

IN DEFENSE OF A WRITING CAREER

BY
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*Young Writers Are Advised Not to Despair,
But to Avoid the Pitfalls of Their Profession*

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A FEW weeks ago a journalism senior at Columbia University visited the offices of the *Saturday Review* in New York. He was looking for an editorial job. He was hardly seated when he began to express serious doubts about the career he had selected and for which he had invested so many years of study.

"I like to write," he said. "My idea of heaven is a big back porch in the country overlooking a green valley, where I can squat in front of a typewriter and poke away till the end of time. Next to that I'd like a job on a magazine or in a book-publishing house. But it's no use. Either as a writer or editor the chance of breaking in is so slight that there's hardly any point trying. And I haven't got enough of that folding green paper to endow myself with my own back porch and let the rest of the world go hang."

This was a new twist. Generally, the journalism seniors stride into the *Saturday Review of Literature's* offices in the spring with more bounce and spirit than the second act of *La Bohème*. They may be re-

buffed, they may be detoured, they may be diverted, but they won't be discouraged and they won't be dismayed. They know exactly what they want to do and where they want to go. They may not have the foggiest idea how they're going to get there, but trying to hold them back is as futile as putting your hand over the spouting nozzle of a fire hose. Yet here was a young man with a brand new script, saying he was sorry he had ever persuaded himself to make writing a career. He meant it, too. His face couldn't have been more liberated from enthusiasm than if he had been dreaming of flying to Paris in a Constellation only to wake up and discover that all the time he was in a subway car stalled under the Hudson River in the tubes to Hoboken.

I was anxious to find out more about both the dream and the awakening. Why did he decide to take up journalism in the first place, and what suddenly soured him? Why so great a gap between the original vision and the present disillusion?

In the next forty minutes he answered those questions fully and frankly. I'd like to summarize what he said because I suspect that his viewpoint and the experience on which it was based may be of some interest to new writers. For almost two months he had devoted nearly every hour of his spare time to visiting magazine and publishing offices, canvassing the possibilities of employment. He had also spoken to a number of prominent writers, soliciting their advice about the glories and perils of free-lance writing. He was especially anxious to find out from these successful writers how he

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ought to go about persuading a book publisher to give him a juicy advance to sustain him while he wrote the great American novel—no doubt on that big back porch overlooking the green valley.

FIRST of all, he said, the only job opening in a magazine or publishing house he had been able to detect was as assistant to the associate editor of a master-plumber's trade journal. None of the national magazines wanted him, though he was quite sure that at least a few of them really needed him. And, judging from what he observed, even if he could crack open a spot for himself at *Life* or *Time* or *Newsweek* or *Collier's* or the *Atlantic* or *Harper's*, he wasn't sure that it would be a wise thing to do. No possibility for advancement. The good jobs were all sewed up and would be for years to come. Most of the magazines were edited by a few men, who, despite the ulcers and anxiety neuroses of their calling, would probably live forever. Men like Mr. Luce, Mr. Hibbs, Mr. Weeks, and Mr. Allen quite obviously weren't going to step down—at least not during the second half of the twentieth century, and those on the next echelon were all braced to resist any replacements or reinforcements for perhaps even longer.

On the news magazines, he said, the most you could hope for was perhaps breaking out of the open arena of the researchers, where men engage facts like toreadors do

bulls, into the well-populated pen of the assistant editors. Here the facts are digested—sometimes passing into the blood stream of the magazine without leaving a trace. Salaries of the assistant editors are adequate though not spectacular. Above everyone, however, is the iron ceiling of anonymity. In such a job one's writing is as shorn of individuality and personality as toothpicks

being processed out of a plank of wood. When the mountain labored, it at least brought forth a live mouse; here you labor over your typewriter for a week and produce half of a dead, upset galley—unsigned, of course.

Newspapers were out of the question, my young friend continued. All right, perhaps, as an opening gambit, just to get it out of your system so you could say you were a newspaperman once. A nice thing to have in your past, but not in your future. True, you meet such interesting people, or so they say, but there's not much creative in-

spiration in the written material or the weekly pay check. Of course, my friend said, it is a different proposition if you are lucky enough to become a syndicated columnist, conjuring up your own assignments in various corners of the world. But it's obvious, he said, that heavy-pay jobs such as this are all filled.

What my friend wanted most of all to do, of course, was to write a novel. He had spoken to a number of prominent writers and had made something of a survey of the creative-writing field—all of which had



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The 1950 Hopwood Lecturer is Editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*.

convinced him that the way was practically barred to all but a few fortunate newcomers. He said he was certain that the unsolicited-manuscript department of the average publishing house was actually the uninvited-manuscript department. He proceeded to give me the results of his investigation, which showed that Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, for example, had been rejected by almost a dozen publishers. And Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* turned down by about ten. Or Gertrude Diament's *Days of Ophelia* spurned by six. Or Mildred Jordan's *One Red Rose Forever* thumbed down by twenty-two. Or Mike Waltari's *The Egyptian* ignored by eleven.

