

ROSS MACDONALD: A Life

Ross Macdonald, the subject of Tom Nolan's new biography, lived in Santa Barbara for more than half his life, a four-decade sojourn that was characterized by opposing forces – reticence and assertiveness.

In the early 1970s, after an exchange of letters, I was selling books by mail order from San Francisco to Santa Barbara's Kenneth Millar. At the same time, as a moonlighting book reviewer for whom the added income was not unwelcome, I was commenting on the novels he wrote under the nom de plume, Ross Macdonald. Ken was not a collector, but a reader. It was text he was after. From our catalogues he was selecting the early titles of, among others, Joyce Carol Oates and John Updike. During a troubled boyhood that found the confused teenager hovering between juvenile delinquency and social responsibility, it was the reading of books that inspired Ken to live a responsible moral life.

After we moved down to Santa Barbara in 1975, Ken and I often lunched. He guided me to the no-frills establishments he preferred via the untravelled, loosely connected back alleys that paralleled State Street. Because of a predisposition toward skin cancer, he wished to avoid the noon glare, Ken explained. It was clear, though, that this most private of men who had absolutely no small talk was not exactly anxious to chance upon acquaintances in his peregrinations.

On the other hand, he took obvious pleasure in telling me of the time he had walked downtown in the company of a prominent city planner from Greece who was taken by the similarities between Santa Barbara and Periclean Athens – the site of Greece's Golden Age. Here, as well as there, the mountains dipped down gently toward the sea. The two climates were equally temperate, the populations roughly the same, and one could walk to any place of civic importance in a few minutes. This comparison appealed to Ken for whom history was the connective tissue that linked generations to each other.

Canadian-bred Kenneth Millar showed up in Santa Barbara by way of Michigan, right after World War II. From his earliest days here he felt integrally connected to the community. Ken was the dynamic force behind a changing group of us who attended writers' lunches started back in the 1950s. The word "writer" was a permissive coinage as newspapermen, publishers, and just plain book people were welcome at the bi-weekly gatherings. (Women were tolerated in those unenlightened days, but not encouraged to attend.) On the evening before a scheduled lunch, it was Ken, a man for whom the telephone was not a preferred mode of communications, who would place some 15 or 20 calls to remind us of the date.

Those lunches were, I am certain, a major part of Ken's social life. By the time we had come to town, the Millars were virtual stay-at-homes. Ken spent many of his evenings at home, corresponding with other, less established writers. He encouraged their efforts and edited their manuscripts. I know of at least two unsung instances in which books he had thoroughly edited might more accurately have been described as collaborations.

Readers of the Lew Archer novels might guess that their creator was a political liberal and cultural conservative. During the Cold War, when the epithet "bleeding hearts" still awaited coinage, Ken wore his liberal views like a hairshirt. Detente was not an option for one who saw political issues in terms of black and white only. There were breaks with longstanding friends whose views he had come to disapprove of.

That kind of activism served Ken better in less controversial areas. He and his wife, Margaret,

were charter members of the local Audubon chapter. In her excellent book on bird watching in Santa Barbara, "The Birds and Beasts Were There," she describes Ken swimming a full half mile out into the Pacific to identify a rare specimen.

Margaret, or Maggie, as her friends knew her, was herself a formidable being, having been established as a successful author of detective novels before her husband was published. The Millars' marital relationship was characterized by internal tensions. She was outgoing in social situations but resented it when Ken invited people to their home. He was introverted yet sought out people with whom he could connect on intellectually intimate levels. He was also a brooder who sifted through his thoughts carefully before speaking, whereas she would blurt out whatever came to mind. It occurred to me that she had been born without a superego. Most tellingly, they even pronounced their surname differently. Ken accented the first syllable, she stressed the latter.

Despite such differences they shared affinities. Each championed the other's work. Ken created the titles for Maggie's books and edited her manuscripts. Both were environmentalists who picketed during the 1969 oil spill here. Ken helped structure the pivotal Santa Barbara Declaration of Environmental Rights that issued from UCSB, and fostered the formation of several nonprofit environmental groups with other socially responsible Santa Barbarans like Robert Easton.

In writing the foreword for Easton's book about the oil spill, "Black Tide," Ken likened Bob to "those ancient Greek historians who fought in the wars they later chronicled ... he is a witness as well as a recorder." Another classical allusion by one for whom the importance of history (which, after all, is human experience shared over time) was paramount.

Kenneth Millar's deeply felt commitment to the city he loved eventually found its way into Ross Macdonald's books. The later novels were thematically organized around actual Santa Barbara disasters. The push and pull of man's relationship with nature absorbed him. The narrative thread of "The Underground Man" (1971) was patterned on the Coyote Fire that threatened the city in 1964. In "Sleeping Beauty" (1973), a fictional oil spill evoked Santa Barbara's recently blackened seashore.

The separate personas of Kenneth Millar the man, Ross Macdonald the author, and Lew Archer, his fictional alter ego, comprise a telling three-dimensional portrait. Ken's roiled youth is reflected in the many portraits of confused young men who crop up in the Archer novels, just as representations of the Millars' daughter, who had her own personal crises, turn up repeatedly in the books.

Many Santa Barbara literary figures were influenced by Ken. Sue Grafton, herself a nationally known author, continues to use Santa Barbara as the background for her Kinsey Millhone detective novels – employing the same fictional place name (Santa Teresa) that Ross Macdonald created for the Archer books. "Even now, in idle moments, I return to his writing, not only for the inspiration he provides, but for the quiet pleasure of his prose," she has written.

Ken's closest friend was Donald Pearce, who followed the Millars to Santa Barbara and is now a retired professor of English literature from UCSB. Don's accounts of their time together in college and graduate school form the backbone of Tom Nolan's biography of Ross Macdonald. Going back more than 60 years, Don still remembers long conversations between himself and Ken in precise and telling detail – the recollective equivalent, really, of perfect pitch in music. This testimony, together with dozens of other people Tom Nolan interviewed has fleshed out an integrated portrait of a model citizen of Santa Barbara.

An early meeting with Ken sticks out in my own mind. We were still living in Northern California, and I had brought my wife and two-year-old daughter to Santa Barbara. We walked the beach with Ken, whose conversation was spare as usual. Later, back home, we received a letter from him.

“The three of you,” he said, “made me feel again that we are making a civilization here in California which will leave beauties like long shadows after it, and wish that I had my life to live over again in those later times.”

Santa Barbara Independent, 1999

COLLECTION BUILDING 101

When Sir Edmund Hillary was asked why he decided to scale Mount Everest, he famously replied, “Because it is there.” Not too long ago, I decided to build a book collection for exactly the opposite reason – because they are not there – “they” being the first books of authors I plan to include in a selective catalogue that will eventually be offered for sale.

An overriding justification for taking on such a quixotic pursuit is the deep satisfaction I experience each time I acquire a title that qualifies for inclusion. The satisfaction obtains because the rigorous standards I am imposing upon potential candidates emphasize importance, rarity and fine condition. So it will be a long haul before I reach my summit, which is fine with me. I am in no hurry, because I mean to have the best copies of the best books I can find (and afford)!

In an early story, Dashiell Hammett’s *Continental Op* talks about a case he is taking on: “You want to do it as well as you can, otherwise there’d be no sense to it.” Years later, when Hammett willingly went to jail for refusing to name names during the Cold War, he was assigned to the cleaning of latrines, a job he took as seriously as the fictional detective did his. In other words, you do work for yourself, not others. I humbly submit that such a mindset guides me in this project.

A perusal of our inventory revealed that a number of significant first books already were in our possession. For example, within sight as I compose these words is a jacketed copy of William Faulkner’s rare first book, “*The Marble Faun*,” that he inscribed upon publication to a young woman of whom little is known. Just who Katherine “Sunshine” Lawless was or what her relationship with Faulkner was remains a mystery, but it is an established fact that the aspiring author gave her one of the two original typescripts for this slim volume of poems.

Another key title in the collection is Ernest Hemingway’s “*Three Stories and Ten Poems*,” which was published in Paris when the author was 24 in an edition of 300 copies. Despite its modest limitation, “*Three Stories*” has never been a scarce book because Hemingway established his literary reputation early on and maintains it to this day. Thus it is an expensive book, one becoming more so all the time as new collectors begin to buy the first editions of this groundbreaking prose stylist and charismatic figure.

Like many first books, this small paperbound volume manifests little of its author’s best work, but first books have traditionally appealed to collectors in the same irrational way Biblical sires favored the first fruit of their loins. One can trace this bias by looking at memorable first book catalogues of past years. I studied several such compilations in quest of information that might prove pertinent to my own research, but it soon became clear that many of those older entries had become as passé as last year’s hemlines. Some of these lapsed reputations will come around again in the fullness of time, but many authors who once flew high have come down to earth for good when it comes to demand for their books. What a bookseller strives for, then, is a state of equipoise between current fashion that affects sales today and one’s deep-rooted conviction of an author’s essential worth or. Putting it another way, you acknowledge critical consensus without abdicating the personal taste that has come out of a lifetime of reading.

What I needed from the start to help me find books for the collection was a comprehensive want

list. I compiled mine by hand on a lined notepad for no better reason than this is how I have always done it. No Googling for this unreconstructed relic. There are more reference books on our premises than books for sale because these are tools that I use daily. And I like having them on hand just when I wish to consult them.

So on I plod, referring to one volume or another in search of help, much like St. Exupery's Guillaumet, who struggles out of the wreckage of his downed mail plane in the frozen mountains of Argentina, and limps on badly burned feet for five pain-wracked days to safety. "What saves a man is to take a step. Then another step. It is always the same step, but you have to take it." Now, making a want list isn't quite that dramatic, but you do go about it incrementally, adding book after book until you have accumulated a substantial pile. And once you have your list, you begin to amass books in the same slow but steady manner.

It is a given that the books I seek or, more precisely, the copies of the books I seek will not for the most part, be readily available. To find enough of them, I will need the help of others. Particular others. In such a case, contacts with colleagues are crucial. One of the main reasons I continue to exhibit at book fairs is that I enjoy being in the company of other booksellers: bantering with them, exchanging information while being giddily aware that I am amidst other elsewhere-unemployables.

Some of these dealers I have known since becoming a bookseller, and it is to our mutual advantage that I let them know about the collection. I am happy to report that my colleagues – unanimously – have been delighted to help. (And, not so incidentally, take my money.) More tellingly, however, they will turn up titles that, industrious as I have been in the composition of my list, I have overlooked or don't know about. Knowing more books, or knowing more about a particular book, is to be a better bookseller.

For example, a little-known first book is Charles Olson's "Spanish Speaking Americans in the War," which was issued by a U.S. Government agency in 1943 and precedes what is generally considered his first book, "Call Me Ishmael," by four years. It is a 24-page photo essay that Olson co-wrote with painter Ben Shahn when both were working for the Office of War Information and about as far away as one can imagine from the innovative Olson theories on Projective Verse that he would postulate years later.

Some authors' first publications are not books but scholarly offprints of magazine articles. These are often issued in mimeograph format and, having been produced for the author's personal use, are not for sale. Thus, Walker Percy's first separate publication is not "The Moviegoer," but a philosophical disquisition that precedes it by seven years and which tellingly manifests the moral and intellectual underpinnings of Percy's first novel and the others to come. I believe that offbeat publications such as these enhance the kind of collection I am building. And while they are not major works, they lend another dimension to the collection proper. Seen in another way, rarities such as these illustrate the latitude available to a collector in the shaping of his assemblage, an opportunity, really to improvise his own cadenza to an established opus.

A particular challenge to the completion of a collection like this one (completion in this case being an unachievable ideal) is locating a first book that its author has subsequently repudiated. At a book fair recently I bought a copy of William Golding's first book, "Poems," which precedes "The Lord of the Flies" by 15 years. The only other copy I ever had (some 20 years ago) led me at that time to write to its author for information about what today is a legendary rarity. Golding kindly replied that the bulk of the edition had long ago been pulped and added, "I'm sorry to hear you found a book of my

alleged 'Poems.' I had thought them sunk without trace."

When I first started buying and selling modern books, I understood it would be necessary to keep up with what was being published. For me, this would take some doing because I am at heart a cultural conservative who is more reluctant than most to honor emerging talent. So, some 40 years ago, I began reviewing books in order to force myself to read contemporary fiction and poetry more closely, though I would much rather have immersed myself in history, biography and, my favorite literary form (when not attempted by anyone under 30), the deceptively simple memoir.

Reading newly issued books enables one to make decisions of purchase in the most satisfying way – by relying on personal taste. And, not to be overlooked, a prescient bookseller can stockpile multiple copies of a promising title upon publication, cellar them like wine and, ultimately – if his judgment proves keen – offer them for sale at vintage prices.

An important consideration in the formation of this collection is the time frame chosen for it. Because many key Nineteenth-Century books are no longer available for the plucking, I am beginning with Theodore Dreiser's "Sister Carrie," which is widely regarded as the first modern American novel. Conveniently enough, "Sister Carrie" was published in the first year of the Twentieth Century, obviating the need for me to pursue the next copy of Edgar Allan Poe's pseudonymously published "Tamerlane" to come on the market. (The last two copies to appear at public auction fetched well over \$100,000 each.)

But my less-than-lavish resources might also be strained if certain Twentieth century high spots become available. William Carlos Williams' privately printed first book, "Poems," of which only some dozen copies have been located, would today unquestionably inspire what auction houses like to term "spirited bidding." Incongruously enough, Joseph the Provider / Books, the rare-book firm I established in 1970, handled what I believe were the last two copies of this rarity to come to light. I purchased the first of these during the setup of a San Francisco Book Fair in the Seventies from Van Allen Bradley of "Gold in Your Attic" renown and reluctantly flipped it on the spot to another dealer because the ignoble balance in our checking account strongly suggested I do so. The second copy came our way years later from New Directions publisher James Laughlin who, after much importuning on my part, agreed to release it to me because I assured him this rarity of modern literature would become the linchpin for a fine and unusually comprehensive poetry collection.

Today, that copy reposes at Emory University along with 75,000 other volumes of verse that were assembled by Bronx-born collector Raymond Danowski, who oversaw the assemblage of his collection not from the environs of Yankee Stadium, but bucolic Dorset. So, unless you believe that the third time is the charm, my burgeoning collection of authors' first books will have to make do with an inscribed copy of "The Tempers," Williams' first regularly published book.

At this time, the collection also lacks a copy of Sinclair Lewis' pseudonymous first book, "Hike and the Aeroplane," even though we had one in stock recently. This is because a serious Lewis collector who had learned of the book's whereabouts contacted me and purchased it. Why did I relinquish the finest copy of this title I had ever encountered? Simple. I am not a collector. Nor do I fancy myself a curator. Putting the matter into emotional context, I am a bookseller who has learned to derive the same pride of ownership that a collector experiences from having his books, even though I no longer have mine.

The way to achieve such a mindset is to shift into the past perfect tense, as in, "I have had." Well, I have had Vladimir Nabokov's rare first book, "Stikhi." Twice, in fact. The second copy was

smuggled out of the Soviet Union in the early Eighties where, seven decades earlier, the author's doting father had privately printed the poems of his precocious teenage son. This copy is a key item in the late Carter Burden's unparalleled collection of modern literature, which his heirs gave to the Morgan Library following Carter's untimely death in 1996, a collection I subsequently appraised for the family with appropriate awe.

One of the reasons the Burden Collection was so outstanding is that Carter took pains to acquire special copies. He liked books that were signed or inscribed, and he loved association copies. He also augmented his collection by inserting an apposite letter here or a manuscript there into a book, thus enhancing the copy further. I do not know anyone who has the appetite (or the wherewithal) to duplicate Carter's mammoth achievement in terms of breadth and sophistication. Still, he can be employed as a model in the same way a mediocre basketball player in the making practices his jump shot in the manner of Michael Jordan.

One of the inevitabilities of dealing in modern first editions is that, more often than might be thought, you get to know authors on a personal level. Many of the authors I met long ago are or have become famous in the 35 years I have plied my trade. (And more than a few, alas, have passed on.) So, having enjoyed social relationships with writers whose first books I plan to include in the catalogue, I am only a hop, skip and jump from making copies of their books more tantalizing to those of us for whom the individual copy is not merely a text to be read but an artifact to be treasured in its own right. I am thus asking a few individuals to write in my books or to send a letter to be inserted in those copies. I want these authors to say something about the book's conception, or its publishing history, or how their fledgling efforts appear to them today, after a hiatus which in some cases amounts to five decades.

As I write these words, the hope is that I will have enough books in a year to issue the kind of catalogue I envision. Until then, I will be after some of the many that I lack, attending book fairs, reading catalogues, making phone calls, even going online to look for the proverbial needle in the haystack. In other words, book hunting. Which, after all, is how the Renaissance was jumpstarted.

Firsts Magazine, 2006

JACK VANCE: The Prodigious Invisible Man of Science Fiction

Jack Vance is burly with a no-nonsense look about him. Physically, he suggests the aging private eye on the late show who wears suspenders and sleeps in his fedora. He is the slower-than-syrup pinch hitter creaking off the bench to bang out the hit you need, the beer-bellied brawler who gets slugged, grunts and keeps coming on.

He is also one of the truly important science-fiction writers of our day, having produced some 50 books over the last 30 years. Beginning in 1945, Vance stories started showing up in science-fiction pulp magazines. His first novel, a paperback original, became available in 1950, but only to those cognoscenti whose reading material comes off drugstore racks. Yet somewhere along the way, Vance has picked up the prestigious Hugo, Nebula and Edgar awards for his work, a literary hat trick no one else has matched.

His name is one of the three or four that come up regularly when talking to aficionados of the genre. Yet outside of this inside world he has attracted about as much attention as an invisible man in a soundproof chamber. In a time when hype rather than quality of product often sells books, Vance refuses to promote himself, adhering to the old-fashioned notion that story, not personality, is what the reader deserves. He didn't even want his picture on this page. "A reader is not supposed to be aware that someone's written the story," Vance said. "He's supposed to be completely immersed, submerged in the environment."

The offbeat variety of jobs he had before he began writing full time – fruit picker, carpenter, miner in Sierra towns, jazz cornet player – make for the kind of dust-jacket promo material publicity agents spend hours concocting for their authors. In this case, it's all true. Jack Vance is a native Californian who has lived in some part of the state for all of his 59 years. He was born in San Francisco, grew up in the Delta town of Brentwood, went to high school in L.A. and attended UC Berkeley where he began as a physics major, only to switch to journalism.

A dedicated reader from very early on, Vance dashed through children's literature with the ease of O. J. Simpson slicing through defensive lines in his prime. Tom Swift, the Oz books, Jules Verne, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert Chambers. The exotic and fantastic appealed to him from the word go. By the time he was 12, he had constructed his own star chart. A decade later, while serving in the merchant marine, he was doing his scanning of the heavens on night watch in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.

Today, Vance quietly turns out work from a sprawling house perched high in the Oakland hills, a house he and his wife Norma have been rebuilding with their own hands since 1954 when they bought it as a cottage. Their son, John Jr., now growing out of his teens, lives with them. The same care with which Vance has poured concrete and cut moldings can be seen in his use of language. Armed with a vast vocabulary and a deep understanding of word origins, his prose more often than not is understated. "The only good style is the style which no one notices," he has said. Nevertheless, the Vancean imprimatur is unmistakable. One of his stories starts like this:

"The war party from Faide Keep moved eastward across the downs: a column of a hundred armored knights, five hundred foot soldiers, a train of wagons. In the lead rode Lord Faide, a tall man in his early maturity, spare and cat-like, with a sallow dyspeptic face. He sat in the ancestral car of the Faides, a boat-shaped vehicle floating two feet above the moss, and carried, in addition to his sword and dagger, his ancestral side weapons. "An hour before sunset a pair of scouts came racing back to the column, their club-headed horses loping like dogs. Lord Faide braked the motion of his car. Behind

him the Faide kinsmen, the lesser knights, and the leather-capped foot soldiers halted; to the rear the baggage train and the high-wheeled wagons of the jinxmen creaked to a stop.”

The jinxmen are brainbenders who dominate by telepathic suggestion. Using sympathetic identification they read minds, hoodooing the Manchurian candidates they have selected from the enemy ranks. In clumsier hands, such invention would go on to include blue-bodied brain burglars or homicidal zombies with laser gun breaths. Yet Vance’s fantasy figures never lose touch with their human inspirations. They may not be real, but they are always credible. His output refutes the wisecrack about what is wrong with science fiction that it is neither science nor fiction. In a field cluttered with adjectivitis, with practitioners who use scientific gimmickry to cover imprecise writing, Vance shuns trickery.

“Science fiction in the far-to-medium-distant past concerned itself with scientific processes, or the consequences of some scientific quirk,” he said. “Often the writers were pretty much ahead of the scientists. They ‘invented’ any number of things which today are showing up around us. As of today, ‘science’ is so vast in scope that no writer – unless he makes it his full-time job – can keep up.”

In addition to his science-fiction work, Vance has also written several detective novels. Just as his fantasy stories explore human behavior and character, the detective work is interwoven with sociological themes. At his best Vance invites comparison with Utopian writers like Huxley and Orwell. As early as 1956, he was building a novel on the concept of cloning, but his real concern is with how characters adjust to this radical scientific innovation.

The novel “To Live Forever” takes place in a future society where a process to halt bodily deterioration has been developed. Since overpopulation is a central problem, only a few can be given inoculations that prevent natural death. Qualification is based on outstanding social achievement, usually in the arts and sciences. As may be expected, the competition is fierce. Everyone has an equal chance for immortality at birth. When one becomes 16 he can opt for a normal life free of stress, or aspire to the Amaranth Society (defined in Webster’s as an imaginary flower which never fades) To opt for Amaranth is to devote virtually all one’s time to study, with the likelihood of immortality statistically improbable. Regardless of whether one tries for immortality or not, when a citizen lives beyond the average age, determined by a giant actuarial computer, he can expect to be visited by an assassination squad assigned by the state. The desirable level of population is thus maintained. Since accidental death is beyond scientific control, successful candidates are cloned upon acceptance.

“When an Amaranth had been admitted into the Society and had taken his final inoculations, he went into seclusion. Five cells were extracted from his body. After such modification of the genes as might be desired, they were immersed in a solution of nutrients, hormones and various special stimulants, where they rapidly evolved through the stages of embryo, infant, child and adolescent, to become five idealized simulacra of the original Amaranth. When invested with the prototype’s memory-bank, they became the identity of the original: full-fledged surrogates.”

Like much of Vance’s writing, “To Live Forever” shows evidence of hurried work. The luxury of taking a year or two to write a book was not available to one whose books sold less than moderately well. Though he says he would have liked his books to make money, Vance seems, almost deliberately, to have resisted commercial success. During television’s adolescent age in the ‘50s, he scripted several successful “Captain Video” episodes for producers who were more than satisfied. As the series progressed, more and more satire was foisted on the indiscriminating audience, seemingly out of sheer perversity. This departure from the popular mainstream resulted in the termination of Vance’s services.

