

# One Man's View Of The Writers' Forum

By R. T. Smith

Nothing funny happened to me on the way to the Forum. I arrived just in time to hear Mr. Sam Ragan introduced and praised. He, in turn, introduced the subject for the Sixth Annual North Carolina Writers' Forum - "The Writer and Hot Topics." Mr. Ragan, himself a distinguished editor and columnist, made several remarks in the way of an attempt to define just exactly what topics are hot. Among these comments were the following: "People in Eastern North Carolina think that Mr. George Wallace is a current hot topic. Personally, I don't think Wallace is so hot." and "I'd rather flunk my Wasserman Test, than read a poem by Edgar A. Guest."

Miss Sylvia Wilkinson, Chapel Hill author of A KILLING FROST and other novels, was the first panelist to stretch her legs and the audience's intellect. The short-skirted, long-haired creative writing teacher explained that she could not write about present controversies because an internal "generation gap" prevented her from writing about anything but her past. This trim race driver-author stated that she believes very strongly in the private journal because she needs a place to record her own observations without being concerned that others will be evaluating the work. Such a "subjective history" can be the "jumping off place for the imagination." She stated that segments of the journal often appear in her books. She really doesn't MAKE it happen though, for the book really belongs to the main character, not to the author. Before returning to her seat, Miss Wilkinson announced that her own personal pitfall is impatience, a flaw that she sees magnified in her writing.

## Man's Inhumanity to Man

Bynum Shaw, graduate of and journalism professor at Wake Forest, shuffled around and took his place behind the rostrum. His white hair and leisurely appearance made me fear intense boredom; when he smiled and said, "one man's hot topic is someone else's cold fish", I knew that my fears were without justification. He began his lively portion of the program with a short discussion of motivation. The excerpts below attempt to recapture the spirit of Shaw's wit: "They say you can't do anything without motivation any more." "None of my characters are motivated. They just do what I want them to do. I've yet to learn how to put a character into a typewriter and let him write a novel for me. I've had to write every blessed word myself." (He later told me that he liked it that way.)

Mr. Shaw related the writer's role with hot topics to his own life by telling a few stories about his adventures behind the iron curtain. He first tried to clear the air with the statement, "I'm not really a cold war spy. That's just a myth that I've perpetuated. And now I intend to perpetuate it further." The energetic journalist explained that anyone who asks questions behind the iron curtain is immediately branded a spy and treated as such. Not only did the communists think that he was an agent, but stated Shaw, so did the C.I.A. Every time he returned to the West, the C.I.A. interrogated him about what he

had seen. Shaw, of course, was only too glad to cooperate, being the loyal American citizen that he is. "I'm happy to tell the C.I.A. anything they want to know, and if I don't know, well, I'll just make it up." Shaw related incidents such as being arrested by a man in overalls for "going to the woods" near a missile base and then being saved by a prostitute whom a fellow journalist had brought to visit her mother near the police station. Another incident—a breakdown in front of a Czech military base. Movie cameras, binoculars, and a gun in the car. Shaw and friend ignored two truckloads of soldiers while towing the car away. Tow rope broke. Soldiers supplied another. He was arrested for carrying secret military information when all he had was some illegal money and objects of art which were not to leave the country. He escaped unscathed. In closing, the humorous orator changed his mood and defined what he feels to be hot topics--man's inhumanity to man, God, love, hate, compassion, anarchy. "It is the job of the writer to write about these things in the context of his time."

I had to get outside for a few minutes and think about what Shaw had said. During the course of Shaw's presentation, a friend and fellow-writer of mine had sat beside me. I stumbled over him on the way out. "Man's inhumanity to man ... context of his own time ... motivation ... hot topic=cold fish...???"

