



Many recent American novelists have experimented with typography that calls attention to their books' own artificiality. Clockwise from top: the epigraph to Thomas Pynchon's *V.* signals the mystery of the novel's title. The "Frame-Tale" from John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* forms a Mobius strip, an infinitely repeated story of once upon a time. The shortest chapter from Nabokov's *Lolita* is both hymn and mockery of the narrator's love for the heroine. In *V.*, again, Pynchon transforms World War II's Kilroy into a monster. Finally, the tombstone from Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* expresses its author's hopeful/cynical metaphysics.



The American Novel

Since the time of Fitzgerald and Hemingway, there have been bold changes in American fiction—as shown by the collage of styles on the page opposite. We have seen new influences in the Southern novel and the Jewish novel, the Academic novel, even the nonfiction novel. Here four scholars discuss the American writers—from Saul Bellow to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.—who have gained prominence since World War II. Earl Rovit describes what these writers have in common. Jerome Klinkowitz explores their uses of humor. Melvin J. Friedman scans the entire postwar period. Tony Tanner, an Englishman, examines the major themes peculiar to the American novel. And some surprises crop up in a *Quarterly* survey of professors' choices of the "most important" novels published since 1945.



THE AMERICAN NOVELIST: A SEMI-SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW

by Earl Rovit

Although the serious novel is still respectable, there is no doubt that the last half century has witnessed its slow decline from a position of cultural supremacy. Television, the movies, the demise of magazine fiction, and the new show-and-tell illiteracy have significantly reduced the prestige of the novel and rendered it less appealing to a large audience. Yet for all the countless pious discussions about the failing health or the impending death of the novel, the plight of its practitioners is usually ignored.

It is blithely assumed, I suppose, that as with the laborers displaced by the invention of the internal combustion engine, novelists will adapt their skills to a more receptive occupation or simply surrender, become recycled, or apply for welfare. This assumption, of course, is grandly inept. First, the peculiar combination of energy and talent that leads a writer to the novel is

not readily transferrable to related literary activities—and especially not to the best-paying of them, the writing of screenplays. Second, the time lag between the writing of a novel and its distribution, coupled with the impossibility of predicting reader demand has historically defined the novelist's job as a full-time profession which is, paradoxically, a part-time occupation.

Only a very few novelists have ever been wholly self-supporting—and then only after their careers were fully launched. Although novelists certainly produce novels with profits in mind, it is also true that they will write their novels when the chances of financial reward and public fame are so poor as to be virtually negligible.

The 1976 edition of *A Directory of American Fiction Writers* (with its 1977 *Supplement*) lists about 1,000 men and women apparently not ashamed to be identified in public as novelists or short story writers. I'm not at all sure what that figure signifies. By way of comparison, there are 10 times as many fiction writers as there are active U.S. senators. On the other hand, there are roughly one-third as many novelists as there are neurosurgeons. To put it another way, we have about one novelist for every 220,000 Americans. It is generally conceded that fewer than a hundred of these novelists are able to live on the income from their fiction.

The period of apprenticeship preceding the publication of a first novel can be quite extensive. More frequently than not, "first" novels are, in reality, the writers' second or third novels. The financial payoff, if any, is also likely to be meager, since publishers are reluctant to dispense large advances to writers who have yet to demonstrate their appeal to buyers of sizable subsidiary rights (book clubs, paperback reprints, television and movie options, and foreign rights). Accordingly, we find that colleges and universities have become the prime supporters of our novelists, treating them not as pets or conversation pieces, but as full-fledged members of their instructional staffs.

To be sure, the university is not the sole option for the

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novelist. A magazine like the *New Yorker*, a wealthy, indulgent spouse or patron here and there, the erratic largesse of philanthropic foundations, catch-as-catch-can free-lancing, journalism, advertising agencies, public relations firms, and the movie and television industries present other sources of support. But these have tended to be, in differing ways, less secure, less accessible, and more time-consuming in their demands than college English departments—especially during the academic boom years of the 1960s.

