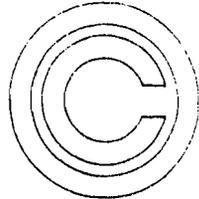
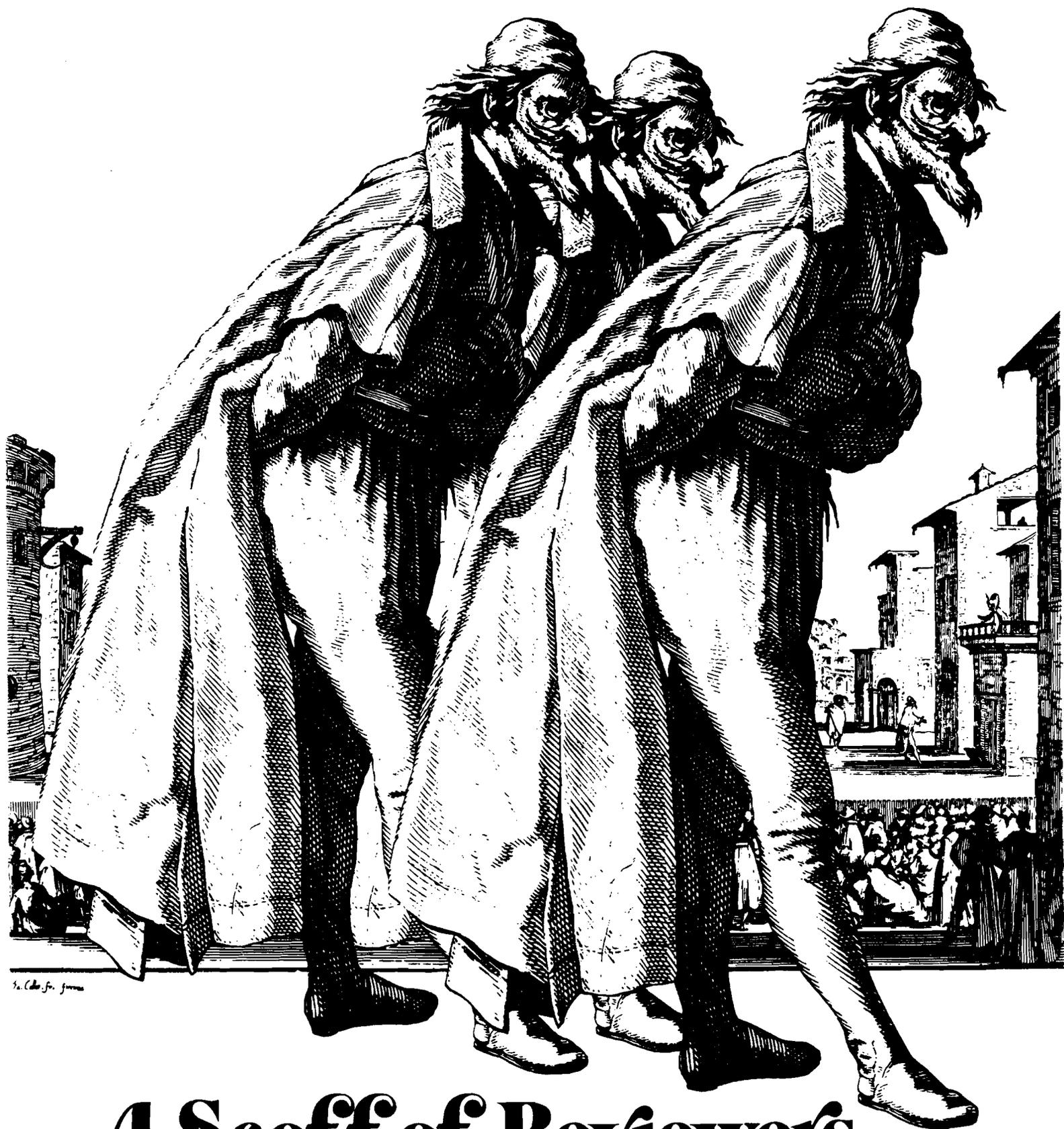


The National Book Critics Circle Journal



Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1, 1975



by Charles Johnson

A Scoff of Reviewers

Book Critics Circle is Born

By Ivan Sandrof
President

Keep this — it's a first of a first of a first! Your grandchildren may be proud of you and culture indebted for your part in creating the organization. The National Book Critics Circle has many functions, but primarily it exists to improve and maintain the standards of literary criticism in an era of diminishing and deteriorating values.

Formally chartered in the State of New York on Oct. 28, 1974 as a non-profit corporation, The NBCC begins its first formal year with approximately 140 members from 25 states and one distinguished critic from England — symbol of the future. The total circulation of media represented by paid members is over 28 million.

The NBCC is proudly democratic, rigid in formulating eligibility and procedure. The Committee on Membership, for example, hacked for weeks on qualifications and submitted a 12-page report! We are vigilant of what begins here and what we do; we build not only for now, but for those who come and, like us, cherish the best of all words.

Our associates include most of the nation's outstanding book critics — polished prose people of distinction. What other organization can include as members the book editor of the largest newspaper in the nation and a convicted felon serving 40 years in a Federal slammer for bank robberies? We are not concerned with the crimes of either, but with their professionalism. Both qualified.

The NBCC is the first national organization of its kind. In that respect for openers alone, we make history of sorts. Why no previous organization? There are reasons . . .

