

Notes from Inside a Glass House

JOHN SCHAFFNER

AFTER reading what he terms his "confessions" by an anonymous writer "of tripe" in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, I have come to the conclusion that someone ought now to enter the literary



John Schaffner

lists in defense of the popular magazine. The attitude of this fiction writer who feels that his work is so dishonest that he doesn't wish to have his name associated with it typifies that of many literary and academic people, who ought to know better. They appear to believe that because a work is popular it must necessarily be bad. In fact, they are so condescending as to imply that in order for it to be popular it has to be bad. Anything which is acceptable to the mass-circulation magazines is supposed by them to be dishonest, vulgar, and meretricious, with no relation to life-as-it-really-is. "The public," our anonymous critic admonishes us, "is carefully shielded . . . by a few men who control the reading of millions." Not only are most aspects of modern life and the problems of adult people who are trying to live it neglected, he assures us, but when actually presented are glossed over with falsehood; major issues are wholly avoided, and a censorship is practised "as bad as if it were imposed by government."

These are serious charges, but the tone of the language in which they are presented, alternately hysterical and pompous, takes away a good bit of the sting. I should like to know, myself, what magazines this man has been reading on which to base these heavy judgments. Likewise, I'd give a pretty penny to have the name of the editor who bought, and paid high prices for, the stories this author says he sat down and ground out in a few easy hours. I happen to have known, as an editor, a considerable number of

EDITOR'S NOTE: "Tripe, Inc." [SRL Nov. 22] was the anonymous confession of a young novelist who had found his standards impaired after writing for the slicks. The "essentially false rendering of reality" in the slick story pattern had left him with a disturbing compulsion to sensationalize. Slick stories, he maintained, negated the function of fiction, which is "to arouse the allegiance of men to worthy ends." Below John Schaffner, formerly fiction editor of a popular national weekly magazine, who has just started a literary agency, answers the author of "Tripe, Inc." in *The Saturday Review's* continuing series on the problems American literature is currently facing.

writers — and rather serious people they are, too—who spend days, weeks, or even months on a story before finishing it to their satisfaction, and then are frequently happy to have it bought by such magazines as *Collier's* or *The Saturday Evening Post*, say, rather than by *The Atlantic*—and not entirely, I believe, because those and other similar magazines can afford to pay more than the more literary journal. After all, who wouldn't rather be read by five million than by a few thousand readers?

The attitude of mind displayed by Anonymous and those he represents is based, most magazine editors will certainly willingly and regretfully admit, partly on the truth. Magazines do often give their readers pap. Even the best of them are too often guilty of offering inferior material to their publics. But I believe that Anonymous is laboring under several misconceptions about the purpose and

value of popular fiction, and I further charge that his criticism is colored by a curious mixture within himself compounded chiefly of snobbishness and envy.

FIRST of all, a simple examination of the purpose of fiction presented in the mass-circulation magazines will show that it is intended primarily to divert. Stories may well—and contrary to Anonymous's charges, they really sometimes do—give "the truth about anti-Semitism, legislative lobbies, state politics, control of the press, and a lot of other things," which he offers as tabu subjects, but first of all they have to be entertaining, they have to tell a story. Why? Because people buy the magazine to read the stories (if they do buy them because of the fiction) in order to be amused. You don't arm yourself with a current popular periodical to while the time away on a train journey, for example, in order to be made aware of the dilemmas which beset the world. Not if you are the average person, that is. You want to get away for a few moments from your own dilemmas, which are in a small way part of those of the world. You want to be entertained. And the entertainment of you, the average reader, is the first function of any piece of so-called popular fiction; if a certain amount of social criticism can be injected into the theme of the story, then so much the better. But the story is the thing.

The harried housewife resting a few moments from her chores, the tired businessman seeking an eve-



ning's relaxation in his favorite chair, the nervous patient in the doctor's waiting room—each of them picks up the magazine to lose himself in its fiction in order to forget his cares or pains and to find amusement.

The sociological tendency in much of modern criticism makes us forget that the first function in any work of fiction is entertainment. No matter how great its artistic achievement or how deep its social implication, the work has first of all to be not only readable but also interesting in the sense that one can identify oneself with the characters and their problems. One of the most commonly used phrases of the magazine editor's stock-in-trade is "reader identification." And the reader naturally wants to see the character in whose problems he is engrossed bring them to a happy solution. But even Anonymous must realize that that day, for instance, when the *Post* insisted upon a happy ending for its stories is over. To believe that a story which simply entertains is bad (because it embodies no social criticism) is to outlaw a very large body of our heritage of English and American literature.

