

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

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have been lost, sunk, and forgotten. As it is, he currently goes unread except by those as immature as he at the height of his fame. I doubt that his work will last, except as an interesting symptom of the period in which he lived.

Among the American novelists who immediately preceded him, one can find ample support for Proust's contention. Hemingway, chief luminary of what we now look upon as the Dazzling (and Dazzled) Twenties, was obviously a very neurotic man; so, too, were Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis and Scott Fitzgerald. So, too, was our greatest poet, Robert Frost, in spite of his private air-conditioning system. Elizabeth Maddox Roberts, who in *The Time of Man* wrote the finest folk epic in American fiction, as well as one of our best historical novels in *The Great Meadow*, and one of our most moving short stories in *The Sacrifice of the Maidens*, was a painfully neurotic woman, as is plainly evident in certain of her other books. Going still farther back, surely Henry James cannot be described temperamentally as anything but neurotic, or Melville either, or Poe.

It is the plodding craftsmen, those whose work is seldom winged for higher flights, like Longfellow and Howells, who make their way serenely through life. For it is the fate of the creative giants to suffer the tortures of the

damned as well as the transportations of ecstasy and insight; Tolstoy, of course, and before him Shakespeare, are proof enough. Tolstoy's self-torturings are evident in his fully documented life, as well as in his autobiography, *What Is Art?*, and *The Kreutzer Sonata*; in Shakespeare's case, we have only the evidence provided by the sonnets and the plays. One could assemble a similar list among the painters and the composers, but I shall not attempt that here.

VERY well—the great creative writer is likely to be, and ordinarily is, neurotic by temperament, subject more intensely than most people to moods and to preoccupation with his own ego. Think of Dickens, slowly committing suicide, lashed on by his thirst for applause and the craving for appeasement from his troubled conscience over his extramarital love affair, driving himself by his dramatized readings into repeated states of physical collapse. Think of Rimbaud and Baudelaire, think of Gauguin and Van Gogh, or, more recently, of Jackson Pollock. It is the men with tongue in cheek, like Frost and Picasso, who maintain the ability to laugh at themselves as well as at the world, who keep their creative energy alive many years longer than other artists less happily endowed.

Let's get back into what was intended to be the mainstream of this article. I

resent deeply the implication now conveyed by the term "creative writing" that only novelists, short story writers, and dramatists actually create. It is one of the falsest assumptions ever made in literary history. If Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* is not a great piece of creative writing, I am willing to repeat my sometimes painful education. If William James's *Principles of Psychology* and his *Varieties of Religious Experience* are not the equal of his brother Henry's best work in true creativeness, may I spend my days in the hereafter reading interminably in the pages of the *Congressional Record*.

Can you name me more creative books than Parkman's histories or, contemporaneously, Bruce Catton's vividly evoking pictures of this nation's most searing experience? What about Thucydides, or even old pull-your-leg Herodotus, who, in writing about the Egyptians, reported one of the most constructive approaches to the solving of human problems of which I have knowledge. The Egyptians, he tells us, first debated affairs of state when drunk; that happy condition produced many imaginative and prescient proposals. The next day in a state of complete sobriety, these proposals were reconsidered and properly acted upon. What a priceless and, up to now, discarded gift to the legislatures of the free world!

The good biographers and autobiographers (witness Sir Osbert Sitwell's splendid re-creation of the Edwardian world), the imaginative as well as scholarly historians, the essayists of the caliber of Lamb and Hazlitt, of Thurber and E. B. White, the science writers like Rachel Carson in *The Sea Around Us*, are more truly creative than the authors of too many blockbuster novels for which you must now pay an exorbitant price, unless you wait for their reappearance in the paperbacks.

