

America's Unwritten Novels

A Chart of the Country Shows What Has Already Been Done and Suggests the Vast Possibilities Still Open for Fiction Writers

By CONINGSBY DAWSON

ONCE heard a publisher say that he stood far more chance of keeping his money if he took it down to a race track than if he tried to back the winners among his season's list of books. If that is true of a publisher, who has the entire field to choose from, how much more true it must be of the author, who has only his own book to back. The lay public can have little idea of the uncertainties of an author, and especially of a novelist. Because readers enjoy a book they inevitably believe that the author enjoyed writing it—which does not follow by any means. Among my own circle of friends I find a prevalent tendency to smile whenever I dare to speak of "having been at work." They do not believe that I work or know the meaning of work. They think of me, if they think at all, as a leisurely gentleman without responsibilities who sits in an easy chair all day, cigarette in mouth, making imaginary love to imaginatively enchanting heroines. Because my work contributes to their play they have decided that I do not work. By some sleight of hand, beyond their comprehension, I have eluded what Stevenson humorously calls "the malignity of bankers" and have persuaded the world to pension me for enjoying myself. "Would that it were so," sighs every novelist, "but it isn't." The legend of Dickens, shouting uproariously as he created his characters, has done much to foster this fallacy. We forget the other unlaughing Dickens, far more true to common experience, who throughout his long life of uninterrupted popularity never for an hour lost the fear of failure—the Dickens who never wrote "Finis" at the end of any chapter without dreading that it was the last he would ever pen.

But to return to my publisher who preferred backing horses to backing books. Once a year at least, if he

is to support himself, your professional novelist, popular or otherwise, has to invent a story, vivid, compelling, exciting, original, and so utterly different that there never was any previous story remotely like it. Moreover, he must turn out the kind of story that is wanted, so that every one who reads it will be constrained to discuss it and in that way will become a lip-to-lip-cavasser for other purchasers. When one considers how many men and women the world over who live by their pens are trying to achieve precisely this object, not once in a lifetime but once in every twelve months, the task that they set themselves seems nearly insuperable. The books not to write if you want to achieve this object are fairly obvious—for the moment you must not write war books. There are thousands of advisers in publishing and magazine offices who can outline for you the laws of success; but for every law they lay down you can instance an exception. They will tell you that your main characters must be lovable. They will tell you that your story must have the sense of the inevitable; that is to say, that your first chapter and every chapter that follows must foresee the end; that your book must be written in an ascending scale of crisis; that it must be dramatic; that it must preach the truth of the supreme and optimistic interestingness of life. And when they have told you everything, they have told you nothing, for scarcely one of them could attain success in literature himself. Even men who have attained success once are often at a loss to know how to repeat their performance.

The time try to follow fashion. H. G. Wells is being widely read, so they will imitate H. G. Wells. But H. G. Wells never imitates himself, consequently his imitators are usually out of date by the time their books are published. H. G. Wells has already set for them a new standard, which he will have again promptly canceled before their borrowed inspirations are ready for the press.

There is one royal road that can be followed, and that is to become a creator of fashions yourself. To do this requires genius, and there are always more novelists than geniuses in the world—so we are no further

forward. And yet the fact stares us in the face that life is amazingly and bewilderingly interesting and that most of the living of our own lives, let alone that of the lives of others, goes down to the grave unrecorded. Everybody's life, however drab and uneventful, is interesting to himself and therefore capable of being rendered interesting to a wider public. Over a hundred million novels, not one millionth of which are being written down on paper, are being lived in these United States at this moment. Each one of them has all the elements of success; it is vivid, compelling, exciting, original and so utterly different that there never was any previous story remotely like it. Each one has an element more potent for success than all of those enumerated put together, for each one in the hundred million is starkly real. The number of practicing novelists in America who can seriously be considered cannot exceed two hundred at any one time, so in any year they have at least half a million stories apiece ready-made to their hand without exerting their imaginations. So why this insuperable difficulty of attracting attention to your fictional wares at least once a year? I am a novelist. I would not give away any secrets that I could use myself. It is because I have no private use for them that I can afford to be lavish. In the first place, I believe that the average novelist is the most introspective and unobservant person that you can find anywhere. He pretends to write about life, but he writes utterly about himself; he is so occupied with his writing that he never lives at all in any proper sense. In the second place, of all novelists now writing, I believe American novelists as a class to be the most unobservant and the least local in their affections. When I say local, I use that term in its best sense. Hardy and Kipling and Tolstoy and Balzac are local; but none of them is provincial. They select a certain area which they know and love and make it the mirror of the passions of the entire world. Very few American novelists have that love of a locality; they seem to lose their traditions and sense of race in the cosmopolitanism of the larger cities.