A similar lack of self-interest may be inferred from the unfavorable terms Vance permitted in the contracts with literary agents. Not only were reprint rights severely curtailed, but in more than one case, he says, he signed away all the rights to his books, necessitating their repurchase years later.

Four years ago, a sincere, 27-year-old science-fiction buff entered Vance's life. Tim Underwood had the dream of publishing his favorite author and, with the innocent wisdom of youth, he bought the reprint rights to Vance's first novel, "The Dying Earth." The foresight he exhibited in enclosing a check for \$500 with his request did not hurt his chances. Underwood, a leather worker settled in San Francisco by way of Michigan, was now an incipient publisher. He acquired a partner, Chuck Miller, and the firm of Underwood / Miller began to produce finely made limited editions aimed primarily at libraries and collectors. To date they have produced nine books (seven by Vance), all done in handsome editions of about 1,000 on acid-free paper with sewn-signatures, illustrated by various artists. Four more Vance books are slated for publication later in the year, one of them a volume of uncollected stories. Miller distributes the books from, of all places, Pittsburgh, while Underwood handles the editorial and production work from his Richmond-District apartment.

This elegant turn of events seems to have had little effect on Jack Vance. He continues to write as he always has. A new novel, "The Face," will be published this fall by Daw Books, a paperback-original house. Like the Amaranth Society, he seems to go on forever. If that immortal group's standards were just, the scope and quality of Jack Vance's achievement just might entitle him to membership.

Los Angeles Times, 1979

THE FAULKNER INVESTIGATIONS

In the darker manifestations of their brilliant complexity William Faulkner's characters commit murder or violence. What distinguishes these descents into evil from ordinary deeds of malefaction is the extraordinary degree of compassion shown by the author for his sinners. In the late 1940s two equally compassionate authors independently investigated Faulkner's appropriation of the detective story form for his own artistic purposes.

At a time when the books he wrote still appeared under his given name, Kenneth Millar, Ross Macdonald wrote a foreword to the Faulkner story, "The Hound," that was published in the mystery anthology "Murder By Experts." Shortly thereafter, Eudora Welty's review of "Intruder In The Dust" appeared in *The Hudson Review*.

Faulkner, Welty, Macdonald – triangulated literary and personal affinities intersect, connecting them. All three authors' libraries revealed a strong predilection for mystery and detective fiction. Faulkner wrote to fellow Mississippian Welty in praise of her first novel, "The Robber Bridegroom," and took her sailing. Two decades later he received a Gold Medal from The Institute of Arts and Letters, and it was Miss Welty who presented it to him.

Ross Macdonald acknowledged Eudora Welty's review of "The Underground Man" as that novel's most important, and dedicated his next book, "Sleeping Beauty" to her. She in turn dedicated her collection of essays, "The Eye Of The Story," to him. Macdonald, whose dual Canadian / California roots nourished his work, wrote that "Faulkner's provincialism and his refusal to turn away from his province was the mother of his strength." Eudora Welty identified Faulkner as "the triumphant example in America ... of the mastery of place in fiction."

The family as self-destructive unit, exploding itself after generations of smoldering is descriptive of the thematic concerns of Faulkner or Macdonald. Faulkner wrote one short letter to Eudora Welty, whose lengthy unpublished correspondence with Kenneth Millar ended with the latter's death several years ago.

There is enough biographical evidence for one to posit a time when a conjunction of the three could well have occurred. On a given day in the mid-Forties while Eudora Welty was searching New Orleans' second-hand book shops for out-of-print Faulkner titles, Lt. Kenneth Millar might have been boarding the U.S.S. Shipley Bay with several Faulkner hardcovers stowed in his dufflebag.

As for Faulkner, who was at the time commuting between Mississippi and Hollywood where he was employed as a screenwriter, he might have been at the movies, seeing "The Big Sleep" screenplay he wrote from Raymond Chandler's bleak mystery transmogrified into a jazzed-up version that capitalized on wise-cracking electricity generated by Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall.

When a killer looks down at the man he has just shot in cold blood and thinks: "Something darker than him, like the wings of a bird, spread on his back and pulled him down." The smoke from his gun could be curling from the pages of a Ross Macdonald novel, or, perhaps, rising in the Yoknapatawpha wind. As it is, this tragic symbol emanates from "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" Eudora Welty's prophetic short story inspired by the murder of black activist Medgar Evers.

Such delayed identification of the author of the quote above does not mean to imply that the words of

these modern masters are interchangeable. William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Ross Macdonald, all devotees and users of the detective story form, are separate wellsprings – from places as various as Canada, as California’s Santa Barbara and Hollywood, as Mississippi’s Jackson and Oxford – feeding into the mainstream of American literature.

Cordelia Editions, 1985

WILLIAM EVERSON: A Collection of Books And Manuscripts

William Everson / Brother Antoninus. Consider the incarnations. Doted on by a young mother and competed with for her affection by a stern father, he became in his youth an ardent pantheist. With strong Scandinavian hands he forested, farmed, planted a vineyard. In a conflicted world, he became a conscientious objector and was interned in a government work camp during World War II, where he composed and printed poetry. After peace came he toiled as a janitor, helped feed the homeless, and with no formal training painstakingly willed himself into one of the very finest of American hand-press printers.

He has shuttled from the lustiness of the prodigious lovmaker to the austerity of a Catholic convert – then swung back from monk’s isolation to high visibility as charismatic reader of his own poetry. Twice-abandoned as a husband, he nevertheless in his sixth decade chose to become a benedict one more time.

In leaving the Dominican Order, he did so in dramatic style, publicly shucking cowl and scapular for the trappings of a mountain man – buckskin clothes, bear-claw necklace, patriarchal beard. Jungian visionary, ecological advocate, meditative teacher, sagacious elder, valiant prevailer over Parkinson’s Disease – those too are the man.

But the essential William Everson is a poet – American and Westerner, at once traditional and cross-grained. His work is indigenous to the California soil he treads in what is now a 75-year journey. Long ago he left the bucolic San Joaquin Valley in which he grew to manhood, moving to San Francisco’s bustling Bay Area where he spent his middle years in cloistered solitude. Then in the winter of his life he headed downcoast to the Santa Cruz Mountains, whose foothills are wetted by Pacific tides, and taught a new generation of artistic and spiritual searchers.

Three locations for three distinct modes of existence. Everson himself has referred to these as “A Hegelian Triad” of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. One can more plainly describe the stages as life in nature, in God, and God-in-nature. In terms of the words he has shaped these three stages can be said to represent their maker’s residual, veritable, and integral years.

Wherever their locus the poems give eloquent voice to man’s dichotomous search for worldly fulfillment and eternal salvation. Whatever their focus they bear witness to the struggle between the spirit and the flesh, the sacred and the profane.

This tall, rawboned man looks the Western poet he is. The persona who inhabits the poems rides high with the purposefulness and vigor of the rugged individualists who pushed toward land’s end before him. When he celebrates physical love it is with a passion of devotion, because the awesome act is for him a way to God. The philosophy of erotic mysticism is forcefully articulated by the saints and sinners who walk the poems in lockstep.

In the real world Everson the man personifies the dual meaning of “confessor.” He has attended the contrition of others and himself cried out in supplication during those dark nights of the soul when it is always 3am. In the poems a narrative voice booms out in unabashed autobiographical tones, its

electrifying energy cracking like a California thunderstorm at dusk.

As suggested by the selections chronologically highlighted in this catalogue, William Everson's poetry illumines with unmatched beauty of rhetorical expression the way stations of his experience. "My life is the poem that I am writing," he has said. A very good poem it is.

Joseph the Provider / Books, 1987

THE CARTER BURDEN COLLECTION OF THE WORKS OF W. H. AUDEN

When W. H. Auden was asked by his Oxford tutor what he intended to do after his university days, Wystan allowed that he was going to be a poet. The don approved, noting that the composition of poetry was an excellent way of improving one's prose style. "You don't understand at all," the young man burst out, "I mean a great poet."

The prescience of that aggrieved assertion has, of course, long been borne out, the unalloyed confidence of its precocious speaker confirmed by critical consensus. No poet of the 20th Century enjoyed a greater command of metrics and versification or a larger understanding of the origins of words and how they worked together. These technical skills, combined with a singularly integrated view of the human condition that expressed itself in unmistakable imagery, were among the qualities that made Auden a great poet.

Reading an Auden poem aloud, especially those composed in the Fifties and Sixties, is like listening to the conversation of a gifted teacher who is also a friend – one who communicates complex ideas in the easiest of ways and, not incidentally, points the way toward a good life. Two of the most learned men I have known, themselves writers and teachers, spoke (and wrote) feelingly of the effect Auden had on them when he was their teacher – as does Pulitzer Prize-winning poet William Meredith in the afterword to this catalogue.

The only time I "met" Auden was some 25 years ago. I walked from my Greenwich Village apartment to N.Y.U. where he was to read his poetry. By the time I arrived the auditorium was filled, with perhaps twice as many people waiting outside. The instructive part of this anecdote is that the reading was delayed a good hour on Auden's orders until a loudspeaker system had been rigged up outside the building to accommodate the overflow crowd.

The cliché "voracious reader" might have been coined with Auden in mind. His was a catholic appetite – Greek mythology and Norse Eddas, Soren Kierkegaard and detective fiction, scientific papers and journals of all sorts, Hegelian dialectic and Episcopalian liturgy, cabaret songs and opera libretti (several of which Auden himself composed in collaboration with the love of his life, Chester Kallman).

In the early 1950's Random House instituted a series of magazine advertisements designed to sell its lexicographical publications, and W. H. Auden became the initial subject of its "The man who reads dictionaries" campaign. (Auden's own 13 volume O.E.D. was hopelessly dilapidated, though not solely from continual use. In keeping with his ramshackle sense of décor, the poet regularly employed its tomes as chair cushions in his Austrian summer house.)

W.H. Auden's oeuvre, however, reflects a design common to much great art – unity of intuition and intellect. A book by book perusal of this comprehensive collection reveals concretely Auden's poetical progress from early verbal virtuosity and social engagement all the way through to the inimitable conversational style characteristic of his post-World War II work.

As I reread these late lyrics that issued so ripely from Ischia and Kirchstetten, from the barbarous streets of the East Village, and from the serene lawns of Oxford where the poet nested near the end of his life, I picture Auden not as the peremptory and disheveled old man he became, but as some mythical, omniscient bird, perching briefly to gossip in magisterial manner of life's pleasures or peculiarities before soaring on to uninhabited planes of interest.

The W. H. Auden Collection offered in these pages is as fine as most and representative as any of Carter Burden's more than 3000 author collections of modern American literature. A typical collection includes all of the published books, a good number of which are signed, inscribed, or association copies. Many of the collections also include a choice manuscript or group of letters.

Carter Burden's 75,000 modern first editions comprise a feat unprecedented in book collecting history. Quality as well as quantity counts for this most sophisticated of collectors who began to acquire "objets d'art" at a tender pre-school age (toy soldiers).

Condition was from the beginning a central factor, though never a fetish. Dust jackets are required for all but the rarest of titles, and upgrading to better copies is an ongoing part of the process. A regular visitor to the Burden library cannot fail to notice the ubiquitous roll of Mylar from which Carter himself cuts dust jacket covers for those books which arrive in unprotected state.

The 28 rooms (and several out-of-house storage areas) of the Burdens' recently vacated East Side apartment had books shoehorned into just about every inch of space, including the ceiling-high shelves that perimetered the kitchen. I once caused their otherwise imperturbable housekeeper to roll her eyes in mock horror when I remarked on the gradual encroachment of her culinary domain by ever-arriving volumes.

When Carter and Susan Burden moved recently to smaller quarters, the dispersal of expendable parts of the collection was begun. All of the science fiction books, for example, were given to the New York Public Library. The pruning away of the British-born Auden's works signals a further reshaping of this unparalleled American literature collection into a more cohesive and manageable unit. Its deaccessioning provides a timely opportunity for collectors of modern poetry to enhance their own holdings.

Joseph The Provider / Books , 1989

JOHN SANFORD: The Loneliness of the Long Distance Writer

John Sanford is short, sure, and slow to smile; a steady-eyed man whose limberness and authoritative voice belie his 77 years. He is also an overlooked literary giant who has lived quietly in Santa Barbara for the last 25 years.

Sanford's writing career, nearing its golden anniversary year, has consistently been studded with 14-karat praise. Back in 1933 the poet Williams Carlos Williams said of Sanford's first book: "I can't say that I have ever seen better work." Forty-two years later the eminent critic Robert Kirsch pronounced "A More Goodly Country" a masterpiece.

Despite such endorsements, Sanford's track record with publishers looks like the form chart of a literary also-ran. It has taken 11 publishing houses to bring forth his 12 books – a near perfect record of divorce in a field noted for happy marriages. What's going on here?

Fierce artistic integrity for one thing, perhaps a constitutional inability to heed editorial advice – take your choice. Sanford is attentive in person, even courtly, though one suspects little give in matters pertaining to his books. Only after a thorough reading of his output comes the realization that fault for Sanford's lack of renown lies more with readers than the writer. To paraphrase Bertolt Brecht, Sanford reaches high but man is low.

His language is exact – and exacting. John Sanford's books are not what the publishing community calls "a good read." Enlightenment is his goal rather than entertainment. His prose is rich in allusion, a cornucopia of historical references. It rolls with biblical cadences punctuated by fragments of everyday speech that he transforms into rough poetry. Fact and fiction merge, lyrical passages upstage story lines, whole sections are typographically set apart. Literary techniques of this kind are bound to disturb those used to simpler structures. Measuring the aesthetic risks John Sanford has run reveals him as a marathon runner who has endured where fainter hearts would long ago have quit the race.

A further obstacle to Sanford's wide acceptance by the reading public is the radical position his books have taken. For radical, one could as easily substitute muckraker, debunker, gadfly, blasphemer, or defender of the underdog. All of these he has been but, foremost, John Sanford is an artist.

In 1936 he left New York for California to accept a Hollywood screenwriting contract. A decade earlier he seemed on the way to a career in law, but Nathanael West, Sanford's good friend, changed that forever with a simple declarative sentence. "I'm writing a book," West told his friend. Sanford recalls that it sounded like the most important thing one could do.

He began to apply himself seriously to the discipline of writing in the Adirondack cabin he and West shared one summer. There, while West was composing "Miss Lonelyhearts," Sanford worked on his first book, "The Water Wheel." A second novel, "The Old Man's Place," followed two years later, paving the way for the offer from Hollywood.

It soon became apparent that screenwriting, which is most often writing by committee, was not the way of his singular man. His romance with the movie business was short-lived. Another romance begun at that time has lasted longer; it's still going on. At Paramount Studios, Sanford met a fellow screenwriter, Marguerite Roberts. Their marriage is now in its fifth decade.

Maggie Roberts continued to write for the movies until her retirement several years ago. Her screen credits include early films like “Honky Tonk” and “Dragon Seed” and more recent ones like “True Grit.” It was she who encouraged John to continue writing books at his own pace and in his own uncompromising way.

During the McCarthy era, like many Hollywood writers, the Sanfords were questioned by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Because they took the Fifth Amendment and because Maggie refused to yield to studio pressure to name names, the Sanfords were blacklisted. They moved 100 miles north to Santa Barbara, light-years away from the betrayal-ridden environment they had come to despise.

The Santa Barbara property they purchased lay high on a Montecito hill, the site of servants’ quarters for a magnificent estate that was to be designed by the leader of Santa Barbara’s architectural renaissance, George Washington Smith. The owner of the property was a gentleman of lavish tastes and the wherewithal to indulge them until the 1929 stock market crash toppled his grandiose plans so that the estate remained in a state of arrested development until the Sanfords arrived.

Slowly, John and Maggie rebuilt the house. The living room sits where the old garage was to be. Sanford enhanced the house’s natural beauty by constructing a stone walk around it with his own hands. In the stonework, visitors can read the same dedication and meticulousness that characterize Sanford’s writing. The interior of the house suggests the setting of a British mystery novel, replete with a one-person elevator that ascends a grand total of 15 feet and an old fashioned intercom through whose ancient chambers the Sanford’s messages to each other squawk forth and back. From outside, the house resembles a Mediterranean villa. Large, open arched windows afford a spectacular view of the ocean. All in all, the abode is a tableau of serenity, broken only by the mewling of various feral kittens Sanford encourages to hang about.

On the eve of the nation’s bicentennial, Sanford’s first book of nonfiction appeared to universal accolades. At Maggie’s suggestion, he had abandoned the novel form, and in so doing he found his true voice. It is an eloquently persuasive one titled “A More Goodly Country,” and subtitled “A Personal History of America.”

Beginning with Lief Ericson’s discovery of “a place called here” and ending at Hiroshima, Sanford wrote more than 200 vignettes which were not quite fact and certainly not fiction, moving easily from Jamestown to Harper’s Ferry to Little Big Horn to Pearl Harbor. The range was as wide open and awesome as a Kansas wheat field and the theme as centrally American as that state’s geographical location. Sanford, quite simply, had chronicled our national heritage in imaginative terms.

Tracking through well-travelled territory, confronting forgotten landmarks, he expanded the significance of large events while pointing out the importance of small ones long passed over. The expected names from politics and literature are there to be sure, but they are shown from a fresh point of view, revealing a little-known side of familiar faces.

Foremost, Sanford avoids nostalgic traps. This is no Yankee-doodling jingoist smoothing over rough spots, extolling mom’s apple pie while ignoring harsh truths. He recognizes, as D. H. Lawrence put it, that the essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. In Sanford’s barn there are no sacred cows, only human beings whose fallibility he does not hide.

With its iconoclastic insistence on the unvarnished truth, “A More Goodly Country” proved once and for all Sanford’s wisdom in foregoing a law career, or for that matter, in foregoing a career in the diplomatic corps. It is an uncompromising work. If books could be measured for moral scrupulousness, on a scale of one to ten, this one is an eleven.

What sets it apart from others of its kind is the way Sanford makes language jump through his hoops. His is a bravura, spine-tingling performance, leaving no doubt that the style he had been painstakingly molding for so many years was now his own and no one else’s.

Writing of Lindbergh, Sanford deflates him at the triumphal moment: “... and lo, in thirty-odd hours the Bright and Morning Star returned to earth! But He wasn’t quite the same as Him that came from the Cross ... the engine of this Christ burned gasoline.” He walks the woods with Thoreau, seeing the limitations of that isolation: “But in the end it came to this, that never was he in danger: He threw no stone nor had one thrown at him.” And he soars heavenward through understatement in a piece on Sacco and Vanzetti: “...they were burned alive a mile or so from Bunker Hill. Not their words, though – the words turned out to be fireproof.”

Research for the book involved what would be another man’s lifetime of reading. Evidence of this prodigious scholarship rests on Sanford’s desk – a foot-high mound of expired daily parking permits to the UCSB library, whose stacks hold the facts on which the book is based.

Sales figures for “A More Goodly Country” were, as usual, disappointing. Sanford remained undaunted. Two companion volumes were published in 1977 and 1980; the first on American literary figures, called “View From This Wilderness,” the second on American women titled “To Feed Their Hopes.” The three comprise a trilogy Sanford calls “The Top of Pisgah.” And there is an as yet unpublished fourth book in the series lying on Sanford’s desk in manuscript. The long distance writer whose track is America has not yet completed the race.

Recently, Santa Barbara’s Black Sparrow Press completed arrangements with Sanford to reissue another of his books. “A Man Without Shoes,” an exquisitely printed giant of a novel, was published stillborn in 1951, killed by the pervading cold war climate. Its fiery, proletarian sentiments were not for that chill era. The book’s title derives from an old saying: “I had no shoes and complained and then I met a man with no feet.” The novel’s hero speaks for John Sanford as well when he says: “I mean to complain till I get my shoes or lose my feet.”

Santa Barbara Magazine, 1982

THE LITERATURE OF BASEBALL

The winds of change blew powerfully across the United States in the 20th Century, transforming virtually every aspect of life. As the country moved from the Gay Nineties through the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression, from the united patriotism of World War II through national divisions created by the Vietnam War, American values and customs changed. Individuals and institutions were forced to modify practices of long standing. Those that did not found themselves swept away and replaced by those more in synch with the times. Everything seemed to be changing. But not the game of baseball. Baseball was an exception to this modern dynamic. Baseball, which provides recreation and entertainment for millions of Americans and which has come to be called the National Pastime, remains just about the same game that Abner Doubleday invented in 1839, the same game that Swedish immigrants in Minnesota and Massachusetts factory hands were playing at the turn of the century in wheat fields or cow pastures.

In welcome contrast with football and basketball, where rule change is the norm, there are still 90 feet between the bases, exactly 60 feet, 6 inches from home plate to the pitcher's mound today as in the game's boring days. Almost a century gone by, yet four balls mean a walk, three strikes are out, and umpires are still as blind as bats.

Were he alive today, Honus Wagner, the ham-fisted shortstop for the 1903 World Champion Pittsburgh Pirates would have little difficulty recognizing the game of his St. Louis Cardinal counterpart, Ozzie (the wizard of aaahs) Smith dazzled at in the 1982 World Series. While baseball has gone through some explosive oo-the-field changes, the game itself has moved along serenely from the first inning of its existence.

The baseball record book has contributed to its continuity. Dead they may be, but Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Dizzy Dean and Jackie Robinson are probably better known to most Americans today than many of the country's former Presidents. A man may not remember (or perhaps would rather forget) the exact year in which his marriage took place, but very likely he can tell you that the year in which Joe Dimaggio hit safely in 56 consecutive games was 1941.

As might be expected, reams upon reams have been written about baseball – team histories, guides, biographies of star players, sociological studies, how-to books, jock memoirs, and learned theoretical texts which prove by the laws of physics that there is no such thing as a curve ball. (Tell that to the Yankees who came up against Sandy Koufax in the 1963 World Series.)

These fact-filled tomes have their function, but the essence of baseball is more clearly expressed by its fiction, by imaginative writing that, paradoxically, proves to be truer than cold facts. While three hits in 10 at bats is considered superior performance in baseball, the ratio of its fiction to nonfiction writing is surely less than 1 in 10, a bush-league average. And finding these books today with any consistency is about as easy as belting a homer with eyes shut.

Baseball literature goes back to the 19th Century and documents the American fascination with this stately and exacting game. Most of the early fiction is simple and formulaic, extolling the virtues of teamwork, fair play and clean living. Generations of youths were influenced by such literary role models as Frank Merriwell, Baseball Joe and the Kid From Tompkinsville. Baseball was a moral force in teaching youngsters how to conduct themselves off as well as on the field.

By World War 1, probably in reaction to this one-dimensional view, Ring Lardner and others began to satirize the game and its players. In pointing out the mental and social deficiencies of someone like Alibi Ike, Lardner and his contemporaries were themselves one-sided, but they proved a refreshing contrast to the reverent way in which the game had previously been portrayed.

