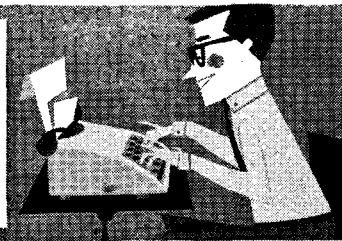


Top of My Head



Those That Will Not See

I'M BECOMING disenchanted with those "blind items" that appear in gossip columns that go something like: "Which make of elegant foreign car was parked in front of what TV producer's apartment with which ignition keys at ready, along with a note in what bucket seat from what famous TV star thanking the producer for getting which TV show on what network?"

Hours were spent attempting to unravel the snarls of this badly composed arcana, wondering which adjective modified what pronoun in this syntectic conglomeration of profligate verbiage.

Mostly I would lie awake nights wondering which make of elegant foreign car it was.

Of course the above example is something that could never have happened. Television programs, we like to think, could never get on a mass medium in that shoddy manner. But *TV Guide* a few weeks ago had some charming ex-

amples in a documented article in depth written by Neil Hickey and Joseph Finnigan. It demonstrated the adventure and romance and fancy finagling which are rife, as they say, on the colorful sward of the cobaltic marketplace.

One of the programs they researched was *Our Man Higgins*, a 1962 show starring Stanley Holloway. The man from the Hollywood studio had been fruitlessly trying to sell the show to ABC. He came to New York and phoned Oliver Treyz, then president of the network. Mr. Treyz was abrupt.

"Look, John," he interrupted impatiently, "we've been through all this. I don't have time to discuss it further. I'm in a hurry to catch a train to Washington." He hung up.

Our studio man went to Penn Station and bought a ticket. "As the train pulled out he began walking through looking for his prey. Finally in the parlor car he spotted not only Mr. Treyz but also two

other ABC executives. He crept up behind them, snapped to attention, and clicked his heels. The trio turned to study him. He saluted briskly and said: 'Higgins reporting, sir.'"

Well, everybody laughed uproariously and decided that a man "who goes to such incredible lengths deserves to be listened to." And they bought the show. One wonders whether that trip was necessary. The show lasted but one brief season, after which it was dropped because of its low rating. Which brings us once again, and in conclusion, to my final stand on the rating system.

(Oh, there he goes again with those ratings. But stay tuned. There's a poignant story coming up.)

The television season has just begun. Is it possible for network executives to be a little more patient and tolerant with the new programs? Do one or two low Nielsen ratings early in the season justify a program's demise? Is a show with intrinsic merit to be consigned to the junkheap simply because 1,130 anonymous Nielsen viewers point thumbs down? Is this the ultimate and final yardstick? I hope not.

Perhaps this story will support my hopes. It appeared in the *New Haven Journal-Courier* under an AP credit and somehow did not run in any New York newspaper. The date is August 9, 1965. This is not one of those vague stories mentioned earlier. It has names, places and direct quotes.

In Bridgeport, Connecticut, lives a young man named Edward Lemoine, age thirty-one. He was contacted by telephone by the A. C. Nielsen company.

"They asked me," he said, "if I had a television set. I said yes I have. They asked me if it was a color set. I said no."

He was asked if he would fill out some forms for the A. C. Nielsen company indicating which programs he tuned in on his television set. He agreed and they sent him the forms. He did this for Nielsen in February and July of this year and it was a nonpaying job.

Mr. Lemoine's preferences ran to news programs and documentaries. "I don't enjoy situation comedies," he said.

They had asked if he had a television set and they asked if it was in color. One question they didn't ask. And he didn't volunteer the information that his television set had no picture tube.

Because, you see, Mr. Lemoine, from the age of seven, has been blind.

In the interview in the *Journal-Courier* Mr. Lemoine was asked what he thought of being asked to be a judge of television programs.

And Mr. Lemoine, bless him, replied: "I thought it was rather funny."

The only hope is that network vice presidents will share Mr. Lemoine's sense of fun. "None so blind as those that will not see." —GOODMAN ACE.

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Does Anyone Know What Creative Writing Is?