For me, as for so many of the writing brotherhood of America, the



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United States used to consist of three cities, New York, Boston and Chicago. New York was my perch; I did my writing there. The moment my writing was ended I used to sail away to Europe to do my living. Then the war came, with the vivid experiences of the front. I lived in action, lived in wholesale instead of in retail, associated with men of every class and discovered how much bigger life is than any book that will ever be written. When the war ended and I returned, I determined that it would be a sound investment to "see America first." My tour of the States occupied seven months of continuous traveling, taking me from North to South and from the Atlantic to the Pacific. I don't think I missed a State in the Union. Until I undertook that tour I had the very foggiest conception of the country in which I was living—a conception based on hearsay, history and novels which were out of date. After I had completed my tour I found that I had made this amazing discovery—that America, as she is today, is in the main totally unrepresented in the fiction of her contemporary novelists.

This accusation is likely to be challenged; it may be possible to prove it too broad and sweeping. But I believe it to be true. I wish some one would issue an annual map of the areas of America dealt with by each current year's output of fiction. Perhaps THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW AND MAGAZINE would undertake the task. The result would at least be instructive. New York, which is decidedly not a representative of the States, would certainly provide the setting for the biggest percentage of the novels; Chicago and Boston would tie for second place. These three cities together would probably afford the background of 75 per cent. of the year's output. To choose another great city at random, I can think of only one novel of consequence which places Cincinnati on the map—"Susan Lennox"—and "Susan Lennox" does not picture Cincinnati in such a way that you could recognize it.

I have come back from my wander with an overwhelming sense of the prodigal richness of the United States for the novelist who is observantly awake to his opportunities. It does not consist of the old romance of cowboys, pioneering and the Mormon trail. A good deal of the ro-

mance is camouflaged beneath a sameness of commercialism and commonplace. But it is there. I was told when I visited Culver City, the home of the moving-picture industry, that every novelist of whatsoever nationality who had been there had confessed to the same secret—that he or she purposed to write the first great American novel of the romance of the film. And why not? The Forty-niners are dead, anywhere their bones rest the moving-picture artist struts today.

I look back through my reading and try to recall what portions of America have been charted for me on my literary map. New England, yes, by half a hundred writers who are illustrious. New York State by Washington Irving, by Stevenson (a Scotchman) in "The Master of Ballantrae," by Mrs. Wharton in "The House of Mirth," and by a host of lesser writers who picture New York in a way that makes it merely a stage-setting. Chicago has found its place in modern literature, and so has San Francisco, but neither of them has been painted by a master hand. George Cable has saved New Orleans for us, but it is not the New Orleans of today. Mark Twain has done the same for the Mississippi; Jack London has placed the North on record and O. Henry has given us fugitive glimpses of the most typical phases of American life wherever it can be found. One could go on adding to the list; but when the list was completed it would be found to consist of writers who are chiefly dead. The impression left would be that in the greatest and most vibrant of countries all the great books which life is writing day by day are passing into oblivion for lack of an observer.

Great books! The themes are ready, waiting to men's hands. To the American born and bred themes should never be wanting. If he'll travel his own country he'll find himself embarrassed by the way they confront him and clamor to be written down. Had Zola been born in America what would he not have made of his opportunity?

If I were still unborn and felt myself predestined to be a novelist and were given the chance to choose the place of my birth, I would pray: "Lord, let it be anywhere in America, with a pad of paper in my crib and a fountain pen ready to my hand."