

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## The Painter Case

JOHN CIARDI's column on "Iowa: the Painter Case" [SR, Mar 26] is understandably indignant, but as an ex-Iowan with many roots still deep in the corn country, I must protest his derogatory use of such terms as "yokel virtues," "clod-godliness," etc., as being as provincial as the decision he derides. He must realize that this decision actually stirred up more righteous indignation in Iowa than he has been able to stir up at his desk. Let us castigate the decision, and hence the deciders, but not damn the whole Middle West from Madison Avenue. Middle Westerners are as interested in seeing justice done to all peoples as any group I have known or lived among, and more so than many.

MRS. E. STEWART GRIFFITH.

Dewitt, N.Y.

It is always gratifying when someone from the outside world publicly recognizes the milieu we are in here in Iowa. Some of us were as shocked by the Painter case as was John Ciardi.

JOHN B. TAM.

Des Moines, Iowa

ON THE BASIS OF ONE newspaper story, Mr. Ciardi delivered four columns of invective and vituperation against a judge, a consulting psychologist, Iowa, and rural folk in general. Since I have only evidence from newspaper reports of the case in question I am unwilling to judge the wisdom of the court's decision.

I am willing, however, to make some judgments about Mr. Ciardi. He is intemperate. He makes judgments with insufficient evidence. He engages in name-calling instead of reason.

DON C. CHARLES.

Ames, Iowa

GOOD FOR JOHN CIARDI for his article castigating the Iowa Supreme Court in its ruling on the Painter case.

I can only hope that someone will see that this case is heard by the U.S. Supreme Court. It is hard to see how individual rights could be more thoroughly infringed upon than they have been by this decision.

CAROLYN LIPETZ.

Carlisle, Mass.

JOHN CIARDI ignored these facts: 1) that Mr. Painter refused to visit his son in some eighteen months; 2) that he three times promised to visit and never showed up (to a five-year-old this can be pretty disappointing); 3) that he cared so little for Mark that he refused to help his own stepmother financially to help keep Mark near him in California, and also refused to contribute support money to the Bannisters—this while he was blowing \$4,300 of his wife's stock and bonds on more "fun" things; and 4) that Mark has said a number of times in this whole affair that he does not want to go live with his father.

Certainly the language of the Iowa



"Mr. Pennington is sulking right now. Could you call back later?"

Court is open to question. But Mr. Ciardi focused on the peripheral issue, not on the main question: Why damage the boy to save his father's capricious ego?

JAMES R. ROBERTS.

Schenectady, N.Y.

JOHN CIARDI'S COLUMN on the Painter case was an excellent one. Having just recently moved to Iowa from Ann Arbor, Michigan, I have read only Iowa press reports of the case and spoken only to fellow Iowans about it, and almost everyone has been in agreement with the court's present decision. Even I had felt somehow that little Mark would be better cared for by his grandparents. Your article showed me how wrong I was simply by pointing out that loving grandparents would surely have kept the father's memory alive in the young boy.

What I want to point out is that Mr. Painter's life has been so similar to mine and my husband's. While in various graduate schools our jobs often changed and I am certain my parents, while understanding on the whole, would often wonder when we were going to settle down with our children. (We once lived in a lovely unpainted country home with outdoor plumbing in Indiana.)

Thank you again for your fine article; but please—Iowa is not all corn and livestock.

ALICE JAMOSKY.

Cedar Falls, Iowa

IT WOULD NEVER OCCUR to most people to brand New Yorkers hayseeds because of their legislature's sanctimonious attitude toward divorce reform or to call Connecticut residents rubes because their courts for years upheld the most offensive sort of birth-control laws. Yet a single decision by

an Iowa court led Mr. Ciardi to use language much less temperate than that of the court itself; moreover, his assumption of statewide support for the decision is belied even by the newspaper from which he got his information. The Des Moines *Sunday Register* ran a strongly worded editorial attacking it. Any investigation into public opinion in the state would have revealed the widespread opposition.

JOHN F. SHELLEY.

Cambridge, Mass.

FERVENT THANKS to John Ciardi for expressing so well the horror that many of us feel about the surrealistic doings out in Iowa. . . .

MRS. BARBARA ANN ZANI.

Newton, Mass.

I HAVE NEVER WROTE to a magazine before but since Mr. Ciardi wrote about the Painter case I want to tell you about Iowa people what you dont unerstan.

