

# Book Forum

## Letters from Readers

where unadulterated justice reigns. Our national perfectionism, our pre-occupation, not with living but with "progress," has for a long time corroded our sense of tradition, of institutions, and of continuity. It has become a national "Portnoy's Complaint."

This has been symptomized in our educational system by the movement from narrative history, from the study of constitutions and institutions, to the study of history as a series of Excedrin Headaches. As "history" has become "social studies" more and more Americans have come to believe that history consists not of the growth of institutions and communities—or even of events—but rather of "problems" and "issues." It is not surprising, then, that the guide-volumes to this set call themselves "Great Issues in American Life."

The New England Puritans—instead of being a people who lived by their lights, who had a respectable cluster of faiths, and whose way of looking at the world is worth recapturing—become Excedrin Headache No. 1: a people primitively preoccupied with the "issue" of tolerance and intolerance, with civil rights for minorities, coping constantly with "anti-democratic" proto-fascists. What they really believed, and the institutions they lived by, drop out of the picture. The whole continent throughout all our history somehow becomes nothing but a vast Debating Society.

A similar bias appears even in the more recent topics. Take, for example, the growth of modern American industry. Everybody knows that the rise  
(Continued on page 34)

### Appreciation

I WISH TO EXPRESS my appreciation to you for your kindness in devoting so much space to the review of my book, *Epistle to the Babylonians* [SR, June 21].

I am grateful to the reviewer, Milton Konvitz, for quoting enough from the book and giving an accurate enough summation of its theme for the reader to determine for himself pretty much what it is all about. The nature of his criticism was also extremely helpful, by constituting in itself an addendum of evidence supportive of a couple of the book's major propositions.

CHARLES L. FONTENAY,  
Nashville, Tenn.

### Intemperance

DURING THE YEARS Harry Golden has written some amusing articles as well as some timely social comment that bespoke insight and courage. Yet it would need no literary Mafia, Jewish or not, to conclude that *The Right Time* [SR, July 5] reveals not only a second-rate talent but a tawdry sense of values.

Mr. Golden's intemperate letter [SR, July 19] prompts the suggestion that his next book carry the title *Enough Already*.  
GERALD OCHBERG,  
Danbury, Conn.

THE PERSONAL RAGE in Mr. Milch's review of Harry Golden's book was embarrassing.

Wouldn't it be funny if, after all the tumult and shouting dies down, it were the man who wrote *Mr. Kennedy and the Negroes* who was honored and remembered, yea, and consulted?

MARY BROSIUS,  
Pittsburgh, Pa.

HARRY GOLDEN'S ANGUISHED REACTION to the review by Robert J. Milch of his latest published trivia is good for a belly laugh.

S. R. CHESLOCK,  
Morganton, N.C.

### Crane Misrepresented?

NO ONE MORE THAN I, I think, respects Louis Untermeyer for his remarkably perceptive anthologies of modern poetry, begun in 1919 with an artistic geiger counter at work in finding true quality a generation ahead of popular taste.

However, his article "Poet Stranded on a Bridge" [SR, July 19] twists the facts and presents many misstatements of fact.

Crane had written and published a number of poems before the *Dial* publication Mr. Untermeyer refers to, and I doubt if at that time anyone had heard of Wallace Stevens, of whose work Crane's was supposed to contain "faint echoes." Damn fine chicken that egg hatched!

Crane, it is true, had many advantages

that many writers of his time, such as Maxwell Bodenheim, did not; but they shrink to nothingness in comparison with what the no-poets of today have. He could live on his father so long as he sold candy in his father's drugstores. He got money from Otto Kahn (who even subsidized chorus girls). He got a Guggenheim grant that paid for very little "drink and dissipation." It also paid for poems in the "Island Sheaf" series that will go down in American literary history.

It does not matter on the surface what Hart Crane seemed to be; it is what he really was and did that matters.

WILLIAM BITTNER,  
Wolfville, Nova Scotia

### Ever Hear of Xerox?

THE REVIEW OF *The Economy of Cities* [SR, July 5] faulted Rochester, N.Y., as a "company town." Without being a spokesman for Eastman Kodak Co., and without citing some of their "liberal" policies, I need only cite a few points that compromise the argument.

Giant corporations have moved in, seeing creative "breakaways" that Eastman supposedly countermanded. These include General Dynamics, who liked Stromberg-Carlson's electronic ingenuity; Burroughs Corporation, who liked Todd's protograph, etc.; 3-M and Revere Camera, the latter noting Wollensak's introduction of the high-speed camera; Du Pont; General Motors; General Foods; etc., etc. These giants should shake up the "company town." (Is Bell & Howell a "giant"?)

Rochester plants and manpower are uniquely high-skilled and technical—the type for creative "breakaways." They offer "heavy industry" a shortage of unskilled labor. Is that uncreative?

Rochester, in addition, dominates the men's clothing field—at least qualitatively. (Bond Clothes, Fashion Park, Hickey-Freeman, Michaels Stern, Timely, etc. are not Eastman satellites.)

Ever hear of IBM—spawned by this "company town"? Taylor Instrument Co. and General Railway Signal Corp. also lead in electronic, automated controls, etc.

EVER HEAR OF XEROX? . . .

DE MILLE L. WALLACE,  
Largo, Fla.

### Coveted Captions

PLEASE, PLEASE RETURN to the captions you had at the beginning of your book reviews!

RICHARD GERBER,  
Great Neck, N.Y.

### Too Neat

I FIND THE NEW HEADINGS much too neat and impersonal! I miss the brief comments before the reviews, also.

MRS. ALVIN L. ROSS,  
Omaha, Neb.

