

well told about conditions or questions with which they were familiar or as to which they had some curiosity—and it is not too great an assumption to suppose that they found them. Like your distinguished essayist I take these works not for their own sakes, but merely as examples of a class which the writer about books is inclined to discredit—labelling them didactic, or fixing on them some other terrific word, and so hanging the dog because of first giving him a bad name.

But the earnest seekers after amusement seem to think otherwise.

BY EDWIN LEFEVRE

The definition of a novel as “a good story well told” means nothing. Coming from a man like Professor Phelps it is absurd. It doesn’t define. A good story well told need not necessarily be a novel. A romance to be a good romance should be a good story well told. But a Romance is not a Novel, because a Romance need be no more than a sort of grown up fairy tale. A novel must deal with real people. It must depict actual life. Even Flaubert who gave us *Madame Bovary* could not give us an historical novel in *Salambo*. Is *Ivanhoe* a Novel? If it is, then *Anna Karénina*, the greatest of all novels, is not a novel at all. If *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is a novel—and most of us believe it is a very good one—then *The Count of Monte Cristo* is not, yet *Monte Cristo* is a very good story, very well told.

BY W. J. LOCKE

I should modify Professor Phelps’s definition of the novel by saying that “A novel is a story told.” A *good* novel is a good story well told. At any rate the story is the essence of the matter.

Many years ago when I was just beginning, I had the privilege of meeting for the first time, our revered chief, Mr. Thomas Hardy, who was good enough to talk about the craft. I remember him saying, “There are a lot of clever young men writing nowadays, but how many of them *have a story to tell?*” Those

words, “the story to tell” I have tried to use ever since as a touchstone to all my work.

When one comes to the way of telling the story, one is beyond the bounds of mere definition. The way is the instinctive way of the individual human spirit, which is the way of art.

BY SIDNEY MCCALL

Professor Phelps, in five words, “A good story well told.”

At first reading the statement that a novel is “a good story well told,” from its comprehensive brevity, appears to be quite unassailable; yet no less a writer than its author finds himself led into further definitions, in order to make clear just what he means by the word “novel.” Once he exclaims, “Definitions are dangerous!”

Now it is just here where I find myself keenly in accord. I have a progressive and cumulative dread of rigid definitions. They come too closely within the province of “generalities,” of which the brilliant French writer said, “No generalisation can be completely and absolutely true—not even this one.”

In the elaboration of his article Professor Phelps has given us delightful thoughts. “Your realist is a homeopath”—“Novels should save us from ourselves by taking us into a refreshingly different world”—“The novelist remoulds the sorry scheme of things nearer to the heart’s desire.”

This last phrase, though in no sense a definition, seems to me to touch the deepest and most intimate purpose of the imaginative writer of fiction. To reconstruct—regenerate—plant seeds and watch them grow—bring clean air and sunshine into damp places—these instinctive longings are part of the spirit of our race. The new psychologists call it “wish-fulfillment.” For children it is a sudden vision of the fairy-godmother, or a dream come true—but for old Omar and the novelists—at least the novelists I care for, and of whose kind I want to be—it is just as Professor Phelps has said—the remoulding of

a sorry scheme of things nearer to the heart's desire.

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

Professor Phelps's definition of a novel as "a good story well told" is to me quite acceptable. It is perhaps as satisfactory a definition as can be made. But it is not the only definition that I should find satisfactory. In the sciences precision of definition is not only possible but necessary. In the arts it is quite impossible; for art is nourished by the personal equation that science seeks to exclude.

BY SAMUEL MERWIN

It seems to me that Professor Phelps's definition of the novel as "a good story well told" is precisely meaningless. If it is accurate, then a symphony is just an enjoyable piece of orchestral music, a sonnet is merely a good poem, a portrait is any sort of a picture. Now a portrait is not a hunt picture or a landscape. A gavotte is not a symphony, a sonnet is not a blank verse drama. And if the terminology of a craft is to have any precise meaning among the craftsmen concerned, a romance is a "story," not a novel.

Among the thoughtful fiction writers of my acquaintance the word novel implies a pretty definite literary form. It implies the sober (though, of course, not necessarily unhumorous) study of human characters in their contrasts and relations to one another and in the common relation to the "story" that grows directly and naturally out of these contrasts and relationships. The point at which your plot artificer or your romancer steps in and so arranges the "story" that it begins to trim and mould the characters is the point at which the work ceases to be a novel. In fact, Professor Phelps's phrase seems to me to be a pretty good definition of the romance as such and in just the sense in which it is *not* a novel as I understand our present feeling for the word.

BY KATHLEEN NORRIS

The definition of a novel as a "good

story well told" is anything but satisfying to me, although I can find no similarly brief and trenchant phrase with which to replace it. But I know that some of my favourite novels are poor stories well told, or good stories poorly told, or even poor stories poorly told, or in some cases not even stories at all!

Where is the "good story" in *Cranford*, in *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, in *The Way of All Flesh* and the *Call of the Wild* and *Kim* and *Klaus Hirsch Baas*? Is none of these a novel? I chose them at random from a shelf of favourites. Not one of them has a "good story," in the sense that, given their various meagre plots as a foundation, one writer in a million could have used the same. Are *Molly Make-believe*, *Bambi*, *Daddy-Long-Legs*, and *The Melting of Molly* (for example) novels? These are all good stories well told, all exceptionally popular. Yet somehow they do not seem to be really-truly novels. And what of Dreiser's books, which according to the critics are bad stories badly told? Undeniably they are novels; very significant and important novels in the eyes of a great many persons who ought to know.

It would seem to me that a novel might better be described as a serious prose attempt to portray, in a realistic manner, and develop naturally, the lives and characters of imaginary human persons. This seems, to me at least, to separate the wheat from the chaff a little more definitely; we are not left with the inevitable decision that *In the Bishop's Carriage* is a better story, better told, than *The Old Wives' Tale* or *Widecomb Fair*.

BY E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Professor Phelps's definition of a novel as "a good story well told," read without any explanation or context is naturally inadequate. A fact which the student of fiction is too often tempted to ignore is that the storyteller and the novelist are persons apart, each possessing some of the other's gifts as a matter of necessity, but each aiming at a