

Letters to the Editor: *Thomas H. Uzzell on Short Story Writing*

Short Story Schools

SIR:—I ask permission to reply to the article on "Short Story Schools" by Jonathan Norton Leonard in your issue for June 8th.

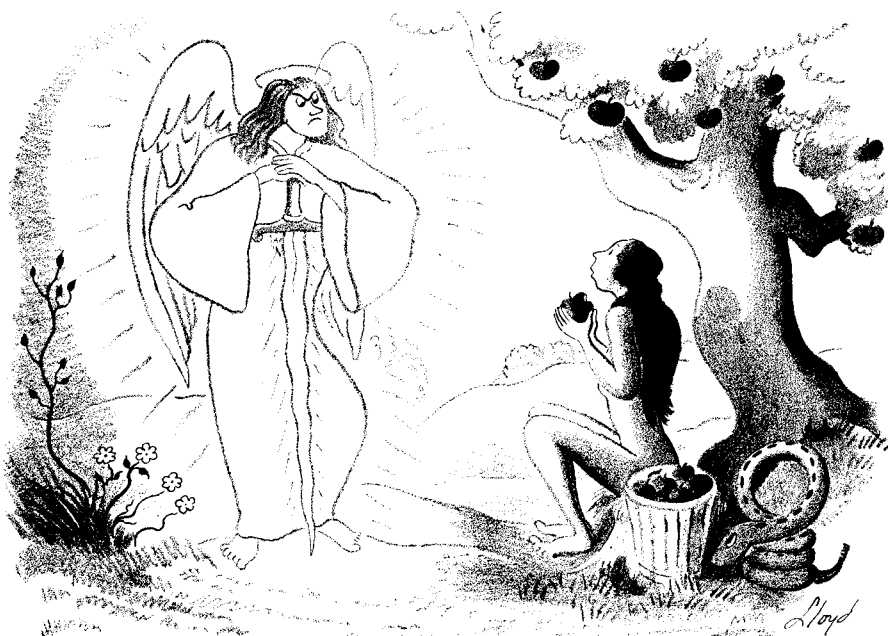
Mr. Leonard says that Americans seeking literary success are disappointed by "correspondence schools," and he speaks truth. Mr. Leonard doesn't know the half; let him continue his research and he'll find negro janitors and farm hands conducting literary instruction by mail and will find well known, revered university professors, heads of English departments, selling the use of their names to racket educational promoters. Some of these totally worthless institutions operate in suburban living-rooms and country barns and take from the helpless public as much as one to two thousand a year.

Mr. Leonard (offering advice) says that learners should ask questions of professional editors or writers "in some adroit way"; the adroitness presumably is necessary to prevent the professional's sending a bill for his labor. If he sends a bill, he's "commercialized" and so naturally a crook. Most professionals, if they're any good, are exceedingly busy and don't like to work hard for nothing, so this approach manifestly is out.

The learner, Mr. Leonard says, may confidently attend writing classes in college; but he also says that only a man with experience as editor or successful writer can be trusted to give sound advice. Such men, however, Mr. Leonard won't find in our colleges; there used to be half a dozen, now I can recall only three or four, and these are so busy that I should expect no really conscientious teaching from them.

What is left? The Bread Loaf Conference. Mr. Leonard seems to feel a trip up there might be safe, admitting too (somewhat inconsistently) that nineteen out of twenty who do go there are duds. But who teaches at Bread Loaf? I have looked into this and as near as I can make out the teachers are the very same successful writers who Mr. Leonard tells us say with unanimity that their art can't be taught! All of which seems to bring us to these conclusions:

Story writing must be learned somehow; we can't get around that no matter how much we'd like to. Story writing may even be taught providing the teacher be an amateur at the business, or be too busy to do more than toss off ex-cathedra advice, and provided, most especially, that he charge nothing for his services. Except at Bread Loaf again. The teachers there, I assume, in some way share the gross receipts (paid by poor people ninety-five percent of whom are being fooled). At Bread Loaf, however, I understand none of the teachers ever require any writing from any of their foolish pupils, whereas the first law of pedagogical psychology is that no one learns anything by listening to any number of talks or lectures; one learns only by doing under the supervision of earnest, competent, well-paid professional instructors.



"WELL, I SUPPOSE YOU DON'T KNOW ME FROM ADAM!"

(Addenda to Literature—Number 1)

Fifteen years spent, in college and out, studying the problems of writers on the make have taught me this: the only things that can be taught a creative writer are, in the order of importance, facts and figures about the publishing business, self-discovery (helping a writer to find his metier—which is often a painful shift from what you haven't got and like to what you have got and don't like) and literary technique (chiefly helping the student to see that technique is anything but "mechanical" as Mr. Leonard thinks).