Beginning in the '40s, such writers as Bernard Malamud, Mark Harris and Robert Coover wrote about baseball in a more rounded way, integrating the game with nothing less than life itself. They created recognizable characters who shared their triumphs and failures with Everyman. In short, baseball was now enough of a universal in American life to be a fit subject from which art could be created. Roy Hobbs in "The Natural" "sees" and tries to catch in his hands the bullet fired at his body – as wonderful a metaphor for the athletic impulse as ever was imagined.

Today, baseball fiction suffers the same natural attrition book flesh in all fields is heir to. Future lovers of the game will find far fewer examples of the genre within whose covers they can indulge their fantasies of perfect pitches and prodigious swings. The stories of Joe Hardy selling his soul to beat the Damn Yankees, Mighty Casey fanning the breeze in Mudville, and hundreds of lesser known fictional ballplayers are worthy of preservation. Losing them means a lot more than losing a ball game.

Ralph Sipper, Joseph The Provider / Books, 1983
(co-written with Larry Moskowitz)

COLLECTING MOVIE SOURCE BOOKS

The Star Theater was the second-run movie house in the South Bronx neighborhood of my youth. On Saturday mornings the line to get into the theater went well around the block, as several hundred kids like me waited impatiently for tickets to go on sale. The tickets would admit us to view – on a screen no smaller than a king-sized bedsheet – three features (one of which invariably was a Republic or Monogram Western), a March of Time newsreel, a few cartoons, a cliffhanger serial (we called them Chapters) and Coming Attractions, which we know today as previews or trailers.

All this cost 11 cents and included a free comic book if you were one of the first hundred entrants. Jujubes, Chocolate Kisses and Shoe Leather (dried apricot strips that eerily resembled flypaper) were not, alas, part of the deal. Today the Jujubes would be going steady with my gold crowns, and my taste in chocolate has evolved toward the rich bitterness of Swiss dark. (Let us leave the Shoe Leather for the cobbler's use.)

The passage of time has changed me in many ways, but one shining constant connects my movie-going then and now: total involvement with what is happening onscreen. I am at two with nature Woody Allen famously said. I am at one with him in refusing to watch a movie that has already begun. And my engrossment extends to more than the movie itself. I want to know who played what part. Are those the sashaying jowls of Eugene Pallette or Francis L. Sullivan? Who wrote the musical score or directed or produced the film? To this day I am among the last to leave the theater, preferring to scrutinize in its entirety the Crawl (such a perfect word) that divulges the screen credits. Thus I soon became aware that a particularly vivid cattle stampede or saloon fight was likely to have been choreographed by a veteran stuntman like Yakima Canutt. I tried to distinguish between the deep focus lighting of Gregg Toland and James Wong Howe. It seemed important to know the difference.

I also learned, as far back as my Star days, that many of the stories being played out on the screen were not written specifically for movies but based on books – usually novels. These stories I would quickly try to locate at the public library or the local paperback shop in hopes of replicating emotionally via the written word the screen image that had so engaged me. Once read, I returned or discarded the books, only to pick up others ranging in literary class from “For Whom the Bell Tolls” to “The Mark of Zorro.”

I did not know then that I was immersing myself in movie source books, or that I would be collecting them in a serious way 50 years down the line. In all my years as a rare-book dealer, I never once wished to assemble my own author or subject collection, though in a professional capacity I helped form a few decent ones.

Now, while it is not usual for drinkers to become bartenders, book collectors seem to metamorphose into dealers with some regularity. There are reasons for this, none more compelling than the expectation of being able to buy at favorable prices. I have seen more than a few clients attempt such a perceived step up the book chain.

Less than two years ago I decided to collect movie source books. The timing was right, for I now had the time and the resources required to begin the comprehensive collection I envisioned. When

I told my colleagues of my plans, a few of them saw this as apostasy. The pro, they smiled sagely, was heading south, turning amateur. One confrere took a more sinister view, likening my switch to that of a hunter tossing away his weapon in order to become prey. Fine books, this ever-practical man concluded, would henceforth be offered to me at, shall we say, even finer prices.

This, of course, is not the way things have worked out. Just as they would for any serious collector, dealers began offering me titles, the availability of many of which would surely have remained unknown to me. It was not long before I had acquired a defining nucleus from which to expand.

Andrew Marvell's words seem worth playing around with here: "Had we but funds enough and time, this book search, lady, were no crime." An ample purse is no doubt useful in entering today's book market. Coyness, even if you must budget your book buys with the mindset of a Silas Marner, just will not do when the right copy of the right book turns up. On the other hand, I have not yet shelled out the \$5,000 or so that a pristine copy of "Gone with the Wind" will set me back, because this key book is expensive but not rare. I am just waiting for the right copy to come along.

As dealers of modern first editions our firm had through the years bought and sold movie source books which we listed in sales catalogues by author. Then one time we offered a group of such books under the rubric "Movie Sources." To our surprise and delight, books waltzed out of our inventory virtually en bloc, at a time when other categories were proving themselves wall-flowers, or worse, three-dimensional wallpaper that lent our shelves an unwanted décor. Now these cinematic belles of the ball were being wooed by me.

Literature and the movies have been married for 100 years, their union existing from cinema's silent, black-and-white beginnings to today's technical innovations. The movies' first phase was primitively instinctual yet awesome: a precocious baby walking, even as it learned to stand. Early film plots required short attention spans from their audience and wandered simplistically. As moviegoers began to come of age they craved more substantial plot structures, and moviemakers soon realized that audiences would fill their theaters to watch full-fledged narratives projected on the screen. Consequently, they turned for source material to historical events, to the theater, and to the novel.

Thomas Edison's fin de siècle pageant, "The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots," with its climactic scene of the ill-fated ruler's severed head bouncing aimlessly across the floor like a point guard's errant pass, is a rudimentary forerunner of the accomplished 1971 Vanessa Redgrave movie (in which Hollywood enterprisingly posits a dramatic, but fictitious, meeting between Mary and Elizabeth, the English Queen who dooms her). Nevertheless, the interrelationship between source and film is in each case there to be examined.

What I was bringing to the collecting table was a lifetime of reading books and watching movies not once or twice, but more. Yet given the vast number of volumes eligible for a movie source collection, I was ripe for the Talmudic reminder that if I knew what I didn't know and didn't know what I knew, I would know a whole lot more.

I investigated what was available on the subject bibliographically and concluded that much of the information contained in even so monumental a reference as the 12-volume "Motion Picture Guide" is flawed when it comes to citing the original literary sources of films. More importantly, the many facts I needed to make a list of movie sources were recorded piece-meal in what discouragingly seemed to be almost as many volumes as I was contemplating amassing. Interestingly enough, one of the better references for comparing films and their inspirations is the monthly "Books Into Film" column that has

appeared in these pages monthly since *Firsts*' inception. Unfortunately, only some 80 books have yet been covered.

So I started compiling my own bibliography from all the knowledge I had been able to glean through the years. It took me the better part of a summer to compile a working list of some 2,000 movie source titles.

The next move was to establish parameters. Since I am by nature picky, it was relatively easy to establish limits. Quality, not quantity, was the keynote from which I would make selections. It would not be necessary to find all of the books on my list (and the ones I would be encountering along the way that I had missed), only those that met my exacting guidelines. Growth for growth's sake, after all, is the ideology of the cancer cell.

So like *Citizen Kane*, I formulated principles. The collection would consist of the finest copies of first editions I could afford, with original dust jackets being requisite for books published from shortly after the turn of the century. Moreover, I would try to get special copies where I could: inscribed ones, association copies, or with an apposite letter from the author laid in.

I vowed to be only slightly more flexible than a U.S. Marine Corps drill instructor in maintaining the rare-book standards I was imposing, and to try to raise the level of my sensibility. Bad sensibility, bad collection. It really is as simple as that.

The movie sources eligible for my collection would be texts that were the genesis of a film, including novels, short stories, plays, biographies, even a poem like Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" or Mackinlay Kantor's verse play "Glory For Me," which was the basis for the Academy Award-winning movie "The Best Years of Our Lives." The original source for "The King and I," for example, is not Margaret Landon's generally regarded "Anna and the King of Siam," but her source, a Nineteenth-Century memoir by Anna Harriette Leonowens titled "The English Governess at the Siamese Court."

Some of the greatest movies ever made will have no literary counterpart in the collection because they are based on original screenplays, or screenplays published in book form, or novelizations published after a film's release. These categories are outside my purview. The rationale for the collection is the relationship between literature and film, between the abstraction of words where you supply your own image of how the heroine looks, as opposed to a fixed pictorial representation that is augmented by cinematography, dramatic interpretation and the like.

In the John Fowles novel, he limns the French lieutenant's woman thus: "It was an unforgettable face, and a tragic face. Its sorrow welled out of it as purely, naturally and unstoppably as water out of a woodland spring." That fine description, evocative as it is, can be applied to as many women as there are readers. In the movie though, everyone gets the planned beauty of Meryl Streep's features as she stares forlornly at the Lyme Regis sea.

Another necessary restriction is that of time. Movies have changed definitively in recent years as the technology of filming has become computerized, digitized and – in my view – often trivialized. I don't watch movies for their special effects. As Ronald Reagan observed in another context, if you've seen one car chase, you've seen them all. Ditto explosions, cute aliens, musclebound Terminators or Rambo's. It is character-driven films that move me, not moving comic books. Sitting in the dark I crave to watch the cinematic workings out of real people reacting to depictions of experience that resonate in our hearts because they are universal.

The period when Hollywood accomplished this most consistently (if not always most subtly) was the so-called Golden Age, the early Thirties – a few years after the advent of talkies until the end of the studio system just before 1970, when Warner Brothers closed their studio and Twentieth Century Fox's Darryl Zanuck left for Europe. This was before the money boys and their accountants began fine-tuning the likelihood of a film's success with a spreadsheet. Today a movie's fate is often decided on the very weekend it opens. Not enough tickets sold and off it goes to the glue factory. They shoot movies, don't they, in more ways than one.

I grudgingly granted entry to a few movie books from the Seventies and Eighties because they seemed too vital to be excluded even if, like many books of this vintage, they were still readily obtainable. To bar novelistic inspirations for movies like "Kramer vs. Kramer" or "The Silence of the Lambs," both of which won major Oscars, seemed counterproductive to the collection's aim at large.

What should be done with foreign movies? I decided to exclude most but not all that were not originally written in English. Thus, the lovely signed copy I have of "The Tin Drum" by Gunter Grass will be denied entry, while Ed McBain's 8th Precinct police procedural, "King's Ransom," which was the basis for Akira Kurosawa's epic film "High and Low," stays. My collection, my call. How about plays that were made into movies? Should a published play, true source that it is, qualify for inclusion? Here I decided to admit only those whose movie counterparts outshone their predecessors, like "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" or "One Touch of Venus," with the divine Ava as the heavenly creature she never managed to be in her troubled life.

Thus, I sometimes break my own rules in exploring the boundaries of the collection. (The etymology of the Latin "probare" makes clear that the exception, rather than proving a rule, only tries it.)

One fertile area for movie books that I am unable to till for lack of the almighty green is the pantheon of literary antiquity. Shakespeare is the source for several films, but just because "Hamlet" and "Julius Caesar" are cinema classics doesn't mean that I can afford First Folios. The same holds true for the first editions of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations," or "Frankenstein" by Mary Shelley, who created the monster back in 1818.

What I can and have been doing is exhausting the possibilities of purchases within my means. When the late Carter Burden's lesser first editions (18,000 of 'em) were sold by his estate to two Berkeley booksellers, I visited Peter Howard's Serendipity and David Wirshup's Anacapa premises in search of some of the movie sources I remembered selling Carter 15 years ago. I had moderately assisted this peerless man in assembling the finest and most comprehensive collection of American literature of our time. (A little-noticed aspect of Carter's accomplishment is that, unlike lesser literary suns, more than a hundred dealers revolved around his prodigious undertaking).

So I went to Peter's, want list in hand. And there they were, just where I hoped they would be. Here for example, was the long-gone inscribed copy of "Blazing Guns on the Chisholm Trail," another copy of which had eluded me since. Why did this routine Western novel zing the strings of my heart so? It is the basis for Howard Hawks' "Red River. Back home I perused the novel to see how the author, Borden Chase, had first written what turned out to be a famous line from the film. The difference was telling and illustrates in part the symbiosis between literature and the movies that this collection hopes to define.

Early in the movie, John Wayne and the teenager he finds wandering, after Indians have massacred everyone else in the boy's wagon train, locate the site where their herd (Wayne's bull and the boy's cow) will graze, mate, and begin their cattle empire. The animals run off and rumble down-camera. The boy starts after them, only to be recalled by Wayne's drawl: "Wherever they go they'll be on my land." This evocative bit of dialogue, coupled with the camera's depiction of the vast Texas plain, makes clear the possibilities available to a man on the Nineteen century American frontier.

In the book, however, the line reads: "Anywhere he turns he'll be on my ground." Ground? Well, what did you expect from a cowboy author who grew up in Brooklyn? At the end of "Red River" a slit-eyed, pigeon-toed Wayne strides imperviously through his cattle to kill the boy (now grown up to be Montgomery Clift) who took his herd from him. After a somewhat improbable brawl in which the (maybe) 140-pound Clift fights Wayne to a standstill (actually a sitdown, if you remember the scene), it is clear that they will live happily ever after.

Chase, however, had the book end with the Clift character taking the mortally wounded Wayne home to Texas so that he can expire on his beloved soil. I am not sure how many care about such differences, but isn't it pretty to think so.

Other movie source books I had sold to Carter that were not recycled back to me at Serendipity turned up later at Anacapa Books. A wonderful scouting day. You get off-the-beaten-tracks books like this one by one; a slow rate of accretion, perhaps, but if you continue to track them, a steady one.

I now have some 350 books, and probably will have to rely on Searchers in the trade to help me corral twice again as many before I have enough to qualify as a real collection. That'll be the day.

Firsts Magazine, 1998

PETER WHIGHAM
1925 – 1987

Peter Whigham was likely to turn up anywhere. The word “peripatetic” with its classical Greek allusiveness seems to me to have been coined with him in mind.

I first met Peter in Berkeley in 1970 or '71 at Moe's Bookstore, where I was serving a self-imposed apprenticeship toward my entry into the rare-book trade. Moe's, just down the street from the U.C. Berkeley campus, was known as a likely source for out-of-print books in all disciplines.

One evening a bearded, imposing presence stood before me, dressed in a red lumberjack shirt with pink silk tie, baggy khaki trousers, and a fitted tweed jacket with belted back. This imperious-looking, formally courteous Viking chieftain introduced himself in Oxbridgian tones as Peter Whigham and announced the purpose of his visit. He was looking for specific titles (and specific editions) by such currently neglected authors as Norman Douglas, Martial, George Borrow, Meleager, G.K. Chesterton, Pierre de Ronsard, and Walter Savage Landor.

As it happened I located several books for him. I like to think that my undisguised pleasure in his esoteric interests pleased Peter. He began to stop in, usually just before the 11pm closing time, and we would talk books and drink beer. Then he stopped coming in and soon thereafter I left Moe's for good.

About five years later Peter turned up in our Santa Barbara offices where, after the briefest of how are yous, he proceeded in medias res to pick up where we had left off – asking me to locate for him some of the books he was currently seeking. Our relationship had been redefined in a trice.

Now located in Santa Barbara, he held two jobs. By day he sold flowers from a street-stand, and at night he lectured on the classical literature he loved to an adult education class. Peter's erudite talks were more suited to an audience of graduate students, but it is to his everlasting credit that he never once talked down to the blue-haired Montecito matrons and hippie carpenters whose tabula rasa sensibilities he filled with Poundian subtleties or his own approach to the translation of Provencal poetry.

Apart from his breadwinning labors, Peter was working on a translation of “The Divine Comedy.” “Life's path half past, / I came to in a dark forest, / the road ahead – lost.” So it began. It was apparent to me from samples that the finished work would surpass in its integrated beauty even his Penguin Catullus, widely considered the finest of modern translations of the Roman poet.

I got used to the following daily routine: Peter's tentative knock on the door, followed by some briskly polite inquiries of what I was up to. Having ascertained that our photocopier was not presently in use, he would commandeer the machine and run off the latest draft of a canto. These copies he would then send in samizdat style to his circle of friends for criticism.

By now Peter was working the 6am to 2pm bartending shift at Don's John, a blue collar bar whose gritty presence belied Santa Barbara's upscale image. Peter assured me that even at that unlikely opening there were myriad souls in desperate search of conviviality. The bartender's own

conviviality was never in question to anyone who knew him. This was a glass lifter as epic in performance as the classical heroes he admired. But Peter never let John Barleycorn (nor anything else) dissuade him too long from his labors. He did his work.

The number of drafts he would produce for a line whose music seemed not quite faithful to his fastidious ear was awesome. Awesome too was his command of poetics, his knowledge of Eastern and Western classical history, his recall of literary arcana of all kinds. In my Whigham file are one dozen versions of his translation of Verlaine's poem, "Colloque Sentimental." The typographical and cursive disarray of the drafts graphically illustrates his meticulous manner of composition. The last draft is neatly typed except for Peter's proud holograph inscription at having completed the poem to his satisfaction: "For Carol & Ralph Sipper / --40 years / Caught in a day!"

Who wouldn't have felt good about helping this truest of artists find books, to astonishedly observe his single-minded pursuit of them. When the bookbuying fever came over Peter, he could quickly accumulate a wall of volumes in utter contradiction of a continual state of poverty. But no sooner had the shelves been filled, the books would vanish as in a fairy tale.

"They had to go," he would announce cheerily, never resenting the modest sums he realized for books purchased at full market price. The financial crisis abated, he would immediately resume his Sisyphean collecting, never complaining. Peter was a most sophisticated man. He understood how the world worked. It happened not to be his way, but he accepted that unalterable fact with the equanimity of a Zen master.

It wasn't all so poignant. There was play – relaxed, vinous dinners at our home. There was work that seemed like play. Carol printed on her letterpress, using Harry Reese's handmade paper, a 50-copy edition of a section of Peter's version of the usurers canto (XVII). The Dante project was in full swing. Then Peter took off once again.

From time to time we would hear about him through mutual friends, or occasional letters would arrive. The last one came from rural Humboldt County, less than three weeks before his death. "I am not a wilderness buff," he wrote, "preferring cows and apple orchards – a peopled landscape – so it is a relief to receive signals every so often that one's friends from a former life are still genially at it."

The next news of Peter was delivered to us by his best friend, the baritone Michael Ingham, an energizing supporter who collaborated with him on several artistic projects. Peter had run the pickup truck that was carrying him and his recent bride, Margaret, off a mountain road at midnight. Margaret thinks he died instantaneously. They were on their way back to Santa Barbara.

Had Peter made it back, just about the first thing he would have done is check on the well-being of the books that Michael was storing for him. That would be typical. In my heart though, I knew the day would inevitably have come when these books too had to go.

But why did Peter have to?

Joseph the Provider / Books, 1987

KINSEYMILLHONE'S UNCHARTERED ITINERARY

Three millennia ago, fair Helen launched a thousand ships and toppled the towers of Ilium. Today, a darker-tressed woman of wonder, sailing a mere word processor, sends shock waves through the publishing world, not from Troy, but from the equally Mediterranean ambience of Santa Barbara, California.

Sue Grafton's 11th book in her Alphabet series of crime novels, "K Is for Killer" was printed recently in an edition of 600,000 – more copies than the combined total of all the hardcovers ever published by Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald. But Grafton does more than just mega-push mysteries to readers in quest of an easy typographical fix; she has consistently earned high marks from the critics for her work.

If you believe in an explainable universe, there is a compelling reason for such an unusual daily double. It goes by the name of Kinsey Millhone, Grafton's narrator. Here she is, introducing herself in "A Is for Alibi" :

"My name is Kinsey Millhone. I'm a private investigator, licensed by the state of California. I'm thirty-two years old, twice divorced, no kids. The day before yesterday I killed someone and the fact weighs heavily on my mind. I'm a nice person and I have a lot of friends. My apartment is small but I like living in a cramped space. I've lived in trailers most of my life, but lately they've been getting too elaborate for my taste, so now I live in one room, a 'bachelorette.' I don't have pets. I don't have houseplants. I spend a lot of time on the road and I don't like leaving things behind. Aside from the hazards of my profession, my life has always been ordinary, uneventful, and good. Killing someone feels odd to me and I haven't quit sorted it through."

Often rebellious, always independent, archly self-deprecating, an intriguing mix of the intuitive and analytical, smart-assed when her superego is on a coffee break, and yet deep down a softy, this complex and completely credible modern woman has – in terms of a reader's knowledge of the detective he is encountering – surpassed Hammett's stoic Op, Chandler's knightly Marlowe, and Macdonald's self-effaced Archer as a fully-developed character with whom to identify.

Sexually, Kinsey is a woman of her time – wary of encounters, but Gung Ho once physically engaged. Like most of us, she lies; only this determined woman consciously shapes her prevarications so as to make them more convincing. Unabashed nosiness leads her into dangerous places, and she thinks nothing of picking a lock or two to get there. She is admirably moral and occasionally moralistic.

Of her kinship with her heroine, Sue Grafton one-lines: "I think of us as one soul in two bodies and she got the good one." Since our trim author jogs several miles four days a week and swims in her pool the other three, this is modesty on her part. Besides, at age 53, Grafton is spotting her fictional alter ego some 20 years.

In a more serious vein, her creator reflects that "Kinsey Millhone is the person I would have

been had I not married young and had children. She is more than that. She is a stripped-down version of my 'self,' my shadow, my projection – a celebration of my own freedom, independence and courage.”

All well and good. But wishing it does not necessarily make it so. What distinguishes the Alphabet books is the perfect narrative pitch of Kinsey’s voice. The timbre of that voice is analogous to the improvisations of a master jazz soloist who wings it, but only after calling on hard-won technical skills to plumb the depths of his experience. Having done the work, he is finally free to fly.

Grafton calls this “getting connected to your stuff, a sense of authenticity or truth.” Much of that authenticity or truth derives from doing homework. She is an intrepid researcher and has taken classes in women’s self-defense and criminal law. She owns a handgun and has fired it at a target because she wanted to know just how it felt to squeeze the trigger. The Grafton library includes various books on crime detection, technical works on toxicology and forensics among them.

A crucial difference between a superior crime novel and one that is only competent is the preparation brought to the task by the writer. Unlike a ready-made pasta sauce, Grafton’s compositional method can be seen as one in which the ingredients have been carefully selected, blended and slowly simmered. This start-from-scratch writer is not your basic Ragu, but the real thing. She composes for several hours a day, every day, to produce perhaps two pages. Her books confirm the truism that good writing is rewriting. It usually takes a full year before another letter of the alphabet can be checked off.