Before we examine the implications of this recent maternal bond between the university and the novelist, it might be sensible to take a small sampling of the *Directory's* 1,000 names—an elite group of 30 of our more successful novelists. My selection is admittedly subjective, but I think most critics would agree that at least 20 of the 30 represent our best novelists to have emerged in the post-World War II period.

James Baldwin	John Gardner	Thomas Pynchon
John Barth	William H. Gass	Ishmael Reed
Donald Barthelme	John Hawkes	Philip Roth
Saul Bellow	Joseph Heller	J. D. Salinger
John Cheever	Norman Mailer	Jean Stafford
Robert Coover	Bernard Malamud	William Styron
J. P. Donleavy	Joyce Carol Oates	Peter Taylor
Stanley Elkin	Walker Percy	John Updike
Ralph Ellison	J. F. Powers	Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.
William Gaddis	James Purdy	Eudora Welty

Each has attracted a following of readers; each has been subjected to extensive literary-critical and cultural commentary. Their works have been reprinted in paperback, and, in many cases, movie and television options have been taken out on some of their books. They span about a generation and a half; the oldest of them (Eudora Welty) was born in 1909 and the youngest (Joyce Carol Oates) in 1938. Three are women, three are black, seven are Jewish, and there are possibly three Catholics and two homosexuals. Five of the writers are closely associated with the South; the rest are predominantly from the Northeast and Midwest. Except in a few instances, specific regional settings play minor roles in their fictional worlds.

As a group, they have received superior formal educations. Almost all of them have gained baccalaureate degrees (not necessarily majoring in literature) and many have done some postgraduate study. There are at least three who have earned Ph.D.s, and there is one M.D. (Walker Percy).

For the most part they have been warmly acclaimed. Seventeen of the 30 have been elected to the prestigious American Institute of Arts and Letters, one is a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, and more than half have won or been in contention for National Book Awards and Pulitzer Prizes. Their popular success, it is true, has differed enormously, ranging from the avalanches of attention that thundered down on Salinger for *Catcher in the Rye* and on Heller for *Catch-22* to the relative commercial neglect of James Purdy. Their prolificity has varied, but in general they have achieved a respectable productivity over the years.

It seems, however, that even this well-favored group has not escaped financial worries. Twenty-one of them teach or have taught on a full- or part-time basis. Nineteen of the 30 have applied for and received Guggenheim Fellowships, in some cases more than once. I count 8 who have enjoyed an association with the *New Yorker* and 12 who regularly augment their incomes by giving readings. Almost all of them (except Salinger and Pynchon) perform some kind of public role in society; they appear at workshops and writing conferences such as Breadloaf and Aspen, and most of them earn some money reviewing books and writing "think pieces."

A Chastening Experience

The novelist is the long-distance runner among writers, and what he requires more than anything else is time—long stretches of concentrated, unimpeded time. Meeting classes, holding student conferences, grading papers, applying for grants, free-lancing, writing television scripts, editing, traveling the literary-lion circuit, etc., may, in some cases, be precisely the worst—and the most eagerly embraced—distractions that the novelist can suffer. In other cases, they may be sensible strategies for buying precious time. Even at its best, writing novels must be among the loneliest pursuits of man, and some responsible engagement with the social world is clearly necessary. But to determine the point at which the loss of momentum and concentration outweighs the gain of social sanity and perspective is a hazardous exercise in fine measurement.

For all of their differences, our novelists articulate a surprisingly homogeneous and moderate vision of the world. The regional, ethnic, racial, and sexual affiliations of these writers—and they seem to fall into the expected patterns of America's professional middle class—are far less divisive than they might conceivably be. Whether the writers are experimenting outrage-

“Writing a novel is a terrible experience, during which the hair often falls out and the teeth decay. I’m always highly irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and it’s very shocking to the system. If the novelist is not sustained by a hope of money, then he must be sustained by a hope of salvation, or he simply won’t survive the ordeal.”