Another thing I've learned: it will never be possible to train writers for their life work as they are trained in other arts and professions because it is impossible to demonstrate the dexterities learned in mastering this art as they can be demonstrated in all other arts and because of the sheer (and entirely understandable) egoism of successful authors who are unwilling publicly to share with anyone credit for their triumphs.

The ideas about literary learning held both by professional and amateur are based not on the commonly understood laws for learning anything but upon fairy tales about famous authors told in high school class rooms. Students planning literary careers don't want to learn; they want to be famous. . . .

THOMAS H. UZZELL.

New York City.

Mr. Leonard Replies

SIR:—When I undertook to "answer" Mr. Uzzell's letter, I did not realize what a tough job I had assumed. This is not because his criticisms are devastating, but because I cannot find any definite criticisms at all. Certainly none which have to do with my article as I wrote it.

Mr. Uzzell says that I advise young writers to scheme to get free advice out of professionals . . . the freeness being the criterion of value. I said nothing of the sort. I told them they should try to associate with people in the writing business. Friends and acquaintances are sources of intangible counsel which cannot be paid for in money. If you haven't got the required medium of exchange . . . personal qualities which make you interesting to other writers . . . you are forced to pay dollars and cents to a professional teacher. I persist in believing that you don't get much for your investment.

In addition Mr. Uzzell makes me seem to approve college writing-teachers in general. I do not. They vary, of course. Some are stimulating, intelligent men. Some are dry-as-dust or actually dumb. But they all have a quality which distinguishes them from the commercial writing teachers. They do not promise large financial rewards in order to attract students. I am certain that at Harvard at least no one ever took a composition course with the belief that he was getting definite vocational training which would assure him an easy living.

As for the Bread Loaf Conference, I did not approve it without qualification, as Mr. Uzzell implies. I know very little about it, but I have been told that it is a somewhat valuable substitute for literary associates acquired in other ways. That was all I said.

Mr. Uzzell states that I believe literary technique to be mechanical. I distinctly said that I consider mechanical teaching methods not only useless but actually harmful. Apparently Mr. Uzzell and I agree on this point. I don't see why he chose to reverse me.

J. N. LEONARD.

New York City.

James Boyd

BY JULIAN R. MEADE

TO his readers James Boyd may be known as a distinguished novelist who indulges in fox hunting as an avocation, but in Southern Pines, North Carolina, people will tell you that Jim Boyd is a fox hunter who indulges in novel writing when he is not occupied with horses and hounds. To say that a man is primarily a novelist might make him seem a slightly different and especial sort of person—and Jim Boyd is just a mighty nice fellow who does not cherish his friends because they read his books. Of course, some citizens of Southern Pines do read his novels and, now and then, the town tries to think of its Master of Hounds as an important writer. A few days after the publication of "Roll River," when the window of the little book store in the town was displaying copies of his novel, James Boyd, the author, was asked to make a speech at the school house; but he carried a fox horn instead of a literary paper and the children, and probably the grown-ups, too, were relieved when he began to talk as familiarly as ever about horses and hunting.

Jim Boyd is a sociable man and he would hate to have anything isolate him from the life and people about him. When he was an army officer his men were keen about him: just before sailing the soldiers of his company staged a show which ridiculed the shortcomings of the men; Boyd was the only officer whose name was included and the jokes on him were greeted with cheers. He still hears from many of his men and, when he was in the hospital last year, a sergeant whom he "busted" in France for drinking came to see him bearing a large bottle which, much to the consternation of the hospital authorities, caused the inmate and his visitor to become mildly hilarious.

He keeps old friends and makes new ones. A few of his favorites are literary people; others are sportsmen, lawyers, doctors, and people unaware of the profession of letters. From his wide and varied circle of friends one learns a number of things about Jim Boyd besides the fact that he is a writer. When he isn't writing he reads innumerable histories, his interest being, as he says, "in history, not as history, but as life," and he reads books about railroads, mining, and hunting. He draws well, writes excellent comic verse, and hates games, with the notable exception of poker. He never winds his watch and is exasperatingly late except when he is correcting galleys or going on a hunt. He becomes intensely absorbed in whatever he is doing: when he hunts he is oblivious of everything but the hounds; and his brother, who whips in and tries vainly to attract his attention, swears that Jim is the only living huntsman who can

neither hear, see, nor smell. In the midst of doing something he will become engrossed in something else and forget his companions, reappearing after an hour or two with a winning smile and the conviction that he has been gone only a very few minutes.