Let us suppose, he said, that a young author sending in his first manuscript relied on a single publisher's judgment. Suppose he received a rejection slip the first time out. Wouldn't he be justified in thinking that the publisher knew more about writing than he did, and in deciding to give up his writing career right then and there? And even if he preserved his confidence in his own work, submitting his book to publisher after publisher, what was he to do if he received rejection slips from them all? Does anyone know how many Norman Mailers or Betty Smiths there might be whose manuscripts were spurned by all the publishers?

No, said my young friend, shaking his head sadly, he didn't believe that even if he did write the great American novel, there was any chance that it could get by the unsolicited-manuscript department. The publishers didn't want to risk either their judgment or their capital on untried talent, and most of them string along with the big names. Some of them even dangled bait before the roving eyes of famous authors who belonged to competitors.

Putting all this together, the journalism senior concluded that he had made a serious error six years earlier when he had decided, on the basis of his editorship of the

high school paper, that he had a natural talent for a professional career as writer.

IT WAS a bleak picture, but, I am afraid, an incomplete one. There are some facts worth considering—facts, I contend, which would justify the choice of writing or editing as a career for anyone with a reasonable amount of talent in that direction. I agree it's a difficult field to break into, but then again, what profession isn't? Anyone who has applied for admission to a medical school recently might have some underscoring he'd like to do on that point. Or, to underscore the underscoring, talk to a graduate of a medical school looking for an internship. Or a law school graduate looking for an apprenticeship. Or a young artist trying to get his works exhibited, to say nothing of the business of finding a cash customer. Sisyphus rolling a stone uphill was on a cakewalk compared to this.

Another conspicuous omission in my young friend's jeremiad concerned his own faulty approach to the problem of finding a job. In talking to him about the magazine and publishing offices he had canvassed, for example, it became apparent that he had failed to apply any imagination to the problem before him. All he had done was to write for an appointment with a key person, and then go in to present his credentials.

"What else was there to do?" he asked.

One thing he might have done, I replied, was to recognize that he had arranged a dead-end tour for himself. What reason was there to believe that his own cold application for employment would stand out in bold relief above the hundreds upon hundreds of other applications—most of them from qualified young people? A job applicant should familiarize himself with each magazine or publishing house the way a surgeon examines the X rays before going into the operating room. Anyone who marches into a publishing office looking for a job ought to know the history of that publication; he ought to know a great deal

about its format and editorial content; about the particular audience it is trying to reach and what the problems seem to be in reaching it; about editorial features tried and discarded; about the people who work on the staff, their fields of special interest and their functions on the magazine.

This is pay-dirt knowledge. It's not easy to come by, but it's worth trying to get, for it can give an applicant a toe hold on an interview. It's axiomatic in human relations that if you expect someone to be interested in your problems, you ought to know something about his. Don't wait for a job opening. Most good jobs don't open up; they are created. You create a job by presenting not only yourself but an idea that can fit into an editorial formula; an idea that reveals your own knowledge of the publication and your understanding of its audience and its needs. My friend had failed to recognize that the best way to sell himself into a publishing job was to sell his ideas. And these should not have been merely random ideas, but ideas carefully tailored to fit the particular needs of a particular periodical or publishing house.

The same theory operates with respect to advancement. Naturally, it's somewhat difficult to offer every young man who goes into publishing a money-back guarantee that he can have the boss's job within five years, but ideas plus the ability to carry them out go a long way. If this sounds like a cross between Horatio Alger and Dale Carnegie, I'd be glad to quote names, places, and dates.

NEXT, for the newspaper business. First of all, let's modify the Hollywood stereotype somewhat. It isn't true that every newspaperman is comprehensively slouched—slouched hat, slouched shoulders, slouched smile, and a slouched psyche. My recollections of my own newspaper experience and my impressions in traveling around America and meeting many newspapermen in many cities are that most

American newspapermen are far ahead of their papers. I've met some hard-bitten cynics, to be sure, but I've also met them in politics or teaching, for that matter. The pay doesn't begin to compare with that, say, of the corporation lawyer, but I've known a number of newspapermen who did fairly well by their families by using their spare time to good advantage in free-lance writing. Offhand, I know of at least six newspapermen now writing novels and perhaps three more writing nonfiction books, and, despite the high mortality of the average unsolicited manuscript, I'd be willing to bet that the majority of them will have their works accepted and published. Yes, the newspaper field is a tough one—tough to get into, in some cases even tougher to get out of. But it's excellent proving grounds for disciplined writing. After a while, of course, the discipline can be replaced by routine, and the routine by rote. But, so far as I know, there's no law preventing anyone from moving on to more fertile pastures if he finds he's been squatting too long near a dry well.