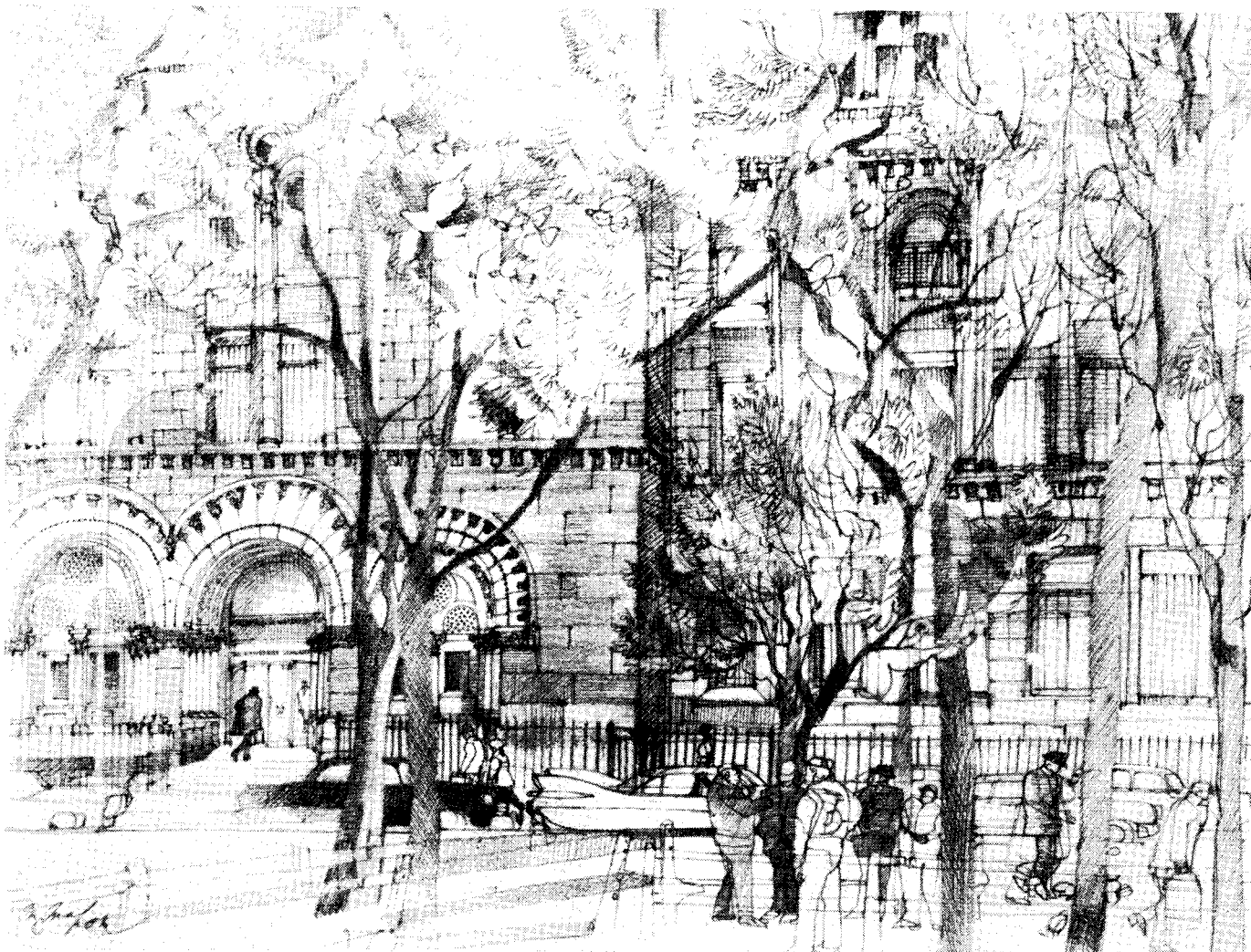
But first I want to tell you how we shur apreesheat the cultur and originul things that comes from New York. I mean TV almost as good as them Hollywood movies. So we reely no that New York and other citys is grate for thinking up things.

Now I dont no to much about San Francisco. My cusin moved to L.A. ten years ago but she dont rite much eksept when she has went to the Iowa picnic they hold out there. But it is a city and we no about New York. Which is a city too. We have got to pertek are young uns from all the bad things in a city.

Well I got to go. My younguns is outside sloppin the hogs and choppin wood fer the cook stove. I got to get em in cuz I'm afeerd the Injuns is cumin agin.

MRS. EDWIN H. MADSEN.

