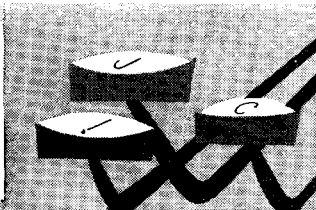


# Manner of Speaking



**Dear Editor: How Do I Become a Writer?** At least half the mail on any editorial desk yearns, implicitly or explicitly, toward the unanswerable and always pleading question, "How do I become a writer?" In its most common sub-form the question reads: "If my writing is not publishable, will you analyze it for me and tell me how to improve it?" And often, as if flashing a credit card in payment of the check, the writer adds: "I am a subscriber."

I mean to quarrel with our subscribers only on principle and only when I must, but I must in reason if the assumption is that a subscription buys not only the magazine but the personal services of the editors. Let me believe, rather, that SR is bargain enough at the price, without including the editors, who are, in any case, no bargain.

Neither are they teachers. If a writer seriously wants guidance, he should enroll in a workshop at the nearest university, extension service, writers' conference, or adult education center. If there is none available to him where he lives, I know of nothing he can do except, perhaps, to move. And if the reasons against moving are more compelling than the desire to be a writer, then that man has something more important in his life than his writing, and he would be well advised to go for what is most important to him. The writer who means to write will find his guidance, whatever it costs him. Nor will any substantial part of it come from an editor—not at least until he is well advanced in his own craft. About all the editor can do for the beginning writer is done when he buys a given piece or rejects it. If he buys it, he may very well offer some suggestions. If he rejects it, he will normally do so with a rejection slip, the essence of which is "Sorry—not for us."

In the mercy that a day's work may hope to earn, there is little more an editor can do about unpublishable manuscripts. It is out of the question to think of providing individual criticisms, and nothing can change that fact, no matter how yearningly the question is put. Some of the other most common sub-questions can, however, be answered with more or less standard information, and those I shall try to answer here.

Q. How do I go about submitting manuscripts for publication?

A. Legibly, and with a stamped self-addressed return envelope. Standard practice is to type the manuscript,

double-spaced, on regular typing paper. Put your name and address on each page. Write an accompanying letter, if you like, but it will serve no purpose: the writing must sell itself. Above all, if your ego cannot stand the thought of having your writing returned with a printed rejection slip, keep the manuscript at home. The editor does not hate your soul. But he will have before him baskets full of the work of equal souls, some of whom may be better writers. His job is not to carry on a correspondence with your soul but to get through those baskets and to find in them the manuscripts that speak to his soul and, as he hopes, to the souls of his readers.

Q. Will my manuscript be read by the editor himself?

A. Yes—as far as the first cliché. No self-respecting editor will willingly buy clichés and the first one is reason enough to stop his reading. He owes at least that much to the readers of his magazine. If you want the editor to read to the end, you need only make sure that you provide him with no cliché-marked stopping places.

Q. How do I break into print?

A. More or less as everyone else does—by submitting manuscripts, collecting rejection slips, and restudying the writing in the hope of improving it until your manuscripts begin to break down the resistance an editor is hired to have. Any one editor may be wrong, but when any considerable number of them have sent back your manuscripts with plain rejection slips, that total adds up to a kind of information any reasonable man can interpret.

Q. Where can I get an agent?

A. In the future—maybe. Until you have published a few things on your own you probably have nothing to offer an agent. He lives on 10 per cent of his authors' sales and 10 per cent of nothing is no return. Go the first mile on your own, and when you are ready for an agent he will find you.

**T**HERE are people who advertise as agents but they generally make their living by charging you a reading fee, not from a percentage of your sales. The code of ethics of the American Society of Authors' Representatives forbids advertising, and it is SR policy to accept no advertising that offers to place for sale the manuscripts of unknown authors.

In general, too, an agent is not of much use to a poet. There are too few

paying markets for poetry, and their fees hardly invite agency interest. Any persevering poet can soon learn the possible outlets for poetry as thoroughly as an agent is likely to know them.

As with agents, so with publishing houses. There are vanity presses that publish at the author's expense, and all such must be approached with great caution. Their method of operation is legal enough, though it is ethically questionable when it involves flattering the writer beyond his merits in the hope of getting him to invest his money in a publication that will be ignored by all but his friends.

If you are in doubt about whether or not the agent or publisher is reputable, there is a simple test. Type out a batch of the worst possible writing you can bring yourself to commit, and send it off to what mystery-story fans call "the suspect." If he replies in nothing less than dithyrambs and panegyrics, duck: you have uncovered a pirate.

**I**F, on the other hand, you sneak back to his letter and reread it with long rapt pauses, and then turn to the carbon of the manuscript and begin to think that maybe you outdid yourself without really knowing it at first—then, ah then, son of man, you have invented no part of the mistake the human race may turn out to be, and the universe does continue to spin around you in the same motion that includes mind and talent and the sublimities of both, but as a writer you are beyond the furthest hope of love or mercy.