This brings us to the final problem surveyed by my journalism-senior friend—in particular, writing a new book and getting it published. I can agree with him readily that the orphan of the publishing industry is the unsolicited-manuscript department. I believe it to be a fact that no branch of a publisher's organization is as understaffed—qualitatively as well as quantitatively—as the unsolicited-manuscript department. The pay for first readers in many houses isn't much higher than for bookkeeper assistants or even for shipping clerks. Many publishers, on those infrequent occasions when they take their hair down, will confess that they have virtually written off their unsolicited-manuscript department as expendable, returning submitted works on the basis of a cursory examination by a forty-dollar-a-week reader.

A publisher will spend thousands of dollars in sending one of his editors on a tour

around America, beating the brush for concealed literary talent, but seems reluctant to spend more than a few dollars to appraise fully and competently such talent as may be found in his own mailbag. It has occasionally happened that an editor on tour will make the discovery of an exciting new manuscript which only the week before had been routinely shipped back with a form letter by his own firm. Apparently, there is no shame in the matter. Indeed, one publisher, on the occasion of his firm's twentieth anniversary, blandly announced in an advertisement that with only a single exception, he had never accepted an unsolicited manuscript. It would have been interesting to get a box score on some of the important books that he happened to miss because they were apparently not worth a careful reading.

My friend was quite right when he listed the names of outstanding books turned down in the unsolicited-manuscript departments of many publishing houses. It's even worse than he supposed. Copies of the two opening chapters of *War and Peace*, and an outline covering the rest of the book, by general consent a fairly acceptable novel, were recently sent to ten publishers in order to test the competence of the unsolicited-manuscript departments. Only four of them spotted the material for what it was. The others sent back routine rejection slips.

It may be asked, Where then do most of the accepted books come from? They represent books written to order or on contract—books by name-writers for whom space is regularly reserved on a publisher's list.

I AM not completely unaware of the publisher's problem. When hundreds of book-length manuscripts are received each week—many of them looking more like tied-up bundles of leftover leaves from last fall—it would put a publisher out of business if he had to maintain a highly qualified staff of readers who gave thorough consideration to every single manuscript.

What has happened is that a sort of literary Gresham's law has been in operation for many years, the bad manuscripts driving out the good.

At one time not so long ago in the history of book publishing, the chief business of the publisher when he arrived at his office in the morning was to inspect personally all the manuscripts in the morning mail. In the memoirs of the publishers of forty or sixty years ago, it is not uncommon to find reference to this daily stint as the most delightful aspect of publishing. The biggest joy in a publisher's life was represented by the thrill of discovery in chancing across an unsolicited manuscript that heralded a new talent. But that was back in the days when a publisher's mail could fit on top of his own desk instead of requiring something in the order of a coal bin, as happens today. And that was before so much of the publisher's time was taken up with arrangements for reprint rights, motion-picture negotiations, contests for bookstores, and the care and spoon-feeding of authors.

A few publishers have recognized this problem and their own responsibility in meeting it. Their experience is worth citing. These publishers have worked out a triple-platoon system whereby the first shock-wave of manuscripts is absorbed by a corps of readers who have authority to reject only the blatantly inadequate. All the others are passed along to somewhat more specialized readers, who make no final decisions themselves but who winnow out the worth-while books for the editors, who constitute the third platoon. It is an expensive system, if done by competent and well-paid people all along the line, but it does succeed in filtering out in many cases the really deserving books, which, so far as the general public is concerned, would seem to be the main function of book publishing.

Meanwhile, the new novelist would do well to stay out of the bottomless pit that is the unsolicited-manuscript department. That is, to stay out if he can. At the very

least, no manuscript ought to be submitted without the benefit of an advance letter to the publisher attempting to establish some contact on a responsible level and seeking some genuine expression of interest. The reply to such a letter is not, of course, conclusive, but its tone and responsiveness may offer some encouragement. It is sound policy, moreover, to write to firms whose lists over the years reveal no prejudice against beginners.

It would be even better, of course, if the young novelist were able to obtain the enthusiastic backing of a recognized third party—perhaps a book reviewer or a teacher or another author who might be sufficiently interested to write to a publisher, expressing his high opinion of a particular manuscript. Strategically, this puts the young author in the happy position—if the plan works—of being courted by a publisher. Of all the consummations in a writer's heaven most devoutly to be wished, none can quite compare with the postal ecstasy of opening a letter from an established publisher which begins: "Dear Mr. Smith: It has come to my attention that you have just written a book . . ." etc., etc.

