



TO "MAKE IT NEW": THE AMERICAN NOVEL SINCE 1945

by Melvin J. Friedman

Ever since T. S. Eliot made his famous statement in 1923 that "the novel ended with Flaubert and with James," novelists have frequently been put on the defensive. In 1957, literary critic and novelist Granville Hicks invited 10 American writers to contribute to a collection of essays entitled *The Living Novel*, with a view to asserting the continuing vitality and importance of their craft. To give a boost to their argument, Hicks declared in his Foreword: "There is no substitute now available for the novel, and those who talk about the death of the novel are talking about the death of the imagination."

Twenty years later, we find some of the same assertions being expressed. A 1977 article by novelist-critic Raymond Federman, entitled "Death of the Novel or Another Alternative," reflects the concern of Hicks and his colleagues, although on somewhat different grounds: "The novel is not dead, it is being assassinated by the big publishers who have turned their businesses into supermarket activities."

The critics' rhetoric of impending doom is still with us, but so are encouraging signs that the novel will survive. Of the 10 contributors to Hicks's 1957 collection, three have come to occupy something of the same position in their generation as Faulkner, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald occupied earlier: Saul Bellow, the late Flannery O'Connor, and Ralph Ellison. At least three others have continued to write vital fiction: Herbert Gold, Mark Harris, and Wright Morris. Not a bad record for a dying species! One can echo Mark Twain and say that reports of the death of the novel are greatly exaggerated.

But what constitutes a novel today? The writers in *The Living Novel* were committed to the ways of modernism—to tidily finished, neatly patterned, mythically ordered texts along the lines of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Another fictional persuasion has asserted itself in the

past decade or so, characterized by "disruption" and "self-conscious artistry"—by an extreme willingness to forsake the conventions of the traditional novel.* Postmodernism is the term most frequently used by academics to describe this new literary climate, which has brought with it an irreverence and uncertainty about even the function of print on the page.

Writing in the wake of new theories about consciousness and time by William James, Henri Bergson, and Sigmund Freud, the modernists produced an inward turning, personal fiction that accommodated the rough edges of the psyche and of "human time." The postmodernists seem to turn outward as they acknowledge the limits of a new technological world and its dehumanizing consequences.† Yet differences between modernism and postmodernism are always relative; it is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins, so much do they flow into each other.

An Accurate Barometer

One can perhaps illustrate this best by referring to the works of two contemporary novelists, John Hawkes and William Styron. Hawkes and Styron, both born in 1925, are as representative of the possibilities and concerns of the American fictional scene as any two writers of the last quarter century. Hawkes's first novel, *The Cannibal*, appeared in 1949, and Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* followed two years later. Just as *Lie Down in Darkness* looks over its shoulder, sometimes uncomfortably, at Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and at Joyce's *Ulysses*, two of the great modernist novels, so *The Cannibal* looks ahead to the postmodern environment of John Barth, Donald Barthelme, William H. Gass, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Both first novels have in common a fascination with words and violence. The difference is that Styron in *Lie Down in Darkness* is something of an old-fashioned rhetorician, with his Faulknerian indulgences, and he deals with violence in comfortably mythical terms, while Hawkes seems to have broken down all classical distinctions between poetry and prose and forced his violence to retreat into the surreal and hallucinatory. Both Hawkes and Styron came out of creative writing programs; they

* See Jerome Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975.

† See Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, and *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975.

moved in quite different directions yet converged interestingly along the way.

Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer, as several critics have recently observed, offer another intriguing pair of alternatives. One can say that Bellow, rather like Styron, continues to honor tradition, especially as conceived by the modernist writers of the 1920s and early 1930s. In contrast, Mailer, more erratic than Hawkes, has moved with ease from antiwar novelist, to spokesman for American existentialism, to nonfiction novelist, to popular culturist—becoming the most accurate literary barometer we have.

Bellow has created a body of work that places him squarely in the center of everything literary in this country. All of his fiction is enviably finished, even the excessively lean *Dangling Man* (1944) and the rather bloated *Humboldt's Gift* (1975). His admirably trim *Seize the Day* (1956), perhaps his most successful effort, belongs among America's best novellas, such as Melville's *Billy Budd* and Faulkner's *The Bear*.