Asked why she has committed to working her way through “Z,” Grafton deadpans: “There must be more than 26 ways to kill somebody.” But it is clear that an ambitious being is making funny here.

A serial reading last month of the first ten Kinsey Millhones provided a continuity not possible had the novels been read separately upon their publication over the last eleven years. And clues as to where Grafton may be heading.

The books have been changing – more of an evolution than a revolution, perhaps, but changing nonetheless. The temptation is to guess that Kinsey is changing in direct proportion to changes taking place in her creator. In any case, the last several books betray a deepening of mood. This may not be readily apparent, because the Alphabet series incorporates various constants within its components. As these constants turn up again and again, so do Grafton’s repertory players who are brought onstage to help define Kinsey.

All the books are characterized by keenly observed description – of characters, weather, architecture and interior design. These digressions from the plot proper are limned with a precision of detail and verisimilitude that can only come from a painstaking study of the subject under discussion. Seeing it right enables you to write it right. Or, as Kinsey puts it while reorganizing her notes on a case: “Information accumulates and compounds, layer upon layer, each affecting perception.”

Grafton is particularly good at evoking the topography of Santa Teresa, the Southern California town in which Kinsey lives. Santa Teresa, of course, is Santa Barbara, where Grafton has resided for much of the last two decades. “A” contains the first of Grafton’s evocations of the town:

“Santa Teresa is a Southern California town of eighty thousand, artfully arranged between the

Sierra Madres and the Pacific Ocean – a haven for the abject rich. The public buildings look like old Spanish missions, the private homes look like magazine illustrations, the palm trees are trimmed of unsightly brown fronds, and the marina is as perfect as a picture postcard with the blue-gray hills forming a backdrop and white boats bobbing in the sunlight. Most of the downtown area consists of two- and three-storey structures of which stucco and red tile, with wide soft curves and trellises wound with gaudy maroon bougainvillea.”

The clarity of Grafton’s prose reflects the years she spent writing for television and the movies, media which demand directness and terseness of expression. When she does resort to a figure of speech it is usually to the point, stripped of ornateness, and wedded to the plot. In “K,” for example, the splattered blood on the baseboard of a fatally assaulted young woman whom Kinsey befriended “looked like tears of paint.”

When social detail is presented, you can bet that it will have a direct bearing on the story. The inner workings of a Santa Teresa water treatment plant and a contentious water board meeting between polarized civic interests advance the plot of “K,” and the lap pool that figures pivotally in the story is much like the one Grafton recently installed in her home.

In this, the 11th Alphabet novel, the defining elements are darkness, sadness and self-doubt. Here are Kinsey’s ghostly thoughts from the first page of “K”:

“The victims of unsolved homicides I think of as the unruly dead; persons who reside in a limbo of their own, some state between life and death, restless, dissatisfied, longing for release. It’s a fanciful notion for someone not generally given to flights of imagination, but I think of these souls locked in an uneasy relationship with those who have killed them. I’ve talked to homicide investigators who’ve been caught up in similar reveries, haunted by certain victims who seem to linger among us, persistent in their desire for vindication. In the hazy zone where wakefulness fades into sleep, in that leaden moment just before the mind sinks below consciousness, I can sometimes hear them murmuring. They mourn themselves. They sing a lullaby of the murdered. They whisper the names of their attackers, those men and women who still walk the earth, unidentified, unaccused, unpunished, unrepentant. On such nights I do not sleep well. I lie awake listening, hoping to catch a syllable, a phrase, straining to discern in that roll call of conspirators the name of one killer.”

Sunny Santa Teresa? Not. More like Lotusland metastasizing into Nightmare on Elm Street. No wonder Kinsey is distraught. Much of her investigating takes place in the dead of night, causing her biological time clock to be thrown off. One hopes that her disorientation is of the enlightening kind that foreshadows a more profound understanding of self. In last year’s “J Is for Judgment,” the proudly self-sufficient Kinsey, who grew up orphaned and learned to keep her inner feelings pretty much under wraps, began to untie the knots of the past and, while investigating the crime she was hired to unravel, went down into her faintest memories, stoically accepting the pain of intimacy she had long avoided.

Grafton is at heart a psychological writer. Understanding human behavior is a central concern throughout her work. Yet, even when dealing with such slippery concepts as human motivation, she maintains a firm grip on her prose. So much of what passes for psychological fiction today is like painting by numbers. The finished portrait is one of uniform obviousness. Foolish psychobabble parades as understanding. Grafton, too, lays out behavioral clothing for the reader, but wisely permits him to dress himself.

In “A,” the man Kinsey sleeps with is romantically referred to as “a sheltering cave of flesh.” He turns out to be the killer, and in the last chapter Kinsey blows him away. The murder victim, Grafton has let on elsewhere, is patterned on her ex-husband. Disposing of a hateful individual in her fiction becomes the author’s sly revenge. Sublime sublimation as this may be, such playfulness is becoming notably scarcer in the more recent books, so that when Kinsey makes tentative contact in “J” with unknown family members, she is plumbing submerged emotional territory.

“K” is darker yet. Kinsey’s friends are little in evidence. She is too depressed to do her jogging. Even her celebrated sense of humor has an edge to it. What we are being made privy to is a life view turning bitter. Kinsey examines a murdered woman’s photograph and sees not a beautiful body but dead meat. “In some ways, it’s hard to know which is more sordid, the pornography of sex or the pornography of homicide ... Decomposition has erased most of the definition from Lorna Kepler’s flesh. The very enzymes embedded in her cells had caused her to disintegrate. The body had been invaded, nature’s little cleaning crew busily at work – maggots as light as a snowfall and as white as thread.”

Is it any surprise, then, that this law-abiding investigator comes to condone vigilantism; that she is, if not technically outside the law, in moral limbo? The novel’s last sentence, “Can I find my way back?” clearly suggests that Kinsey is at a crossroads. Given the symbiotic relationship of the character and her creator, one wonders where the former is leading the latter.

Sue Grafton is not the first detective novelist to dead-end in this way. Ross Macdonald, another notable user of the Santa Barbara / Santa Teresa locale, incorporated large chunks of contemporary social issues into his last three novels. The use of such natural events as a forest fire that threatened the local environment or an oil spill that betrayed irresponsible civic behavior clearly indicated that Macdonald was consciously broadening his books, perhaps returning them to their origin, the general novel itself.

Sue Grafton is upping the literary ante on a more personal level. If Kinsey Millhone is perplexed, then so must Sue Grafton be. Sensing that more is at stake, she will be slowing down the pace that has produced a book a year since 1985. Her publishers have been told not to expect the manuscript of “L” on the same implied annual basis.

Sitting in her living room amidst an imposing pile of “K” to be autographed, Sue Grafton heaves a deep sigh: “I come down these mornings and look at the blank screen of my word processor. It is a scary sight.” Probed several times about where the series may be heading, the author remains silent. She focuses directly on her inquisitor, then looks through him into the distance. “I don’t know,” she finally says.

In this context, “L” could unkindly be interpreted as “Lost.” But, given the clues that have been planted, it seems likely that greater achievements are in the offing for Sue Grafton and Kinsey Millhone.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

This is the best of times. A worst there isn't, not if you are lucky enough to earn your living by dealing in books. Nevertheless, a quarter-century after establishing our rare-book enterprise, I felt chained – not, like Prometheus, to a rock but to my desk. (The only gods working my liver over daily were the heavenly beings in my wine cellar disguised as bottles). I longed to get back out to where the fun has always been – hunting down books.

When you get right down to it, much of mail order bookselling is a passive endeavor. You wait for books you have bought to arrive, for letters and phone calls to be answered, for catalogues to return from the printer, for orders to come in. Oh, and you wait to be paid.

Instead of saluting books that marched daily into Santa Barbara like an invading army (this force clad not in khaki but motley cloths, boards and, to be sure, pristine dust jackets), I decided to go AWOL for good and resume marching to my own tune.

So here I am, back where I was in 1970, unsalaried and, if you will pardon the expression, raring to go.

Six months ago I traveled as the representative of Joseph the Provider / Books to a distant place. There I considered the acquisition of a few extraordinary books. More recently, with a wallet full of new business cards announcing me as Ralph Sipper / Books, I journeyed to an equally exotic venue in quest of – you guessed it – more books. And this time, more than just a few.

Books, Butterflies and the Bear

High up on an Alpine rise that overlooks Montreux, the centerpiece of the Swiss Alps, the son of Vladimir Nabokov lives in an unprepossessing condominium whose exterior belies its ritzy ambience. Waiting for the doorbell to be answered, I look down on majestic Lac Lemman and the yellow-shuttered twin edifices of the Palace Hotel where Nabokov and his wife lived out their last years in the midst of Old World tranquility. Close by is the small cemetery where their ashes repose in the same urn.

I have crossed the Atlantic at the invitation of Dmitri, the Nabokovs' only descendant, who now manages the family affairs. Dmitri himself constitutes an Alpine presence. As the door opens, I look up to a Swiss bear who stands six and one-half feet tall and seems almost as wide. Here is the kind of power forward screen an NBA shooting guard would give his off hand for. For all his burliness, though, the son has turned out like his sire, being an economy size blend of erudition, formal courtesy and independence of mind.

Dmitri believes that the time has come to release into the world of those to whom such things matter the extraordinary family copies of his father's books. Several years ago Nabokov's literary papers were sold to the New York Public Library. Now being made available to me (for a price, of course) are the very copies Vladimir presented to his wife. Each volume has been lovingly inscribed with multilingual sentiments that are both verbally playful and intimate. Several of the books also bear

the author's holograph corrections, attesting to his legendary editorial fastidiousness.

Nabokov's is among the most desirable and rarest of modern autographs. He signed books only for persons he knew and not too many of them, at that. Only J.D. Salinger's signature comes to mind as being of comparable importance, value, and scarcity. Furthermore, these fabled copies, which have been celebrated in print and whose existence has been known to collectors, are adorned by exquisitely rendered multicolor drawings of butterflies that in themselves are *objets d'art*. Nabokov avidly roamed the world in search of rare butterflies and published respected scientific papers on lepidopterology concurrently with his literary compositions.

Thrilling as the copies are, it soon becomes apparent that their acquisition will sprain the prospective buyer's solvency if not downright fracture it. The Bear, you see, is not unaware of what he has. Still, he is worldly enough to realize that he needs the help of a professional to move along these beauties at state-of-the-art prices. So begin 48 hours of intense negotiations, with the visitor at a jet-lagged disadvantage.

Dmitri is an engaging fellow, a Harvard graduate whose graceful English locutions interact mellifluously with continental inflections. During the course of the day he converses easily in Italian with his housekeeper and in Russian with his assistant. My host employs other foreign tongues in the course of answering the intermittent ringing of his telephone, but I am not really paying attention.

I am pondering how to swim back with at least a few books in tow and yet not drown in red ink. Inside my wallet is a bank check drawn against our line of credit. The full meaning of earnest money dawns on me.

Dmitri jumps up. He is late for lunch in nearby Gstaad with William Buckley. Would I like to join them? I decide to remain in continued consideration of the books and watch the Bear fold himself into his Ferrari, part by large part. Years ago Dmitri was a racing car driver on the Italian circuit, an impetuous one apparently. He has the scars to prove it. He is also a basso who has shared the opera stage with luminaries including Luciano Pavarotti. In addition, he is a no-nonsense mountain climber, and has translated a good number of his father's books from Russian into English.

I am personally able to bear witness to his discriminating interest in fine cuisine and wine. By the end of the second night, with a small army of depleted goblets as witnesses, we finally reach an accommodation. It is one a.m. Swiss time and I am loath to calculate how many times zones my lightly pickled body is removed from California. My good host offers to drive me back to the hotel.

Our Lucullan debauch has left the Bear, I believe, in need of hibernation, and after glancing again at his racing scars, I announce my intention to walk the serpentine mile or two back to town. I can still hear Dmitri's booming Goudonovian tones as I round the first corner, imploring me to avoid the treacherous *culs de sac* enroute. The collar of my light corduroy jacket is pulled up in a pitiful attempt to keep the 30-degree temperature from turning me into a mini-mountain. By the light of the full moon I make out the Palace Hotel and employ it as a lodestar to guide me home.

Freezing, exhausted and knowing I have overspent myself, I am nonetheless exhilarated. I can hardly wait to be back home in order to catalogue the books.

Books, Books and Books

Not long after driving northwest from the Dallas / Fort Worth airport, traffic thins out radically. I am heading into the country of the relatively few. Over the next two hours, in the words of a song I like, “the road don’t bend, there ain’t no twist.” The air conditioning unit in my rented car is striving valiantly to keep the 100-plus-degree heat from cooking me like the chicken-fried steak I hope to be tearing into that evening at the Texasville café in Archer City.

You may know Archer City by other names. In his novel “The Last Picture Show” Larry McMurtry called it Thalia, but that unlikely Olympian appellation with its evocation of beautiful Muses and Graces was further altered by McMurtry and director Peter Bogdanovich in their movie adaptation of the book.

Those outside the book trade may not be aware that in addition to a distinguished literary career McMurtry has been a book dealer for as long as I have – more than 25 years. A couple of years ago he suggested to me and a small number of colleagues that we might wish to travel to Archer City and see for ourselves the many books he had quietly been herding from all over the contiguous 48 states into this remote hamlet of 1,500.

Larry explained that he had been buying large quantities and in some cases the full inventories of some 15 bookstores. “Fragments and remnants,” he termed them. He estimated that by now some 300,000 volumes had been shoehorned into three large buildings he owns on the town’s main street.

If Larry’s figures are correct the math works out to 200 books for every man, woman and child in these unbookish parts. Think of it another way. Archer City’s ubiquitous ranches are probably populated by more cattle than John Wayne encountered in all of his oaters put together. And what with your average tome weighing in at about one-and-one-half pounds – well, podnuh, that’s a lot of paper on the hoof.

Why am I, an allegedly picky rare book dealer, making this pilgrimage? For a number of reasons, none of which I seem able to justify entirely as I hang a left at Bowie, just 45 straight-as-an-arrow miles from the promised land.

When I told Larry that I was coming he let on that several other book dealers had been there recently, naming a batting order of such rare-book sluggers that I thought it unlikely there would be many sleepers left to drive home. Still, I am carrying a thick portfolio of want lists – serious collectors’ desiderata as well as books I am looking for personally – in order to further my buying opportunities.

I am on this dusty quest, though, for a reason far more compelling than locating specific titles. I want to know if I can still find books in the most honorable way: one by one. And in the most unpromising of places, where others may have left behind treasures unknown to them. What I am really doing is journeying back to my beginnings as a bookman, a time when a little knowledge and lots of persistence were my only assets. Approaching Archer City it occurs to me that I can do much better in terms of potential profit by attending an ABAA book fair or by calling a few rare-book contacts for one of the 50 or so modern literature highspots everyone seems to want.

But squeezing the last few dollars out of a book is only a short-lived satisfaction. It does not begin to inspire the ecstasy that attaches to the chase itself. If such talk strikes you as naïve, even Quixotic, then you have never experienced the edgy anticipation of waiting in line for the doors to a library sale to open to you and a horde of other antsy book scouts, the thrill of sprinting to the sale tables despite the likelihood that you will be disappointed by the selection.

Larry himself is a legendary scout (See the June 14, 1976 issue of *The New Yorker* for Calvin Trillin's hilarious account of being shown the ropes by McMurtry at a Vassar sale). In "Cadillac Jack" Larry articulated a basic principle of book prospecting, "anything can be anywhere," whose seductive truth has kept me digging on many occasions when good sense dictated otherwise.

This grass roots approach is anachronistic in today's upscale book trade, which is tilting toward gentrification and uniformity of interests. Big money books defy the principles of gravity and funnel upwards to carriage trade booksellers who place them with affluent collectors. Price guides, marginally useful as they are, inhibit individual expression and discourage collecting that is not mainstream in scope.

No longer relevant is the kind of specialized knowledge implied by the adage that "an expert is someone who can tell by the wrinkles in the sheets whether it was done for love or money." Love and money really *are* the polarities at work here. I am certainly not opposed to money and I like books a lot (love I reserve for my wife and daughter). Bringing the two into harmony is the rub.

Getting out of the car in front of Booked Up on South Center Street proves a hellish experience. Dante Alighieri has incomprehensibly transmigrated to Texas, bringing with him a Ninth Circle of concentrated fire that defies description. Or maybe I have lost my way and am really in Larry's of Arabia, minus the camels parked outside.

It is 5 p.m. and Harlan Kidd, who manages the stores when Larry is not there (which is most of the time), shows me around. Learning that I would like to work late, he heads home where cooler climes prevail. He is also smart enough to divine that any fool willing to function in this infernal swelter is too dumb to steal. Before abandoning me to my pleasant agony Harlan gives me the key to Larry's house, which the locals refer to as the Mansion or the Big House. Larry, who had planned to be here, has been detained in Los Angeles, but thanks to his generosity I will have the two-story place with its 14 large rooms to myself for the next two nights.

The Mansion used to belong to Will Taylor, an oilman who became something of a recluse after his son died in an accident. Taylor would lend Larry, who grew up on a nearby Wichita Falls ranch, books from his well-stocked library at a time when there were virtually no other reading facilities available to the precocious young reader. After Taylor died the house was put up for sale, but Larry could not afford to buy it. The Mansion then somehow metamorphosed into the Archer City Country Club until Larry purchased it in the mid-Eighties.

McMurtry has said that he hopes to have 1,000,000 books in Archer City by the turn of the century: "An anthology of book stores past," in his words. Interrogated as to why on earth he would want to succumb to such romanticism, Larry invokes the name of Bertram Smith. For those of us who assembled our inventories by driving cross-country a generation ago and visiting large, general stores, Smith's Acres of Books in Cincinnati was a book-laden way station not to be missed. Few rarities or highspots were to be found, but there were thousands of good books to be had and no remainders to have to paw through, either.

At the Mansion I peel down to T-shirt and shorts, pausing briefly to walk through the rooms. Each one is crowded with books and other eclectic collectibles Larry has gathered from all over the world. Not all the books are first editions in as-new condition, but all are of quality, most of them no longer to be encountered regularly on bookshelves. I would dearly like to buy from this wonderful corpus of literature, history, biography and travel, but know better than to be boorish enough to try.

The house is my ideal of comfort and grace, and constitutes a frame for the bibliographical wealth it contains. The furniture is predominantly of heavy wood, including an ornate bed from Thailand that arrived disassembled and, I am told, with its own little Thai man to put it back together.

Though I am hardly anxious to abandon the Mansion's cool ambience, I must make my way back to where there are books for sale. On the way out I beat Larry for a beer from the fridge and feel it briefly and thrillingly irrigate my parched insides like a child's pail of water being upended on the sand of a beach.

Book scouting requires a mindset as well as a rhythm. You can go along the shelves slowly, taking care not to miss such crucial things as an authorial inscription in an otherwise undistinguished candidate. The flip side of this painstaking method is to zip along in the full knowledge that you will miss a good book here or there, but that you will see several times as many books in the same time period.

I opt for a synthesis, going into overdrive when the binding seems all too familiar or otherwise unpromising, and braking sharply when something prickles the back of my neck, much like the little man inside "Double Indemnity's" Edward G. Robinson, clueing him in that something is not kosher with the insurance case he is investigating. This is not so much instinct as learned behavior, the *déjà vu* of one experienced. Good scouts really are like good detectives. They know when something of interest is close by, even if they cannot articulate how they know.

The three stores I will be working are all airless and not optimally lit. I need to psych myself up for the physical ordeal to come. I do not (as the high-strung Bill Russell was known to do before Celtic games) throw up in purgative preparation, but I do promise myself that I will hold to my objective, which really is simple. I mean at least to make eye contact with every book.

So I climb the ladder to the topmost books and work my way down shelf by shelf until I am at floor level, where I reach for a much-needed footstool as my lower back reminds me it is not nearly as limber as it once was. I repeat this drill again and again and again until 1 a.m., surprised that time has gone by so fast. Out of the thousands of volumes scanned, I have culled perhaps 15.

Back at the Mansion, I eschew a badly-needed shower, fall into bed and, as they say, sleep the sleep of the dead until 6 a.m., when an uncharacteristic and perverse burst of early morning energy propels me to my feet. I pull on the same T-shirt and shorts over aching muscles, secure in the knowledge that no one is here to discern my, shall we say, less-than-mint state.

Midway between the Mansion and the bookshops is a convenience market in front of which a group of truckers and ranchers are taking in their caffeine, chatting by the headlights of their idling semis and pickups. I bring my coffee container to the checkout with proffered dollar in hand only to have the bill handed back to me by the matronly clerk: "Why, honey, coffee's free before 7 a.m.," she smiles. It dawns on me that I have stumbled upon a highly evolved society.

Over the next 18 hours I will dig out another 40 books including a lovely copy of a Frank Lloyd Wright book from the display case, some McMurtry proofs that I can immediately place and some film books I believe Larry has underpriced by a Texas mile. I decide to pass up two middle-period Ezra Pound letters that are priced \$2,500. They could have been bought, but I choose not to swing at this shoulder-high fastball and instead opt for a John Updike paperback original that will set me back \$3.00

(less discount).

Harlan and I have a quick lunch at the Texasville Café, where the walls are decorated with newspaper clippings describing the 1971 filming of “The Last Picture Show” in this town back in 1971. Back at work I force myself to slug through an entire wall of proof copies that Larry bought from the heirs of the late and beloved bookman Frank Scioscia. The proofs have not gotten any better since the last time I saw them at Frank’s several years before, the choice plums having long since been plucked by others.

At five Harlan and the rest of his young crew of book clerks leave. I fleetingly consider going somewhere cooler and less print-oriented, perhaps down to the dam where Lois and Sam the Lion once skinny-dipped. Instead I walk a block back to the most stifling and book-crammed of the stores and keep slugging away. Hours later I come across a row of books that look eerily familiar. A sickening feeling pours over me. I went through this section *yesterday*. As if there were not enough books to see, I am repeating myself much like the neighboring cows who, too are in the process of chewing their cud twice.

Finally at midnight I bring all my stacks from the various buildings back into the main store. They will be shipped to me. South Center Street is deserted as I head back to the Mansion. I do not sleep as well as the previous night because I am anticipating rising at 5 a.m. so that I will be back at the airport in time for my flight home.

On the way out of town I decide to pass up the free coffee and drive right by the convenience store, not far from where Billy dutifully swept the street in front of the pool hall in “The Last Picture Show.”

Firsts Magazine, 1996

FRANK SCIOSCIA (1922-1993)

From the day we launched this firm our catalogues have sailed forth under the benevolent banner of the original Joseph the Provider. But so saddened were we this summer by the death of Frank Scioscia, cherished friend and worthy colleague, that we have chosen to dedicate this catalogue to his memory. It is Frank's likeness which appears on the front cover alongside The Provider – as for years it was his knowing presence that informed all our catalogues.

