soshes"). The name under the title was the gender-less "S.E. Hinton," the recommendation of a Viking female editor who didn't want the authenticity of the story doubted just because a girl wrote it.

By the following year, *The Outsiders* had become a "must-read" for kids in junior high and high school, and a genre of American literature called "young adult fiction" was never quite the same again. It must also be noted that until the film's first release, a great many people did not know that "S. E. Hinton" was a young woman called Susie. In 1980, Francis Coppola received a letter at his Zoetrope Studios from the librarian of the Lone Star Junior High School in Fresno, California, stating that the faculty and students of her school had nominated him to make a movie out of a very special book called *The Outsiders*. A hand-signed petition from the students was attached.

Coppola asked Fred Roos, to look into the matter. He learned that *The Outsiders* had sold some four million copies in the United States alone, and was in the curriculum of many school systems across the country. It had been translated into seven languages, including Japanese, and was hugely popular with youngsters in other lands. It seemed that when you got right down to basics, like wanting to belong and feel secure, to love and be loved, kids everywhere were just alike.

"I made some rather bold connections right as I was reading it," says Coppola. "I realized I wanted to make a movie about youth, and about belonging, belonging to a group of people with whom you made identification, and where you felt real love. Even though those boys were poor and, in a way, insignificant, the story gives them a kind of beauty and nobility."

In order to capture on film that evanescent moment of youth, performers whose real age approximated that of their characters were selected as far as possible. After a major talent search, eleven young people were chosen for the starring roles of "greasers" and "socs," Tulsa-style, 1966. Many are well known from film and television, while others were making their professional debuts.

Plot

Dallas, Ponyboy, and Johnny sneak into a theater and seat themselves behind two Soc girls, Cherry and Marcia. Dallas starts flirting with the girls and refuses to leave them alone until Johnny tells him to back off. Dallas leaves, and the girls ask Ponyboy and Johnny to sit with them. Later, the boys are walking the girls home when their drunken boyfriends, Bob and Randy, catch up to them in their Mustang. Bob and Randy are itching to fight, but Cherry defuses the situation by asking Bob and Randy to take Marcia and her home. Johnny and Ponyboy go to a vacant lot and end up falling asleep. When Ponyboy goes home, Darry, his brother, is upset with worry and, during the confrontation, hits Ponyboy. Ponyboy runs from the house back to the vacant lot and wakes Johnny. They go to a nearby park to cool off.

At the park, Ponyboy and Johnny are confronted and harassed by Bob, Randy, and their friends. The Socs try to drown Ponyboy in a fountain, but flee after Johnny draws his switchblade and stabs Bob to death. Ponyboy and Johnny ask help from Dallas, who gives them a loaded gun, money, and directions to an abandoned church in Windrixville, where they are to hide out until Dallas comes to retrieve them.

Ponyboy and Johnny cut off their hair to make themselves less recognizable, and Ponyboy bleaches his with peroxide. The boys pass the time by smoking cigarettes, playing cards, and eating baloney sandwiches. Ponyboy also reads to Johnny from a paperback copy of *Gone with the Wind* and shares the Robert Frost poem *Nothing Gold Can Stay* with him. Ponyboy confesses that he never quite understood the poem.

One week later, Dallas comes to visit the boys and takes them to get some hot food. Dallas tells Ponyboy and Johnny that Cherry is willing to stick up for them to the authorities. Johnny says that he and Ponyboy want to go home and turn themselves in, which upsets Dallas. Nevertheless, he starts the drive back home.

Ponyboy and Johnny see smoke from the direction of the abandoned church. They beg Dallas to drive by and they see that the church is on fire. When they hear the cries of children trapped inside, Ponyboy and Johnny both run in to rescue them. They get all the children out safely. Ponyboy escapes the inferno, but a roof beam collapses and falls on Johnny, who is still inside. Dallas immediately moves to rescue Johnny. Dallas, Ponyboy, and Johnny are taken to the hospital. Dallas has minor injuries, and Ponyboy is basically unhurt, but Johnny is in critical condition with severe burns and a broken lower back.

The next day, Ponyboy is resting at home when Steve and Two-Bit come over. They show him a newspaper article that calls Ponyboy, Johnny, and Dallas heroes for rescuing the children in Windrixville, and that Johnny is being charged with manslaughter for killing Bob. Even though Randy and the other Socs had admitted that they had been the aggressors, and that Ponyboy and Johnny were only defending themselves, Bob's death at Johnny's hands has sparked the call for a gang fight, or a "rumble," from the Socs.

The day of the rumble, Randy seeks out Ponyboy and admits that he does not want to fight in the rumble, nor will he, because he feels that no matter what the outcome, nothing would change. He has grown weary of all the fighting, is ready to leave town just to get away from it, and wanted to tell someone who he felt would understand how he feels.

Dallas breaks out of the hospital to join in the rumble. The rumble begins, ending with the Greasers victorious. As the Greasers revel in their win, Dallas and Ponyboy rush to the hospital. The head doctor initially refuses to let them see Johnny because he is dying, but eventually relents. Dallas tells Johnny about the Greasers' victory, but Johnny seems disinterested. Dallas then tells Johnny that he is proud of him, which fills the younger boy with happiness. Johnny looks over at Ponyboy and tells him to "stay gold," and with that, Johnny passes away. Completely heartbroken, Dallas flees from the room.

Ponyboy returns home to tell the rest of the gang that Johnny is dead and that Dallas ran off. The gang is worried about what Dallas might do, and their worry becomes alarm when Darry receives a phone call from Dallas, who had robbed a convenience store and was now being pursued by the police. He tells the gang to meet him at the vacant lot. The gang races to the vacant lot to intercept Dallas, but they are too late; Dallas is already surrounded by police officers. He pulls out an unloaded gun and commits suicide by police in front of his horrified friends.

Days later, Ponyboy is flipping through the copy of *Gone With the Wind* that Johnny had left behind and finds a letter from Johnny, addressed to him. Johnny's letter explains that the phrase "staying gold" in the Frost poem means to never lose the appreciation for the things one finds wondrous when one is young. He urges Ponyboy to tell Dallas about it. The film ends with him writing the opening line of the film, which is also the first line of the novel: *When I stepped out into the bright sunlight, from the darkness of the movie house, I had only two things on my mind: Paul Newman and a ride home...*