PERHAPS the most meaningful and fruitful way of all to fashion a key to the literary kingdom is through such writing and study units as exist at the University of Michigan—though I doubt that there are more than a dozen really first-rate writing courses at the university level in the country. The men and women who head these workshops are known and respected in the publishing offices and are constantly pursued by publishers for promising names. These magistrates of writing talent have built up over the years a position of respect among publishers and editors.

Finally, there are the various literary awards, of which the Avery Hopwood awards in creative writing occupy such an important place. There are fifty-three local,

regional, and national writing prizes and distinctions of one sort or another—many of which lead to publication. The value of these contests, however, is represented not only by the prizes themselves, but by the fact that a manuscript generally receives a much more careful and competent reading than in the ordinary course of submission through the unsolicited-manuscript channels. Leading national publishers, such as Harpers or Dodd, Mead or Houghton Mifflin or Farrar, Straus, accept many manuscripts for publication out of their prize-contest hoppers in addition to the ones that receive the top awards.

All in all, I told my young friend that anyone with ability who selects writing as a career today—whatever the particular branch may be—need not fear that all the doors are shut or that once inside there is no place to go. The difficulties are real, but they are not insuperable, so long as there is a reasonable degree of familiarity with what not to do, a fair amount of ingenuity in mapping and pursuing alternatives, and, most important, patience of the order usually associated only with camel drivers.

WRITING as a career offers a good life and a rewarding one. It represents a continuing challenge. Each writing project is like a difficult battle, requiring a skilled combination of strategy and tactics to accomplish a specific objective. It demands a mobilization of concentration—and concentration is or should be one of the higher gifts of human mental activity. It is agonizingly difficult work at times, and you almost feel in need of a drip pan to catch the droplets of cerebral sweat, but, as John Mason Brown recently said about creative writing, it is the sweetest agony known to man. This is the one fatigue that produces inspiration, an exhaustion that exhilarates. Double-teaming the faculties of imagination and reasoning and keeping them coördinated and balanced is a tiring process, but you've got something to show for your efforts if you succeed. I suppose that was

why Socrates liked to refer to himself as a literary midwife—someone who helped to bring ideas to birth out of laboring minds. As a master of cerebral obstetrics, Socrates also knew and respected the conditions necessary for the conception of ideas and recognized the need for a proper period of germinating reflection.

With all these delights of the creative process it may seem extraneous and crass to mention the tangible inducements, but it may be said for the record that most people in the writing profession eat very well. Some authors even make as much money as their publishers, and a few of them a great deal more. True, there is what you might call the law of the dominant fraction these days by which the government can obtain the larger part of an author's royalties, but retention of capital has always been the prime problem of authors anyway, with or without respect to taxes. A not-inconsiderable advantage is also afforded by the fact that this is one profession in which you can take a trip to Paris or Switzerland or the Riviera or the Antarctic, for that matter, for the purpose of obtaining material and vital repose for your next book, and be able to charge all the costs of this soul-stretching safari up to deductible business expenses.

Apart from all these reasons—biological, philosophical, materialistic—in favor of a writing career, there is yet another reason as significant as it is compelling. That prime reason is that there is great need in America today for new writers. I am not thinking here of a technical shortage of supply, for production is still several light-years ahead of consumption. The need for new writers I am thinking of has to do with the type of book and voice America is hungering for today. That type of book will not be afraid to deal with great themes and great ideas. It will not be afraid to concern itself with the larger visions of which man in general and America in particular are capable, for America today is living far

under its moral capacity as a nation. It will not be afraid to break away from the so-called hard-boiled school of writing which has made a counterfeit of realism by ignoring the deeper and more meaningful aspects of human existence.

This need of which I speak has come about because too many writers have been writing out of their egos instead of their consciences; because too many of them have been preoccupied with human neuroses to the virtual exclusion of human nobility; because too many of them, in their desire to avoid sentimentality, have divorced themselves from honest sentiment and honest emotion. Indeed, we have been passing through what later historians may regard as the Dry-Eyed Period of American Literature. Beneath the hard and shiny surface of the school of the supersophisticates there is no blood or bones, merely a slice of life too thin to have meaning. Instead of reaching for the grand themes that can give literature the epic quality it deserves, too many writers have been trying to cut the novel down to the size of psychiatric case histories.

Beyond this there is need for writers who can restore to writing its powerful tradition of leadership in crisis. Most of the great tests in human history have produced great writers who acknowledged a special responsibility to the community at large. They have defined the issues, recognized the values at stake, and dramatized the nature of the challenge. Today, in the absence of vital moral leadership on the official world level, it is more important than ever that writers see themselves as representatives of humanity at large. For the central issue facing the world today is not the state of this nation or that nation, but the condition of man. That higher level needs champions as it never did before. There is no more essential and nobler task for writers—established writers, new writers, aspiring writers—than to regard themselves as spokesmen for human destiny.