Who can forget what it was like to visit Frank at his home in Hastings-on-Hudson? Early in the morning you proceeded up the Hudson River Valley. With a view of the Palisades on the Jersey side you crossed into Westchester County and made your way up the steeply-sloped streets of Hastings to the last house in a cul-de-sac, where Frank and his wife, Mary, a woman of unforced graciousness and endless patience, would be waiting.

Crossing the Scioscia threshold you entered a bookman's dream world. Good books were everywhere – on shelves in all the rooms not excluding the bedrooms, on the floors, in the hallways and basement, even in the garage from which cars had long been displaced. The house held more books than could possibly be viewed in any one visit, and there were thousands more in the warehouse Frank rented in the next town to house his American fiction holdings. Not enough? Frank maintained not one but two general book stores in downtown Hastings. An estimated 300,000 books in all and you never knew where the ones you were looking for would turn up.

Though a bountiful breakfast was hardly a top priority, Frank and Mary made sure to feed you before you were turned loose. Then off Frank would scurry, usually to the downtown stores, though throughout the day he would make brief and impromptu appearances before racing off again somewhere else. He might suddenly turn up in the warehouse, looking for Sixties novels a customer had requested; or you might be in the house when Frank would dash in barely in time to drive Mary to an appointment; or sometimes he would arrive and whisk everyone off to lunch at a local restaurant (Frank always paid). Later you would go looking for him at the main store only to find that he had zipped off to a book sale in Irvington; or was he making a private purchase in nearby Dobbs Ferry? More likely, of course, there were those unpredictable times he and local pal, author Steve Kanfer had captured unwary visitors and spirited them off for a game of boccie down near the river.

Over the years the complexion of Frank's stock inevitably changed. Many of the choice, older items had long ago been siphoned off by the many dealers for whom Frank was a source of sources. Vintage titles of then-unproved writers whose books Frank had cellared found their way from his care into rare-book catalogues at first-growth prices. Still, there were treasures to be dug up – for instance, a copy in the rare dust jacket of Nathanael West's "Miss Lonelyhearts" found stashed away on a bottom shelf in a hallway, an out-of-the-strike-zone area where Frank probably hoped no one would look.

About 12 hours after your arrival with the sun long dropped below the Hudson's horizon, you brought all of the books that you had garnered from the various book locations into Frank and Mary's living room and placed them in their disarray on the floor. Getting down on his hands and knees while blithely puffing away on his pipe, Frank sifted surely through the amorphousness and in jig time he had reconfigured the books into meaningful stacks.

“These are \$10 each, these are \$25, these \$50, these \$100, and that one over there is \$500.” There were usually two piles Frank did not identify. Asked about these, he would mumble something like: “That stack, oh, just take those,” and of the other, “these I don’t want to sell just now.”

It took some years to figure out what was going on here but it finally dawned on us that Frank held these books out because he felt he had overpaid for them and he did not want to embarrass you by asking more than you could pay. Once we discerned this nicety we were sometimes able to liberate a sacred cow or two by making preemptive offers. Frank, wise soul that he was, might then relent, recognizing fools even more profligate than himself.

In the final analysis you went to see Frank not for his books, plentiful and good as they were. You went, really, out of love for the man’s essential decency – you never heard him run down anyone in our incestuous little world of book people. You respected his awesome tenacity in pursuing books and appreciated the unalloyed generosity with which he passed them on to you and to so many others. You basked in the fireplace of Frank Scioscia’s warmth. It’s colder out there now.

Joseph the Provider / Books, 1993

(co-written with Larry Moskowitz)

MILLER'S TALE: HENRY HITS 100

This year marks the centenary of Henry Miller's birth. Throughout the year, various events and publications will celebrate the life and work of this most American of authors who left the land of his birth in order to discover himself. Like Huck Finn lighting out for the Territory, Miller rejected a civilized ambience he found utterly depressing for an earthier, more simple one. In an age where practical champions of science appeared to be crowding out spiritual expression, he chose literally to beg for bread rather than be just one more three-piece suit competing for material success.

Miller located his muse in post-expatriate Europe during the Depression, turning up there penniless and disillusioned just as Hemingway and company were picking up their coats; for them the party seemed over. For Miller it was a beginning; the first day of the rest of his life. Remember, he was already 43 years old when "Tropic of Cancer," his first and most important book, was published in Paris in 1934. At an age when American men are in mid-career, Miller was just beginning to reconstitute himself from social misfit to literary innovator.

"Cancer's" very first page sets a euphoric tone as its confident narrator announces: "I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive." This first-person voice employed by Miller to serve as his fictional alter ego speaks to us with immediacy and verisimilitude. It is an irrepressibly optimistic voice, one that remains cheery in the face of absolute poverty. Nothing can defeat this man – not hunger pains nor marauding bed lice nor indifference to his writing. The writer Alfred Perles, an intimate of Miller's during this period, remembers him thus: "In those days his friends walked in his shadow and even his shadow was warm."

What accounted for the radical change in Miller? The emergent charisma? Back in cold New York he had been a round peg stuck in the square hole of a stifling existence that imprisoned his soul. Stultifying jobs sapped his energy and inhibited his writing. The first of his five wives divorced him. A perfectionist mother, whom he could never please, sniped at him constantly, castigating his nonconforming life style. The desultory writing he was producing satisfied nobody, least of all himself.

Most crucially, in the immediate period before he abandoned America, Miller was being alternately elevated and brought low by his second wife, June Mansfield, who of the many women in his life, was most dominant. June, in support of Henry's ambitions to write, encouraged him to stay home while she worked long hours in dance halls and speak-easies, teasing wealthy old men out of their dollars. Some of Miller's earliest literary efforts were ghost-written pieces that June signed and then hawked to her sugar daddies, staying out all night in the process and making Henry furiously jealous. By the time he arrived in Paris, Miller was an emotional mess.

Once there, he was reborn on the spot, it seems. To paraphrase Peter Weiss' Marat, Miller pulled himself up by his own hair, turned himself inside out, and saw the world with fresh eyes. Miller's revolution, though, was not a political one. It was the wedding of his life and his art. Actual and imagined experiences became indistinguishable from each other. "I am the hero and the book is myself," he says in "Tropic of Cancer." In the hands of a less-gifted writer, such blurring of narrative voice invites disaster. Miller pulls it off seamlessly. Exactly how is not so easy to describe.

His fictional persona is many things – graphically erotic, elliptically surrealistic, unevenly anarchistic, combatively philosophical, abidingly romantic, downright funny – and always deeply felt. He resoundingly deplores patriotism, modern medicine, financial responsibility and organized religion, presaging emulation by such latter-day iconoclasts as Norman Mailer and Lenny Bruce.

"Tropic of Cancer" and its companion volumes, "Black Spring" (1936) and "Tropic of Capricorn" (1939), are the bedrock on which Henry Miller's worldwide reputation rests, though he

would continue to publish books for almost another half-century. It would be more than two decades, however, before that reputation took root in the United States. When Grove Press finally published “Tropic of Cancer” in 1961, it ran into a buzz saw of lawsuits that charged irredeemable obscenity. Two years later, a Supreme Court decision lifted from Miller’s shoulders the onus of being censored in his back yard. At 70, he was hailed by the ‘60s counterculture as a hero.

Miller had been elsewhere beleaguered since returning to the United States after World War II broke out in Europe. Though never a political activist, he openly opposed America’s entry into the war, an unpopular view that cost him prestige at a time when he seemed to be catching on in the literary world.

James Laughlin’s pioneering modern press, New Directions, had begun to publish some of Miller’s less-controversial texts, though his independence of mind would keep the kettle bubbling no matter how tame he tried to be. He wrote an ambivalent account of a year-long cross-country automobile trip, imaginatively titled, “The Air-Conditioned Nightmare.” The trip ended in Los Angeles. It was 1942 and Miller was still broke and struggling. He was not yet a household name worthy of *Playboy* or *People* magazine.

When living in Los Angeles palled, Miller moved up the coast into what he considered his first real home – an unheated cabin with no plumbing in rugged Big Sur. From this primitive outpost at Land’s End, where he could look toward the Orient he had always venerated, Miller, now married to Janine Lepska, and with two young children by her, bartered the watercolors he was producing by the dozens for food and clothing.

Lawrence Clark Powell, then university librarian at UCLA, made regular pilgrimages up Big Sur’s precipitous Partington Ridge for the collection of the author’s manuscripts and other literary artifacts that eventually would comprise the Henry Miller Archive. Prescient book collectors were vying for Miller’s first editions. (Today a pristine copy of “Tropic of Cancer” easily commands five figures.)

The aging outsider finally came in from the cold, relocating for the last time in 1963 on the strength of royalties from American publication to sunny, upscale Pacific Palisades. Enscorced there in the kind of middle-class dwelling he would have deplored in more contentious times, Henry Miller settled into the role of literary lion.

He corresponded with a legion of admirers and greeted a steady flow of visitors, including several dotting young women who sought the warmth of the old romantic’s banked but not quite extinguished fires. There also was a short-lived marriage with a Japanese entertainer half his age.

Now in the winter of his life, Miller revisited his youth, writing a series of bittersweet memoirs and a critical study of D. H. Lawrence for an old friend, Noel Young, of Capra Press. This last of Miller’s published works had been abandoned almost 50 years earlier because its fledgling author felt he had not gotten Lawrence right. Miller was instinctively correct, because his true subject, always, was himself.

Like Walt Whitman and Henry Thoreau, two authors whose work he loved, Henry Miller sang his own song, marched to his own gait. Like those noble literary dissenters, he remains an American original.

Los Angeles Times, 1991

LIFE ON THE RUN by Bill Bradley

Several years ago while researching the literature of American sport, I was surprised to find how small a body of serious writing there is on this universal activity. Sport moves the national imagination deeply, cutting through differences of geography, social class, economic circumstance, and ethnic background like little else in our society. A nucleus of significant material does exist, but its quantity and quality seems inversely disproportionate to the vast amounts of psychic energy Americans invest in sports.

One neglected strain of this literature, whose popularity was most evident from the turn of the century through the Great Depression is the inspirational sports juvenile as exemplified by the work of writers like Ralph Henry Barbour and John F. Tunis.

Clumsily structured, cardboard-charactered, this formula fiction had one feature that redeemed it—its overriding concern with moral behavior. Read one on the heels of another as they were, these “boys” books catechized their malleable readership in how to conduct themselves both on and off the playing field. And while their black and white standards seem not to bear close scrutiny in this more-sophisticated time, they influenced adolescent thought in a positive way and helped to shape the social attitudes of our fathers and uncles.

Bill Bradley’s “Life on the Run,” a first person account of some three weeks in the life of a professional athlete, is of that moral tone in the best sense of the phrase. It is concerned above all with character. Bradley’s uncompromising commitment to playing basketball in a certain way dominates the narrative and sets it a court-length pass ahead of the preponderance of trashy superjock accounts it superficially resembles.

After one of the greatest of collegiate basketball careers at Princeton followed by two years at Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship, Bradley, according to media reports of that time, walks over the ocean to sign an all-time record contract with the New York Knicks. With but a little help from his disciples, he will not only guarantee the championship, but as the “Great White Hope” in a league where three out of every four players are black, he will fill the arenas with paying fans eager to witness the miracles he will surely perform.

But it proves to be a tough year for our savior. He plays well enough to be sure, but he is slower, shorter, and cannot jump with most other forwards. This Christ can only cruise while the rest of the world is in overdrive.

So Bradley makes the adjustment. He shifts down from superstar to quintessential team player. Minimizing individual talents, he becomes the team’s catalyst, doing all the unnoticed things that lead to the sensational plays of others. He runs the court doggedly, setting the patterns out of which the team’s winning style is to emerge. It is an index to Bradley’s character that he has learned that the pass that leads to the pass for the winning basket is vital to what poet Edward Dorn has called “the cosmology of finding your spot.”

Perhaps the book’s deepest insight lies in Bradley’s appreciation of sports as a bridge between the worlds of the child and the adult—the world of feeling and the world of knowing. “When something special happens on the court... I feel the power of imagination that creates a sense of mystery and

wonder I last accepted in childhood, before the mind hardened.”

Something special happened, all right. A special book has come our way.

The Pacific Sun, 1976

THE BAD LANDS by Oakley Hall

The Western frontier of Post-bellum days is a potential gold mine for novelistic inspirations. Its turbulent history contains enough material to have fleshed out dozens of fine movies. Yet a surprisingly small number of first rate novels came out of this same rich dust. "The Ox-Bow Incident," "Shane," Hall's own "Warlock," and a handful of others have succeeded in incorporating the events of that rough era into the demanding framework of the novel. "The Bad Lands" lays legitimate claim to join such a select group.

It is the story of those who came west to a plenitude of open land beyond their wildest expectations, to a range where a man's cattle could roam freely so that wherever they chose to graze they would still be on his land.

Within this uncharted territory both mortality and morality are of central importance. Ironic, sometimes paradoxical ideas of fairness and justice in a place the law has not yet come to are skillfully explored in a narrative that is shadowed by the imminence of different kinds of death. These include the dying out of vast buffalo herds due to indifferent wastefulness; the slower dying of the cowboy who is progressively being squeezed out of a way of life by newer methods of working cattle; by the dying of freedom to continue westward as the frontier begins to close.

Heavyweight ideas like these can stampede one's interest in a story quickly, especially when a number of its characters are dressed in iron clothes of rectitude. It is a measure of Hall's considerable talents that he does not falter despite such thematic profundities.

His story begins in 1883. Andrew Livingston, whose character is loosely patterned on that of the young Teddy Roosevelt who lived in South Dakota before returning east to pursue a career in politics, has come to Pyramid Flats to forget the accidental deaths of his wife and child. He soon finds himself between groups of warring ranchers and alongside homesteaders whose agricultural interests conflict with those of the ranchers.

The novel's other main character is a larger-than-life Scottish aristocrat who is consumed with the ambition to build a cattle empire second to none. It is this man's grandiose manner and schemes that energize the plot.

Employing a bedrock prose that is without stylistic affectation, Hall, nevertheless, creates occasional passages of rough-hewn beauty that honor the book's intentions as well. Here is Livingston writing home:

"These long, swift, morning lopes through green grasslands are wonderful times. The sweet air, still with its early-morning touch of chill, and the rapid trot of the tough little horses makes a man's blood teem with the pleasures of being alive. As we climb the steep sides of the butte, out of the mists that still cling in the hollows, the sun flames in the east. Care does not sit heavily upon a rider whose pony's hoofs are dashing through carpets of flowers, and whose shadow is thrown level and long behind him."

Hall also gives us an understanding of how things worked in a frontier town. Edifyingly described are

the mechanics of a roundup, the economics involved in running a whorehouse, the interior of an abattoir, and the formation of a vigilante committee with its necessity and inherent dangers fully discussed.

“The Bad Lands” is a misnomer. It is only men who can be bad. Pyramid Flat’s entrepreneurs are a meld of bad and good, both dumb and smart, some lucky others not. It is through the universality of Oakley Hall’s art that we can recognize them. They are us a century ago.

Los Angeles Times, 1978.

AFRICAN CALLIOPE: African Calliope; A Journey to the Sudan by Edward Hoagland

Before one can properly assess others he must have a good idea of his own sum. In this not-so-brave post-Freudian world where self-delusion often seems the norm, Edward Hoagland knows himself. His four previous books of personal essays attest to this. And they show that that knowledge did not come without cost. A note of sadness runs through Hoagland's books, punctuating narrative like the persistent throb of an old wound.

This sadness confers authority—enforcing realities, building themes. No contemporary essayist sifting through his own experiences—not John McPhee, Edward Abbey, or Peter Matthiessen—can match the unadorned clarity of Hoagland's voice. It is a voice to trust, one requiring no throat-cleaning warmup before singing its song.

Some of his finest essays have been collected in "The Edward Hoagland Reader." Issued simultaneously with "African Calliope," they reflect not only an impressive diversity of interests but the painful way he scrutinizes himself.

A piece discussing divorce mirrors marital failure in Hoagland's own life; another on living in New York demonstrates how the urban experience agitated his bloodstream; a third focuses on the difference in the temperaments of lions and tigers, suggesting that nuance is usually present if one takes the trouble to search for it. To read Hoagland is to discover he takes the trouble.

The three novels Hoagland wrote before turning to nonfiction dealt with material much like this but he has not published another since 1965. Perhaps he feels more comfortable interposing his own life between subject and audience. The novelistic skills, though, remain evident as he easily creates a full-blown portrait or encapsulates a personality within a single sentence.

Two years ago Hoagland went to the Sudan. The Africa that existed for those of us who studied Colonial geography in the 1940s is now obsolete and seems to change daily. He went because the newness of this largest and most varied of African lands intrigued him. He is soon speculating why men explore primitive places and searching his own motivations for doing so.

"After one has read dozens of explorer's journals with the books of contemporary wilderness enthusiasts thrown in, it isn't hard to reach the conclusion that the search these individuals have made to find the wildest areas left on earth—a kind of relay race, at best, but a lone compulsion in many cases—was really an attempt, itself, to start over. I'm not speaking of formal anthropology, but of the impetus of so much wilderness-trekking and love-of-the-primitive, the wish to go and live in the bosom of raw nature. A fist-fighter lurks just under the surface of a lot of these books. The masochism or sadism, the general tenor of choler, vainglory and self-distrust so often perceptible between the lines makes you suspect that one reason why the author sought so hard for a personal, presumptive site for the birth of man, and a feel for the circumstances of it, was that he wanted to be born again, to reexperience his own birth and thereby possibly straighten himself out – to do things over."

By rearranging the chronology of his travels, Hoagland has highlighted those events he wishes to give weight to. "Plunge straight in," he exhorts, "Life is a novel." Well, perhaps. But let us follow the author and see where he takes us.

He is constantly on the move—to Jubo, Gilo, Eritrea, Khartoum—approaching wary strangers whose language he does not speak. There is an additional difficulty. Hoagland is a lifelong stutterer, a fact no secret to his readers. Though he makes clear how painful the speech impediment has been for him, Hoagland harnesses his “vocal handcuffs” so that they work for him. He coolly analyzes the varied responses he gets to his head-whipping, spit-flying struggles to bring out words.

There is nothing wrong, however, with his eyes and ears. He is a virtuoso of the generalization that rings true. O pilot flying sheep to Jiddah is: “A Floridian with the requisite beard for adventuring in Africa, but also the curious air of insubstantiality most pilots have when you talk to them.”

The oppressive details of physical hardships common to African life are concretely detailed—fathers digging chiggers out of crying children’s bare feet with razors or washing their fly-sucked eyes in the absolute dryness of the desert (The flies were thirsty too.) The quality of poverty is indelibly underscored in a description of leisure activity among Kababish herders, who play a game with “48 bits of camel dung tossed into 12 scoops in the sand.”

Technical representatives are ubiquitous in the Sudan, earning substantial corporate or federally funded bucks building roads, digging wells, growing flowers, rebuilding motors. (An expert was somebody who can tell by the wrinkles in the sheets whether it was done for love or money.)

There is political information to be gleaned from “African Calliope” but politics is not one of Hoagland’s overriding concerns. What he writes seems verifiable. President Numeiri wins points for having survived in this most volatile of political arenas. The fatalism central to Muslim belief, more than anything else, is what sustains them in their squalor. Americans are regarded as adjunct Britishers and tolerated, with the real enmity existing between blacks and Arabs.

Hoagland does let himself go on occasion (To hunker naked on a riverbank in the heart of Africa was quite dramatic if you thought about it—drama, like sex, existing primarily in the mind.) But the unifying thread that runs through the book is Hoagland’s determination not to spare Hoagland. He admits being distracted by bare-breasted African women, having a tenderfoot’s stomach, holding up a hunt because of his slowness, carrying on a brief affair with an Egyptian girl (he makes clear that she was not pretty and that it was she who left him.

See the author sitting around with an embittered white hunter whose safari-organizing days seem over. The hunter rolls up a pants leg, revealing deep scars inflicted by a charging lion whose jaw he had shot away and who died leaning up against him. Hoagland, with the natural ear of a born reporter, knows just which question to pose.

“Who got the skin,” I asked. “My client”, he said, with the flat sort of look worn by professionals in any field when they mention the ironies they live with.”

In his field Edward Hoagland is the consummate professional. For so long he has been so very good and so few seem to have noticed.

Los Angeles Times, 1979

LITERARY SAN FRANCISCO by Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Nancy J. Peters

Has it been only 130 years? California's phenomenal growth from insignificant provincial outpost to freewheeling larger-than-life superstate, more with it than anywhere back East, is the stuff of fairy tales, where Jack's beanstalk just grows and grows and grows.

It began much earlier, of course. Even before the 15th Century had ended, California was being imagined as an island by Columbus and his peers as a magical El Dorado peopled by black Amazons who hurled gold spears. Three centuries later the embryo that grew into California was no longer being fed by European dreams of conquest but by the hopes of Americans seeking escape from a stultifying past, grabbing at a second chance to a freer and better existence. Something new and good had to be out there at the end of the frontier.

They came first to San Francisco from where the golden news of Sutter's Mill in 1849 was quickly followed by a thorough trampling of Northern California real estate. Out of this cloud of dust dampened by hysterical sweat came the true beginnings of California literature.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Nancy J. Peters' photographic essay, containing more text than associated with the form, traces Bay Area literary history from that time to the present day. Ferlinghetti's introductory essay sets the tone, embodying both a touch of the poet and the persistent, punchy jabs of a local booster and political gadfly.

"It { San Francisco } looked like an island, vaguely Mediterranean, with its white buildings, a little like Tunis from the sea, not really a part of America...Eighty or ninety years ago, when all the machines began to hum (almost, as it seemed, in unison), San Francisco was still the only city on the West Coast...It was never a cowboy town—derbies outnumbered Stetsons and sombreros...the railroad spreading its tentacles over the West, became that octopus Frank Norris novelized, and it sowed the iron sperm of that industrialized monster which rules life today."

Co-author Peters takes us up to the 20th Century. Working with a compact but encyclopedic series of chronological sketches, she links the emergence of San Francisco's literati with the city's history—the land booms, the development of mining and agriculture, the struggle for water, the establishment of utopian colonies, the beginnings of lumber, oil, and aviation conglomerates. The book's structural plan is obvious: an all-encompassing survey to emphasize detail while scaling down essence—not a bad design for a book covering so much ground.

The parade of authors begins with Francisco Palou, whose doting Boswellian notes recorded for posterity the achievements of Junipero Serra. Many of the names are familiar—Richard Henry Dana, Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, Robert Louis Stevenson, Lincoln Steffens, Jack London—others less so.

J. Ross Browne produced a body of work that influenced such disparate talents as Herman Melville and Twain. Fitz-Hugh Ludlow's 1857 "The Hasheesh Eater presaged the druggy days to come in Haight-Ashbury a century later. Ur-hippie Sadakichi Hartmann traipsed down the road to Los Angeles where he would imbibe many a glass with John Barrymore and other tipplers.

