

When Not to Take Advice

JESSE STUART

IF it were possible for me to re-write "Taps for Private Tussie" since I have read American critics' reaction to it, would I do it? My answer is definitely no. I have the right to say what I want to write and they the right to write what they want to about it. It is not that I think it is a perfectly written book, for I know it is not. And it is not that I do not respect the critics' opinions. I feel that at least ninety per cent of the criticism of this book is good sound criticism. I think, probably, they lavished too much praise upon it. The critics were too generous with me as they have been with each book that I have written. So it isn't that I have a grudge against the critics for I haven't, and have never had since my first date with them October 14, 1934 when "Man With A Bull-Tongue Plow," my first book, was published.

The main reason why I wouldn't re-write "Taps" is, I cannot write anything according to pattern. That is, I have to think the thing out for myself. I learned this one thing in college. During those days I wanted to write poetry. And when I wrote a batch of poems I'd take them to one of my English professors; if he praised them I was happy. If he condemned them, I felt badly about it. If he suggested that I throw them aside and "try to write like Shakespeare" I did it. I believed everything my English teachers told me for the period of my college and university days. Suddenly, I rebelled. I rebelled, for each one of them had a different opinion about poetry and I knew somebody was wrong. I returned from the university with a determination to write something to suit myself (I burned five hundred poems that others had told me how to write) and I wrote "Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow." And this idea occurred to me which has been a part of my everyday philosophy! "Write something to suit yourself and many people will like it; write something to suit everybody and scarcely anyone will care for it."

If anybody starts telling me what to write, how to write, and when to write, there is something in me that immediately rebels. For instance, I was told that I couldn't write a sonnet in college. That is one of the main reasons why I use this medium despite its hampering effects. (I hope I've loosened it up a bit). I was told that I couldn't write a short story and I believed my English instructor at that

time. Later I thought that I would see. In two days I wrote three short stories. Results: *Story Magazine*, *Southern Review*, and *The American Mercury* accepted these three stories, and all three stories were on Edward J. O'Brien's Honor Roll for 1936.

Since then I've had approximately three hundred short stories published in quality magazines and books. And I was told that I couldn't write a novel, told not by college English instructors and by critics.

I think it is the nature of the American people to do a thing when they have been told they can't do it. Many of us remember prohibition days when people were told they couldn't drink anything stronger than lemonade. During prohibition days, in this region of America, moonshine licker became a big-time industry. When I was principal of a couple of large high schools, I never put a sign on the school yard to tell the students not to step on the grass for I knew they would do it just to see how the touch of the grass felt to their feet. I removed the signs from the school yard and suggested they didn't walk on the young grass until it was well-rooted in the ground. I don't think a student thereafter stepped on the grass unless it was by accident. I did this because I knew how I'd felt when I was told that I couldn't write a short story, a sonnet, or a novel.

I disagree with many authors about the American critics. I have read authors' criticism of the critics; I have heard them criticize critics—blast them with scorching tongues and say we didn't have a worthwhile critic in America. I think America has more intelligent critics than any country in the world today just as I believe America has many more important writers than any country in the world today. America has the dream and the promise of a great literature yet to come. And this World War II will not



—Victor Kraft
Jesse Stuart: "The critics were too generous with me. . . ."

stop it, for we are hellbent in America to step on the grass if we are told we can't, hellbent to drink if we are told we can't have it, hellbent to vote if we are told we can't, hellbent to write short stories, sonnets, and novels if we have been told we can't write any of them. We still have vigor in America as a nation of people. And "vigor" was something lost among the peoples of twenty-seven countries that I visited in Europe in 1937-38.

As for my future in America as a writer, I do not know, since critics are pointing out that I can write a short story, a novel, and a sonnet. That is why I say the main fault I have had to find with critics in America with me individually is, they have been too lavish with their praise. Critics have praised my books highly when the public wouldn't buy them. For instance, one book of mine highly reviewed sold less than a thousand copies. But I remember that the critics pointed out in 1934 that I had written myself out in poetry when I put 703 sonnets into "Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow" and that as a poet I was finished. I have held their remarks in mind for ten years. I haven't forgotten nor will I forget those remarks. Thanks to the American critics.

TO A CERTAIN UNCERTAIN ASSERTIN' CRITIC

By David McCord

HE takes the long review of things;
He asks and gives no quarter.
And you can sail with him on wings
Or read the book. It's shorter.

New Novelists of 1944

ALICE HACKETT

THAT the most talked-about fiction titles of the past year were written by new novelists is an interesting and important fact for American literature. And since to be talked-about, to achieve word-of-mouth advertising, is the most effective way of promoting book sales, a few of these new writers' books were the outstanding hits of the year.

