

The Writer, The Publisher, The Gull

Now it strikes me as an extremely melancholy calamity that when the novel died some years ago the American novelist did not die with it. It would have saved us so much time, so much money, and so many forests. Norman Mailer would have been spared all the mortification he feels about having written but one good novel, and we would have been spared Truman Capote, a man who has yet to match even Mailer's scrawny accomplishment. Further, the great publishing houses could continue to disgorge their trashy stuff without any spasms of conscience—"The novel is dead and so are the novelists, alas, so up with our brassily acclaimed nonce editions," books of popular luridness, books of bogus revelation about the system and the self, books of socio-political tosh, and that book about an admirable sea gull who was so steeped in the wisdom of Bertrand Russell that he broke away and became truly his own bird.

It is hard to say who is more responsible for the rubbish that is extruded from the publishing houses, the philistines who publish it or the philistines who read it. Generally I would lay the blame on the consumers, for as with so many other free-market transactions, it is the consumer's vote that elects what is produced. Unfortunately, readers, and for that matter most members of the culturati, are rarely so demanding or so independent as, say, automobile consumers. To the contrary, readers are generally the most abject slaves of fashion known to man, and those who design literary fashion actually seem to have a more profound power over their sequacious clients than Yves St. Laurent has over the ladies of high fashion. I imagine there are limits beyond which even the ladies of high fashion cannot be hoodwinked; however, I cannot envision such limits for general readers. I am too familiar with the commercial achievements of poseurs like Philip Roth.

The gentle and pliable nature of the American reader has been noted forever and anon, but lately he appears even more gullible than in the past, a development about as astonishing as the discovery of dirt under Andy Warhol's fingernails. With increasing frequency American readers are the shabby products of our pervasive university system—a system full of ghastly places through which students are herded like so many bewildered bovines run through the stockyards of a slaughterhouse. When the unpleasant and unenlightening process is over, the average college graduate views the world from about the same perspective as the hapless hooper hung wrong side up awaiting certification to be stamped on his rump. It often takes years to eradicate the damage that four years of college can have on a young mind. Some graduates

are so embittered by the experience that they become lifelong opponents of the written word, but, though they are the avowed enemies of writers and readers alike, their influence is practically benign compared to the influence of those graduates whose minds have been bedaubed with intellectual pretense and a vague yearning for occasional whiffs of "culture." These innocents are more dangerous to literature and to publishing in America than a million Watch and Word Societies or two million George Wallaces. Literature is always safer when apes are burning books than when monkeys are buying them, for when monkeys buy them, charlatans are free to fill them with the rankest nonsense.

Today the charlatans are doing a brisk business. Publishers realize that publishing junk is much easier and more lucrative than publishing quality. There are no apparent Faulkners or Conrads loose in the Republic—notwithstanding the thousands of creative writing greenhouses now in existence—and it is costly and difficult to ferret out what talented writers there might be. Really talented writers fret over each sentence, they might go for years without ever sending in a manuscript, and then its chances of weaseling its way into the best seller list are about equal to Richard Nixon's chances of becoming a Supreme Court justice. Harold Robbins' baloney grinder is more productive and eager to please.

So the publishers turn out poorly edited books written for the enthusiasms of the moment. They make them long beyond belief, because it is more profitable. And they make them idiotic, because they realize that even amongst their gullible readers there is a restiveness with the written word. Television is the dominant pastime even for the readers and if a book is to sell it has to be written in the form of tv drama or tv news. It has to be simple, pretentious, and nerve-racking. It has to soar ostentatiously on the winds of *Zeitgeist*. Hence, the popularity of general interest books like those of Teddy White and all the fawning potboilers about Daniel Ellsberg, Patty Hearst, etc. Hardly a one of these books ever informs readers of anything that has not already been reported in the press. Nonetheless they become publishing events of great moment, and for weeks they sell famously and their authors gab incontinently on tv talk shows. They are truly an epiphenomenon of the electronic press. The same can be said for our works of fiction. They are all either gimmicky tales like *Ragtime* and that really repulsive story of the sea gull, or they are ventures into romantic turpitude.

America has become a junkyard of fourth-rate fiction that rarely rises to the distinction of Maurice Hindus' forget-

table *Red Bread* or Felix Salten's *Bambi*. There is hardly a novelist in America worth reading, and none is capable of sustained quality. Frankly, I doubt that very many of the books published are ever read. I am certain that few of them are actually read in their entirety. They are carried by saucy-minded sales girls as they exhibit themselves on the subway, hoping to trap culturally inclined stock boys, or they are purchased by readers for whom the very financial transaction is a kind of cultural fix. When they are discussed it is only by readers who have seen the movie.

Anyone, even Richard Speck, must tire of reading about the bold, candid, teleological orgasms of Smith-educated lunatics or of *belles lettres*' he-man types. Endless recastings of the adventures of Raskolnikov, Madame Bovary, or Huckleberry Finn have got to eventually weary even the Book-of-the-Month Club clientele. How long are readers going to remain intrigued by woebegone figures peering into their belly buttons, figures who throughout history have always been put down as imbecilic, warped, or arantly criminal? No, I cannot believe that many of the popular books purchased in America are ever read, novels least of all.