Cedar Falls, Iowa



Newberry Library, Chicago

## This Way to the Time Machine

In a library the time is seldom now. Outside, the year is 1966; inside, it may be 1066 or 2066. The past never ceases to be pertinent because even the most contemporary problems are influenced by ancient cultural patterns. As for the future, it is being shaped at this moment by readers of books who are encountering new ideas and

creating new theories. Rand McNally is a participant in this making of the future. By publishing books, maps, atlases, and globes and by manufacturing books of all kinds for other publishers in our extensive printing and binding plants, we help keep the library shelves filled and the time machine running.



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# Books

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## LITERARY HORIZONS

### Something Salvaged for the Future

A YEAR or two ago a friend of mine, a teacher of Latin not given to reckless praise of contemporary fiction, wrote to me that he had just finished a novel of the sea, Gwyn Griffin's *Master of This Vessel*, that seemed to him "the best Conradian novel I have read since Conrad." He was enthusiastic enough to send me a copy of the book, and in time I read it and agreed. Griffin has not only Conrad's powers of description—his cyclone is tremendous—but also some of his awareness of the deeper recesses of personality.

Griffin's new novel, *A Last Lamp Burning* (Putnam, \$6.95), a story of Naples a decade or so after the close of the Second World War, may not be quite so impressive as *Master* but it is very good. It has a fine opening sentence: "In the end they brought the coffin down the fire escape." The coffin contains the remains of Ercole Sanbren-edetto, a wealthy man, a former Neapolitan, who has been living alone on the Adriatic coast. Driver of the hearse is sixteen-year-old Gennaro, grandson of L.P. Quong, a Chinese undertaker who has been paralyzed by a stroke. On the way back to Naples Gennaro gets into trouble with the police, and there are other happenings that turn out to be important as the story develops.

Many of the characters are residents of a slum tenement owned by the deceased. There is Quong, with whom Gennaro lives and to whom he gives devoted care. There is Crocifissa, an old and poor storekeeper, who is fond of Gennaro. There is Renato, a young and innocent Communist, and there is pregnant Iole, whose husband is serving a long prison term. Among the characters who do not live in the slum are a teacher, the proprietor of a restaurant, a powerful industrialist, and a high official of the police department.

Then there is the once noble Colavolpe family: "So there, at last, they all were—a bestially poor, neurosis-ridden

family engaged in killing each other off in psychological warfare. Four old women, three of them completely penniless and only one of whom, Concezio's mother, had never been married. A sly, drunken, equally penniless old man—Tarquinio; the mutilated hero, his dead brother's sluttish wife, her wretched little son and—high above them all, shut away in a single room at the top of the house—an ancient, paralyzed, blind old creature whose face had long ago become so fearful with the ravages of his disease that he habitually wore a cloth mask." Out of this nasty gang, one half-way decent person has emerged, Galo, and he has been done in by his relatives before the book ends.

By the time all these characters have been introduced, Griffin has announced six or seven related themes, and now these are developed at a pace that constantly accelerates, until the reader is almost breathless. Although he writes calmly, Griffin is effective in the description of violence, of which there is no small amount in the latter part of the book. The climax, with a riot, a fire, and a storm, is almost as tempestuous as the cyclone in *Master of This Vessel*.

Much of the power of this novel results from Griffin's success in evoking the atmosphere of Naples, particularly the Piazza Vittime Civili di Guerra: "The blotched, worn housefronts were sloughing their skin of stucco leprously in the sticky heat, the flagstones were scattered with torn paper and excrement, both animal and human, the public urinal, as so often, was blocked and surrounded by a viscous pool of spreading filth. Flies and children swirled in knots which broke apart, fanned out and came together again; many of the children wore nothing but tattered swimsuits and their bare feet were black and crusted with dirt."

The style is polished and often epigrammatic. Commendatore De Santis, a great industrialist, brings a pair of

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Americans to see the Colavolpe home. "De Santis," Griffin writes, "had acquired an automatic habit of complimenting Americans on all occasions. In his mind they resembled a herd of huge, graceless cows who would consume any amount of flattery fed to them and give off gallons of golden milk as a result. It was a slightly outdated view but then Commendatore De Santis was an elderly, rich and powerful man; he did not change his views easily." Griffin says of one of the guests: "Colonel Forth prided himself on being all things to all men and had therefore, and far too early in his career, become nothing much to anybody." The house, he observes, had been built "without any attempt at domestic comfort, a concept which was totally un-