

FINE PRINT

Two Blue-Pencil Geniuses

by Doris Grumbach

"A book must be done according to the writer's conception of it as nearly as perfectly as possible, and the publishing problems begin then. That is, the publisher must try not to get the writer to fit the book to the conditions of the trade, etc. It must be the other way around."

—Maxwell Perkins to M. K. Rawlings
1937

"The editor is called upon to play many roles, because with each new manuscript he is confronted with a new set of ideas, the projection of a new personality, and the necessity of adapting himself to a new form. His is therefore a flexible mind, ever remembering that each new book with which he deals is an entirely new entity."

—Saxe Commins
Speech at Columbia University
1944

CREATIVE, deeply concerned, hardworking editors like Maxwell Perkins and Saxe Commins are still in the book-publishing world. So it is good for readers to be reminded by two new books—*Maxwell Perkins: Editor of Genius*, by A. Scott Berg (Dutton, \$15), and *What Is an Editor? Saxe Commins at Work*, by Dorothy Commins (University of Chicago Press, \$10)—of how much an editor can improve a manuscript and, what is more, how demanding, egotistic, and ungrateful writers tend to be to the editors who publish them.

Max Perkins worked for Charles Scribner's Sons for most of his adult life. An extraordinarily conscientious man, he labored at editing manuscripts seven days a week, preferring his office to his home. A. Scott Berg, who is Perkins's first biographer, assigns partial blame for this habit to Perkins's unhappy marriage (which nonetheless endured). His was an all-female household, for in addition to his wife, he had four daughters, who were both a pleasure and a source of interruption to his single-minded passion for having a hand in the making of good books.

Perkins's puritanical nature prevented him from pursuing Elizabeth Lemmon, the one woman he really loved. (Intellectually, he seems to have been somewhat of a misogynist, from Berg's evidence, even though the biographer thinks Perkins's dislike of women was verbal foolery.) Lemmon

and Perkins corresponded throughout their adult lives. She never married and lived alone in a southern mansion in Virginia, which he visited only twice. She saved all his letters carefully—a fortunate parsimony, for much of what Berg knows about his subject comes from them, "the only diary he left." These letters, Perkins's correspondence with his writers, and the remembrances of persons who knew him or worked with him during his 37 years at Scribner's are the materials Berg has used for his full-length portrait of a talented and modest man whose greatest enjoyment in life was "to take on an author at the start or reasonably near it, and then to publish not this book and that, but the whole author."

Perkins's first important "whole author" was F. Scott Fitzgerald. Then, on Fitzgerald's recommendation, he took on Ernest Hemingway, and later, Ring Lardner and Thomas Wolfe. These four provided Perkins and Scribner's with financial rewards and enormous personal problems. Fitzgerald needed reassurance, editorial suggestions (although, as Perkins knew, Fitzgerald was his own best editor), constant advances and loans of money, and help with his chaotic personal life. Lardner overworked, smoked and drank too much, and was ill with tuberculosis. Hemingway required reassurance and sympathy as well as admiration for everything he did and wrote. And Thomas Wolfe, as is well known, was totally dependent on Perkins for the reduction to printable size of his first two mammoth manuscripts, *Look Homeward Angel* and *Of Time and the River*.

To this "list of desperate friends," as Berg calls them, Perkins gave everything: all his time, his affection, his constant concern, and the fine edge of his critical intelligence. Sometimes his writers—Hemingway and Wolfe are examples—turned ingratitude.

Berg's biography is sometimes burdened with too much detail and the customary inexorable chronology of today's lesser biographies. He has been careful to follow Perkins's advice to Douglas Southall Freeman: "You must put in everything, and not simply select what is valuable from some purely artistic or literary standpoint." I found myself wishing for somewhat less anecdote, especially the better-known ones, and more depth. Ideally, it

would have been nice to find Perkins, who had such a fine editorial hand, portrayed in less awkward and less slangy language: Edmund Wilson's *I Thought of Daisy*, writes Berg, "won the respect of the literary crowd." In one paragraph describing the cutting of Wolfe's novel, characters "are sentenced to the chopping block," and then "instead of propelling the story, the large crew of characters" slow it down.

These are small matters. The twenty-eight-year-old biographer has marshaled much material to bring the editor to life, to prove that lonely, hard-drinking, eccentric Perkins was, as the book's subtitle says, "an editor of genius," a man who recognized that most writers need both psychological and critical attention.

Dorothy Commins has put together a tribute to her husband, Saxe, Random House's great editor. In some ways, hers is a more satisfying book than Berg's, perhaps because she has mixed her own memories and commentaries with Saxe's diaries, journals, and correspondence with his authors.

Saxe Commins was an excellent writer and editor: His stories of his relations with such authors as Robert Penn Warren, William Faulkner, W. H. Auden, John O'Hara, and Isak Dinesen are extremely interesting. He put down his thoughts about manuscripts in office memos and in his journals.

The most distressing part of the book (and it must have been agonizing for Commins as well) concerns his relations with sick, suffering, frightened Eugene O'Neill and his apparent shrew of a second wife, Carlotta. As Perkins aided Wolfe, so the self-effacing Commins served O'Neill as confidant, literary consultant, editor, and adviser on family troubles. He stood by O'Neill during the playwright's last illness, giving his friend the care a good editor who believes in a writer provides.