I know that I certainly will not spend much time on these novels. Truth to tell, I have always considered people who read contemporary fiction for purposes other than ridicule to be intellectually suspect. The Western literary tradition is such an enormous vault of treasures—treasures which can be read and reread with pleasure and instruction—that I see no reason for an intelligent reader to loiter amongst the trash of contemporary fiction.

That it is trash is a fact of public record and that it will remain trash is certain for so long as it fixes itself to our stunted and demented *Zeitgeist*. What the novel needs is real people sweating it out in credible or interesting conditions. The authors should know something about people, not just the way they ejaculate or the way they butcher one another or the way they go bonkers, but the way they have lived for centuries and the way they live today. People, not clinical statistics, make novels informative, amusing, engaging, and beautiful. Which suggests another desideratum: novels can impart a sense of the beautiful. What is beautiful is a complicated question but I do not think that there is any question that beauty has a great deal to do with art. And here we come to just what contemporary creative writing lacks most. It lacks art; it is too limited. It is abstruse journalism. It is sophisticated gossip. But it is not art and until it returns to a pursuit of art it would be best for it and for its practitioners if they were to be marinated in formaldehyde. □



David Sanford

Ralph Nader, Amok Raker

(Mr. Sanford's article has been adapted from his forthcoming book, *Me and Ralph*, to be published in March 1976 by the New Republic Book Company.)

We have had Ralph Nader to kick us around for ten years. His book on the Corvair, *Unsafe at Any Speed*, was published in November 1965, and it wasn't long afterwards that General Motors quite unintentionally saw to it that Nader would become the most powerful and probably the most admired private individual in the country. In attempting to discredit him with the fruits of a private investigation, GM sent Nader flying, for here, in trumpeting the deceitfulness of the nation's largest industrial corporation, was a ready-made opportunity to develop and lead the "consumer movement." Nader had the genius and the public relations skills to make full use of the opportunity, and since GM's dick, Vincent Gillen, hadn't been able to find any dirt on him, Ralph's credibility was very high from the start. All that remained for Nader to do was to coalesce power around himself, articulate issues, recruit troops, and go to town.

By 1972 Ralph had come to be listed as the sixth most admired man in the world, falling appropriately between Spiro Agnew and Pope Paul on the Gallup Poll's list. Now he exercises an enormous influence not only on auto safety but on nearly every aspect of American life dealing with economics, consumer goods, and health and safety. Since 1968 he has been the prime mover behind at least 35 books and reports. He has spun off a score of organizations with pious names like Public Interest Research Group, Center for Study of Responsive Law, Public Citizen,

and Corporate Accountability Research Group. He has inspired the new profession of the public interest lawyer. He has, through his lobbying efforts, written or backed a passel of new laws. And he has lured all kinds of money into the causes he supports. Student Public Interest Research Groups on college campuses raise more than a million dollars a year for local lobbying projects of the sort Nader approves. Public Citizen solicits a comparable amount in small donations. Nader's speaking and writing earn him a quarter of a million dollars a year or more, 95 percent of which he claims to turn over to his octopus. Not bad for the son of a Lebanese immigrant.

Nader's most important possession has been his nurtured credibility or, as Robert F. Buckhorn, one of Nader's five biographers, put it, "If Nader has one overriding asset it is that he is what he says he is. He never masquerades, he doesn't pretend, cheat, or manipulate." That asset is buttressed by the alleged uniqueness of the man: according to the Nader Myth, he is selfless, hardworking, modest, devoted to no interest but the public's, disdainful of wealth, personal property, sex, and conventional pleasure. In other words he is said to be all the things the rest of us are not—a freak in the midst of hedonists. Were the myth correct he would truly be invincible. As it is, so many otherwise perceptive people are so totally captivated (and that includes most of the journalists who have written about him) that it is not very likely that Nader will be unperched.

Nader has coopted the press, he has no electorate to answer to, he is accountable to no one. But there is, nevertheless, an effort being made both to correct the Nader Myth and to subject Nader's work

to rigorous analysis. The effort is in order both because Nader is not the man his admirers believe him to be and because Nader over the years has come to think that his views determine and are coterminous with the public interest.

In a brilliant piece published in 1972 by the *Texas Law Review*, Peter Schuck, a former employee of Nader's, expressed his uneasiness about Nader's monopoly on the public interest: "For Nader, as for Rousseau, virtue consists in a passion for the 'public interest,' and the wisdom to apprehend it. And it is in the central notion of a 'public interest' that both Nader and Rousseau manifest their most dangerous tendencies. Nader, keenly aware of the decidedly illiberal implications of *a priori* notions of 'public interest,' claims that the concept is a processual one, referring not to the substance of a particular policy decision, but rather to the conditions and procedures under which decisions are arrived at. Nevertheless, his promiscuous use of the phrase (and its diabolical opposite, the 'special interests') raises serious moral questions with which Nader has never really grappled.

"Having invoked the 'public interest' *ad nauseam*, Nader seems convinced that he knows what it is. But what in fact *is* the 'public interest,' and where does it lie? Given the existence of a freely elected government with an independent judiciary and a body of duly enacted law, at what point are we justified in concluding that particular policy outcomes are 'not in the public interest'? What criteria of representativeness, independence, and due process are we to apply in repudiating the handiwork of Congress? Are the revealed preferences of voters entitled to the same respect in the legislature as those of consumers in the marketplace? If