In some cases, critical esteem went along with financial success, as was the case with the novel that perhaps outsold any other in the bookstores of America in 1944. This was "Strange Fruit," by Lillian Smith, published by Reynal & Hitchcock almost a year ago. Even though it was out of stock many times during the course of the year because of paper shortage, and though it could not be sold in Boston stores, 470,000 copies of "Strange Fruit" passed over bookstore counters in 1944.

Unfavorable criticism of this novel about whites and Negroes in the South condemned its "uncouth speech." Most reviewers* hailed its understanding and integrity, its honest interpretation of the Negro mind and problems. Edward Weeks in *The Atlantic* considered it a new "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and Malcolm Cowley said in *The New Republic*, "Not a promise but an achievement." Another first novel dealing with conflict between races in the South was Hodding Carter's "The Winds of Fear" (Farrar & Rinehart), recipient of the Southern Writers' Award for 1944.

Although "Strange Fruit" was Lillian Smith's first published novel, she is not an unpractised writer. As editor of the magazine *South Today*, she has mastered the craft of translating her ideas on race relationships into print. Miss Smith grew up in Clayton, Georgia, where her father was owner of the mills, the town's chief industry. In 1921, she went to China, where she taught music in the Methodist Mission School.

Equally publicized in 1944, a book perhaps just as much talked about as "Strange Fruit," was "Forever Amber." Its author, Kathleen Winsor, was the literary glamor girl of the year. Authors, as a rule, are not as photogenic as Miss Winsor, so that the Macmillan Company made effective use of the Reves-Belo picture of her in advertising the book, and of her presence at literary teas, book fairs, etc. With "Strange Fruit," "Forever Amber"

shared the notoriety of being banned in Boston, not for its language but for what were termed the "questionable morals" of its heroine. There was little question, however, about Amber's morals; they were decidedly lax. Most reviewers balked at the outpouring of Restoration England's bawdiness, but some praised the book as robust and vivid, and considered the 700-odd pages fast-moving and absorbing reading.

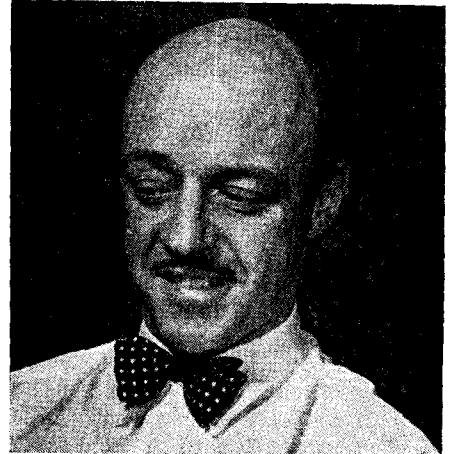
There has been division of opinion about the authenticity of "Forever Amber's" background. Historical novelists, however, usually are permitted some license in adapting detail to the cause of their plots. The story of the origin of the book has often been told. Unlike Lillian Smith, Kathleen Winsor has only amateur standing as a writer. She became interested in the England of Charles II when her husband, a classmate at the University of California, brought home some books on the period while working on a student thesis. Kathleen Winsor has lived in California most of her life, but came to New York while her book was being produced. Hollywood is now interested in making a movie of it and Miss Winsor has even been mentioned as a candidate for the title role.

Historical fiction occupied the attention of quite a number of the past year's writers. Most highly praised by critics was "The History of Rome Hanks," by Joseph Stanley Pennell (Scribner). It was not entirely as a historical novelist that they most admired Mr. Pennell, but for the originality of his presentation, his vocabulary, and for his experimental style. The absence of quotation marks and the mingling of past and present scenes without transition were, however, troublesome to some readers. His book was also banned by several booksellers in Boston and Cambridge on complaint of the Watch and Ward Society because of its frankly realistic language.

About "Rome Hanks," Orville Prescott predicted in *The New York Times*, "It is unlikely that any novel this year will cause such furious disagreements, such enthusiasm, and such rage." Besides being impressed by the author's novelty of presentation, critics found the book admirable for its vivid descriptions, especially of Civil War battles. Said N. K. Burger in *The New York Times*, "... the story of our nation ... has been handled with a sweep and scope and awareness that has not been equalled since Stephen Vincent Benét wrote 'John Brown's Body.'"



John Hersey



Charles Jackson



Elliott Arnold



Harry Brown

The Saturday Review

*In referring to reviewers' opinions in this article, I have purposely gone outside *The Saturday Review*.