Lucky for us that books on two such men should appear in the same year. And it's significant that a commercial press and a university press, which often have disparate aims, should issue them. Perhaps the no-man's-land between the two publishing entities is diminishing so greatly that we will be able to tell them apart not by subject matter or treatment but solely by the publisher's imprint. ●

TRADE WINDS

Summer Reading

by Walter Arnold

FROLICSOME FRIEZES that fill June book supplement pages with naiads and nereids disporting themselves amid Neptune and dolphins announce summer-reading recommendations. But you never see book sections devoted to fall reading. Or to winter reading. Practically every periodical has its spring books issue, but not spring reading. And there are no summer-books sections, just articles on summer reading. Odd. Yet who ever reads a book, really *reads a book*, during a torpid August in this so-called temperate zone?

Not I, certainly not I. Well, hardly ever. I once started to read W.V.O. Quine's *Methods of Logic* on the beach at Cotuit, but I was just trying to avoid the distraction of bikinis. Anyway, I never finished it, which probably explains why I am still always convinced by the last argument I hear in any discussion. Too much light, too much heat, too many glistening bodies. Like Dante's Paolo and Francesca, I read no more that day.

But when I go to the beach these days, which is very seldom, everybody over the age of twenty-two seems to be immersed in a book, usually some fat paperback best seller, a pseudoepic of other times, other worlds. This year, I suppose one will have to avoid stepping on flocks of *The Thorn Birds* in order to reach the saving waves. Having shelled out a mere \$1.9 million in advance for the rights, Avon ought at least to have 'dump bins' full of the product and a cash register on every sandy spit. I suppose it will be a blessed change from acres of *Looking Out for #1; Getting Yours; Power!; Success!; and Notes to Myself*. But have you ever noticed that no one ever seems to turn a page while "reading" a book at the beach? The whiteness of the pages, I think, makes an excellent reflecting surface.

I realize that there are places other than the beach to read books in August. But like Bartleby the Scrivener, we prefer not to have air-conditioning at home. So August nights are for collapsing in preparation for walking out the front door on days *not* fit for dogs. And reading books is still frowned upon in most offices, especially in publishers' offices. I have never tried reading in an air-conditioned movie house, but it might be the best place for hot

new books. And when the air-conditioning is working on the trains, people just sit stunning themselves. When it isn't working, which was often the case on the bankrupt Penn Central (has any public service actually improved in the past 25 years?), people just try to avoid breathing too much.

Fortunately, if you just can't help reading books all the time or find that August is the only month you have the time to read, you'll find that publishers don't take any notice of people like me. Even though they all, like psychiatrists, are out of town in August, trying to avoid reading themselves, they have usually planted plenty of books that are due to come up around now. What if most turn out to be weeds? Even among them we will be able to find some goldenrods or purple loosestrife. But in fact, publishers have two views of equal weight on bringing out books in August: one, that it is the worst month of the year to issue books because nobody is really interested; the other, that it is one of the best times to publish books, especially "big" fiction and newsworthy nonfiction, precisely because there are relatively so few other books being published during that lazy month.

An interesting question is, What books that were published in deep summer, for example in the prewar years of 1914 and 1939, have stood the test of time? From 1914, the year in which W. D. Howells was still the dean of American letters and *Pollyanna* and Booth Tarkington's immortal *Penrod* sold like wildfire, only two novels of August now stand out, on both ends of the literary spectrum: Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes* and Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* And there were novels in that season by Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, and H. G. Wells. In nonfiction, the serious talk was about Graham Wallas's *The Great Society*. Enough said.

From August 1939, when the Hitler-Stalin pact was signed (just before the guns of September), the only notable work of nonfiction I can spot is, appropriately enough, *Journey to a War*, by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood. Writing about the Sino-Japanese War, the authors noted that in a conquered but unoccupied Shanghai "life goes on like a watch dropped in a desert." (I should add to this book the appearance

of a number of volumes in the then continuing and still indispensable WPA Writers Project Guide to the States series.) The fiction of that season fared better: Thomas Wolfe's *The Web and the Rock*; Rumer Godden's *Black Narcissus*; and Pietro di Donato's powerful *Christ in Concrete*, interestingly just now back in print after many years. One of the biggest best sellers of 1939 was *Mein Kampf*, which is still accumulating unclaimed tens of thousands of dollars in royalties held by the Alien Property Office, in Washington.

And what are the auguries for this month in the present summer, which I trust will not be ominously perfect? Among the hard-cover books scheduled to be published, the ones that seem to me to have a chance of lasting beyond the season include some novels: *The Country Cousin*, by Louis Auchincloss, which is about old New York society in the Thirties; *A Good School*, by Richard Yates (author of *The Easter Parade*), about the ruin of a New England prep school during World War II; and *Miss Rhode Island*, by Norman Kotker, which is about America's search for skin-deep profundities. What looks like a coming Conrad revival may be further stimulated by the release of the recently published *Congo Diary and Other Previously Uncollected Pieces*. In realms other than fiction, the Kinsey Institute study *Homosexualities* will probably be the most important book on the subject for some time. Aside from that, I note *Acting Out: Life in Big City Schools*, by Roland Betts, which is an account of the collapse of New York City's public school system.

As far as paperbacks are concerned, in addition to the epic of the Australian shepherders (and possibly to "balance" that), Avon is releasing in a five-volume set Leon Edel's masterful biography of Henry James. Appropriately enough, Dell is bringing out an original novel called *V-J Day*, by Alan Fields, although I have no idea how good or bad it is. Some fun may be had with *The Harvard Lampoon Big Book of College Life* and the *National Lampoon's Sunday Newspaper Parody* (their high school parody of a few seasons ago was wonderfully on the mark). Mostly, however, I see titles coming up like *The Tropic of Desire* and *Tender Fire*, which are obviously the products of a long winter's writing. ●