Mailer's career, on the other hand, has been jagged and irregular. Like the phoenix, he keeps rising rejuvenated from his own ashes, assuming an unending variety of masks. His early novels, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), *Barbary Shore* (1951), and *The Deer Park* (1955), are quite different from the quasi-journalistic *The Armies of the Night* (1968), *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970), and *The Fight* (1975). The last three bear comparison with such recent hybrid works as E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), because all blur distinctions between history and myth, fact and fable.

Contemporary "Conduct Book"

At least three other novelists deserve mention in the front ranks of American fiction since World War II: Ralph Ellison; Vladimir Nabokov; and Flannery O'Connor, a Southern writer (see below). For various reasons, each is less central and repre-

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PROFESSORS' CHOICE

| <i>Points</i> | | <i>Cumulative Sales</i> |
|---------------|--|-------------------------|
| 162 | Invisible Man,* Ralph Ellison | 1952 50,313† |
| 102 | Lolita , Vladimir Nabokov | 1955 3,633,467‡ |
| 84 | Catch-22,* Joseph Heller | 1961 6,113,000‡ |
| 73 | Gravity's Rainbow , Thomas Pynchon | 1973 487,490§ |
| 64 | The Catcher in the Rye,* J. D. Salinger | 1951 5,985,626‡ |
| 63 | Herzog , Saul Bellow | 1964 1,338,773§ |
| 52 | All the King's Men , Robert Penn Warren | 1946 2,354,734§ |
| 44 | The Naked and the Dead,* Norman Mailer | 1948 2,816,662‡ |
| 44 | An American Dream , Norman Mailer | 1965 1,002,100§ |
| 42 | The Adventures of Augie March , Saul Bellow | 1953 1,081,342§ |
| 33 | The Sotweed Factor , John Barth | 1960 359,313§ |
| 28 | Second Skin , John Hawkes | 1964 195,000§ |
| 28 | Portnoy's Complaint , Philip Roth | 1969 3,866,488‡ |
| 27 | The Armies of the Night , Norman Mailer | 1968 750,000** |
| 25 | Henderson the Rain King , Saul Bellow | 1959 739,350§ |
| 24 | The Naked Lunch , William Burroughs | 1959 690,000§ |
| 24 | V.,* Thomas Pynchon | 1963 537,000§ |
| 22 | Rabbit, Run , John Updike | 1960 1,469,000§ |
| 21 | One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,* Ken Kesey | 1962 6,717,693§ |
| 20 | The Old Man and the Sea , Ernest Hemingway | 1952 3,500,000§ |
| 20 | The Assistant , Bernard Malamud | 1957 1,190,000§ |

Note. None of the above figures include book club sales.

*Author's first novel.

†Random House and Modern Library editions only; NAL/Signet paperback sales figures not available.

‡All printings through 1975, according to *Publishers Weekly*.

§All printings to October 1977, from publishers.

**All printings to October 1977, exclusive of original hardback publisher's sales figures, which are no longer available.

sentative than Hawkes, Styron, Bellow, and Mailer.

Ellison has written just one novel, *Invisible Man* (1952). The story of a young black man's responses to southern education, New York radicalism, and the inability of whites to see or know blacks except on their own terms, it brought to Afro-American fiction the major elements of continental literature and thought from Dostoyevsky and Kierkegaard down to the French existentialists. *Invisible Man* is the closest thing we have to a "conduct book" for our time. Still, it cannot quite stand up to the exten-

The Wilson Quarterly asked 44 professors of American literature to name the 10 "most important" novels (in order of preference) published in the United States since World War II. Twenty-six professors responded, nominating a total of 88 books by 54 authors. Among first choices, **Invisible Man** led with seven, followed by **Lolita** with four. **Gravity's Rainbow**, **The Catcher in the Rye**, **Herzog**, and **All the King's Men** each had two nominations for first place.

We assigned points to each title on the basis of 10 for a first preference, 9 for a second preference, and so on. A list of the nominees receiving the 20 highest point scores appears at left.

