



Books

LITERARY HORIZONS

Texas Bound, Bones and All

WILLIAM HUMPHREY's *Home from the Hill* was the kind of first novel that makes reviewers sit up and pay attention, for the author had a story to tell, and he told it with great power. It is the story of a man and a woman and of their relationship with their son, a story laid in a small Texas town that is skilfully brought to life. One of its episodes, the hunting of a boar, is a splendid example of descriptive and dramatic writing. If this passage and others, including the fine opening scene, owed something to William Faulkner, Humphrey had learned his lessons well.

Now, after seven years, we have *The Ordways* (Knopf, \$5.95), which is not merely about but is in effect a love letter to the State of Texas. Although the action begins in the eastern part of the state, it moves west and south, giving Humphrey a chance to display both his affection and his descriptive powers.

A family novel, it introduces the Ordways on a "graveyard working day" in Mabry, a suburb of Clarksville. The narrator, who was a boy at the time, presents his relatives, alive and dead, and at once we have a sense of the character of the family. After a time he concentrates on his great-grandfather, Tom Ordway, who established the family in Texas.

Following the battle of Shiloh, Tom's wife, Ella, getting word that he has been killed, drives her mule and wagon across Tennessee to recover the body. On discovering that he is not dead but has been blinded and crippled, she brings him home. Then, when he has recuperated as much as he is likely to, they set out for Texas with a team of oxen, their children, and not only the bones (in kegs) of the Ordway ancestors but also their gravestones. This journey is, like one of the great ordeals in Faulkner's novels—say, the pilgrimage of the Bundren family in *As I Lay Dying*—an exhibition of almost unbelievable fortitude.

Humphrey turns now to the next generation, to Sam, with whom Ella was pregnant during her heroic migration. Sam grew up in Mabry, married, and had three children, his wife dying while bearing the third, Ned. In time Sam remarried. While Ned, aged about three, is being taken care of, as he frequently has been, by neighbors, the Vinsons, he and they abruptly disappear. After considering various other hypotheses, Sam concludes that the Vinsons, who were always fond of Ned, have kidnapped him, and, when the crops are harvested, he starts out in pursuit.

Sam's wanderings, which occupy more than half the book, take him over a good part of Texas. At first the account of the search is pathetic, as Sam is time after time disappointed; but as the journey lengthens the pathos diminishes, until Humphrey seems to be chiefly interested in telling a series of stories, in the manner of the picaresque novelists. We have Sam at a political rally, speeches and all; Sam robbed by a notorious con man; Sam as the caretaker of a circus elephant; Sam on trial for intended murder. Some of the episodes are tall stories in the tradition of frontier humor, and others, such as the trial, are pure farce. At last, having reached the valley of the Rio Grande, Sam gives up.

AFTER these prolonged divagations, Humphrey is ready to wind up his novel, and he does so adroitly and pleasantly. At last Ned did return, having been told the truth by his supposed father, Will Vinson, as the latter was dying. "A perennial boy, restless, prankish, barely housebroken," Ned quickly wins the hearts of his new-found relatives. He invites them all to visit him on his ranch near the Rio Grande, and the Ordways set forth, fourteen cars of them, so that the book can end with a Gargantuan barbecue.

Since this is intended to be the story of a family, much of the material in the long account of Sam Ordway's search is

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irrelevant, so much so that the novel is curiously deformed. Why Humphrey, who knows as much about form as the next one, permitted this deformation is hard to explain except on the ground of his love affair with Texas. Some of the extraneous material is so good in itself, and he writes about it with such obvious pleasure, that one is tempted to forgive him, but the fact remains that the impact of the novel is seriously weakened.

On the other hand, there is Humphrey's feeling for Texas, which he manages to communicate even to one who has never set foot in the Lone Star State. More important, there is his feeling for the family as, so to speak, both a vertical and a horizontal institution:

We Southerners are accused of living in the past. What can we do? The

past lives in us. And not just that single episode which those who accuse us have in mind: the Civil War—but all of the past. If the Civil War is more alive to the Southerner than to the Northerner it is because all the past is, and this is because the Southerner has a sense of having been present there himself in the person of one or more of his ancestors.

The Southerner no more identified himself with the Confederacy than he did with the Union; both were abstractions. . . . Clannishness was and is the key to his temperament, and he went off to war to protect not Alabama but only those thirty or forty acres of its sandy hillsides or stiff red clay which he broke his back tilling and which was as big a country as his mind could hold, whose sanctity to him came from the fact that in it were buried the bones of his own blood kin.