One man's search among the incompetents, the charlatans, and the adherents of Congressionese and educationese for writing that does its job

By J. DONALD ADAMS

THERE IS no more abused term in literary parlance than the phrase "creative writing." I have not been able to determine just when its use became common, but certainly it has been widely employed for at least the past thirty years. Colleges the country over have courses in "creative writing," and summer schools featuring courses in "creative writing" multiply like rabbits, but instead of feeding on lettuce leaves, they grow fat on the consumption of theories about what constitutes poetry and other theories about the practice of fiction, both in the novel and the short story. Here and there courses in playwriting are offered. So much for one side of the picture I mean to set forth.

For there is a reverse side, and it is not a pretty one; in fact, I find it disturbing. The truth is that, with notable exceptions, chief among them our Quaker and Roman Catholic schools and colleges, the fundamentals of the ordinary skill (let alone the art) of putting words together is ignored. The shade of John Dewey, who wrote some of the muddiest prose concocted this side of Washington, D.C., aided and abetted by his too zealous disciples, darkens the prospect we are viewing.

The results have been dire. Suppose we briefly examine some of them. One, every publishing house annually receives a host of manuscripts from aspiring novelists and poets who are unable to construct a simple English sentence, who consider punctuation unnecessary and a tiresome holdover from preceding centuries that is not worth the trouble to master. In a recent TV interview Alfred A. Knopf, currently celebrating fifty

years of distinguished publishing, reported that his lawyer friends complain constantly of their difficulty in finding, among the law school graduates they employ, a sufficient number capable of writing a brief that clearly states the writer's meaning. Asked if he looked for notable prose in the manuscripts submitted to his house, Mr. Knopf said he had long since abandoned any such expectation, and is now satisfied if the writer is able to convey information, tell a coherent story, communicate a mood, or express a thought in terms within the grasp of the average intelligent reader.

WHAT a sorry spectacle! The indictment of American educational practice is implicit, and shameful to behold. To amplify the picture, some of the editors in our leading publishing houses are apparently as ignorant of the fundamentals of good English as the writers over whose copy they labor. If you think this an unfounded assertion, open at random, as I often do, a batch of newly hatched books, particularly those known as "creative writing," and read a few pages carefully. Often they would not have passed muster by the nineteenth-century schoolmarm of the little red schoolhouse enshrined in American memory, let alone the teachers in almost any contemporary British or European grade school. For one Maxwell Perkins, to name the already classic example of a literate book editor, there are at least two or three men or women holding editorial posts who should be sent to night school. Those who exhibit some knowledge of and regard for good English are not unlikely the beneficiaries of the training provided by some exacting newspaper editor who himself had the benefit of an instructor free of hifalutin theories. Such was the foundation of the style created by the man who, at his best, wrote the tautest, most suggestive prose of any novelist or short story writer of his gen-

eration. I refer, of course, to Hemingway, who, before he was cold in his grave, suffered jealous and sneering attacks by piddling little writers unworthy to lick his boots.

My concern here, however, is not so much with the deficiencies I have been describing as with the narrow application of the term "creative writing." Although it is true that some of the worst abuses of the English tongue are to be found among such writers of nonfiction as sociologists, engineers, philosophers, and psychologists, not to mention the mayhem committed by legislators, Cabinet officers, and bureaucrats (and now and then a President), the fact remains that there are other writers of nonfiction whose product is far more creative in the true meaning of the word than much of our current fiction and poetry.

Suppose we ask ourselves first what a piece of creative writing is, or rather what it is not. Should we extend the term to include those multitudinous efforts in fictional form to purge the writer's memory of an unhappy childhood? Are they any more creative than the rambling recollections of a disturbed patient lying on the psychiatrist's couch? It may be true, as Proust maintained, that nearly all that is worthwhile in human culture we owe to neurotics, but the debt is evident only when the neurotic happens also to be an artist.

Thomas Wolfe (not to be confused with the current Tom Wolfe of the *New York Herald Tribune*, although they have much in common through their addiction to a diarrhea of words) affords a prime example of the neurotic who is only a half-baked artist. Wolfe, whom I knew and liked, having first met him in one of his less egomaniac moods (indeed, in a humble one), could not possibly have achieved the reputation he did had it not been for the unselfish efforts of two literate book editors—Max Perkins and Edward Aswell. Without them, he would

J. Donald Adams was editor of the *New York Times Book Review* from 1925 to 1943, and a contributing editor from 1943 until his retirement last November.