

# ARE WRITERS MADE, NOT BORN?

By RICHARD DIERS

AS A COLLEGE STUDENT Walter Van Tilburg Clark discovered that the writing of fiction could be, in his own words, "an amusing diversion." What originated as an amusement was destined to evolve into his life work, first through the exacting discipline of writing poetry, then the short story, and finally, the novel.

Today Clark's stories are widely anthologized, he has three novels to his credit—among them the highly regarded *The Ox-Bow Incident*—and he is currently at work on a biography. Writer-in-residence at the University of Nevada, he has directed creative writing workshops at Stanford University, the University of Montana, and San Francisco State College. As one might expect, he is deeply convinced that creative writing, within certain inherent limitations, can be taught on the college campus.

"Everyone accepts the fact that a person who wants to become a musician must take music lessons somewhere along the line," he explained recently. "No one is amazed when an aspiring painter enrolls in figure-drawing classes. But in the academic world, where people ought to know better, I'm constantly confronted with the attitude that writers are born, not made. What's more, I'm told that courses in creative writing should be kept in their proper place, as a kind of half-acceptable program in a dark corner, where they won't interfere with serious academic progress. I imagine the popularity of this view is ascribed to the fact that everybody speaks, reads, and writes a language, and since writers use language too, why should lessons in creative writing be necessary? Yet, at the same time, nobody has the slightest doubt that college students should concentrate on freshman composition and advanced English courses if they're going to develop their communicative skills. But a talent for creative writing? People assume one is born with it."

To Clark the basic differences between a writer and the average person are clearly defined.

"Fundamentally a writer uses his ears and eyes better than the average person," he explained. "As a result his memory is keener and he remains more concerned about life, continually making associations between his past and his present. It's not a difference in kind,

actually, it's a difference in degree. Courses in creative writing supply a necessary kind of preparation for the student who intends to become a writer by improving his technical proficiency. They can save him what can be a matter of years in finding his own way. Whether or not the student becomes an artist is something else again, however, for nobody can be taught to be an artist.

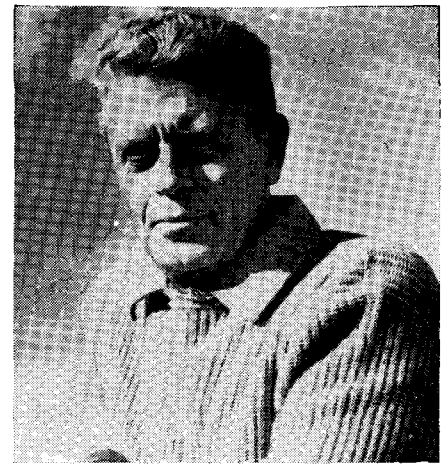
"Before he has anything to say or can define his own philosophy, his own view of life—or, to paraphrase Henry James, when he can 'discover his own subject,' a student has to attain a fairly mature level of competency. In reality his subject discovers *him*, emerging from his entire life, and his environment, and developing all sorts of psychological connections within him."

In college, the formative years of the novice writer are underscored—and often marred—by literary influences. The derivative work of an undergraduate English major hoping to one day become a writer may reveal the adverse effects of two or three literary masters, or worse yet, just one.

"Ernest Hemingway's prose, for instance, may hold him spellbound," noted Clark. "I've known many young people who were caught in that trap because of Hemingway's deceptively simple style. As Hemingway himself said, 'I developed my style because I couldn't write, it's the only thing I could do.' Many students with the same attitude are baffled when they can't find their own way, when they can't discover a language of their own. They mistakenly believe that style is something that can be created automatically by sitting down at the typewriter. Style isn't that easy to come by. It's the result of years of growth, of the development of a personality, of an attitude.

"Then there are always those students who become addicted to highly infectious prose by writers such as James, Wolfe, Faulkner, the Joyce of *Ulysses*—some of the most dangerous influential literary people in print. *Ulysses* seems to be the point where the big infection sets in. So the students write long, long passages in Joycean prose that are nothing but imitations on the language level that have not emerged from their own experiences and consequently have no depth. And then they become bewildered when nobody cares for them."

An alert instructor can divert his



—Wide World.

Walter Van Tilburg Clark

charges from such perils at the risk of temporarily stifling their creative efforts. In most cases, Clark believes, the risk is well worth taking. Clark has had to admonish his "infected" students to stop reading Faulkner, for example. "Cut it out," he has ordered them. "Your ear's infected. Sure, Faulkner's great, he's done tremendous things. But his world isn't your world. It's not your vision of that world or your natural language rhythm. Nothing about it is yours." Yet there are those who struggle vainly for years to free themselves from such literary servitude.

"Sometimes it's a perfectly natural association," Clark admitted. "A student might have some regional affiliation with a certain writer, and perhaps many of the questions that stirred the writer are questions that prompted the student to put words down on paper too. Then the situation becomes doubly dangerous because if the writer has said some things magnificently, the student will be tempted to write about these same things. He'd jolly well better write about them in a fresh manner or turn his attention to something else."

In *The Ox-Bow Incident* Clark expressed the gross injustices that paralleled the rising menace of Nazi Germany in the late 1930s. He champions causes, convinced they are vital to a writer's development.

"A person isn't going to write anything worthwhile until he is driven by a concern for some specific qualities in life. I've little use for the 'art for art's sake' school. No one is going to work very long at writing unless he is interested in the craft as more than just an art form. His concern has got to arise with specific matters in this world."

When is an individual prepared to work independently, free of ties to teacher and textbook?

"When he has attained a degree of proven critical detachment. In other words, when he no longer tosses off a grossly Joycean piece at two in the

morning with a feeling of tremendous inspiration," Clark stated. "When he can evaluate his own writing with sufficient objectivity and recognize another influence upon it, when he knows when he is saying something that hasn't been said before and can trust his own critical judgment—only then will writing emerge that is truly his own.