The matter can be put very simply. The editor wants to sell his magazine, therefore he prints material which will interest and entertain the largest number of readers. This material is colored by the moral and social and religious prejudices, as well as by the ideals, of his readers; it has to be. And therefore to criticize the social and ethical immaturity of the ideas presented in magazine fiction is really to criticize the immaturity of the society the readers are a part of. In other words, blame the world, don't blame the editor!

The editor himself, much as he feels a duty to uplift and to educate, is a part of the materialistic society which his publication reflects. If he were not, he wouldn't be an editor—he would have long since lost his job.

But it isn't as bad as all this sounds. Fortunately for both readers and writers (and even editors, in a way), there exists today great rivalry among the top national magazines. Now if ever is a time to write—as Conrad Aiken pointed out [*SRL* Sept. 20], the rewards to today's writer come almost too easily—because the editors are vying to secure for their own

publications not only top "name" writers but new writers of promise. Scouts beat the bushes of academic hinterlands and scan the little magazines and reviews for new talent, and associate editors of rival magazines now compete with each other in various social ways for the attentions of the literary agents, where in past years the agents had to come on bended knee to the editor. It simply isn't true that good writing doesn't appear in the popular periodicals. In fact, it does appear so consistently that such "quality" magazines as *Harper's* and *The Atlantic* have pretty much to content themselves with seeing material only after it has gone the rounds of the bigger markets and been rejected, or, as *The Atlantic* has so successfully done, inaugurate as a special feature a painstaking search for "first" authors.

In fact, I should like to ask Anonymous, if good writing doesn't appear in the popular magazines, where then does it appear? Has he ever looked into *Harper's Bazaar*, *Mademoiselle*, *Good Housekeeping*, for example? But perhaps he doesn't consider these ladies' magazines to be slicks.

It is fashionable among the literary (and especially the unpublished literary) to damn such writers as J. P. Marquand and Somerset Maugham for being "slick," but by their contemporaries Dickens, Scott, and Kipling, all immensely popular in their own time, were hardly considered members of the elect either. (The words "slick" and "pulp," actually, of course, referring only to the type of paper on which the magazine is printed, themselves have been perverted to mean something opprobrious.) The fact is, in my opinion, that those writers who condemn such practitioners of the "slick technique" as Marquand and Maugham (always the favorite examples of lost souls among popular authors) could no more approach the perfection of that technique themselves than their work can command the popularity of that of those superb craftsmen.

I have discovered that many otherwise fair-minded people are today judging popular fiction by what they read before the war or even what they read as long ago as the Twenties. They do not realize that to a certain degree (to put it cautiously) editorial policies have become greatly more enlightened, partly because of a new awareness by the general public of the pressing social, political, and economic problems the realization of which the depression and then the war forced upon most Americans, and partly because the paper shortage relieved editors of the worry of losing circulation. If an outraged reader canceled his subscription, there generally

To Any Highminded Candidate

By Irwin Edman

PURE spirit should, I think, not mix
 Ever at all with politics
 Particularly not I fear
 During a Presidential year.
 A saint embarked on a campaign
 Would never be himself again.
 The precepts you were taught in youth
 Of telling nothing but the truth
 However high be your intentions
 Will vanish long ere the Conventions;
 Along with them will promptly go
 The power of saying "yes" and "no"
 Of saying the obvious things that you like to
 For fear that somebody may dislike you.
 You'll answer questions when they make you,
 Meet issues when they overtake you;
 You'll utter platitudes galore
 On Justice and Freedom, Peace and War.
 You'll promise all things contradictory
 And mean them to the day of victory,
 You'll be for this, you'll cheer for that
 The latest word—the oldest hat.
 You'll wish all things be done for all:
 Wages to rise, prices to fall,
 Taxes cut to piddling pence
 But billions also for defense,
 All aid to Europe, but all hail
 The full domestic dinner-pail.
 No—No, pure spirit flee today
 To somewhere lone and far away—
 Write down your memoirs, add to knowledge
 Preside maybe at some nice college
 Where you can be yourself serene
 And say—or partly—what you mean!

was during the years 1942 through '46 another subscriber waiting to take it up. Although this situation no longer holds true, the general quality of all magazine fiction continues to reflect the improvement created by the greater freedom it gave the editor in the selection of his stories. As an editor, I frequently heard complaints from writers—especially the older sentimental lady authors—that they are no longer able to sell so readily, if at all, to their former popular markets.

