

Perspectives on RPW

by Tom Landess

Robert Penn Warren:

Genius Loves Company

edited by Mark Royden Winchell
Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press;
122 pp., \$19.95



The late Mark Winchell's recently published *Robert Penn Warren: Genius Loves Company* is a collection of essays focusing on Warren's close associations and literary affinities. Warren was known as a kind and generous man who encouraged other writers in their work, helped those in need, and nurtured fragile friendships over a lifetime, sometimes with people whose political views he rejected. Whether genius loves company is debatable. Faulkner certainly didn't. Neither did Emily Dickinson. As this book proves, Warren clearly did.

Some of the essays—written by diverse hands—dwell on personal relationships. Others deal almost exclusively with similarities in theme and technique. Most split the difference. All, however, have their roots in biography, the genre that Mark Winchell understood better than almost anyone else.

Winchell's own contribution is perhaps the most useful because it examines Warren's closest and most important literary friendship—with critic Cleanth Brooks. The two met at Vanderbilt, renewed their friendship as students at Oxford, taught together at LSU, were cofounders of the original *Southern Review*, and ended up on the faculty of Yale University, where they remained close friends and collaborators until Warren died in 1989.

Here was a friendship that flourished as few others, despite differences in temperament and contrary opinions on the most basic issues. Warren was a self-described atheist. Brooks was a devout Christian, an Episcopalian who left that church when it abandoned theological orthodoxy. Warren was known as a political "liberal," and

Brooks was a lifelong conservative. Water and oil.

Yet, as Winchell points out, they arranged to pursue their academic careers together and collaborated on some of the most influential textbooks in the history of literary studies—*Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, to name but two. These texts taught students (and their professors) that a poem or short story had a formal integrity all its own, that it should not become the mere instrument of ideology or personal taste. In these texts, Brooks and Warren taught the "New Criticism" to several generations of serious readers.

In his essay, Winchell quotes passages that reveal not only the way their extraordinary collaboration worked but also the influence that Cleanth Brooks had on Warren's poetry. In summary, Winchell quotes the following passage from a letter Warren wrote to Brooks acknowledging the debt:

You can't imagine how much I owe you about poetry—on two counts. Our long collaborations always brought something new and eye-opening to me, seminal notions for me, often couched in some seemingly incidental or casual remark. One of the happiest recollections I have is that of the long sessions of work on UP [*Understanding Poetry*—not to mention earlier and later conversations. The other count has to do with the confidence you gave me about my own efforts. I'm sure that you were over-generous, but even allowing for that, it still meant something fundamental to me. I have often wanted to say something like this to you, but I know that you'd give me an embarrassed shrug and disclaimer. Anyway I can say it now without your interruption.

"Warren, Bellow and the Changing Tides," written by Joseph Scotchie, may be the most surprising essay in the volume. Here Scotchie shows his readers two lions in winter, angered by

the excesses that an earlier, more civilized liberalism had spawned. As they grew older, Warren and Bellow viewed with growing disdain the leftist iconoclasm of the 1960's and 70's, with its affection for the subliterate and its anti-intellectual undercurrent. After examining the latest Yale curriculum guide, Warren told a friend, "One . . . seminar apparently consisted only on reading contemporary pornography. I suspect it was the first time in history kids got credit for reading dirty books." He criticized the New Deal, which he came to believe had brought about a "weakening" of the American spirit. And, to the horror of his left-leaning friends, he actually praised Jefferson Davis in print. Indeed, he and Eleanor Clark, his leftist wife, began to have friendly arguments about politics, she calling him "you old Agrarian," he calling her "you old Trotskyite." (In 1937, Clark served as a translator for Trotsky and was married briefly to his secretary.)

Bellow likewise refused to follow the New Left down the road to political anarchy. He deplored the 1960's attack on the academy, ridiculed multiculturalism ("Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans? I'd be glad to read them"), and told a reporter that political correctness was

a serious threat to political health, because where there is free speech without any debate what you have is a corruption of free speech which very quickly becomes demagoguery. It's a bad moment in the history of the country.

In "Robert Penn Warren and Albert Russell Erskine, Jr.: A Sixty-Year Friendship," James A. Grimshaw, Jr., highlights the important role that Erskine played in Warren's career and in 20th-century American literature. Erskine met Warren at Southwestern College in Memphis. Erskine was a student, and Warren a young instructor. When Warren joined Brooks at LSU and founded the *Southern Review*, Erskine came along and became business manager of the magazine, as

well as a third reader of manuscripts.

