

# 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.

## Fiction

### THE O'HARA GENERATION

by John O'Hara

Random House, 491, \$6.95

THIS LATEST COLLECTION OF O'HARA is long; the *Generation* spans a period of thirty-two years, from 1935-66, and contains twenty-two short stories. Although that represents less than 9 per cent of his total output of stories, it still runs to almost 500 pages. Add to that a page-long list of other credits—a whole shelfful of novels, novellas, plays, essays—and the industry of the man seems staggering. Moreover, it shows no sign of slackening off; after 1960, his editor proudly announces in the introduction, O'Hara produced ninety-six stories in five years.

One day, no doubt, some patient researcher will work it all out in terms of thousands of words per day. Meanwhile, for O'Hara's editor, the facts and figures speak for themselves of a lifetime's inspiration and devotion; he even invokes for comparison the startlingly incongruous figure of John Keats. I wish I could be so enthusiastic. But, alas, O'Hara's remorseless industry promotes in me the same depression that most Europeans feel when faced with the German "economic miracle": a mixture of awe, irritation and despair, which adds up to an overwhelming sense of injustice, a conviction, in the teeth of all the evidence, that in literature as in life hard work should *not* be enough. Yet there is O'Hara—professional, shrewd and vastly successful—to prove that it is.

Perhaps his secret is that he is essentially a writer without a style—which is a curious achievement considering his long triumph with *The New Yorker*. I do not simply mean that he has no rhetoric or elegance or Capote-like daintiness, all perfume and pastel shades, or any of those esthetic preoccupations the Marxists scornfully dismiss as formalism. Given a certain skill, which O'Hara undoubtedly has, it is easy enough to pile on the effects; that he has steadily refused to do so says much for his integrity as a writer. Just as good Communists spurn the seductions of formalism and stick to their plain, common-law wife, socialist realism, so O'Hara has been faithful, in his fashion, to his plain vision of plain America. He is our leading exponent of capitalist realism.

But his peculiar lack of style has less to do with disciplined renunciation than with a fundamental defect of the imagination. It means that you can read through 500 pages of his prose without forming any impression of the sensibility of the man who wrote it all.

The stuff is as indistinguishable and repeatable as the paper on which it is written.

His prose has neither character nor inner rhythms. Nor has it designs on the reader; it makes no demands. Perhaps this is why O'Hara's fiction is so popular. It simply goes on and on and on, unchangingly. "It is," someone once said, "like being in a straitjacket with the telephone ringing."

No doubt O'Hara would be delighted by this. He has always avoided guilt even by association with the high-brows, and takes pride in the fact that he never revises or reworks what he writes. He said of another collection of his stories, "The contents of this book came out of the author's typewriters (*zip-zip!* just like that)." *Zip-zip!*: the implication is that to work something over, to care about the precise weight and balance of every word and every sentence, is to cease to be a regular guy; it is to be numbered among the phonies and the arties. *Zip-zip!*: so much for Flaubert, Henry James, and all that crowd. *Zip-zip!*: so much for Pappa Hemingway, who worked like a dog over his prose. *Zip-zip!*: so much even for Dashiell Hammett, who wrote, in comparison, like Flaubert himself. In place of all that, O'Hara gives us inspiration of the people, by the people, for the people: *zip-zip!*

"Give the artist his due," says Evan Reese in "Mrs. Stratton of Oak Knoll," one of the stories included here, "and don't distort what the author wrote." It may be that formal excellence and even an artistic personality of his own have never interested O'Hara. He relies in their place on two strengths. First, he has a total recall of all the details of American life in the opening half of this century: the layout of a display window in a hardware shop in the Twenties, the workings of an old-fashioned overhead change trolley, the war decorations and women's dresses worn for a big night at the Lanthenengo Country Club in the early days of Prohibition, the goodies on the shelves of the neighborhood store when he was a child, the coachwork of a Pierce-Arrow, and the headlights of a Simplex. I would guess that a large proportion of his most faithful readers are middle-aged and up, and they go to his books to be reminded of how it was. So it doesn't matter that his eye for the details of America now is altogether less sharp and compelling. As a source of nostalgia he is irresistible.

His second strength is a remarkably good ear for speech, particularly for those subtle variations that denote class differences: the bosses may talk more or less alike but the Irish ser-

vants, Negro bellhops and rural handymen are all noticeably distinct. Perhaps this is another reason why O'Hara himself seems so elusive: he speaks only through others. Indeed, the narrative progresses mostly through talk. Everyone is always filling in everyone else on his or her background:

"What do you like about the doctor?"

"Well, he's a man. All man. He was married before and his wife died of leukemia, the year he went into private practice. Then he went into the Navy for three years, and after that he came back to Gibbsville, reopened his practice. When I got the flu I sent for him, having already been his patient once before. The abortion. He annoyed me by throwing in a piece of advice that I hadn't asked for. It was part medical and part moral. He said that a woman with my record of abortions ought to have periodic checkups for T.B., and I told him to mind his own business. We became friends, and lovers. He had other women, but I was it, he said."

"What makes either of you think you'll make a good doctor's wife?"

"You *are* trying to talk me out of it," she said.

It is accurate, serviceable, but also oddly inert, like a flashback in an old-style movie. Time and again, the conversation between O'Hara's characters is interrupted by hazy dissolves into time-past. It is a form of creative laziness, as though the characters were saving their author the effort of dramatizing necessary action. Perhaps this is why the talk seems so insensitive when compared with that of a real master:

"You wouldn't consider a good offer?" asked Gudrun.

"I think I've rejected several," said Ursula.

"Really!" Gudrun flushed dark—"But anything really worth while? Have you *really*?"

"A thousand a year, and an awfully nice man. I liked him awfully," said Ursula.

"Really! But weren't you fearfully tempted?"

"In the abstract but not in the concrete," said Ursula. "When it comes to the point, one isn't even tempted—oh, if I were tempted, I'd marry like a shot. I'm only tempted *not* to." The faces of both sisters suddenly lit up with amusement.

"Isn't it an amazing thing," cried Gudrun, "how strong the temptation is, not to!" They both laughed, looking at each other. In their hearts they were frightened.

That is from *Women in Love*. I quote it not to prove that Lawrence is better than O'Hara (who's arguing?) but simply to show that the novel has a dimension which a play or movie-script lacks: it can shift continually