News from Eastern cities traveled slowly so local literary journals began to flourish, starting with The

Pioneer in 1854, thus initiating the San Francisco small press tradition. Local geography was interpreted imaginatively. Mary Austin's fictional milieu was the desert; Robinson Jeffers' images derived from the sea; Clarence King and John Muir wrote of California's mountains. A distinctly Western literary style began to evolve—exaggerated and fantastic, tolerant, open-ended.

Many of the writers credited as being San Franciscans were in fact transients who came to the city late and stayed. Open to new ideas that flowed in with the seaport tide, San Francisco's singular literary ambience attracted mavericks of all kinds. Henry George advocated the redistribution of wealth with his single tax theory, Edwin Markham's "The Man With the Hoe" rallied exploited farm workers by the thousands, Kenneth Rexroth championed radical literature through his salon, William Everson spearheaded the Conscientious Objectors' movement in the West during World War II by courageous example, Allen Ginsberg serenely fought establishment censorship over "Howl," Lenny Bruce endured bust after bust for his four-letter iconoclasm. Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore, set among North Beach's topless tourist's traps, functioned as a cultural and political oasis, while his anarchistic poetry kept the pot boiling. This is a catalogue that adds up to more than the sum of its parts.

Alas, the more contemporary sections come across as less substantial. Street poets and publishers by mimeograph are given more credit than they merit. Nor is there much joy in seeing a philosophical lightweight like Eric Hoffer demolished by a sledgehammer review, reprinted here word for sarcastic word.

On balance though, "Literary San Francisco" is a solid achievement that has been doggedly researched and is accompanied by some 200 decently reproduced photographs, some of which are rare. The authors have laid the foundation for those who wish to study in greater depth writing inspired not only by San Francisco but by all of California.

Los Angeles Times, 1980

CITIES OF THE RED NIGHT by William Burroughs

The addict's sense of world is timeless. Hour after druggy hour he sits contemplating the end of his shoe. Life is measured by the intervals between fixes, waiting for The Man to come. But The Man is late. (Always catch the buyer hungry and always make him wait.) When the pusher does arrive, the dope he brings will cost the addict, whose algebra of need ever-expands. Entrepreneurial killer instinct obtains.

No booking American letters captured the essence of junk life better than "Naked Lunch" when it appeared in 1959. Surreally fragmented, nihilistic, time-warped, obsessively homosexual – it chillingly paraphrased its author's view of modern man hooked on a capitalistic regime that ultimately swallows him.

Redeeming this mordant view of America as spiritual wasteland was the kaleidoscopic language that exploded from its pages like a pinball machine gone berserk – jump cuts, pornographic flash, psychotic vaudeville sketches, hangings by the dozens, lowlife bohemian scams, abrupt fadeouts. What instant horror would come next one never knew, but veining its awfulness in therapeutic relief was a flow of comic writing that recalled great satirists of the past.

After more than 20 years of writing for the avant garde, Burroughs in "Cities of the Red Night" is clearly attempting to make his apocalyptic view accessible to a wider audience. His subject – the spiritual decline of man – remains the same but is here treated in more conventional literary form. Though sequences still jumble and spatial shifts are dizzily frequent, the narrative is easier to follow than in previous works.

Deep in the Gobi Desert time is turned inside out. The ancient cities of Tamaghis, Ba'dan, Yassmaddah, Waghdas, Naufana, and Ghadis are riddled with infectious Space Age diseases. Viruses are genetically induced and characterized by cancerous sores and priapic seizures.

Lithe primitive youths with trigger-happy libidos roam ruined streets in pederastic packs. A soldier of this not so brave world, his tingling energy gun blazing a path, conducts an out-of-body search of a village decimated by epidemic. The followers of an 18th Century pirate with utopian dreams share pages with a screeching humanoid mandrake plant that feeds on human excrement. Macambo magic implemented by buggery exorcises a young man's evil spirits.

It is clear that this book means to offend entire groups of readers. Boosters of new technology will find the graphically detailed accounts of inhuman medical experiments distasteful just as feminists will deplore the exceptionless depiction of women as evil incarnations or despised sexual receptacles. Burroughs is democratic in his putdowns of organized groups, treating them all the same. Like dogs.

In fact the outrageousness of "Cities of the Red Night" suggests it was written in collaboration with Swift, Baudelaire, Schopenhauer, Orwell, Lenny Bruce, General Patton, and in a curiously perverse way, John Calvin.

Inside the pessimistic cloak he has shrouded himself, a strait-laced moralist with religious strivings is struggling to emerge. William Burroughs just may turn out to be a hipster Moses leading his children into the promised land.

San Francisco Chronicle, 1981

THE HOTEL NEW HAMPSHIRE by John Irving

One of the best book collectors I know used to collect American literature written after the year of his birth, continually adding to his library through the years the work of new and promising novelists, poets, and playwrights. He read a ton of contemporary fiction, then chose those authors he would keep and keep up with. This was done solely on the basis of his own sensibility, which he filtered through a carefully formed network of critical opinion. Some thirty years later he had a remarkable collection comprising thousands of first editions, most of which he had bought immediately upon publication.

What was he after? He wanted to define his time and his place through his books. If one believes books to be a social barometer, the tangible essence of this man's personal experience reposed on his bookshelves. I am reminded of this singular collector – whose energy and commitment represent a benign egotism – by the work of John Irving.

If a writer's life is his capital, Irving is a spendthrift. And he has gotten good value from that expenditure. Fiction writers do draw on their lives for material, but the key to creating a work of art lies in the transmutation of one's own experience so that it becomes universal. Irving, from what I can gather has created a personal mythology for himself to the point where he is now a media event. But he has also harnessed this obsession to his work and it shows. "The Hotel New Hampshire" proves him a novelist thoroughly in control of his resources.

He continues to wrestle with the largest of themes –life and love, responsibility and anarchy, death and survival are among them – and this time he has stepped up in class. Like the book collector, John Irving is trying to define his own time and place through his books.

To do so he has pulled out all the stops. His story is funny and sad, melodramatically dreamlike, incredible while remaining true to life. It is a steamroller of a book that stops on a dime when its driver wants it to. Foremost, it is the story of a contemporary American family, an exotic family on first appearance whose humanity Irving artfully extracts from their kooky behavior.

We follow Winslow Berry, his wife and five children for a generation through their ownership of three quirky hotels; their two bears, one of which will turn out not to be a bear; and a dog who continues to live after his death. The Berrys will travel from Maine to Vienna to New York and back to Maine, where what resolution there is for the family takes place.

Within this framework will occur a pivotal rape, an act of terrorism, incestuous love, two suicides, an accident that kills two members of the family, another resulting in a fatal heart attack to a main character. Not to mention two blindings, a bear-mauling, and assorted acts of violence. One of the children will become a bestselling author, another will metamorphose into a movie star. Deafness, dwarfism, and homosexuality will not be strangers to the Berry clan.

Among the supporting players are not one but two Freuds, A Gatsby figure dressed in a white suit, a real-life poet whose lines are quoted at length, five distinctive whores, one of whom is a virgin, another dubbed Screaming Annie because of the vociferousness of her faked orgasms, two Austrian female terrorists named Schwanger (pregnant) and Fehlgeburt (miscarriage), a black giant of a football player and his toothless sister who teaches kissing.

Despite this breezy summary “The Hotel New Hampshire” is a serious attempt at a profound statement. Clearly, Irving has tried to make his novelistic vehicle accessible to a large audience, but he has tinkered painstakingly under its hood to make it hum thematically. From inside this runaway truck of a novel, a slim work of truth and beauty struggles to emerge and in the end does.

As the Berrys journey through the three hotels of their lives, John, the middle child and the novel’s voice, grows from youth to temporary disillusionment to maturity. The physical weights he learns to lift are those of responsibility. The events he narrates occur chronologically in straightforward manner. The language is colloquial while the dialogue is fine-tuned to perfect pitch.

This is a book surely to be canonized by college students, an X-rated “Catcher in the Rye,” perhaps too much so. Catchphrases are repeated to the point of diminishing returns. It is not difficult to imagine slogans like “keep passing the open windows” and “sorrow floats” gaining currency in hip circles. The comparison to Salinger is hardly farfetched. The heroine is named Franny, while the Berrys constitute the most intriguing family ensemble since Seymour Glass and company.

Irving brings a 19th Century sensibility to this modern saga, reminiscent of Dickens and Hardy. In a time when fiction thrives on understatement and ambiguity, this author has forcefully demonstrated that the novel can do worse than return to its popular origins, to the imaginative telling of a story about real people, no matter how made up they are.

San Francisco Chronicle, 1981

THE BABY IN THE ICEBOX And Other Short Fiction
by James M. Cain

James M. Cain, dubbed the twenty-minute egg of hardboiled fiction by David Madden, spent less than a fourth of his life in California, but California is where he really cooked. Like another transplanted Marylander, Dashiell Hammett, Cain did his best work at land's end. It was in a Western setting that he found his subjects – egalitarian characters who chased misguided versions of the American Dream that ultimately turned into nightmare.

Cain's California time was the Thirties and Forties when he wrote the novels for which he is remembered. After returning East in the Fifties he labored for two more decades but failed to maintain the hardnosed standard he had established with "The Postman Always Rings Twice" and "Double Indemnity." The late historical novels he turned out were flabby compared to the above twin tales of illicit sexual passion cum murder. Trim storyline, relentless pace, and fatal consequence had given way to age.

But what was Cain's early life like? This collection proposes to answer that question. For one favorably disposed to his work, the answer is a regrettable not much. Here are ten journalistic sketches, nine short stories, and a novella that was originally serialized in Liberty magazine. Most of the sketches first appeared in H.L. Mencken's American Mercury and they have not aged well. Composed in cutesy vernacular as satires of government and bureaucracy, they ape Ring Lardner's caustic style but lack his bite. Cain as Will Rogers seems an irony of miscasting.

At this time Cain had begun to publish stories too. Those here included are notable for their inchoate announcement of themes that he later developed fully. The title story and "Pastorale" are studies in domestic murder, but the calculated device of speaking through a countrified voice interferes with the dialogue and sabotages the stories' effects.

The best of the stories is atypical. "The Taking of Montfaucon" is based on an incident experienced by Cain during World War I and follows a loyal soldier trying to deliver a message through a hazardous no man's land of detonating shells. Despite its understatement, "Montfaucon" epitomizes the confusion and terror of trench warfare, and here the ingenuous voice of the unsophisticated soldier seems just right.

The novella, "Money and the Woman" takes up a third of the book, and while it does not qualify as early work, does add pages to a slim volume. "Money" appeared a year after Cain's four major novels had been published and is a shallower variation on "Double Indemnity." Again there is a felonious plan in which the narrator is seduced by the wife into what turns out to be a reverse embezzling scheme. As a bonus, the story constitutes a crash course in how to beat the bank without getting caught.

But something has gone awry. The essential Cain woman, ruthlessly determined and driving the sexually obsessed narrator to his moral and psychological limits is here a vague, mostly off-stage

shadow of Cora , Phyllis, or the lawful but equally driven Mildred Pierce. And, inexplicably, a melodramatic happy ending is tacked on. Nowhere to be found is Cain's taut structure of simple declarative sentences that build suspense and foreshadow the inevitability of tragic consequences.

A good Cain sentence slugs the reader – as one of Joe Louis' opponents described the champ's jab – “like an electric light bulb exploding in your face.” I found no such worthy examples in “Money and the Woman,” whereas a quick flip through “Double Indemnity” produces two: “I loved her like a rabbit loved a rattlesnake” and “She looks like what came aboard the ship to shoot dice for souls in ‘The Ancient Mariner.’”

That's Cain –vintage stuff – not to be found in this collection of historical interest only. These fruits were picked too early or hung on to too late.

Los Angeles Times, 1981

DASHIELL HAMMETT : A Life
by Diane Johnson

Precisely because it was so singular, Dashiell Hammett's life lends itself to various modes of interpretation. Richard Layman, in the first full-length study of Hammett, "Shadow Man," examined his subject with fundamental soundness from a polite academic distance. In "Hammett: A Life at the Edge," published earlier this year, William Nolan used a zoom lens and, in the relentlessness of his focus on Hammett's charisma, magnified the legend, thus losing the man.

If Layman's respectful account is a faraway melody teasingly half-heard and Nolan's a full-volume shout, Diane Johnson's artful work is an after-hours blues that echoes truth. Her tracking of Hammett's inner life is the most revealing to date.

She begins sure-footedly, finding Hammett at nadir—almost 60, broken-bodied from a lifetime of illness, blocked from writing for 25 years, in jail for contempt of court in those chill days when McCarthyism froze liberal bones. The glamour has long gone out of the Thin Man. No more is he the rich, elegantly dressed bon vivant seen at the right Hollywood parties; he is also far removed from early prominence earned as the creator of a new branch of American literature.

But this is the time when Hammett will courageously rise to heights of will and character. "It is the long black years that prove the spirit," Johnson says of him. Using her considerable novelistic gifts, she takes us back to the beginnings that shaped this contradictory man, and leads us forward to his sad end. In the process, Hammett's complex life is rendered understandable by direct examples that she counterpoints with succinct analysis.

To be sure, Johnson enjoys an advantage over other biographers, having had access to Hammett's papers by his executor and longtime intimate friend, Lillian Hellman. Though she talked at length with this strong-willed keeper of the flame, Johnson takes care to rely on Hammett's own testimony as shown through his correspondence. She also interviewed Hammett's wife and daughters, giving us a mirror image—the subject as seen by those closest to him.

Authentic is the word Johnson uses to summarize Hammett. It rings right. Not that Hammett was Sam Spade in the flesh; the fictional detective was more an idealization to which the writer aspired. Hammett himself, though universally respected, was a man with glaring weaknesses. He drank, gambled, womanized—all in epic proportions. He was a man whose graph of success by worldly standards showed a decided downward slope. He was emotionally blocked, never able to commit himself fully to a relationship with another person. "It was love, real love, that he could never speak of," concludes Johnson.

But Hammett was also strength personified. He wrote the four novels for which he will be remembered in a compressed creative period of less than three years. He went to jail willingly rather than compromise his principles. "I don't let cops or judges tell me what I think democracy is," he told Hellman. He gave up drinking—cold turkey—when the doctor told him that booze was killing him.

Years later Hellman remembers asking Hammett how he found the inner resources to quit. He replied: "But I gave my word," puzzled that anyone could fail to understand how such a statement bound him.

In an admittedly romantic sense he can be seen as the incarnation of manly celluloid images—the Waynes, Fondas, Coopers and Stewarts who helped form our real-life responses to adversity and fate. Most simply, Dashiell Hammett was a special man. Johnson sees him as “peculiarly American.”

“At each decade of his life he did the American thing—went West before World War I when young men went West, joined the Army, went West again to San Francisco during the '20s and the heyday of gangsters and Prohibition, went to Hollywood in the glamorous '30s, when Hollywood was at its peak, to war again in the '40s, and in the '50s, during the witch-hunts, to jail. He presented himself gamely to history and bore its depredations cheerfully.”

Johnson fixes on pivotal experiences that shaped Hammett's character. While working for the Pinkerton Agency he was sent to Montana to help break up a miners' strike. The brutal methods his side employed (at one point the young detective was asked to take part in the murder of a labor leader) had the effect of radicalizing Hammett for life.

Johnson explores the origins of Hammett's lifelong distrust of authority, whether it was parental, military or political. Out of his implicitly antagonistic stance (though at times he stoically accepted being subordinate), he created the unwavering rules by which he lived. One did work for oneself, not others, and took pride in it even if the job was cleaning a row of latrines. “You want to do it as well as you can,” says the Continental Op, talking about his own job in a Hammett story, “otherwise there'd be no sense to it.”

But inner strength may also be a character defect. Hammett was cruelly critical of less talented writers, sarcastically riddling their efforts with acidic reviews. Though well intentioned, he was a failure as a husband and parent, at times abandoning his family with icy confidence that things would be as they had been after he came back.

In the years immediately following World War II, after profound efforts to write again failed to produce more than false starts, Hammett channeled his creative energy into helping Lillian Hellman polish her plays. Hellman recalls a particular speech in a “The Autumn Garden” that he wrote and rewrote, a scene in which a man looks back.

“At any given moment you're only the sum of your life up to then. There are no big moments you can reach unless you've a pile of smaller moments to stand on. That big hour of decision, the turning point in your life, the someday you'd counted on when you'd suddenly wipe out your past mistakes, do the work you'd never done, think the way you'd never thought, have what you'd never had—it just doesn't come suddenly. You've trained yourself for it while you waited—or you've let it all run past you and frittered yourself away. I've frittered myself away.”

Hammett, of course, was summarizing his own life.

Perhaps Johnson's most delicate accomplishment is the fine line between iffy psychologizing and creative analysis. There are two basic ways to approach biography. One is the encyclopedic account that endeavors to record all the minutiae—where the subject was at what time, who paid for lunch—an accretive process designed to sum up a life.

The other—riskier—is the interpretive approach chosen here; the biographer studies the facts and filters them through her own sensibility, looking for significant patterns.

Diane Johnson has done just that with her multifaceted subject and the result is pure light.

Los Angeles Times, 1983

WAR ALL THE TIME: Poems 1981-1984 by Charles Bukowski

No American writer of our generation has challenged the American dream as consistently as Charles Bukowski. In some 40 books of prose and poetry he has pilloried such commonly accepted values as love, community, the Protestant Ethic, even life itself. The racetrack, any saloon (the more disreputable the better), a cheap motel room strewn with empty liquor bottles and fully dissipated women—these constitute the essential Bukowski habitat.

Yet, despite the gloom-and-doom ambience of his work, Bukowski is a popular writer, not only in this country where his first editions are sought by collectors, but in Germany and Japan where his books are best sellers.

“War All the Time” confirms this reader's feeling that a significant change has been taking place in Bukowski's last several books. The wildness is receding, the anger dying down. Charles Bukowski of all people is becoming respectable with age. No longer a morose loner, the narrator of these poems seeks an accommodation with the rest of the world. The awesome rage of earlier books has turned into reflection, acts of self-destruction to an urge for survival.

*I no longer hold the paring knife
near the jugular vein--
the end is getting
close enough
all by
itself.*

In this volume some 20 of the book's 100 poems refer directly to the poet's own impending death. Recognition of this most final of facts has produced changes in Bukowski.

When one out of five of a writer's formal efforts turn morbid, you can be certain that the changes will not be insignificant ones. The new Bukowski persona no longer gets into fights; he breaks them up. These days his women give him vitamins instead of black eyes. A poem titled “Eating My Senior Citizen's Dinner at the Sizzler” has lines like this:

*It's 20% off for
us old dogs approaching the sunset.
Its strange to be old and not feel
old
but I glance in the mirror
see some silver hair
concede that I'd look misplaced at a
rock concert.*

There is even a poem about nursing a sick cat back to life. Bukowski making nice to a kitty? What would the earlier, macho Buk have had to say about this, well, pussycat of a man?

The poems that comprise “War All the Time” are more richly textured than their predecessors. Less jazzy, more thoughtful, they have—like their celebrated author—a lived-in look about them. Not all of the changes, however are necessarily for the better. A good deal of the humor has been replaced by stoic rumination and even an occasional dose of bathos. Almost gone are the exuberant descriptions of drunken sexual gropings and scatological disasters. As was the case with Bukowski's autobiographical novel, “Ham on Rye,” which told the story of his unhappy childhood, the elusive, surreal images sometimes harden into uncharacteristic philosophical verities.

This hardly implies that Bukowski's poetry is not as good as it once was. There is far more moral substance here than in previous work. And one shining constant endures—the spare Bukowski line that is his own and no one else's: a string of simple declarative sentences free of general modifiers, highlighted by a well-chosen action verb or colloquial phrase, headed toward an all-encompassing punch line, as in “Nice Try,” an idyllic poem of being able to fly:

*When I awakened
I was on the
drunktank floor
of the old
Lincoln Heights jail
at North Avenue 21
and not only
didn't I have any wings
all I had was my property slip
and somebody was puking into the toilet.*

*Maybe I'd be an angel
some other time.*

At times, though Charles Bukowski sure writes like one.

San Francisco Chronicle
1985

VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov by Andrew Field

One of the supreme ironies of 20th Century American literature is that its most distinctive and stylistically innovative voice was developed by an exiled Russian who came to America at age 40 by way of Germany and France. Vladimir Nabokov never returned to the land of his birth, but he passionately held on to his cultural heritage for as long as he lived. From these somewhat opposed elements, Andrew Field has crated an intriguing study that deftly combines, as the book's subtitle correctly proclaims, Nabokov's life and art.

Field, who has written two previous books on Nabokov and also compiled a comprehensive bibliography of the writer's works, not surprisingly got minimal help from his cordial but persistently evasive subject. In all, he managed to interview the writer over a period of but six weeks. Nabokov was impressed with Field's knowledge of his books and amused by the biographer's boldness and tenacity in ferreting out facts that Nabokov characteristically obscured but did not completely hide. In this he seems to have adopted Samuel Beckett's strategy of "neither helping nor hindering" his biographer.

According to Field, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov was born in the 1st year of the 19th century into an enormously wealthy and influential White Russian family. His childhood was remarkable for its absence of any kind of stress. Young "Volodya's" parents were loving and lavish with their precocious child, sending him to the finest private school in Russia. Volodya thrived there and began to show signs of the classic narcissism (as opposed to egotism) that Field believes is central to an understanding of Nabokov's books. At the tender age of 17, he self-published a slim volume of his own poetry. (Today it is one of the rarest, most desirable, and expensive of modern first editions.)

One year later the Bolshevik Revolution uprooted the Nabokovs and their social class with savage finality. It was the pivotal event of the young artist's life, and it changed forever his way of engaging the world. Never again would he confront it head-on. Many years later, while teaching at Cornell, Nabokov confessed to a student that he didn't own a house because he was afraid he might lose it as his family had lost theirs to the revolution.

In an even rarer moment of self-revelation, Nabokov told his biographer: "The past is my double." Though his possessions had long since been confiscated, he stored ideas in an emigre's suitcase, ready to be unpacked and used wherever he might find himself. Nabokov's attitudes and world view surfaced in mutated form in his fiction as he re-created his life with subtlety, understatement and verbal ambiguity enhanced by a thorough fluency in Russian, French and English.

The loss of a fortune, while materially catastrophic, can serve—for one who is strong-willed—as a builder of character. Having been deprived of the silver spoon with which in his early years he had tasted the best of life, Nabokov, according to Field, refused to feel sorry for himself and single-mindedly channeled all of his inner resources to transform himself into that most ephemeral of callings—an author.

In his fiction and in such autobiographical works as "Speak Memory" Nabokov conjured, fabricated

and embellished his own experience through an exquisite use of language that was inimitable and with a telltale fastidiousness and condescension toward others that betrayed his patrician beginnings.

