

INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

FROM: CG

DATE: June 30, 1950

TO:

CBF		
JM		
EFD		

COMMENTS:

[See also JM memo of same date on Fellowships in Creative Writing in the U.S. filed 100 ER]

SUBJECT: Aid to Creative Writing

One of our objectives is to encourage and support original writing of a high order. (This should be done in many countries, but as a start I will speak here only of the United States.) We want to see increased vigor, maturity and effectiveness in contemporary literature, and we know this will come only in and by the creative activity of individuals with unusual sensibility and imaginative power. Our focus is on the writer, existing or yet to come, and our problem is what we can do towards stimulating and helping his best efforts.

The kind of a writer to be helped is described in the review of the Atlantic Awards. He is one with "a discriminating sensibility, a wide awareness and a ready and subtle power of response, a sense of phrase and the gift of organization and control (Coleridge's 'more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order')--all these are clearly necessary. But the congenital writer needs something more as well: he must have his own particular kind of creative energy. Not only toughness and industry, and certainly not mere fluency and facility, which the second-rate author often possesses in abundance, but an imaginative vitality which continues to flow, even though intermittently, with a current strong enough to overcome all obstructions whether from within or from without."

What incentives are needed to develop potential writers in this country? How are highly promising writers who have made a good start to be identified and the best of them selected for help? What does the promising writer need in the way of training, time and experience to continue and improve his writings? Outside his own experience and powers, what does a writer feel his work depends upon, and what are now the major difficulties in his way? It is tempting to go on with these questions and try to set the stage completely for a positive plan of action. But to keep preliminaries brief, I will call attention to three major demands I think we must satisfy and one negative comment. The major demands of a writer as I see it are

- a) A sense of community. The writer wants to feel he has a place, his work an importance in his society. He wants to know about other writers, and the conditions and effects of contemporary writing.
- b) He wants a fair chance to publish.

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- c) He wants a public, - attentive readers and intelligent criticism.

10022° My negative comment is that a program of fellowships or similar forms of action seems to be a way of avoiding the difficult and fundamental questions about the aims and function of writing in our society, raised above.

In a nutshell the plan I recommend is to encourage and contribute funds toward the publication by a few university presses in cheap editions of first-rate, original writing recommended by a well-chosen panel. Five main elements are involved, but they must be seen as features of an organic scheme:

- 1) Selection of writing. Only plays, novels, short stories and poetry will be considered. A panel of as many as fifteen astute and discriminating judges, on a country-wide basis, should be organized. They will read, comment on and recommend manuscripts. A manuscript may be rejected on the considered judgment of one, but the recommendation of two would be required for a manuscript to be published. Each member of the panel would be paid \$25 to \$50 for each manuscript he reads. A central office to receive and circulate manuscripts would be established probably with a secretary.
- 2) Publication. As a starter, five lively and well-managed university presses would be given help to embark on a regular publication scheme for writings selected as above. In the interest of geographic equity, but of course thinking of the effectiveness of the press concerned, the following is a good list:

University of North Carolina Press (Lambert Davis)
 Cornell University Press (Victor Reynolds)
 Louisiana State University Press (Marcus Wilkerson)
 University of Minnesota Press (Mrs. Harding)
 Stanford University Press (Donald Bean)

Each press would be given up to \$10,000 as a revolving fund for publication. Each would print paper-bound and cheap editions with a first edition of 1,500 to 5,000 copies. The aim is to keep the retail cost per copy between \$1.00 and \$2.50. Manuscripts would be taken from those recommended by the panel. While generally each press would have the right to publish its own choice among recommended manuscripts, provision would be made for the publication of all manuscripts considered first-rate by the panel, within the total publication limits of the scheme. Similar support, i.e. in the neighborhood of \$10,000 could be considered for up to four or five additional presses later on as the scheme proves successful.

- 3) Distribution. The principal task here is to discover, serve and enlarge the public in the United States disposed to read good contemporary literature. To ascertain this public and distribute to it directly will require initiative and a radical revision of practices on the part of university presses. At the present time books are distributed either

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by book stores or direct mail. As we all know, the 3000-odd bookstores now in the United States are on the whole an unsatisfactory vehicle for distributing books of the sort considered. While this situation may improve, techniques of direct mailing based on the identification of possibly interested readers should be first exploited. Lessons can be learned from the immense success of the commercial publishers of direct mailing. It is of interest to note that the Cornell University Press now sells seventy-five per cent of its books through direct mailing. Direct mailing has the notable advantage of reducing the present large discount rate of 40% on the list price which goes to the bookseller. Knowledge of the interested public (isn't it more than 500,000?) may be difficult to gain but certainly not impossible. Mailing and subscription lists of periodicals as well as of certain publishing houses would be useful. The periodicals I have in mind are more of the sort of the Yale Review and the Pacific Spectator than the "little magazines."

- 4) Cooperation: Promotion and Criticism. If the plan is to succeed, it will require the active support of many groups concerned with good literature. For example, the critical literary magazines, the sound reviews, summer writing schools, men teaching creative writing in universities should know about the scheme and be expected to help make it work. I feel the general idea makes so much sense that enthusiastic support would be given from many quarters. One result of this would clearly be to meet the first demand I noted above, namely, to give a writer a sense of importance in his society. The interest so taken in the plan would go a long way towards stimulating writers. Those interested in quality rather than income will be glad to know they can escape the labyrinthian maze of literary agents in New York and have a more direct and acceptable route to publication.
- 5) RF Action. As a rough estimate, I would say the above scheme or something like it would cost the RF \$60,000 to \$100,000 for at least two years. Just as important as the funds, however, would be our initiative in exploring the feasibility and implications of the scheme with the presses concerned and with many other individuals and groups which would be interested. Responsibility would be entirely ours until a panel had been organized and university presses had committed themselves to undertake publishing.

The substance of this plan was first suggested by Howard Cady, now head of the Doubleday Doran office in San Francisco. He said he would send in a detailed formulation of some such plan but has not done so yet. CG discussed the plan informally with George Reynolds whose response was enthusiastic. Reynolds feels that the scheme would have great appeal and as a bold campaign would be unquestionably the single best thing that could be done for good writing and the improvement of contemporary literature.

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