Eight authors accounted for 31 of all the novels recommended by the academics. John Barth, Saul Bellow, and Bernard Malamud were each represented by five works; William Faulkner and Norman Mailer each by four; and John Hawkes, Vladimir Nabokov, and Thomas Pynchon each by three. Although **Invisible Man** received more points than all of Bellow's works combined (162 vs. 141), Bellow's novels actually received the greatest number of nominations (23 vs. Ellison's, and Mailer's, 22), suggesting that **Invisible Man**'s overwhelming lead may have been helped by the fact that it is Ellison's only published novel to date. Pynchon had 19 mentions, followed by Heller and Nabokov, each with 16.

The professors' selections covered a span of 38 years, but half of their choices were published during an 11-year period, 1959-69. Two novels from 1977 were named: Robert Coover's **The Public Burning** (3 points) and Joan Didion's **A Book of Common Prayer** (1 point); one from 1976: John L'Heureux's **Jessica Fayer** (3 points); but none from 1975.

Would the survey have produced different results had we phrased the question another way? One professor thought so: "You ask for the 'most important' novels. I take this to be distinct from the most popular (which are read and forgotten) and from the *best* (which are not always widely read and may lack any public import). In a list of 'best' novels I would [replace] Salinger, Vonnegut, and Heller with Hawkes, Barth, and Barthelme."

sive, wide-ranging body of work by Bellow or Hawkes.

In general, Nabokov's vast output, written over a 50-year period, cannot honestly be considered as purely "American" fiction. *Lolita* (1955) and *Pnin* (1957) are the exceptions. Most of his writing belongs in a Russian tradition that includes Pushkin, Gogol, and Goncharov.

There is always some difficulty with classifying American writers of the high order of those just discussed. Their fiction seems to resist neat cubbyholes. Lesser novelists, however, are

BUYERS' CHOICE

| | | <i>Cumulative sales</i> |
|---------|---|-------------------------|
| 1950 | The Cardinal , Henry Morton Robinson | 2,950,807* |
| 1951 | From Here to Eternity , James Jones | 3,646,004* |
| 1952 | The Silver Chalice , Thomas B. Costain | 2,236,004* |
| 1953 | The Robe , Lloyd C. Douglas | 3,724,391* |
| 1954 | Not as a Stranger , Morton Thompson | 2,667,977* |
| 1955 | Marjorie Morningstar , Herman Wouk | 2,164,128† |
| 1956 | Don't Go Near the Water , William Brinkley | 1,291,000† |
| 1957 | By Love Possessed , James Gould Cozzens | 1,167,498‡ |
| 1958 | Doctor Zhivago , Boris Pasternak | 5,010,520* |
| 1959 | Exodus , Leon Uris | 5,473,710* |
| 1960 | Advise and Consent , Allen Drury | 2,456,718* |
| 1961 | The Agony and the Ecstasy , Irving Stone | 2,866,718* |
| 1962 | Ship of Fools , Katherine Anne Porter | 1,346,000† |
| 1963 | The Shoes of the Fisherman , Morris L. West | 1,913,402† |
| 1964 | The Spy Who Came in from the Cold , John LeCarré | 2,638,000† |
| 1965 | The Source , James A. Michener | 2,687,734* |
| 1966 | Valley of the Dolls , Jacqueline Susann | 9,500,000* |
| 1967 | The Arrangement , Elia Kazan | 3,485,000* |
| 1968 | Airport , Arthur Hailey | 5,474,949* |
| 1969 | Portnoy's Complaint , Philip Roth | 3,866,488* |
| 1970 | Love Story , Erich Segal | 9,905,627* |
| 1971 | Wheels , Arthur Hailey | 2,604,614* |
| 1972-73 | Jonathan Livingston Seagull , Richard Bach | 9,055,000* |
| 1974 | Centennial , James A. Michener | 3,591,763* |
| 1975 | Ragtime , E. L. Doctorow | 2,855,667† |
| 1976 | Trinity , Leon Uris | 3,178,886† |

Note: None of the above figures include book club sales.

*All printings, through 1975, according to *Publishers Weekly*.

†All printings, to October, 1977, from publishers.

‡All printings, to October, 1977, exclusive of original hardback publisher's sales, which are no longer available.

more readily grouped. Thus we can observe three kinds of novels written since World War II, distinguished as much (if not more) by subject matter as by technique: the Southern novel, the college or academic novel, and the Jewish American novel. (One might also think of the "Beat" novel with its many variations, given a certain respectability by Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, 1957, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Her*, 1960.)