In reality, Nabokov was just one more fleeing European who landed on these still-peaceful shores in 1940. But Field shows that with the help of American acquaintances who admired his little-known Russian novels—notably Edmund Wilson—Nabokov found employment as a free-lance book reviewer and later as a professor of Russian literature. He also spent much of his spare time at New York's Museum of Natural History classifying rare butterflies that he had discovered and captured in what amounted to a lifelong hobby. It was while driving cross-country in search of new butterflies that Nabokov first witnessed the less-than-elegant Motel Six side of America. He would soon mercilessly (and hilariously) satirize America's junk-culture values in “Lolita,” the sensational novel that brought him literary fame.

The idea of a middle-aged professor who lusts after a pre-teenybopper and who bribes his way into her not unwilling arms with milkshakes and movie magazines is one with which a repressed '50s readership felt uncomfortable. Though, in fact, “Lolita” is now regarded as an American classic, its publication brought Nabokov unwanted notoriety. It also brought to an end four decades of hand-to-mouth living.

There was little in his own life that might have prompted Nabokov to create such a *succes de scandale*. Field tells us that as a dashing young emigre in Berlin, Vladimir had a number of affairs, several with older women. None were with “nymphets,” the new word “Lolita” ushered into the language.

At age 26 he married a young Russian woman with whom he lived happily for more than 50 years until his death in 1977. Vera Nabokov was herself remarkable, capable of holding her own with a sharp-tongued, sometimes irascible husband. Field amusingly describes their spirited yet amiable sparring over incidents long in their mutual past. Vera served as Nabokov's amanuensis and as his buffer to the outside world when the author's fame brought scores of admirers and interpreters to his door.

I can think of few biographies that better integrate a man's ideas with his deeds. Field's perspicuous analyses of the books illuminate what he terms Nabokov's “nobility of spirit.”

In actual experience, as well as in his fiction, Vladimir Nabokov was an uncompromising marksman who disdained anything less than a bull's-eye. His arsenal—unshakable self-confidence, a linguistic capacity for the subtlest of wordplays, structural sleight-of-hand that disguised thematic intentions and an enduring belief in the primacy of art—was formidable enough to catapult this singular Russian into the upper reaches of American literature.

San Francisco Chronicle, 1986

YOU MUST REMEMBER THIS By Joyce Carol Oates

“You Must Remember This,” Joyce Carol Oates demands in this, her latest novel, and proceeds to about-face us into the bleak time frame that was the 1950s.

We are back in a period of social and political repression, when loyalty oaths are demanded of and acceded to by many Americans, when sexual urges are clumsily satisfied in fogged-up cars, when the threat of nuclear devastation—on the heels of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—gives birth to the short-lived bomb shelter. In this stultifying social climate the Stevicks, a working-class family living in the chilly northwestern corner of New York State, play out their entwined individual fates.

Moving seamlessly into and out of the various narrative voices of the family, Oates uses the geography of Port Oriskany—as Joyce used Dublin and Faulkner his Yoknapatawpha County—to explore the universal strivings of people bonded by place and blood.

Past 50, Lyle Stevick is a man weighted down by the accumulation of many small defeats. He is conversant with the works of such philosophers as Hobbes, Spinoza and Schopenhauer, but his time nevertheless is spent amidst the discarded furniture that he buys and sells. \$TEVICK'S FOR \$AVING\$ reads the shamefully corny sign in his store. Lyle's family, while not physically removed, is no longer with him in spirit. His passive wife might just as well be one of the old chairs he slumps into, for all the liveliness he finds in her. His son is a physical and emotional casualty of the Korean War, and his three daughters seem lost to him, especially Enid Maria, his precocious youngest and the child he loves most.

Brooding over the tumbledown state of his loveless existence, Lyle obsessively measures himself against his half-brother, Felix, who seems to succeed without trying. Handsome, forceful, attractive to women, Lyle's kid brother, recently retired from the ring where he was a contender for the middleweight championship, has quickly made a bundle through shadowy real estate deals, the details of which are beyond the older man's knowledge.

Also unknown to Lyle (and everyone else) is that for more than a year the slender Enid Maria (who at 15 is half her uncle's age) and Felix have been having a love affair that is—to evoke a '50s word—torrid. It is Oates's bravura description of every step of this erotic relationship that periodically energizes the novel, revealing a maturity of accomplishment only hinted at in previous work.

The conformist era that the Stevicks inhabit is regularly invoked, like signposts that illuminate a once-familiar road. Fifties icons large and small are noted. Adlai Stevenson, Debra Paget, Carmen Basilio, the Rosenbergs, Arthur Godfrey, Bishop Sheen, Frankie Laine—these and other topical references place the story of the Stevicks within its historical context and explain their behavior.

When Felix asks Enid to dance for the first time, the song the band plays is “As Time Goes By.” The familiar standard, with its cinematically reinforced resonance of Bogart's and Bergman's lost love found again, flutters the young girl's heart. But Enid's is hardly a movie romance. As Felix's moods swing forth and back, both ecstasy and dread occupy the teenager's passionate core.

“She felt her eyes roll upward in her head in astonishment, gripping and releasing in a quickening beat that began to anticipate and hurry his own; she saw a match raised to a scrap of cloth or paper, then the tiny flame took hold, flared violently upward, was not to be stopped. Now all veered away from her and she realized she controlled nothing, surely not the tiny panicked muscles in spasms encircling him, her hands’ wild clutching at his back, his shoulders, his hair, she sobbed aloud crying his name O love love love she was ravenous wanting it never to end begging him never to leave her. She knew then she could not draw a single breath without him, she was dead.”

Sex as death for a good Roman Catholic girl is juxtaposed with a cold-hearted lover's physical fever. And the steamy affair itself is contrasted with Lyle's innocuous daydream of dalliance with a briefly encountered hat check girl and his timid real-life failure with an attractive woman whose antiques he has been summoned to buy.

On a first reading, the fullness of Oates' psychological insights can easily be overlooked as one forges ahead with the story. Re-examined, her virtuosity is apparent as she imagines herself into Enid Maria, then Felix, then Lyle and back again to the girl in an ever-widening circle. Each narrative ripple produces crucial truths by showing a character not only subjectively but through the multiple sensibilities of others.

What in the abstract seem paradoxical plot resolutions—the endurance if not vindication of a failed life, the breakdown of another that seemed invincible, the craving for obliteration by yet another whose possibilities seem endless—are resolved in masterly ways by a writer who unsparingly portrays her main characters as the imperfect, tormented creatures they are.

And yet, after all the pain and revulsion and self-blame and heartbreak, in a long and sustained “mollybloom” soliloquy (from a male point of view), Oates movingly affirms much of the negativity that has preceded, ending this, her finest novel, on a surprising note of apotheosis.

San Francisco Chronicle, 1987

WHERE I'M CALLING FROM By Raymond Carver

I admit I hold to the dark view of things,” says a Raymond Carver character in typically laconic manner. This man, after the passage of some years, has turned up unannounced at the home of his remarried ex-wife. Far from expressing surprise, the woman lets him in and brings him a cup of coffee. Then, in a deadly matter-of-fact tone, she reads him the riot act, spelling out in detail his past derelictions. He listens mutely for a long time.

“And then I do something. I reach over and take the sleeve of her blouse between my thumb and forefinger. That's all. I just touch it that way, and then I just bring my hand back. She doesn't draw away. She doesn't move. Then here's the thing I do next. I get down on my knees, a big guy like me, and I take the hem of her dress. What am I doing on the floor? I wish I could say. But I know it's where I ought to be, and I'm there on my knees holding on to the hem of her dress.”

This understated description of the character's act of contrition amounts to a Carver climax. Although the man's emotions are not verbalized, the unexpectedness of his act stuns the affected reader. The story ends with the woman helping her ex-husband to his feet and walking him to the door.

The name of this story is “Intimacy.” It is one of seven new stories that share space in this volume with 30 others selected from previous collections. Considered as an extended work, the book summarizes Carver's writing career and testifies to a literary achievement equaled only by the very best of modern American story writers—Hemingway, Welty, Salinger, Cheever.

Carver explores confused or uprooted lives in the simplest of ways, using everyday language with calibrated precision to suggest profound depths of meaning. For such economy of expression he has been pegged by undiscerning and lazy critics as a “minimalist”. Hardly. To see Carver's stories small is to overlook their fundamental engagement with universal problems. In them, under-achievers and even downright failures at life are given their just due—they are taken seriously.

The Carver landscape is peopled with casualties—bankrupts, insomniacs, unsuccessful door-to-door salesmen, desultory philanderers, young couples who have lost their childhood because of an unwanted pregnancy, and alcoholics who half-heartedly dry out. (“Part of me wanted help. But there was another part.”)

These people aimlessly jettison close personal relationships as well as their personal effects because they have been defeated in small ways that come to add up to too much. They mourn long-departed, adored fathers and abide unappreciative senior citizen mothers who can still reduce them emotionally to the level of an 8-year-old. The children of Carver's characters often turn out not quite right themselves (“The truth is, my kid has a conniving streak in him.”) Wives are not so much to make love to as to cuddle while watching late-night TV or with whom to share 3 a.m. cigarettes.

Strangely, the viewpoint is not as negative as these examples seem to imply. An intermittent dry humor eases narrative tension, and the latter stories contain elements of, if not hope, then at least acceptance. Reading through this collection chronologically, one notes a deepening of thought, an evolution toward compassionate observation hinted at in earlier stories and now fully realized.

As two horses materialize out of the fog on a suburban lawn, the failure of a man to recognize his wife's handwriting is symptomatic of a marriage that has failed in the story "Blackbird Pie."

"Fever" charts the confusion of an abandoned husband who, unable to care properly for his young children, is himself tended by an angel of mercy, coming to him in the form of an elderly baby sitter.

In "A Small, Good Thing," an 8-year-old boy is knocked into the street by a hit-and-run driver, and mysteriously fails to respond to medical treatment. As his anxious parents wait for the child to awaken, a crank caller, obsessed by an imagined slight, intrudes on the couple's tense vigil. Out of this miserable situation, a communion unfolds in the story's last paragraphs, beautifully illuminating the darkness that has preceded.

In an early story, "Are These Actual Miles?" the forced sale of a family car, a wife's indifferent betrayal of her alcoholic husband and the man's disgust with himself contribute to his consideration of whether or not to hang himself. It turns out that he does not, but "he understands he is willing to be dead."

"Menudo" finds Carver at the top of his powers. The middle-aged, ex-alcoholic narrator of the story is acting strangely. Standing in the dark at his bedroom window, he thinks back on his failed love relationships. He remembers the sweet young wife he left, who now entrusts her life to various psychics. His present wife, whom he regards as something of a cold cookie, once left him, but now he is betraying her by having an affair with a married woman who lives across the street. He stares at the light in the kitchen of her otherwise-darkened house. Later he finds himself in the yard of another neighbor, unsolicitedly raking the leaves.

This man will not hang himself. He thinks: "But now I don't know what to believe in. I'm not complaining, simply stating a fact. I'm down to nothing! And I have to go on like this. No destiny. Just the next thing meaning whatever you think it does. Compulsion and error, just like everybody else."

Just like everybody else. Even the epiphanies of this wonderful writer are modestly stated. Pick up on Raymond Carver. Where he is calling from is the innermost region of the heart.

San Francisco Chronicle, 1988

THE LETTERS OF JOHN CHEEVER by Benjamin Cheever

In the best of his fiction, John Cheever re-created the suburban experience in America as no writer has before or since.

The men of Shady Hill, St. Botolphs and Bullet Park are ordinary residents of patrician attitude whose lack of wherewithal sadly limits their social-climbing ambitions. They are impulsive adulterers who bathe in mortifyingly cold water, heavy drinkers who soberly carve the Thanksgiving turkey for an All-American family, men who ache to be good but are betrayed by moral flaws.

Cheever explored such conflicted existences with precision and a felicity of expression that made the essential lightness of his fictional beings not merely bearable but amusing. Graceful and lapidary are operative words for John Cheever's prose.

The letters in this volume, selected and edited by his son, generally reflect the cheerful and urbane Cheever persona that dominated his books. The later ones especially are distinguished by a burnished easiness of phrase and a sly humor that on occasion turns unkind. But the correspondence also plumbs darkness and betrays an ineffable sadness that the author in real life sought to keep under wraps.

"I have always been the lover--never the beloved," Cheever complained to a friend a few years before he died of cancer in 1982. The beloveds were many for this long-married father of three, and included men as well as women. For Cheever, these entanglements were always connected with the need for love. "Unseemly close," Cheever elsewhere characterized the undocumented relationship with his older brother than may have been the crucial one in his life.

The editor reminds us that his father's homosexual episodes were superseded by a lusty heterosexual life, and Cheever's homophobic outbursts seem to support that view. Actress Hope Lange, with whom Cheever had a protracted love affair, recalls him in these pages as having been the most ardent of lovers.

Following his sister Susan's troubled 1984 memoir of their father, Benjamin Cheever endeavors in this account to explicate his father's complex character more thoroughly. Perhaps too much so. In lengthy notes that precede rather than follow the letters in the conventional fashion, Benjamin pinpoints virtually every epistolary reference. The memoir he constructs as apposite to the correspondence has the unswerving authority of primary witness and bravely documents a child's love for a difficult parent. But the editor also leads the reader shamelessly, not trusting the material at hand to speak for itself.

The early letters are notable for fluency of expression and a corresponding superficiality of subject. Much high-blown talk of work-in-progress and local geography fills the pages as the young Cheever communicates with such senior literary correspondents as Malcolm Cowley, Josephine Herbst, e. e. cumings and Elizabeth Ames, executive director of Yaddo, the artist colony where Cheever spent many of his summers.

It takes service during World War II to focus the young writer's descriptive abilities on more substantial subjects. But even here, Cheever comes across as being along only for the ride. He is apolitical to a

remarkable degree and strangely equable about the drudgery of army life. Petty details engage him, not the larger social picture. Writing to his wife, he observes: "I dream continually about the day when the war will be over. It's always in the country somewhere, always in the east where there is grass and where there are elm trees, and you're always wearing a sweater."

Once discharged, he toils for subsistence wages as a free-lance writer of stories, principally for *The New Yorker*, with whom he has begun a lifelong professional affiliation. Years later, after his first novel is finally published and he can afford to do so, John Cheever--in what comes across as an act of pure will--transforms himself into the country husband he has so beautifully brought to life in his fiction--complete with Westchester Country home, picture-perfect family and loyal dog, the death of whom produces this bittersweet reminiscence:

"Some years ago I went to a psychiatrist who told me I was obsessed [sic] with my mother. When I told him that I like to swim he said: Mother. When I told him that I like the rain he said: Mother. When I told him that I drank too much he said: Mother. This was all rubbish but sitting here with Cassie one evening I saw her raise her head exactly as Mother used to and give me a pained, sweet, fleeting smile that was unnerving."

Central to Cheever's life was his alcoholism, the fact of which he denied to himself for a long time. Writing to Josephine Herbst as late as 1968, he is still evasive about his drinking: "There is a terrible sameness to the euphoria of alcohol and the euphoria of metaphor--the sense that the imagination is boundless--and I sometimes substitute or extend one with the other."

Just five years later, after disastrous teaching stints at Iowa and Boston University that were dominated by alcoholic binges, a gravely ill Cheever is taken to Smithers Clinic in Manhattan to dry out. Though initially resistant to the treatment ("half the time I know why I'm here, half the time I don't", he never drank again.

The sexual ambiguity that divided him was opposed more obliquely. In 1976, a few years before his death, Cheever's transcendently confessional novel, "Falconer," was published to popular and critical acclaim. Readers did not fully pick up on its autobiographical aspects, and Cheever equivocated in interviews when asked about the book's homosexual elements.

Ultimately, as these letters attest when one scratches their veneer, John Cheever's life was characterized by an unending search for goodness that he never despaired of finding. Writing to an unnamed young man with whom he had been physically intimate, Cheever tellingly notes: It seems from adolescence that we must learn to love one another.

Anything less it seemed, would wreak some basic damage to my spiritual balance." This problem appears in all the books and stories."

San Francisco Chronicle, 1989

THE LIFE OF LEOPOLD BLOOM
By Peter Costello

The best thing about this innovative novel is the deceptively simple idea behind it: to radically compress James Joyce's polymathic and daunting tome, "Ulysses," and extract from its weighty allusiveness a bare-bones narrative of Leopold Bloom, Joyce's central character and modern Everyman.

Like Alexander's decisive hacking of the Gordian Knot, Peter Costello has lopped off the arcane appendages that have challenged readers of "Ulysses" since its publication in 1922. Gone are the Homeric parallels that Joyce utilized as structural elements. No longer present are philosophical meanderings based on the thinking of such as Dante, with whose exile Joyce identified, and Giambattista Vico, whose cyclical theory of history he incorporated in his book. Nowhere in this slender volume are there to be found examples of bravura interior monologue or elaborately linguistic wordplay of the kind known simply today as Joycean.

What remains after Costello's prodigious sculpting is a straightforward account of the quotidian events that Joyce embellished with an artistic invention new to English literature. Thus unencumbered, the comings and goings of a canvasser of advertisements in Dublin on the single day that comprises the time frame of "Ulysses"--June 16, 1904, or Bloomsday--unfold with economy and immediacy.

But where Joyce left off, Costello continues for another 33 years, plausibly projecting on the basis of evidence left by his model, and imaginatively (if not always satisfyingly) supposing what became of Bloom and Molly and Stephen Daedalus after Molly's book-ending soliloquy.

Among the scenarios he creates are Molly's death, followed much later by Bloom's. Brought to center stage are their daughter and her husband and--pivotaly--their child, Bloom's grandson, with whom the old man connects as he did a generation back with Stephen Daedalus.

Scholars who have paddled through the vast waters of Joyce studies will find in this book an immediately available short-hand that charts a clearer understanding of the mere man who created a world so much greater than his flawed self. The minor character of Stephen Daedalus' father is recognizable in this fiction as the doppelganger of Joyce's own parent, who was in large part the spur for his son's adoption of "silence, exile and cunning" in the invention of not only his books but his life.

Joyce buffs will also be aware of unifying inventions like the journey back to Gibraltar that Bloom undertakes late in life, "An explorer in search of the past, the lost youth of his dead wife." So the old man sits for an entire afternoon in the Alameda Gardens, the ultimate and apotheosizing scene of Molly Bloom's epic daydream.

These and other novelistic events take place against a background of political and social life in turn-of-the-century Ireland. Through Bloom's sympathetic eyes we see the aftermath of real-life political events: the fall from grace of political reformer Charles Stewart Parnell and the violent end of Michael Collins, a leader in the 1916 Easter Rebellion.

Joyce used Irish history in the service of art. Costello can be said to have moved in a polar direction. He mines the novel to unearth the real Dublin that Joyce mythologized. Each chapter of "The Life of Leopold Bloom" is headed by a list of advertisements taken from a contemporary post office directory--just the kind of ads that Bloom himself might have solicited for the newspaper that employed him.

What we have then in "The Life of Leopold Bloom" is an aria that serves as the signature melody for the full-length opera. Peter Costello's necessarily attenuated pretty song will undoubtedly inspire some to consider going back to or taking in for the first time "Ulysses" in all its complex and integrated entirety.

Los Angeles Times, 1993

D. H. LAWRENCE : The Story of a Marriage - by Brenda Maddox
FRIEDA LAWRENCE - by Rosie Jackson

D. H. Lawrence just might be the most misunderstood of major modern authors. He has been reviled or adored as a sadistic misogynist, empathetic portrayer of women's feelings, proto-fascist, mystical pantheist, latent (and on at least one occasion overt) homosexual and pornographer. An early biographer dubbed him "The Priest of Love," as apt an epithet as there may be for this enigmatic and charismatic being.

Brenda Maddox is the latest literary sleuth to confront the mystery of who—really—David Herbert Lawrence was. She brings formidable credentials to a complex biographical case, most particularly a thorough grounding of her subject's time and place. She also thoroughly mines new Lawrence scholarship in the form of many previously unpublished letters and a key memoir by a little-known inamorata to bolster her critical views.

Maddox's previous book, the widely acclaimed "Nora," studied Lawrence's brilliant coeval, James Joyce, through the prism of his marriage. In her biography of Lawrence she again chooses to illuminate a biographical subject in the light of his conjugal relationship.

The union of Lawrence and the Baroness Frieda von Richthofen Weekley was an unlikely one. The biographer quips: "It was a mismatch made in heaven." Yet despite compelling differences of ethnicity, class and sensibility that frequently found them at each other's throats (literally, at times), the embattled couple endured in uneasy but vital symbiosis.

Frieda and Lawrence were wed in the early part of the 20th Century, a times when the English were unencumbering themselves from Victorian constraints. On the face of it, Lawrence was overmatched by a Rubenesque, sexually liberated mate. Nonetheless, he was emboldened in an early poem to apotheosize his own bedroom performance as "all my best/Soul's naked lightning." Frieda must have loved that. She was ever-proud of the literary genius who immortalized their love to the world. She was also apt to seduce the nearest man when her freedom-loving mood so dictated, dalliances Lawrence largely chose to ignore.

Maddox emphasizes the Lawrences' lives through a psychosexual dimension designed to reveal the author's inner life. Frieda championed her husband's literary genius yet challenged his opinions in public, acts that Lawrence found infuriatingly disloyal. He idealized her as Venus incarnate in his books, but due to the ambivalences in their relationship could not satisfactorily communicate the importance he assigned to his sexual role in his novels. As a result, he fixed on the experiences of friends, which, in marginally disguised form, found their way into his fiction.

Maddox's biography is laced with Freudian thought—the good, not the sticky, babbly kind. She argues persuasively that Lawrence created prodigiously and at a feverish pace in unthinking denial of the lifelong tuberculosis that would ravage his frail frame and leave him dead at the tender age of 44, weighing just 85 pounds. She is equally convincing in relating Lawrence's wanderlust to a quest for the restoration of his health.

Most important, she posits that the refined and doting Midlands mother, whom he so lovingly limned in "Sons and Lovers," was in fact a stifling presence in her son's formative years at the expense of his rough-hewn coal miner father. In "Sons and Lovers," Lawrence's protagonist, Paul Morel, dilutes the milk nourishing his terminally ill mother and at a late stage pours in a lethal dose of morphine to release her from worldly pain. The underlying suggestion is that the son is freeing himself in the process, a neat psychic reversal of Lydia Lawrence's years of smothering.

In a devil-may-care autobiography, written after her husband's death, Frieda, whose opinion was augmented by the authority of personal experience, reflected that, for all his sympathies toward them, Lawrence "dreaded women, felt that in the end they were more powerful than men." It is such subterranean truths that Maddox digs in search of and largely succeeds in locating.