For Erskine, that experience marked the beginning of a long and highly successful career as an editor, handling such important works as Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Warren's *World Enough and Time*. In demonstrating the importance of Erskine to Warren, Grimshaw quotes lengthy passages from the letters of both men, including an exchange in which Erskine makes suggestions for the revision of Warren's fourth novel.

In a lengthy essay, H.R. Stoneback discusses similarities in the works of Warren and Elizabeth Madox Roberts, both of whom wrote about early Kentucky and two of its most historically significant residents, Daniel Boone and John James Audubon.

In "Warren and Pasinetti: A Study in Friendship," William Bedford Clarke chronicles Warren's extraordinary kindness toward Italian writer Pier Maria Pasinetti, an outspoken anti-fascist who was trapped in Italy at the outset of World War II and had good reason to fear the Mussolini government. Warren worked unceasingly to rescue Pasinetti and, in later years, promoted both his academic and literary careers.

Tony Morris documents Warren's early influence on Robert Lowell at LSU and then examines similarities and differences in their poetry. In these perceptive textual analyses, Morris provides valuable insights into the thematic concerns of both poets.

Robert Penn Warren and Ralph Ellison (*Invisible Man*) first became friends while both were in residence at the American Academy in Rome. Steven D. Ealy explores their friendship and their continuing dialogue on race and its role in history. Ellison's famous interview of Warren in *The Paris Review* was an outgrowth of this friendship and serves as a showcase for Warren's brilliance as a conversationalist and as a social critic.

Robert Cheeks examines the friendship and literary achievement of Warren and William Styron in the light of their common Southern heritage. As Cheeks puts it, "Theirs was a mutual

understanding that even though a generation separated them, they shared a unique Southern historical and cultural heritage that resisted the assault of modernity."

Daniel Cross Turner departs from the theme of Warren's Southern sensibilities to explore the friendship of Warren and James Dickey, both of whom were highly acclaimed poets and novelists. However, the main thrust of Turner's essay is his remarkable exploration of "primitivism" in the works of the two.

The last essay in the volume—Joseph Millichap's discussion of Warren's influence on TV scriptwriter David Milch (*Hill Street Blues*, *NYPD Blue*, *Deadwood*), a friend and former student, demonstrates the role of "high culture" in shaping popular entertainment, a phenomenon as rare as the Po'ouli bird.

As is usually the case with such a collection, all contributions are not of equal merit. In particular, some of the technical and thematic comparisons require an extraordinary exercise of imagination, if not a willing suspension of disbelief. Yet—as Winchell obviously understood—each essay earns its place in the collection by telling readers something important about Warren that they didn't already know.

As a whole the book is a valuable addition to the body of biographical and critical work on a writer whose poetry and fiction will surely be read a century from now. The history of American literature is filled with goblins, trolls, and three-headed monsters—men and women you wouldn't want in your neighborhood, much less in your family. For this reason, it is nice to know that every so often the republic of letters turns out a normative figure like Robert Penn Warren, someone you could confidently take home to meet your mother-in-law.

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Evolving the Sensitive Soldier

by Clark Stooksbury

The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture From the Second World War to the Vietnam Era

by Andrew J. Huebner
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press; 371 pp., \$24.95



World War II cast an enormous cultural shadow over American life. It provided a backdrop for novels, television shows, and—especially—movies. Like many boys who grew up in the decades after the war, I read about the conflict, traced my fingers across maps illustrating the U.S. island-hopping campaign in the Pacific, watched and rewatched war movies, and constructed models of P-51 Mustangs and B-17 bombers.

The Warrior Image examines how American culture viewed fighting men in the shadow of World War II, starting in the 1940's when the war was in progress and running through 1978, when the Vietnam War films *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter* were released. Andrew Huebner relied on press accounts, works of fiction, movies, and other media in writing his book. He proposes that, while the perception of the soldier evolved over 30 years in the United States, the warrior image created during the "good war" had much in common with that of the war in Vietnam, even though public perception of the two wars was (and remains) entirely different. He credits the Korean War with having played an important role in the evolution of that image.

The film industry, which began making movies about the U.S. role in World War II shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, was hugely influential in shaping the image of the war and its combatants. Huebner focuses on movies that show the struggles of the common soldier, such as *The Story of G.I. Joe*, based on the columns of Ernie Pyle. He claims that Pyle "had