Southern writing is predominantly rural in setting. From Faulkner through the latest novels of Reynolds Price (*The Sur-*

Since 1950, only one novel from the Top Twenty* selected by professors of literature for *The Wilson Quarterly* has led any of the annual best-seller lists compiled by *Publishers Weekly*, the voice of the book trade. (See facing page.) It is **Portnoy's Complaint**. Only five have placed on any of the annual lists of the Top Ten compiled by *PW* or its predecessor, *The Bookman: The Naked and the Dead* (1948), **The Old Man and the Sea** (1952), **Lolita** (1958 and 1959), **Herzog** (1964 and 1965), and **Portnoy's Complaint** (1969). Five appear on the list of all-time best sellers (defined as books that sold over 2 million copies) in *80 Years of Best Sellers, 1895-1975*, edited by Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke: **Catch-22**, **The Catcher in the Rye**, **Portnoy's Complaint**, **Lolita**, and **The Naked and the Dead**.

Of the 67 also-ran "Professors' Choice" novels, only eight have placed on any annual best-seller list: **The Wall**, by John Hersey (1950), **East of Eden** by John Steinbeck (1952), **Ten North Frederick** by John O'Hara (1955), **Ship of Fools** by Katherine Anne Porter (1962), **The Confessions of Nat Turner** by William Styron (1967), **The Fixer** by Bernard Malamud (1966), **In Cold Blood**[†] by Truman Capote (1966), and **Peyton Place** by Grace Metalious (1956 and 1957). **Deliverance** by James Dickey (1970), **In Cold Blood**, and **Peyton Place** appear on the list of all-time best sellers. In the combined fiction and nonfiction category, **Peyton Place** was the no. 10 title, topping *Roger's Thesaurus* and *Webster's New College Dictionary* (but trailing Dr. Spock's baby book, the all-time no. 1).

Before 1895, Charles Dickens had seven U.S. best sellers. American novelists with best sellers included Louisa May Alcott, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Mark Twain.

In 1976, the paperback Harlequin romances (e.g., *Love in a Stranger's Arms*, *The Honey Is Bitter*) published in Toronto, sold 50 million copies in the United States. Written by 140 women authors according to a standard formula (no premarital sex, no violence, no politics, no unspoken gothic threats, and a wedding at the end), these romances accounted for an estimated 14 percent of total U.S. fiction sales.

*Actually 21 titles, with two books tied for 20th place.

[†]Listed by *PW* as nonfiction but considered fiction by the professor who nominated it.

face of Earth, 1975) and Madison Jones (*A Cry of Absence*, 1971), there is a very precise feeling for landscape and terrain. Carson McCullers of Georgia and Eudora Welty of Mississippi appeared almost simultaneously on the literary scene in the early 1940s. It became clear that the female sensibility was to be a major force in Southern letters when another Georgian, Flannery O'Connor, published her first novel, *Wise Blood*, in 1952. (Her second, and last, novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, appeared in 1960.)

O'Connor is probably the best of the Southern writers after

Faulkner. Yet she falls short of being a major figure because of the sameness of her themes and techniques and the limitations of her vision and sensibility. She stands apart from most of her regional contemporaries by virtue of her Catholic background. Her characters may be Bible Belt fundamentalists, but they seem imbued with a Catholic sense of sin and redemption.

The most typical of the gifted Southern novelists in the period after Faulkner are probably the late Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, Walker Percy, and Truman Capote. While the first two devoutly tilled the Southern literary soil through most of their careers, Percy and Capote have reached beyond their rather undaring fictional beginnings toward postmodern forms. Percy's *Love in the Ruins* (1971), for example, flirts with the conventions of science fiction as it reveals an uneasiness about current technology. Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), which the author called a "nonfiction novel," launched the new hybrid form that Mailer, Doctorow, Haley, and so many others have favored in the past decade. It is interesting to note, however, that even though the setting for *In Cold Blood* is western Kansas, Capote reminds us that "one is still within the Bible Belt borders." His own fictional beginnings in the rural South, first in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), then in *The Grass Harp* (1951), appear not to have been forgotten.