Early on, Maddox theorizes that Lawrence "gives to the sexual act a weight it will not bear." This may be so but then polemical overkill is an important component of D. H. Lawrence's power. When the scales settle, it is clear that Maddox has accomplished what any serious biographer hopes to: to bring her subject into the light of understanding. This modern biography, in the best sense of that phrase, lets us see Lawrence and his astonishing body of work more clearly than ever.

"Frieda Lawrence," by Rosie Jackson, does not concern itself with D. H. Lawrence's literary output, focusing on the author's life only to explore that of his wife. This study means to dispel the scholarly consensus of Frieda as an obtuse and bickering mate who thwarted the progress of Lawrence's genius.

Jackson sees her subject as an independent-minded woman who bravely left her first husband for Lawrence at a time when it was anathema to do so. She sees Frieda's extramarital affairs not as betrayal of trust but as a larger-than-lifeness that invigorated those around her. Much of the evidence for such a view comes from Frieda's daughter, who is quoted at length in the book.

Jackson's account portrays her subject as an extraordinary woman for whom living, not the creation of art, was paramount. The biographer attempts to buttress her views by including an abridgement of Frieda's published autobiography which was composed after Lawrence's death, along with previously unavailable memoirs that are transparent fictions of her love affairs. Jackson gamely tries to make a case for Frieda's abilities as a writer, but a reading of the last two sections shows that Frieda's authorial misgivings were well-founded.

San Francisco Chronicle, 1994

UNITED STATES: Essays, 1952-1992
By Gore Vidal

The publication of “United States” confirms Gore Vidal as the most stimulating essayist of our time—if one agrees that a slip in the face qualifies as stimulation.

Love or loathe his confrontational style, Vidal’s urbane and confident intelligence remains spellbinding. Whether he discusses literature (classical, modern, unfashionable and obscure), politics (in which he has been a prime-time participant, having made an unsuccessful primary run for a U. S. Senate seat from California) or philosophy (as a “born-again atheist,” he works over monotheism, “easily the greatest disaster to befall the human race,; with a rhetorical rubber hose) he is never dull.

He consistently brings to his subject something on the order of one part formidable knowledge, two parts aphoristic wit a la Oscar Wilde and a liberal dose of whatever it is that chefs use to make their sauces a touch bitter. The zest with which Vidal takes on perceived enemies pervades this collection. If revenge is indeed a dish best eaten cold, it may be deduced that Vidal is not in need of a microwave oven.

In a piece on critics titled “Literary Gangsters,” he ironically posits: “It is not wise to praise anyone living.” Vidal’s writings adhere to this maxim. Norman Mailer’s “The Naked and the Dead” is “a clever, talented, admirable executed fake...I do recall a fine description of soldiers carrying a dying man down a mountain (done almost as well as the same scene in Malraux’s earlier work).”

If Mailer’s compositions can be disingenuously alluded to as plagiarism, it is only a hop, skip and jump to the passing along of nastier (and unsubstantiated) rumors. Vidal recalls a discussion with World War II novelist John Horne Burns in which Burns theorized that to be a good writer it is necessary to be gay. “But what about Faulkner, I asked, and Hemingway. He was disdainful. Who said *they* were any good? And besides hadn’t I heard how Hemingway once...”

This is three dot journalism at its most lethal, with a deceased and thus unverifiable source dropping the poison pill into the goblet.

Minor authors no longer with us, however, have nothing to fear. Thomas Love Peacock, Logan Pearsall Smith, Dawn Powell and Frederic Prokosch are among the writers’ writers whose works are thoroughly and enthusiastically explicated.

The middle ground is a humdrum terrain not often occupied by high-flying controversialists. But it is just when Vidal is ambivalent or patently undecided that he is at his most interesting. This is the case with pieces written on Tennessee Williams, whom he knew well, and Somerset Maugham, whose entire output he had absorbed while still in his teens. Sexually complex lives like theirs engage Vidal and prod him to investigate the psychological underpinnings of gay life in general. There are no homosexuals or heterosexuals, he wisely observes, only homosexual and heterosexual acts.

The political essays gathered in this book are incisively humorous. Vidal, whose forebears were in the political mainstream, wryly suggests that the Japanese now regard us as “The Yellow Man’s Burden”

and hope they will treat us more kindly than we did them now that the shoe appears to be on the other foot. “Should we disobey, they will buy the networks and show us many hours of the soothing tea ceremony.”

A visit with Barry Goldwater in the ‘60’s produces this punchy metaphor: “When the Presidential virus attacks the system, there is a tendency for the patient in his fever to move from the Right or the Left to the Center where the curative votes are, where John Kennedy now is.”

Feminism, a cause Vidal is generally in sympathy with, is deplored for the sameness of its texts. “Each does a quick biological tour of the human body, takes on Moses and St. Paul, congratulates Mill, savages Freud (that mistake about vaginal orgasm has cost him his glory), sighs over Marx, roughs up the patriarchalists, and concludes with pleas for child-care centers, free abortion, equal pay, and—in most cases—an end to marriage.”

“United States,” then, is provocative. It will try many a patient soul. Even that unflappable master of the art of casuistry, William Buckley, lost it upon being stung by Vidal’s verbal jab once too often on network television). Buckley abandoned the finer points of his celebrated debating technique for the more direct and less rational resolve to reshape the nose of his tormentor with clenched fists.

Vidal can do that to you. These essays, however, are better approached with a philosophical acceptance of their occasional displays of pettiness. They are redeemed by courageous (and outrageous) thought, by a superb prose style and by an enlightened use of history in the service of wisdom. With this collection (which spans four decades) Vidal, as much as anyone, defines for us who we are at this time in this land.

San Francisco Chronicle, 1993

THIS WILD DARKNESS: The Story of My Death
By: Harold Brodkey

Yes, the inevitable arrival of one's death is a concern of more than passing interest. For most of us the prospect of nonexistence, as we are periodically reminded of it, is depressing. One day it will happen. Yet few of us must face knowing just when it will.

In 1993, Harold Brodkey learned that he had contracted AIDS. The disease was the unexpectedly late consequence of homosexual experiences engaged in a full generation back. "This Wild Darkness" is his unsparing chronicle of the two-plus years he lives out a fate that overtook him earlier this year. Pulling out all the stops—and then some—Brodkey, whose career has been a critically controversial one, picks at the scabs of his feelings and thoughts in punishing detail.

"In the confused, muddled velocities of my mind was an editorial sense that this was wrong, that this was an ill-judged element in the story of my life. I felt too conceited to have this death. I was illogical, fevered, but my mind still moved as if it were a rational mind—the mind, everyone's mind, is forever unstill, is a continuous restlessness like light, even in sleep, when the light is inside and not outside the skull."

Particularly unstill is the restlessly nuanced Brodkey intelligence, whether it is defiantly spurning "any human gesture of solidarity," coolly theorizing that "it's ecological sense to die while you're still productive, die and clear a space for others," or gratuitously administering a mean blow: "It is so boring to be ill, rather like being trapped in an Updike novel."

Aloof and combative as he is throughout, Brodkey proves touchingly tender toward his wife, the novelist Ellen Schwamm—his "human credential," as he wryly refers to her. His stated wish to die in order to spare her is met with fierce resistance. She wants to be with him for as long as possible despite the potential danger of infection.

As Brodkey passes through predictable emotional way stations, including Kubler-Ross's definitive five (anger, denial, bargaining, depression, acceptance), a resourceful wife placates or remonstrates with her suffering, difficult mate.

Much of this death memoir seesaws the reader to the point of motion sickness. The hallucinatory intensity of a nonfiction work is characteristic of Brodkey's convoluted stories, alternately entrancing and repelling. This book-length descent from the ranks of the living is a tour de force of brilliant observation and cranky willfulness.

There is occasional relief from the verbal onslaught of this driven being as he digresses. Brodkey compares with enviable insight the variant national styles of aggression that one encounters in traveling abroad—all of which, predictably, are anathema to him. Or he interweaves the intrinsically American penchant for optimism, as reflected by our collective susceptibility to advertising hype, with the hopelessness of his terminal condition.

Uncharacteristically stoic is Brodkey's description of the stance he enforced upon himself as an

adolescent while being sexually fondled by his adoptive father. The impression gathered here is that he may not have come to terms completely with his bisexuality. When he discusses his gay adventuring, he makes it clear that in these encounters he was not being done to but the doer.

Less than a year before his death, the author journeys to “insolently pictorial” Venice, where he allows himself to be feted by his publisher. The flesh may be unwilling but the vaunted Brodkey imagination still catalogues prodigally. He zeros in on today’s disguised forms of Italian fascism, on the inner meaning of a gondolier’s physical stance, on Veronese’s view of the world from within the small church where he painted. Even in twilight, little escapes the glittering eye of this literary mariner.

Throughout this slim volume, one supposes that its narrator will not go gently into the goodnight. And yet, in a reflective coda that amounts to an apotheosis, Brodkey does just that. Looking out his window, he beholds midtown New York, content in the knowledge that he did it his way.

“I can’t change the past and I don’t think I would. I don’t expect to be—understood.” For those who make it through this brave, uncompromising book, though, Harold Brodkey will be understood. Complex and abrasive as his work is, he stands out as a totally engaged man whose artistic energy will be missed.

Los Angeles Times, 1996

DAMNED TO FAME: The Life of Samuel Beckett
By James Knowlson

Twenty-five years ago when James Knowlson informed Samuel Beckett that he had been commissioned to write a biography of him, the self-effacing author courteously but clearly indicated that he would be less than pleased to make the details of his private life available for public scrutiny. Knowlson backed off for two decades and continued to study his subject from afar, writing or editing 10 books on Beckett.

In the interim, an unauthorized biography (by Deirdre Bair) was published, a project some critics believed she was not up to. Though he takes pains to avoid being critical of Bair, Knowlson obviously was not impressed by her effort. In 1989, he again approached the now-ailing author for his unambiguous consent. Beckett replied in eight words: "For biography of me by you it's yes."

Six months later Beckett was dead, but not before he had been extensively interviewed by Knowlson. For the first time Beckett confirmed the veracity of many of the actual events that turn up in his writings as recondite transformed fictions. These late harvest gleanings are responsible for much of the maturity of tone that pervades this 800-page study. And Knowlson's crisp and unobtrusive writing makes it easier to get through than one might imagine.

Beckett's belated agreement to cooperate was no mere change of mind from a man who had habitually disdained all interest in him from the world at large. This was, after all, the man who, upon learning that he had won the Nobel Prize for literature, holed up in, of all places, Tunisia until the media frenzy had abated and subsequently sent his publisher to Stockholm to accept the award.

Anyone acquainted with Beckett's habits will understand that Knowlson was hardly alone in having been initially turned down. Through the years many petitioners for an audience, including this reviewer, were rebuffed.

In 1982, when the late Art Seidenbaum asked me to interview Beckett for these pages, I wrote to the author in Paris requesting permission to submit a list of written questions concerning his work, permission that Beckett granted by return mail. My ensuing queries earned an equally prompt response that was at once apologetic and firm: "I have no answers to such questions. I am sorry to disappoint you."

The point here is not so much to spotlight Beckett's fabled guardedness with regard to his artistic intentions but to suggest that the apparent inaccessibility of his published work was emblematic of the way in which he led his life.

Beckett's willingness to help having been secured, Knowlson sure-footedly tracks the relationship between experience and art and ends up with some provocative conclusions. For example, he sees Beckett's trilogy—"Molloy," "Malone Dies" and "The Unnamable"—not as the generally received philosophical maunderings of a man alone in a room passively revisiting his past but as "the most deeply personal books he ever wrote."

Knowlson evaluates these fictional narratives, which, along with “Waiting for Godot” secured Beckett’s reputation, as a brave attempt by the author to go into himself on the deepest level and deal “with the fragmentation he discovered in the self.”

Knowlson’s analyses are certain and deft, without the kind of critical bludgeoning often resorted to by uncertain interpreters. He is especially good on “Godot,” noting that the play is rooted in Beckett’s French Resistance activities during World War II (and courteous in crediting the earliest critical source for this theory, Hugh Kenner).

The biographer makes no secret of his respect and affection for Beckett, finding him as formidable in personal encounter as on the printed page. Beckett admirers will find it easy to empathize with Knowlson’s feelings, so many of us having been awed by what may be best described as the nuclear force of his words.

Relentlessly exploring through the barest of language what it means to be human on the most elemental of levels, Beckett ruthlessly empties his compositions of all that is extraneous. The compressed remainder is then harnessed to explode the reader’s mind with the universal truths he so persistently (and for some so depressingly) pursued. Knowlson tells us that Beckett deemed music and painting to be art forms superior to language and thoroughly documents Beckett’s lifelong involvement with both.

He is also not loath to discuss the man’s frailties, among them a predilection for heavy drinking. During a long union with Suzanne Deschevaux Dumesnil, the French woman who championed his work early on and who interposed herself between a diffident husband and the literary establishment, he had several affairs with other women that seemed to be less about love, or even sex, than about a necessary release from tension. It is a measure of the man that the women tended to remain friends long after the affairs had run their courses.

A crucial relationship for Beckett was the difficult one with his mother, whose strong-mindedness drove him from Ireland in his 20s but whom he never really left. “I am what her savage loving has made me,” he wrote to a friend at the time.

In Paris, Beckett fell under the influence of James Joyce and editorially assisted the older writer, who by then was almost blind. Knowlson observes that even at this formative stage of his literary career, Beckett’s philosophic underpinnings led him to disagree with Joyce, who believed that the key to artistic expression lay primarily in the rearrangement of words. Beckett, on the other hand, intuited early on that “whatever is said is so far from the experience” and that for him it was a matter of “getting down below the surface to the authentic weakness of being.”

One of the many fine things about this book is its evocative title. Not surprisingly, the telling words issued from Beckett. Knowlson came across the phrase “damned to fame” in one of the author’s notebooks and knew enough to employ it, just as his subject had taken his own cue from Alexander Pope—himself no slouch at depicting the ridiculousness of the human condition.

We read about the lives of others to monitor, if not indeed validate, how we ourselves live. By working through this model of biographical excellence you will better understand Beckett and perhaps yourself.

Los Angeles Times, 1996

MISFIT: The Strange Life of Frederick Exley
by Jonathan Yardley

Frederick Exley, the chronically bibulous subject of this unexpectedly affecting biography, was a self-absorbed jangle of nerves that were matter-of-factly exposed by their insouciant owner to the fascination or horror of all who encountered him.

Capable of exerting a hold on people and endowed with an outrageous sense of entitlement, Exley was larger than life and largely deceitful in relationships whenever he encountered difficulties – which was often. Still, he managed to produce “A Fan’s Notes” in 1968 – a “fictional memoir” of his failed life. Three decades after its publication the book remains in print, is taught in university courses, and has had an enviable number of prominent champions.

One of these is Jonathan Yardley, the Pulitzer Prize-winning book critic for the Washington Post. In “Misfit,” Yardley has undertaken to explain what was so singular about Fred Exley, whose literary persona he rates as a great American character, up there with Huckleberry Finn. Laying out the facts of the tortured existence Exley himself described as a “long malaise,” Yardley poises between esteem and disapproval.

A-bare-bones summary of that life goes something like this: Fred Exley was born in Watertown, New York, a bleak upstate town characterized by freezing weather and a WASP ruling elite that employed the town’s factory workers and laborers. The stunted lives of men like Exley began and usually ended in blue collar saloons.

Fred’s father was a local sporting legend, reputed to have been the best athlete ever to come out of the region. Earl Exley’s son, as young Fred was known, could not begin to approach his father’s athletic feats, though he persevered at sports in high school and was competent.

Early on, Fred turned completely inward except when he was drinking, whereupon he turned crude and wittily wounding according to the many witnesses whose testimony Yardley collected. Exley had trouble when he was sober as well.

Women for Exley were vessels of two kinds: long-legged Ivy League Holy Grails never to be actually encountered or despised receptacles through whom he indulged his childish whims. Twice he was remanded to mental institutions, where electroshock treatment was employed to curb his alcoholism. He married twice and was divorced both times by patient, loving wives who left reluctantly. His especially doting mother took Fred in on the frequent occasions he had nowhere else to go. His friends – and Exley never lacked for them – advanced him money with the full knowledge it would not be repaid.

Then, miraculously, like a phoenix rising from its own ashes, Exley stopped drinking long enough to compose in palimpsest form the story of his first 35 years. Rereading “A Fan’s Notes,” one is taken by its utter candor, its stylistic *éclat*, and the ingenious nature of Exley’s narrative device. Transferring the

impossible hero worship he never stopped feeling for his father onto real-life football star Frank Gifford, with whom Exley attended the University of Southern California (they did not know each other), the narrator is able to zero in on the emotional impact of what being a spectator entails, and to intuit what Yardley shrewdly understands as its “metaphoric and self-aggrandizing possibilities.”

In the real world a fantasizing Exley cheers Gifford on from his bar stool in tones approaching lunacy, fully aware of the ridiculous character of his ardor. As Yardley points out: “The honesty of the book verges on the terrible. No one was ever harder on Fred Exley than Fred Exley himself. Each of his faults is isolated, explored, magnified. He does not let himself get away with anything.”

Though they never met in person, Exley contacted Yardley after the latter praised “A Fan’s Notes” in a national magazine article. Thus began what for Fred was a common practice – boozy phone calls that he similarly made to what must have been hundreds of other people. According to Yardley: “Exley simply wanted to talk; he did not want to listen.”

In the literary bar of Exley’s choice, the Lion’s Head in Greenwich Village, Yardley tells us the bartenders routinely left the phone on the hook when Fred telephoned and went about their business while he slurred on.

Two unsuccessful books followed “A Fan’s Notes.” The biographer correctly concludes that Exley was a one-book writer who squeezed all that he had or ever would have into his first book. He was, as someone cruelly put it, a downwardly-mobile man.

Self-defeated, Exley would drink himself to death a quarter-century after the publication of “A Fan’s Notes.” It proved to be a long, anticlimactic dying. The terrible irony is that while Frederick Exley failed in life, his book lives on as the inspired work and cautionary tale it remains

San Francisco Chronicle, 1997.

ROCKWELL KENT: The Art of the Bookplate
by Don Roberts

Once upon a time in America—if you were a book person—you would commission an artisan to emboss on a block of soft wood your family name within a decorative design. From this matrix, your bookplate would be imprinted on 2-by-three inches of paper. These modest talismans of ownership would then be affixed to the front inside covers of the books in your library.

Just as you employed a particular person to cut your hair or repair your car, you engaged someone to create your bookplate. And, as did so many other material possessions, your library would serve as a conspicuous index of your worth.

The peak time of the bookplate as aesthetic artifact was the period between World Wars I and II, when most of the nation turned its back on the world at large to focus on matters domestic. In the arts, painters such as Grandma Moses and Grant Wood depicted unadorned rural tableaux, while writers composed homespun narratives like “Winesburg, Ohio” and “our Town,” which emphasized the virtues of small-town life. At Sunday concerts, John Philip Sousa's patriotic marches energized park visitors to stamp their feet in collegial unison. Back then, it was not TV talking heads but speakers on the Chautauqua circuit who instructed and entertained.

This bygone age is engagingly evoked by Don Roberts in “Rockwell Kent: The Art of the Bookplate.” Although the book centers on Kent, who was one of the best known U. S. artists and illustrators for much of the first half of the 20th century, Roberts slips in mini-cultural history of the times with deft and telling detail.

The bookplate came into being shortly after the invention of movable type in 15th century Germany. Its raison d'etre was utilitarian. Bookplates served as tangible evidence of ownership and were meant to inhibit book theft. Early bookplates by such artists as Albrecht Durer featured coats of arms and armorial motifs than emphasized a family's lineage.

It was not long before mottoes and sayings found their way onto bookplates. Some were humorously chiding, like Sir Walter Scott's: “Please return this book; I find that though many of my friends are poor mathematicians, they are nearly all good bookkeepers.” Well-known illustrators William Hogarth, Kate Greenaway, Marc Chagall and Eric Gill further developed this miniature art form. Bookplates became collectors' items.

In today's condition-conscious rare-book circles, the presence of a bookplate is generally considered a defect unless it establishes a book's provenance or is that of a notable person. Special collections departments in some institutional libraries now mark their volumes with ink visible only under ultraviolet light or emboss them with microchips. But let's go back to Rockwell Kent's time, when so much thought and energy were lavished on the making of these personalized slips of paper. A summary of his lifetime achievements reads like one of those typerbolic publisher's introductions of a new author by way of his previously esoteric (and sometimes fictional) occupations. In Kent's case, however, it is true.

He was as renowned book designer for major publishers—creating fine editions of such classics as “Moby-Dick,” “Beowulf,” “Candide” and the complete works of Shakespeare. He created the Random House logo still in use today. His paintings were regularly shown in prominent art galleries and museums. Painters Marsden Hartley, John Sloan and Edward Hopper were among his admirers and friends, the last having been Kent's roommate as they began their careers.

Chronically restless (he rose at 5 a.m. and expected everyone else to do likewise), Kent traveled periodically, usually alone, exploring the world from Greenland's northern climes down to the Patagonian archipelago. After returning home, he wrote—and illustrated—several bestselling books about his adventures.

Married three times, Kent regularly began romantic dalliances with other women, then 'fessed up to his mates and encouraged them to welcome his newest inamorata into the family fold. That the wives accepted such arrangements attests to an always loving husband's formidable powers of persuasion.

Though the social milieu Kent matter-of-factly inhabited was largely that of the wealthy and privileged, he was a lifelong political activist of socialistic bent. During the Cold War, he fearlessly traded barbs with Sen. Joseph McCarthy at a congressional hearing on Communist activities and breezed out free of the contempt charges others faced in that politically repressive era.

Charismatic and multifaceted, Kent also created 160 bookplates, working closely with varied patrons: millionaires as well as those without the wherewithal to pay; personal friends, including Margaret Sanger and Bennett Cerf, and people randomly encountered. Kent invited their ideas. He saw the creation of a bookplate as a collaborative venture: “The best way by all odds is to pick a good designer, confide to him the story of your life, your likes, your aspirations...” When his clients did, Kent was happy to employ his technical mastery in their behalf.

In his bookplates, Kent gave the human form a modern, idealized treatment, imbuing his Art Deco-style renderings with an indelible sharpness of line that was at once geometrically precise and flowing. He borrowed freely from Mythology, drawing magnificently plumed birds with talons that metamorphosed into human hands. He limned trim, high-breasted female nudes being borne on flying horses—an image that conveys the notion of classical chastity as well as sexuality.

A recurring theme in his bookplates is of reaching. A lonely arm thrusts into the night sky as if seeking a star to touch. In these more self-conscious times, such a flamboyant gesture could be regarded as overly earnest, even corny. Kent's bravura position in the art world hierarchy after World War II was taken over by the Abstract Expressionists, then the newest darlings of art critics. Bookplates, too, are relics, but Kent's heroic images still live as an authentic expression of their time.

Los Angeles Times, 2002