Whether Humphrey's generalizations hold true or not, his own feeling for what must be in large degree his own family permeates the book. It is significant that the novel begins and ends with family gatherings, the one a pious duty, the other a gay celebration. In between lie the struggles that Humphrey describes so intensely. Although I believe that the novel goes off the track, it will be read and deserves to be, for it contains a great amount of felt experience, of experience that has been acted upon by the imagination. Flannery O'Connor often said that one of the advantages of the Southern writer was the Southern habit of telling stories. There is surely a strong oral tradition behind this book, and if this tradition misled the author at various points, it must be recognized as one of the sources of the book's vitality.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

FRAZER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT No. 1122

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1122 will be found in the next issue.

M VFRT PMG VFOO OFDT MR
PKNW VFEWFG WFR VFE MR
WFR FGNSPT.

NWTRETQXFTOA

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1121

Arguments are to be avoided: they are always vulgar and often convincing.
—WILDE.

ON THE FRINGE

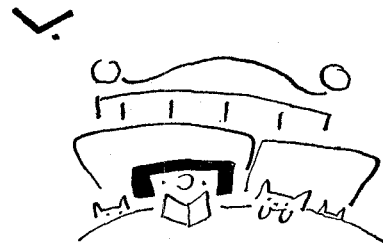
Fathers, Lovers, and Fiction

When a youngster of twenty-nine without a wrinkle to his name focuses on you from behind black-rimmed glasses and says thoughtfully, "I guess I'm an antiquarian by nature," as far as I am concerned it is time to leave the table. The party is but definitely over. As the young man of twenty-nine was named Richard J. Whalen and had backed up his statement with 200,000 words entitled *The Founding Father: The Story of Joseph P. Kennedy* (SR, Dec. 19, 1964), I kept my big trap shut and let him go on. "I mean I'd rather create a time than puff and pant alongside of the younger Kennedys. Anyway, the world did not need another book about the Kennedy boys, but it did seem to me that there was a need for some understanding of the first and indispensable Kennedy."

"The book began in the summer of 1962 when I joined *Fortune* magazine. Came there from the *Wall Street Journal*. The magazine wanted a political piece on JFK's promise and performance. As the youngest and newest staff member, maybe they figured it would cost less to assign me to the project instead of anyone else. Anyway, I got it. A boy looking at an emperor. Then I was yanked off it and switched to Joe Kennedy. We had a piece on him in our files from 1937. This became the source of our plea to JFK for cooperation on this updated look at his father. Pierre Salinger sent us word to wait awhile because of Joe's stroke. We decided to go ahead and do the piece from the outside. It was too good a story to drop."

"I worked three and a half months with two researchers. The final article, which I finished on Election Day 1962, ran to 13,000 words. The piece appeared in January 1963, and the issue, at \$1.25 a throw, was a sellout. I got calls from about a dozen publishers about doing a book. Since I had material for twice as much as I had written and since my research work had opened some doors to me, I thought okay, I'd do the book."

Except for the briefest of meetings with Bobby Kennedy in the Rackets Committee office in the basement of the Senate Office Building in 1958 and being a passenger, in 1957, on a commercial flight from New York to Richmond which Senator John F. Kennedy boarded, Richard Whalen has had no contact with the family he has "lived with" since 1962.



Was there anything beyond the 200,000 words he had already written on Joseph P. Kennedy that he might care to offer? The young antiquarian thought about it. "I admire him but I wouldn't want to be his son."

If you are at all concerned about your wife's figure, skip the candy this Valentine's Day and get her a copy of the very unusual *Love*, illustrated and designed by Vanni (Braziller, \$5). Even if you don't care about her figure or if it is too late to save it, or you are not married (I think that covers all possibilities), still take a look at *Love*, which will be released on February 14. You may recognize the story as one you've heard before but I doubt if you have ever seen a more impressive example of the printer's art.

On April 15, 1965, Farrar, Straus & Giroux will publish *In Search of Bisco*, by Erskine Caldwell. On June 15, 1964, they published his *Around About America*. I spoke with him—and his wife—sometime between books, if a sixty-one-year-old man with forty-five books to his credit can ever be described as between books.

Erskine Caldwell is built along the fullback lines of that guy who is always galloping across Marlboro country. He has a reddish crew cut and blue eyes set in a ruddy complexion. Though my tin ear didn't catch it, he said he still retained traces of his birthplace, Coweta County, Georgia, in his speech.

Usually when you interview an author there is a definite book to be discussed. In Erskine Caldwell's case there were two possibilities. I asked what book he chose to talk about. "I've done forty-five books. Why should I single one out?"

So I chose *In Search of Bisco*. "It's a personal reminiscence of life in the South of the past fifty years. Bisco was my Negro playmate when we were both in our early ages years ago in Georgia. I don't know any more of his name than