

The Role of Authors

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WHEN I WAS INVITED TO CONTRIBUTE to this symposium, it was suggested that I address the question of the “role of authors in ensuring quality.” Whether there can be such a role may be answered, of course, by a simple negative: No one, whether interested outsider or author, himself can “ensure” quality any more than we can ensure what kind of a baby a particular couple will produce.

What serious creative authors will write depends on what is in their heads, or, as they used to say in Vietnam, in their hearts and minds. “Winning hearts and minds” was the phrase used in the United States policy for motivating and energizing the forces in Saigon, an enterprise known among its participants by the acronym W.H.A.M. of WHAM. If what is wanted is a WHAM program for writers of the future, my advice would be: Don’t. Writers are not that open to suggestion, as indeed the people of South Vietnam—for various reasons—were not.

What really was wanted, I imagine, was a statement on whether the conditions of publishing and marketing, in view of present trends, will discourage rather than encourage and support the writing of books of quality, or, on the contrary, will tend to debase them on a descending scale weighted to benefit the lowest common denominator of consumers. This is what seems to me to be the fear underlying the present discussion. It derives from concern that commercialism in the chain bookstores will come to exert the determining influence on what shall

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be published and what shall not, because of the chains' intervention in telling publishers in advance what will sell. In short, the determining factor in publishing will be that old devil, the bottom line.

Well, this is hardly new. Publishers were in business to make a profit even when they were all Charles Scribners and John Murrays and Alfred Knopfs and Leonard Woolfs (Woolf's Hogarth Press, I read in a recent review, was "always in the black"). Books of enduring value were published in those days and trash, too; and when publishers made money from the trash, they had that much more to invest in good books that brought their houses distinction, if not box office receipts. I do not see why the same operation should not hold true today in spite of those corporate monsters lurking in the background. The junk can still finance the experiments and the best creative and scholarly work—the worthwhile books that will stay on the shelves.

I know that the gloom-sayers are asking whether writers will still write their best when the rewards—the big auctions and fat contracts with advances in six figures—are offered for the easy winners, for the thrillers about double agents foiling some villainous plot to blow up the world, or kidnap the president, or spread sinister germs in the national drinking water, or the horror books about a fiend stalking a small town, or the packaged romances about forbidden love. I think true literature will still find its way into print, for not withstanding Dr. Johnson's dictum that, "no one but a blockhead ever wrote except for money"—a pronouncement that may stand as the farthest from truth of any statement ever to make the dictionaries of quotation. I can say as one blockhead to my fellows that most writers write for the love of writing, because they have a story to tell or because they have something they want to express, and because they want to fashion their prose into a work of art, just as a sculptor wants to carve a thing of beauty from a block of marble. That wish, that desire, cannot be eradicated from the born man of letters any more than you could take the wish to go fishing out of Izaak Walton, or make an athlete stop running, or skiing, or swimming, or whatever it is that makes him go.

I do not think the chain stores are necessarily a menace. If these stores sell more books and reach more book readers and book buyers than were reached before, that is to the good even if the product is junk because of the act of reading and the pleasure it gives will induce the reader to move onto something better.

The specter of electronics is the second fear—the worry that electronic devices will somehow replace the book—which I suspect is even less of a menace than the bookstore chains. The people who carry on

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about this fearful portent foresee it sweeping the book into the dust pile, leaving readers gazing in dulled passivity at lines of little green angular letters flickering on a screen. The worriers have not considered, I believe, the factor of consumer resistance. RCA Corporation, according to a report in *The New York Times* of 4 April 1984 has stopped manufacturing its video disk players, three years after introducing them as the product that "would revolutionize home entertainment." But the video disk revolution failed to materialize. It failed, reports *The New York Times*, "to generate consumer enthusiasm." Let every book lover take heart at these happy words. I see the book of the future rising in serene triumph, like a many-colored phoenix, over a rust heap of old disks and tapes discarded in that mysterious nonappearance of "customer enthusiasm."

Deterioration in the quality of books, or its reverse, will depend, not on the externals of commercialism and electronics, but on the values of our society. If values degenerate further toward the point where everything offered to the public in the field of arts and letters and other cultural matters is the cheapest product that the seller thinks can make the lowest and broadest appeal, then I suppose writing, or at least publishing, will reflect the degeneration.

As examples, I can point to one in print and one on the air waves that illustrate the worst taste that I could imagine being put before the public. One is a series of joke books which proudly assert their tastelessness and in which pornography, scatology, anti-Semitic, antifemale, anti-every-minority jokes covered page after page in a repulsive parade. I called the president of the publishing company responsible for one of these books to ask how come he was in this *galère* and to express dismay. His reply came down once again to profit and commerce. After the first of the books appeared and the market responded with enthusiasm, it was clear, he told me, that the other firms would rush in to copy the product and share the sales; and if he did not enter the competition, others would; and they would reap the advantage. In other words, his own standards did not operate at all—and he is otherwise a fine, respectable man of active social conscience—but only the bottom line.

The other example was the interview with former president Nixon on "Sixty Minutes" on Sunday, 8 April 1984. I am certainly no partisan of Richard Nixon, but I thought the questions about his private and public feelings concerning his wife and his feelings about Watergate were so offensive that I felt embarrassed for him, and wondered that he did not throw a pitcher of water in the questioners' faces. But here, too, I suppose revenue was the key. The network, it was said, had paid him

some fabulous sum in six figures, which presumably made the nastiness bearable. No fact of interest—political or psychological—was turned up. The interviewers brought out nothing new that might have justified the miserable exhibition and apparently none of them objected to what they were doing. It was high level show biz and the public could be expected to wallow in it with morbid delight. Whether the public did or did not, I have no idea. The public, Alexander Hamilton said, “is an ass” (or “a great beast”—or words to that effect) and yet it can be also discriminating. It responds to good books when they appear, as it did, if I may be immodest, to *A Distant Mirror*.¹ A book about an unknown character laid in the fourteenth century sold over half a million copies in hard cover—it was wild and astonishing. My publisher replying to my puzzlement said, “you must remember that among book buyers there are many publics.” This is the fact and that is what saves us and will continue to save at least a proportion of books and writers and readers for work of enduring quality.

Reference

1. Tuchman, Barbara. *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century*. New York: Knopf, 1978. Editor's note: see also: _____. *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*. New York: Knopf, 1984 (currently a Book-of-the-Month Club selection).