Mrs. Copeland, author of children's novels and enemy of hate, was talking when I returned. It seems that she had said something about nobody understanding what anybody else is saying. "People don't accept facts they don't want to believe, even if they're paying for it." It was food for thought, but I wasn't fair to Mrs. Copeland. While she told of a boy who loved snakes in a place where everyone else hated them, I reflected on humanity and the author. The young boy was overcoming a prejudice, and all I could think of was "can an author interpret his finished work from any position of authority, or must he compete with the other critics as a non-privileged equal?"

## Poison Pen

George Garrett, who reminded me of a salesman, arose and began to, inadvertently, sell himself to the audience. My nostalgia was broken. My pencil resumed its function. "Taboos occur when people gather." "Publishers and the few Americans who DO read have their own taboos which must not be broken." "Potential buyers of books." "What are we permitted to satirize?" According to Garrett, a RED CLAY READER contributor, the author can deal with sex in a serious manner or a light manner, but he can never be bawdy. Art and its motives are "beyond question" (definite no-no's for satire). Protestants and White racists, said Shaw, are "fair game", but black racists, Catholics, Jews, and Eastern cults are off limits for satirists. Garrett read several humorous and poignant passages from a book that he is working on and expects to publish next year in England. The book is about a worldly author-by-accident who spends the entire book chasing money and broads and insulting readers. An especially fine passage reveals the hypocrisy of the author's "holier-than-thou" publisher who is publishing, what he considers, a very poor novel

because he needs the money. The book is to be titled POISON PEN. I intend to be waiting on the doorsteps of my favorite bookshop the day it goes on sale. I don't read much contemporary American fiction, but I do not intend to miss this.

The most enlightening thing, I think, that resulted from the question-and-answer period was Shaw's statement of belief that no topic should be avoided by the serious writer. He is against filth for filth's sake and does not care to see it on the newsstand, but also feels that the capable author can deal with any subject in an artful manner.

## Where Does The Author Stand as an Interpreter of His Own Material

When all the final thank-you's were said and the crowd adjourned for coffee or punch and cookies, my friend and I raced to the front of the auditorium to corner Mr. Shaw and asked him what he felt was an author's responsibility in explaining a completed work. He seemed to think that the author has had his "go" at saying what he wanted to say; if he failed, then it is up to the critics to point this out. However, many of the critics are just not sharp enough to discern what is there. But if the critic is a good one, then he is really in a better position than the author to restate the book in a synopsis. The critic's position is more likely to be objective than the author's. I asked why authors are asked to write intros, prologues, and notes to their works to facilitate easier interpretation if they are in no special position to judge, citing Eliot as an example. Mr. Shaw admitted that, in a few cases, the author's opinion is of great value. We asked him if we don't,

perhaps, over-interpret the works of an author, reading in information that just is not there. Shaw said that this is often the case and cited Hemmingway as an example.

The same questions extracted a different type of response from Mr. Garrett, who was also concerned with the competency of contemporary critics. He, too, believed that the author has his chance to convey his message in the book itself. He wholeheartedly agreed that we read often what is between the lines of our own minds. Sitting down on stage and lighting a cigarette, he cited a little story that goes something like this - He was taking a humanities class at Princeton under Saul Bellow (a superb writer but uninspiring lecturer). The topic was THE ILIAD. Bellow said something like, "Now we come to the place where Hector's dead body is dragged around the walls of Troy. How do you feel about this?" One exceptionally bright student raised his hand and began to explain that the most important fact in this scene is that Hector was dragged around Troy three He said that this was the focal point of the entire epic. It demonstrates the theory that Homer based the book on a complicated utilization of triads, and that the entire epic was an attempt to express this philosophy etc., etc., etc. Bellows paced the length of the classroom a couple of times and then, turning to the boy said, "MY GOD, SON, DOESN'T IT MAKE YOU FEEL A LITTLE BIT SAD?" Bellow asked the boy if he didn't FEEL anything when Hector was being so humiliated. The boy said that it made him feel that Homer wrote in triads.