—Flannery O’Connor

ously with literary conventions and styles (Hawkes, Barthelme), exploiting extravagantly the idiosyncracies of their personalities or backgrounds (Mailer, Reed), or fashioning relatively traditional stories (Cheever, Updike), the appeal of their fiction is grounded less in the social constituency that the writers represent than in the vitality and competence of their performances. They are frequently acerbic in their criticism of American bourgeois principles and they are far from Pollyannaish in their outrage and despair at the grossness that they find at the core of contemporary life; but I am unable to find any significantly *radical* thrust in their analyses of our social framework.

It would be foolhardy to categorize the social philosophy of 30 unusually volatile individuals, but I might suggest that each of them, in a sense, knows that he has achieved a measure of success within the system. And, as novelists, as long-distance runners, each shares the chastening experience of going to the typewriter day after day in a mood of mingled patience and hope, for out of no other mood can a novel be pushed to completion. (Here it is not entirely irrelevant to note the much higher incidence of suicide and nervous breakdown among our contemporary poets, sprinters rather than long-distance runners, than among our novelists.) The way the novelist has learned to cope with his own novel-in-progress—what the Freudians describe as the principle of delayed gratification—may be the same approach that he is likely to choose in coping with the psychosocial conditions that enmesh his life.

It has been argued that this middle-class conservatism is a complacent compromise, a consequence of the academic umbrella that shelters our novelists’ lives. From the cradle to the grave it is possible for an American novelist to be rarely out of earshot of the sound of chalk scraping a blackboard; and even

with the upheavals of the late '60s, the Vales of Academe are hardly the places where the main action is.

One might speculate on whether the novelists' conceptions of power are drawn from university politics—the cyclic tension of confrontation and accommodation among the student body, the faculty, and the administration. It is possible that the relative failure of the contemporary novel to delineate the real sources and interrelationships of power rests with the campus's lack of two essential elements—a working class that produces basic goods and services and a nexus of control above and beyond the campus with final responsibility and authority. Any social institution is likely to mirror the values and practices of its society, but the academic setting may be more artificial, cloistered, and stifling than, say, a hospital, corporation, or factory.

One mitigating factor may be the interesting statistic that 22 of our 27 male novelists have served in the military. In fact, several saw active combat in World War II or the Korean War. Clearly the military table of organization and chain of command offer a crisp sociopolitical introduction to power relationships that can easily—too easily—be applied to the civilian world. Think of Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948).

The Human Predicament

Since Emerson's time, American artists have been told that the vitality of literary expression rests on prior authentic experience ("Life is our dictionary"). I suspect that this imperative does nag intermittently at our novelists' consciences, but the mysteries of creativity are profound and murky. Some critics contend that the true sources of an artist's work can only be found in his adolescent and pre-adolescent experiences. Even if this theory overstates the case, no one can seriously believe that it is necessary to sail before the mast or become a soldier of fortune in order to feel in full the pain, the contumely, the bewilderment, and the joy that constitute the human predicament.

What, then, do our contemporary novelists share? And how do they differ from their predecessors? First, they are generally nonregional and urban in their perspectives. Born, most of them, after World War I, their experiences with village and rural life are largely of a secondhand or artificial nature. They are habituated to a culture of technological mobility, standardization, and rootless anomie to a degree that the Faulkner-Hemingway generation would scarcely recognize, and this is amply reflected in their work. At least 24 of these writers

characteristically use urban or suburban settings for their fiction.

Second, the superior success of the motion picture camera in presenting "live" narrative has compelled our novelists to focus intensively on the medium of their craft—on *words* rather than story line. They are more concerned with creating a verbal artifice than in competing vainly with the dramatic action of film and television.

And third, they have tended to avoid large-scale realistic portraits of social life, restricting themselves deliberately to what they can analyze minutely or suggest symbolically.

The novel form always exists in an irreconcilable tension between the forces of coherence and those of dissolution. We have every reason to suppose that yet another generation of writers, those who came to maturity during the explosive 1960s—with the civil-rights movement, student rebellion, the Woman's Movement, the Vietnam ordeal and its aftermath—will soon be adding a different series of rhythms and colors to contemporary American fiction.