From my experience in the fiction departments of two of the largest-circulation magazines in the country I can say with sincerity that what is constantly sought is writing that has conviction and honesty. We all too infrequently find it, but it is what we look for.

First, as I have said, there must be a real "story." The literary sketch, the story with its conclusion implied (as developed by *The New Yorker*), and the reminiscence do not readily find acceptance. There must be a beginning, a middle, and an end, as our composition teachers used to tell us, and the story must present some sort of conflict and then resolve it (otherwise I question whether it ought to be called a short story at all). Second—and here we get down to a matter on which Anonymous can base a pretty strong case, unfortunately—there are the considerations of editorial timidity in the face of the advertising, publicity, and circulation departments. One cannot blink the fact that their influence is often both foolish and evil. And finally, of course, there are the tabus imposed by a society which can complacently put up with "restricted" residential areas, for instance, while extolling democracy, which accepts the condemnation of the use of tobacco by a great religious body which derives a large part of its financial support from the very communities that produce tobacco, a society, in fact, which allows political groups to defranchise the Negro in the South, "patriotic" groups to dispossess the Nisei in the West, and "Christian" organizations to molest and oppress the Roman Catholic and the Jew and other minorities in all parts of the country!

Yet, in spite of these limitations—literary, economic, and social—most of the magazines are doing as well as they can with the material they are able to get. That no more that is good is written is not their fault. And the earlier 1947 issues of the magazine '47 (a journal which was planned, partly at least, to bring to light the work of writers not acceptable to the popular market as well as the unaccepted work of popular writers) illustrated

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The World. *Our readers may be interested in glancing at Vera Micheles Dean's own "The United States and Russia" for informed background material in connection with Fritz Sternberg's enlightened pamphlet on the Russian question, reviewed below by Mrs. Dean. . . . The "judicial error" which sent the French officer Alfred Dreyfus to Devil's Island for treason in 1895 was conceived in anti-Semitism, but the notoriety of "The Dreyfus Case" stemmed as much from deep social cleavages within France, which still exist. Hence the title of Herzog's book, reviewed here, "From Dreyfus to Petain."*

U.S. Must Face World Trend

HOW TO STOP THE RUSSIANS—WITHOUT WAR. By Fritz Sternberg. New York. The John Day Co. 1948. 146 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by VERA MICHELES DEAN

AT A TIME when every dinner-party conversation eventually ends up in discussion of whether we shall have war with Russia and, if not, how we can stop the Russians by means other than war, this pamphlet by Fritz Sternberg, who prides himself on accurate predictions, should prove both useful and encouraging.

It is useful because Mr. Sternberg, in simple if repetitive language, punctures current facile generalizations about the necessity and feasibility of a preventive war against Russia—whatever is meant by that self-contradictory phrase. It is encouraging because Mr. Sternberg believes that the United States has it in its power to check Russia in a constructive way which, in his opinion, would ultimately benefit not only this country and our friends in Europe and Asia, but even Russia itself.

Mr. Sternberg contends that, in spite of our industrial strength, at present superior to that of Russia and its

satellites; our monopoly, for the time being at least, of the atomic bomb, and our naval power, we would face grave, if not insuperable difficulties if we undertook to wage war on Russia. For, in his opinion, "it is impossible to defeat the Soviet Union by a lightning war" because of its favorable strategic position on the Eurasian Continent which, among other things, makes it possible for the Kremlin to decentralize its industries in such a way as to make them less vulnerable to atomic warfare. Moreover, "a war against the Soviet Union would have to be won not only on Soviet territory but in Europe and Asia as well"—and the price of American victory would be the reduction of those two continents to barbarism. Instead of preserving the American economic and social system, war would "destroy the foundations on which the United States has built its economic system and democratic institutions."

What, then, can the United States do to prevent further extension of Russia's influence in Europe and Asia? Mr. Sternberg holds no brief for appeasement which, according to him, would merely postpone war—and "during this postponement the power of the Russians will increase." His prescription is that this country should squarely face "the great process of transformation" that is taking place all over the world—a process of which the Russians take advantage whenever they can. American foreign policy, he urges "must be to work in harmony with this world-wide trend and so prevent the Russians from directing and *misusing* it."

How are we to achieve this objective? Mr. Sternberg's formula, in a nutshell, is that we must be more progressive than the Russians, especially in those frontier areas where we are in visible competition, notably in Germany and China. In the case of China, we should bring the Chinese a higher standard of living, without depriving them of personal