"Some extremely talented young people have taken a long while to arrive at such a degree of critical objectivity because they were too self-doubting by nature, they lacked the will, the necessary degree of detachment. In the final analysis some remarkably gifted students have come to nothing because they could never evaluate their own performance with confidence.

"There is a vast difference between the creative state and the critical state of mind. In the creative state—the initial stages of writing where the imagination seizes hold—one loses himself entirely in the piece of work so that it produces itself, so to speak. The critical state is completely analytical—one asks how the writing occurred, how should it have occurred, and what differences would improve it. In my way of thinking, no one has written well in the critical state of mind."

Does the critical state of mind successfully serve the teacher's own writing, though? Clark, teacher and writer, confesses that it keeps his imagination at bay.

"The critical state can become a real bug-bear when you're in the classroom. You're thinking and talking so much that you can't rid yourself of it when you begin to write. It's like a spook who has been haunting your students—now it begins to haunt you too. It taps you on the shoulder and says, 'Unh, unh, Clark, that won't do.' And before you've written two paragraphs it's warning you, 'Ah, but what are you going to do in Chapter twenty-seven if you start out like this?' The situation is analogous to the proverbial centipede who had no trouble getting about until someone asked him how he managed so well with all those legs, then he began to think about it and discovered that he couldn't move.

"The beginning writer who learns anything about what he's trying to accomplish will fill a great many wastebaskets. That's part of the creative process. As he grows he has to maintain a deep conviction that everything he is writing about matters, that it's essential. Ten years later he'll discover that little if any of it *did* matter. Twenty years later, if he's lucky, he may come close to saying something in his own voice. Anybody who thinks he can achieve that in less time is only kidding himself. For writing—well, it's a slow business."

## Books in Communications



### The Way It Was

**B**OOK PUBLISHING, as any reader of the financial pages knows, is no longer exclusively the occupation for gentlemen that one publisher has called it; more and more it is also an occupation for businessmen. The complexities of mergers, Wall Street, movie and television rights, book clubs, paperback reprints, and a vast tangle of other awesomely intricate considerations have turned virtually every publisher, whether he likes it or not, into a man who must secretly wish his brain could somehow be crossbred with a computer.

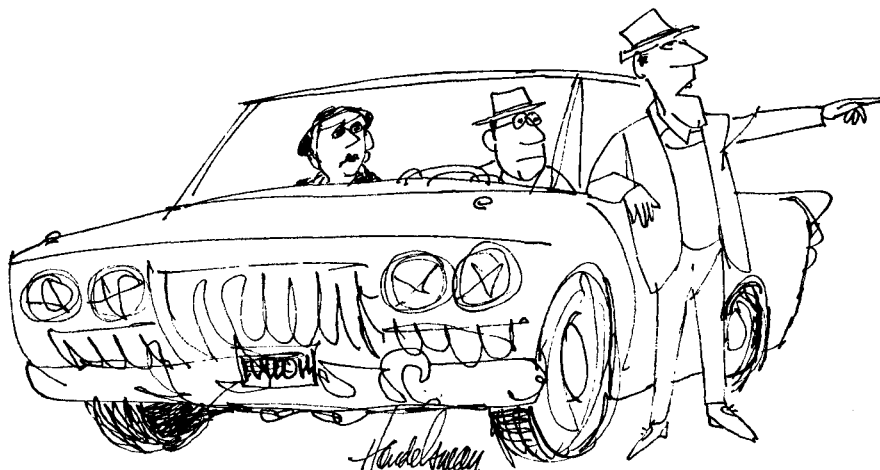
Things have not, of course, always been this way, and one convenient way to relive publishing's past is to read Harold S. Latham's *My Life In Publishing* (Dutton, \$5), a loving reminiscence, judiciously spiced with a few harsh words, by a long-time (1909-52) editor for the Macmillan Company. Mr. Latham's qualifications for his recollections in tranquillity are impressive. He joined Macmillan when he was fresh out of college, eventually became a vice president and top editor, and in the process was privy to both the happy triumphs and hopeless disasters that help make book publishing as precariously uncertain as a night in Las Vegas. It was Mr. Latham who, on a trip to Atlanta in 1935, managed to persuade a reluctant Margaret Mitchell to let him read an enormous chaos of a manuscript titled *Tomorrow Is Another Day* (the title was eventually changed to *Gone With the Wind*, and the rest is

history). And it was also Mr. Latham who, upon reading an unsolicited manuscript by an unknown writer named Kathleen Winsor, said emphatically that such a book—it was about a woman named Amber and was, judged by the literary mores of its day, somewhat gamy—would besmirch the Macmillan reputation and should under no circumstances be published (the sales manager, calling Mr. Latham an old grandmother for his prudishness, ultimately won the battle, and *Forever Amber* was brought spectacularly to life).

It is this kind of candor that gives *My Life in Publishing* much of its charm. Mr. Latham knows, as only an editor tempered in the thick of publishing's battles can, that you can't win 'em all. Part of the business lies in its inevitable mistakes, and the honest editor knows that the best he can do is hope his mistakes will be counterbalanced by enough sound decisions. It is Mr. Latham's credit that he not only can admit his mistakes but also laugh uproariously at them. It's a rare talent in any business.

Mr. Latham learned publishing the hard way, which may in the end be the only way to learn it (or anything else). He started in the advertising department, doing work he hated at \$14 a week, but in time—largely by default—he began to do editorial work and to meet authors. "My first actual contact with authors," he writes, "came largely

(Continued on page 56)



"That way madness lies."