In spite of the severe sinus malady which has followed him relentlessly (which, since the publication of "Long Hunt," necessitated three operations and caused him to postpone "Roll River" for two years), Jim has boundless enthusiasm and energy. Almost every day he spends a good number of hours in dictating as he paces up and down his long study, writing novels, he avows, because he prefers it to other work and his Presbyterian training gave him the idea that "every man has got to do something." He has not been pressed by need of money; he has been enabled to write what he wanted to and, yet, he has been notably sympathetic toward young writers who must earn their bread by writing.

Jim Boyd is completely sincere in his democratic associations with many types of human beings. One cold winter's afternoon he and his wife went to the funeral of the wife of their Negro gardener. It was warm inside the little wooden church because of the closely packed congregation and because of the fine new chuck stove which smelled of pine knots and turpentine and occupied most of the aisle. Beside the stove there was a white coffin with nickel trimmings and scroll work—"like the cake for the Lord Mayor of London's Banquet," as Jim said. Everything was ready for the funeral but there was no sign of the preacher. After a long and awkward wait word was brought that the preacher's car had broken down and the Reverend had no way to reach the church in time for

the burial. Then there was a conference between the deacon and the chief mourners. The deacon came forward and said, "We's gonna ask Mister Jim Boyd to say a few words in place of our preacher."

As Jim observed later, it would have been impossible to decline. So he arose and stood between the coffin and the stove. He began to speak simply and sincerely in honor of the deceased. "My brothers," he said, "we know not the time nor the hour—"

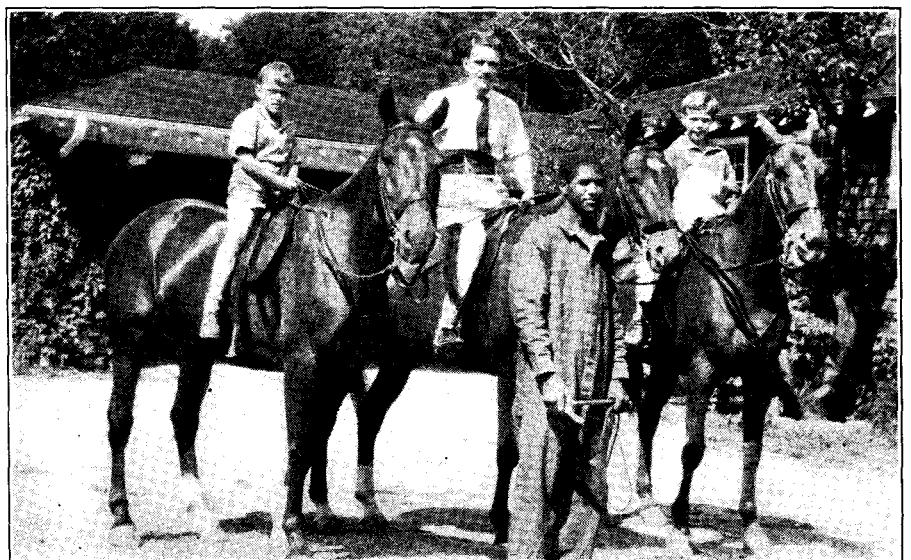
"Amen, Oh Lawd," cried the mourners.

"It comes to one—comes to all—"

"Yes, Lawd, too true, too true," chanted the mourners.

Well, the Negroes said that was the best funeral sermon they ever heard and doubtless it was; certainly they made a perfect audience, for the steady accompaniment of their moaning, like a Greek chorus, inspired Mister Jim Boyd to heights of eloquence which surprised no one more than himself—unless it was Katherine who felt that her husband had never spoken or written more forcefully. The tale is related here because it serves to illustrate the esteem a novelist with a partly Northern background has won in a Southern community. Jim Boyd has gained the friendship of Southerners of various walks of life. The only people he has professed to abhor are snobs, very large women, loud boosters, and American Legioners, and it is likely that he would have sympathy for individuals of any of these classes if he encountered them in trouble.

He would be the first to admit that he may have lived in a small community more placidly than many other writers because he has not been tempted to use the people around him as material. "Drums" is a novel of Revolutionary days; "Marching On" is an epic of the Confederacy which does not show the more distasteful fruits of its author's long research; "Long Hunt" is a picture of the pioneer period; "Roll River" is the tale of a Pennsylvania town from the eighties



JAMES BOYD, HIS TWO SONS, AND CICERO