A lady approached Garrett and asked him why his book was being

published in England. When she began to compare freedom of speech in America and England and explain that she had been brought before McCarthy's committee on UnAmerican Activities, we felt that it was time to leave. We thanked Mr. Garrett, pitying him his immediate companion, and proceeded to seek a female opinion on the position of the author as a critic and explainer of his own material.

Sylvia Wilkinson was the right female to approach. Her reply could almost be characterized as uniquely female. She began by stating that one would have to do some hard talking to convince her to try to capsulize her books. She felt, however, that people who could pinpoint her intentions better than she could would be few and far between. She is also a critic of critics. She feels that it is sad indeed that a hack writer who has been writing detective stories should be her intermediary with the reading public. She smiles a lot.

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A cup of punch, some quick small talk, and a plunge into the brisk night air to wonder about authors who deal with particulars and inadvertently stumble upon correspondent Universals.

## U. A. Week

# Protest At The Olympics

By Walt Sherrill

Now that the Olympic Games are over and the United States has come away with the lion's share of the medals, a few thoughts on our performance there might be in order.

A number of athletes, among them Tommie Smith (gold medal winner in the 200 meter dash) and John Carlos (bronze medal winner in the same event) used the awards ceremony as a platform from which to protest racial inequities in the United States and to flaunt their new-found Black identities.

It is the custom of all nations competing in the Olympics (perhaps as a result of the Third Reich's rather distasteful performance in the Thirties) to avoid openly using the International Games as a showcase for national or international maneuvering. The quick sanctions of the International Olympic Games Committee against Smith and Carlos—demanding that the U.S. team drop the two athletes from the team or risk expulsion from the games—were taken on these grounds. Yet if the truth be known, I was quite surprised at the speed with which the U.S. team officials complied with their demands. No doubt U.S. officials were thinking about those who had not then had their chance to compete, but I think there was more involved than that.

Whether the United States wishes to admit it or not, there is a critical social problems in our country. That similar problems exist elsewhere in no way excuses

us; if we consider ourselves the standards-setters for the world, and I think we do (perhaps incorrectly), we have no excuses. Yet when Smith and Carlos stood with heads bowed and black-gloved fists raised, people throughout our nation were shocked and shamed. Many felt, no doubt, that these two men had disgraced the U.S. in the eyes of the world. Perhaps they did, but I can't get too excited about that disgrace; the real disgrace, the one I find intolerable, was our dropping of Smith and Carlos from the team.

We ask Smith, Carlos and people like them to bear with us while we attempt to solve the problems staring at us from the ghettos and slums; we say stick it out, take the good with the bad,

it'll get better. Yet when they in turn offer us the good with the bad, we kick them in the teeth. I'm afraid we live under a double-standard.

Had a Soviet athlete demonstrated against the Litvinov trial in Moscow, or had a Czechoslovakian athlete drawn attention to his people's plight, we would've applauded them; but when the display comes closer to home we become hypocrites. We are proud that our athletes do not fear to speak out, that they have many freedoms that those from the Communist-bloc cannot enjoy, that we don't repress dissent. Yet what happened to Smith and Carlos? We had a chance to stand before the world as a people—and we blew it. What now?

## On Campus

"On Campus" this week presents a provocative and detailed look at the role of a commuter college student—his advantages and disadvantages over a resident student.

What are the pros and cons of remaining in Charlotte for the four year period of college training? What is missed in this training by living at home with parents and sometimes noisy siblings? Is it easier to study at home or at the dormitory? What possible career advantages are to be had by gaining experience in

your future vocation or profession while attending college? And, not to be overlooked, what are the social advantages of remaining in a city like Charlotte rather than living in the relatively small and isolated college towns?

These topics and the answers to these questions which often haunt the student who wonders what he is missing or gaining by remaining at home are clarified and brought to the surface in this enlightening look at the commuter college student. Don't miss this one!!

Channel 42, 7:30 p.m., Thursday, November 7.