And though your other virtues are as the stars in the firmament—though you honor your parents, love your children, earn your paycheck, vote thoughtfully, and do not beat your wife or husband, as the case may be—though every civil merit shines in you, and though you yourself shine in society as a personage, yet, I submit, you have no business with editors, nor have they any with you.

Your soul remains as real, and as unreal, as any other, and the editor means it no disrespect. But your papers on his desk are a daily nuisance of which he must rid himself in the simplest way, and the simplest way is the rejection slip.

You may not like the form of that slip, and your ego may find in its impersonality a rebuff to the intensity with which you recognize your own individuality. Yet the rejection slip, though necessarily vacuous, is always sweetly worded. It is meant to convey no rancor. And properly understood, it does answer your question. You wanted to know what he thought of your manuscript and he has told you, impersonally, yes, but politely enough: he doesn't like it.

And that, alas, does happen to be one of the answers of which the universe is capable.

—JOHN CIARDI.



# Books

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## LITERARY HORIZONS

### The Many Faces of Failure

THE NAME of Arthur Miller's story and moving picture *The Misfits* could serve as title for a large proportion of the novels that are published in these days. And why not? Surely most of the novels about the successful men and women in our society are dull or superficial or both. In a large way, of course, most of the world's great literature is about failures of one sort or another; that seems to be the way the world is. But I am thinking about failure in a narrower and more contemporary sense. Today, from the point of view of most serious novelists—and most serious artists of other kinds—adjustment to our culture is disgraceful. Like the anachronistic cowboys in Miller's story, the misfits in our fiction are both admirable and pathetic.

Clifford Stone, the hero and narrator of *The Cherry Pit*, a first novel by Donald Harington (Random House, \$5.95), has escaped from Little Rock to take his master's degree at Yale, to find a respectable post with an antiquarian society in Boston, and to marry an intellectual and rather frigid alumna of Mount Holyoke. Fed up with both job and wife, he flees to his native city, where he learns, like Thomas Wolfe's hero long before him, that you can't go home again. In time, however, he finds three old and congenial friends: an erstwhile girl of his named Margaret, who has remained virginal while growing more and more eccentric; his former boxing companion, Dall, now a sergeant of police; and a prosperous, sophisticated, enigmatic Negro known as Naps.

Harington has shown much ingenuity in devising adventures for Stone and his friends, and the incidents, if not always plausible, are entertaining. Harington writes well, sometimes brilliantly, and if he comes to no particular conclusion, that can't be held against him. What does bother me is that, like many first novelists, he writes as if he were never going to write another book and must say here and now all that he has

to say. In spite of this, he does give a convincing account of one type of rebellion.

In *Totempole* (Dutton, \$5.95) Sanford Friedman has told the story of a natural-born misfit, telling it largely in terms of the sexual experiences of his hero. We begin with Stephen as an infant, and follow him along a course that Freud has made familiar to us. In several chapters we are told about Stephen at a boys' camp at seven and nine and older, and much of the account is revealing. I do not know of any piece of fiction that deals more perceptively with pre-adolescent sex.

As Stephen grows older, we can watch the process by which his alienation from contemporary society is deepened. In college he associates with a group of young men and women who are interested in dramatics and pride themselves on being outcasts, and, though he is not wholly at home with them, they are more congenial than other students. The scene shifts abruptly to Korea, where Stephen finds sexual fulfillment and more than that. Voluntarily teaching English to a group of prisoners-of-war—North Koreans who are anti-Communists but who are being held prisoner during peace negotiations—he enjoys a kind of brotherhood he has never known before. At the same time, one of the prisoners, a doctor, slowly leads him into a sexual relationship deeper and more satisfying than any relationship he has previously had with either men or women. When he goes home, he feels "both overjoyed and sorrowful."

The novel may not be a particularly subtle study of coming-of-age, but it does seem to be a wholly honest one. Friedman treats the homosexual theme, as he does the theme of infant sexuality, with great candor and no lubricity. If at times the book seems a little too much like a case study, there are episodes that are developed with unusual imaginative power.

Edward Hoagland, who wrote well about misfits in two novels, *Cat Man* and

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*The Circle Home*, has made a different approach to the subject of maladjustment in *The Peacock's Tail* (McGraw-Hill, \$5.50). Whereas the first novel described life in a circus and the second was concerned with boxing, the new book has as hero a young man of proper background, Ben Pringle ("the Fair-haired Boy had been a name for him in college, where he'd loomed larger in his friends' forecasts than he did lately"). As the story begins, he has just lost his job, and, returning to New York, has discovered that he's lost his girl as well. He takes up residence in an uptown hotel, largely inhabited by Negroes, Puerto Ricans, and whites on relief, and among these outsiders he finds certain satisfactions, especially in telling stories to and playing games with the dozens of young children.

Somehow it doesn't seem a substantial enough subject for a novel, especially a