### WIT TWISTER #124

Edited by ARTHUR SWAN

*The object of the game is to complete the poem by thinking of one word whose letters, when rearranged, will yield the appropriate word for each series of blanks. Each dash within a blank corresponds to a letter of the word.*

The leaders turn \_ \_ \_ \_ \_  
and whisper low.  
Their \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ respond so  
humbly, yet we know  
That the \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ which  
their masters spout  
Were by these underlings first  
reasoned out.

—A. S.

(Answer on page 52)

# The Publishing Scene

David Dempsey

"I WISH SOMEONE WOULD WRITE a book describing a thousand ways to amuse a child," a taxi driver once remarked to Cass Canfield of Harper & Row. In his book of reminiscences, *The Publishing Experience* (University of Pennsylvania Press, \$5), Canfield notes that in due course Harper published 838 *Ways to Amuse a Child*, by June Johnson. He does not explain what became of the other 142 possible means of distraction—was Miss Johnson simply anticipating television?—but he does uncork a lot of old bottles in this little volume, and anyone who is curious about publishing before it went pornographic will be rewarded by Mr. Canfield's account of forty-five years in the business. The book consists of two lectures he gave at the University of Pennsylvania as recipient of the A.S.W. Rosenbach Fellowship in Bibliography.

Canfield is the last of the old-time editors. He joined Harper & Brothers in 1924, came up through the ranks, earned a seat on the board of directors and was made chairman of *Harper's* magazine. Instead of becoming a senior citizen when he reached retirement age, Canfield stepped down to senior editor. His career was spent entirely with one publisher, and the Harper list reflects Canfield's personal tastes in literature, his diplomatic skill in finding and working with authors, and even his mistakes, which sometimes were fortunate.

As he points out in "The Real and the Ideal Editor," a publishing house can indeed survive its mistakes, but not too many of them. Harper's once asked James Harvey Robinson, the historian, to read a long, turgidly written book then making a stir in Europe: Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*. Robinson admired the work, but advised against publishing it because he thought it too difficult for the general reader. It would not sell, he added. Harper's followed his advice, and *Decline* was published elsewhere. "The editor was right in accepting the expert's opinion on the value of the manuscript but should have ignored his views about salability," Canfield remarks.

As a young man representing Harper's in London, Canfield sought out J. B. Priestley on the strength of a book of essays Priestley had published in England. To Canfield's surprise, the British author insisted on selling him a novel, sight unseen. What's more, he wanted an advance. It was axiomatic

in those innocent days that unknown writers almost never got an advance on unread manuscripts, but both Priestley and Canfield had over-indulged themselves somewhat in a London tavern, and when the young editor staggered out he had bought, for a few hundred pounds, the American rights to *The Good Companions*. Priestley has been a Harper author ever since.

Continuity in publishing, as Canfield knew it, is becoming rarer. Editors change jobs oftener, authors change publishers. As the business "goes public," as firms are merged and cannibalized, the editor may be the only personal element remaining. A problem authors have today—and one reason they play so much hopscotch among publishers—is that editors are so frequently shot out from under them.

Another is the competition for manuscripts, which leads authors to contract for books they haven't written and assume risks they might have avoided in more leisurely times. Graham Watson, a representative of the Curtis Brown literary agency in London, points out in a letter to *Publishers' Weekly* that such contracts are easily voided by a clause specifying that the manuscript "must be in a form and content satisfactory to the publisher." He asks: "What is this word 'satisfactory'? 'Your ms. is not satisfactory because we have sacked your editor and don't want any of the books he commissioned'? 'Your book is not satisfactory because we commissioned it under the influence of three dry martinis and are now sober. . .?'"



Cass Canfield—"the last of the old-time editors."

Not as much speculative publishing of this kind took place when Canfield was helping to build the Harper list. There wasn't the back-up money from reprint houses, the table stakes were lower, and lunch hours were shorter. A good way to attract manuscripts was the literary prize, and Harper was one of the first publishers to do this systematically with its biennial \$10,000 Novel Contest (later upped to \$15,000). Harper quietly dropped the contest last year after the judges had twice failed to find a winner. Yet, out of twenty novels "discovered" in this way, three won Pulitzer Prizes and others launched their authors on successful careers.

Did most of the Harper winners stay with the firm? Or did the prize simply bring them to the attention of publishers willing to offer larger advances? Canfield doesn't say, but apparently some of these authors burgeoned under other imprints. I sampled half of the prizewinners, going back to 1927. Only a few remained with Harper. Several never published another novel. Undismayed, the firm (now Harper & Row) currently emphasizes work-in-progress grants channeled through the Harper-Saxon Fellowship, a \$7,500 award intended primarily for unpublished writers and given without fanfare whenever a promising, and incomplete, manuscript justifies financial backing.

(Parenthetically, the literary prize game is flourishing as never before. One hundred and eleven organizations, foundations, universities, societies, committees and publishers gave awards to an estimated 300 books last year in the adult field alone. Top money at present is two prizes of \$20,000 each by American Heritage for the right to bring out special editions of other publishers' books under the American Heritage imprint.)

A surprising revelation in Canfield's memoir is that half of Harper's adult trade books and 75 per cent of its juveniles are now sold to institutions. The institutional buyer has in some measure changed the character of American publishing, and since the U.S. Government (through Title II appropriations for libraries and schools) is the largest single customer for books, publishers have become unexpectedly dependent upon federal money for their continued growth. The big firms all maintain Washington offices to lobby for their share of the pie.

This is a vast change from the days when Canfield did business in taxicabs and taverns. *The Publishing Experience*, for all its wisdom, is less a guide to the future than a nostalgic glimpse at a vanished past.