THE gap in quality that distinguishes the best nonfiction from the bulk of our current fiction and poetry—not to mention the deplorable depths to which the theater has sunk, both off-Broadway and on, is one that impresses me more deeply with each passing year. I am all for an avant-garde if it has anything to say, but if there is any drearier writing than is to be found in today's little magazines (once so interesting and fertilizing) which concentrate on short stories and poetry and, dreariest of all, criticism, I don't know where to look for it, except in the pages of such overtouted quarterlies as the *Partisan Review* and the *Kenyon Review*. Must I listen to little Allen Ginsburg yapping or bleating his *Howl*? Must I wallow with Samuel Beckett while he crawls face down through the mud, to what purpose I cannot conceive? Life is too short and potentially too



"Where are the squares going this year?"

glorious to waste the precious, unrecoverable days in so footless a manner.

Anyone who has lived as long as I have should know that man, generically speaking, is a silly creature who shows little indication of arriving, as a species, at emotional and rational maturity. He seems stubbornly determined to cook his own goose, though gifted with brains far superior to those of the extinct creatures that preceded him. The hell of the matter is that occasionally he rises spiritually, as well as physically, to incredible heights. His potentialities are so great that one feels ashamed, as I sometimes do, for having lost so much of my faith in him. Nevertheless, I cling to the remnant. I am one of those who can pray only when they are happy—never when my feet and heart are heavy, and I pray every day now that he may be delivered from the threats that encompass him on every side.

IT IS one of my deepest convictions that writers can play a part in that deliverance, but few of them are doing so today. In a recent article in this magazine I named some of those who seem to me to be making that effort. I wish they were more numerous, and I think their number may be increased if we can rid ourselves of the mistaken notion that "creative writing" is limited to novelists, poets, and playwrights. There is an occasional new novel that I read with admiration and respect; there is an occasional new poem that does something to the pit of my stomach, but these are few and far between.

I like to remember Coleridge's definitions of prose and poetry: prose, words in their best order; poetry, the best words in their best order. They are requirements rarely met today, and more often in nonfiction than in what is known as "creative writing." I like, too, his assertion that a poem is the better for not being completely understood, in support of which Walter de la Mare's "The Listeners" has long seemed to me the perfect example. Many of Frost's poems are similarly successful. But too many contemporary versifiers (if they are entitled even to that denigrating term) feel themselves licensed to be not understood at all.

Looking back on what I have written, I seem not to have explicitly told exactly what I think creative writing is. How briefly can I do so? Could we not say that a piece of creative writing is one that creates in the mind of the reader the picture it seeks to convey, the thought or mood it seeks to communicate, and that in so doing it widens or intensifies the sensory or rational awareness of the reader? And if such is the case, is not the term "creative writing," as currently used, insufficiently inclusive?

They Never Left Texas

By FRANK H. WARDLAW

THEY WERE an incomparable trio of writers, Roy Bedichek, Walter Prescott Webb, and J. Frank Dobie, who used to gather for long evenings around the fire at Paisano, Dobie's beloved ranch in the hill country northwest of Austin, Texas. There they would wrangle interminably about all sorts of things—religion, politics, education, history, literature, grass, the habits of wild animals and cattle—everything under the sun and beyond it. They were completely different, these three friends, and yet they held certain important things in common that are the measure of their corporate legacy—identity with the land and the need to live close to it, wide-ranging minds that refused to be corralled with the boundaries of either time or of space, and complete and fearless dedication to intellectual freedom. They were natural men, earth men, full men, free men.

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Perhaps they were anachronisms in modern America—writers whose strength came from the soil and from communication with the great minds of past ages, men never concerned with literary merchandise or current fashions in thought. It is a happy circumstance that the Southwest's three great regionalists should also have been the region's greatest foes of narrowness and provincialism.

"I have never had any idea of writing about my section of the country merely as a patriotic duty," Dobie said in the preface to his *Life and Literature in the Southwest*. "I would interpret it because I love it, because it interests me, talks to me, appeals to my imagination, warms my emotions." And Roy Bedichek had a theory that the deeper down into the earth a plant sinks its roots, the richer its fruit will be. These three men had very deep roots.

ALL literate Americans know Frank Dobie's name, although not all of them appreciate him; he would be meaningless to the denatured, the urbanized, the