Surprising Ambiguities

College fiction thrived in the 1950s. One of the most successful and typical of the species is Robie Macauley's *The Disguises of Love* (1952). Set in an American university during the 1940s, the plot centers around a clandestine love affair between a strait-laced college professor and a co-ed. In technique, it bears a close and sympathetic relationship to the best modernist novels.

Similar concerns and techniques are evident in other academic fiction of the period—Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1952), Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* (1954), and, in a far more serious vein, May Sarton's *Faithful Are the Wounds* (1955). The genre continued into the early 1960s, sometimes with a nod to the Angry Young Man motif imported from England, in such novels as John Barth's *The End of the Road* (1958), Mark Harris's *Wake Up, Stupid* (1959), and Bernard Malamud's *A New Life* (1961).

The End of the Road is the most intriguing and curious of these because Barth seems to acknowledge modernist practices and concerns while remaining steadfastly uneasy with them.

Each chapter is dutifully summarized before the chapter proper begins, but in the mocking, irreverent way that Pynchon later employed in *V.* and Vonnegut in *Cat's Cradle* (both of which appeared in 1963). The opening chapter, for example, bears the heading "In a Sense, I Am Jacob Horner," laying a foundation of surprising ambiguity for its first-person narration. In this story of a college teacher who has an affair with a colleague's wife, the furnishings may be familiar but the twists and turns they are subjected to are not.

A novel published four years after *The End of the Road*, Philip Roth's *Letting Go*, has much in common with it. Roth's Gabe Wallach, another self-conscious narrator, is a more aggressive Jacob Horner who settles uncomfortably into academic life and gets involved with a married couple. The major difference between the two is that *Letting Go* attends to the idiosyncrasies not only of university faculties and ill-suited love relationships, but of an urban Jewish way of life.

Roth's example may be partly responsible for a shifting of ground by older Jewish writers. The old-world values of Malamud's early novels and stories have given way to the preoccupations of dislocated modern urban Jews in *Pictures of Fidelman* (1969). Isaac Bashevis Singer, who has devoted the larger part of his writing to Polish ghetto subjects, set his latest novel, *Enemies, A Love Story* (1972), in New York City—with the Holocaust as backdrop.

The "Disruptionists"

Jewish subjects have proved intriguing to non-Jewish writers as well. John Updike entered the arena with *Bech: A Book* (1970), and Styron is working on a novel tentatively entitled *Sophie's Choice*, which has strong Jewish preoccupations. In fact, urban Jewish subjects now seem as irresistible as the dilemma of the American innocent abroad once did to such writers as Henry James, Mark Twain, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

A word must be said about another group of novelists who do not fit any of the above categories. Their work is more usefully discussed in terms of technique and stylistic devices than ethnic or regional themes. Jerome Klinkowitz sees the 1967-68 publishing season as the first flowering of this group of "literary disruptionists," which includes Jerzy Kosinski, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., William H. Gass, Ronald Sukenick, and Raymond Federman, among others.

At one end of the spectrum is Kosinski, who seems to be writing fairly conventional prose in *The Painted Bird* (1965) and

Steps (1968)—at least on the surface. His syntax is regular. His pages are visually orthodox enough to offer the printer no particular problems.

Sukenick and Federman, at the other extreme, completely alter the face and possibilities of fiction. Federman's two novels in English (he also writes in French), *Double or Nothing* (1971) and *Take It or Leave It* (1976), are typesetters' nightmares. Each page is a discrete visual entity and calls on the unflagging attention and dedication of the printer. *Take It or Leave It* is not even paginated. As Federman explains: "all sections in this tale are interchangeable therefore page numbers being useless they have been removed at the discretion of the author."

Gass falls somewhere in the middle. He can be as deceptively traditional as Kosinski, yet takes many experimental risks. His first novel, *Omensetter's Luck* (1966), belongs to a language-intoxicated tradition in American literature that started with Melville and includes Faulkner. A comparison between *Omensetter's Luck* and Faulkner's *Light in August*, which it occasionally resembles, reveals, however, the extent to which Gass has passed beyond modernist technique and into postmodernism.

The experiments of recent American fiction writers seem endless—always a healthy sign for a supposedly vanishing species. One has every reason to feel more comfortable about the fate of the American novel now than did the contributors to *The Living Novel* in 1957.