Fearfully and wonderfully made, to borrow from the Book, literary critics fiercely keep their independence. In theory they are beholden to nothing except the values they try to maintain and which they (secretly) cherish.

When The NBCC informally began during a seminar at the National Book Awards of 1974, I had the nervous pleasure of presiding and presenting the creation and its slate of officers adopted by an advisory board the previous day.

The motion was enthusiastically and almost unanimously carried, but

I took home a haunted image — that of a herd of highly sensitive, thoroughbred race horses, each in its own corral pawing turf, ears flaring, backing at the approach of THE STRANGER.

I told the incident to a writer, who nodded understandingly.

"You'll need a big lasso," he said.

The NBCC begins in a period of economic disturbance, and yet it grows and will continue. The reason can only be because of recognition by those who care of the need to maintain the function of criticism. We are watchmen and women. Writers may write as they please; publishers may publish as they wish — and critics may and should whinny and whine of mediocrity and abasement, dullness, stupidity, the big lie and the small, the sins of omission and commission, fraud and plagiarism. Many readers will listen. Many writers and publishers will abort their terrible works and think twice — or even once before mixing ink and mud.

We will appeal to the conscience of writers and publishers, praise and reward the achievements of those who ennoble the art and oppose those who abase it.

The NBCC Journal will improve as a vehicle of information, bearing news of interest to fellow craftsmen. We welcome contributions, including pertinent trivia and particularly suggestions for improving our functions and fulfilling our destiny.

On behalf of The NBCC, I thank those who have helped so much — The Publishers Publicity Association; Andrew A. Anspach, managing director of Hotel Algonquin; Louis Nizer and attorneys Andrew J. Tunick and Robert A. Kline of his office; Edward L. Bernays; The New York Times; The Worcester Telegram-Gazette; Jacqueline Schuman and Grossman Publishers for cover art.

In creating The NBCC some omissions were inadvertently made — some more than eligible prospective members overlooked, or incorrectly approached. We want you and need you, and urge that you come into what is essentially your organization, to be shaped and directed with your participation for the greater good of all of us.

Book critics have been called "mice with tiger teeth," (Hazlitt). Another description: "little lions with nibbled nails." (Lanza del Vasto, a Christian disciple of Gandhi).

We Will At Least Be Honest

By John Leonard
Advisory Board

It is with a sense of wonder that I read page after page of articles about literary politics. Philip Nobile, in *Intellectual Skywriting*, has written a whole book about The New York Review of Books. Richard Kostelanetz, in *The End of Intelligent Writing*, has written a whole book on why nobody in the literary establishment likes Richard Kostelanetz. Charles Kadushin, in *The American Intellectual Elite*, tells us that he spent months identifying the "influential" magazines, and then years counting up the number of times so-and-so's name was mentioned in these magazines, in order to compile his list of the Top 70 Intellectuals. I wonder why.

The assumption behind all three books, and hundreds of reviews of them, seems to be that an old-buddy network must exist, running our literary culture, conspiring against our splendid uniqueness. The buddies meet every Wednesday on New York's Upper West Side for calisthenics. When the Zeitgeist sneezes, they all catch cold. Groping through their phlegm, they arrive at a consensus — such and such a writer is to be sanctioned, such and such a career to be aborted. They are brokers on a stock exchange of style and personality; they refuse to invest in Richard Kostelanetz.

None of this is true, but it is so widely believed that it must satisfy a felt need. One of the many things Watergate has done to the mind of the nation is to have legitimized paranoia. All those bright young men doing kennel-duty in the executive branch of the government, with their flag-pins and their shredders and their kewpie-doll wives and their enemies' lists — what did they think they were doing to us? The FBI, the CIA, the IRS, the FCC, the Justice Department and the Securities & Exchange Commission — whom did they serve? One imagines the President of the United States alone at night, in a dark wing of the White House, listening to himself on tapes. It should have been a play by Samuel Beckett. Who did he think he was, Charles DeGaulle?

So the paranoids were right about Watergate. Maybe paranoids are right about lots of things. And writers have always been among our leading paranoids. A case could be

made that most post-World War II American novels are either about adultery or about paranoia, with paranoia slightly in the lead. It's a crazy business, anyway, writing, locking yourself in a room and inventing stories, no way for an adult to behave. Then your book is published; the sun comes up, as usual, and the sun goes down, as usual, and the world is in no way altered, and it must be someone's fault.

The establishment. The mafia. They were too interested in what Norman said about Jason and Jason said about Norman and Mary said about David and David said about Mary and why Anatole doesn't like Franz and why Kurt doesn't like Anatole and whatever happened to Dwight to find time for your book.

Of course there is an American literary establishment. It consists of those magazines and newspapers most of us read, the people who write for them and the clerks who edit them. The names of the players, however, change so quickly that this establishment couldn't field a softball team, couldn't conspire at tiddlywinks. Its moanings and heavings and tidal wastes are sloppy and accidental. The Sixties shattered any consensus it might have agreed on. Somehow literature got all mixed up with drugs, politics, personal liberation. In the confusion, critics were taking movies, television, soup cans, rock music and graffiti seriously. Everybody, according to Andy Warhol, was going to be a celebrity for fifteen minutes in his life. That Warhol lasted longer than fifteen minutes is the ultimate graffiti on the walls of the Sixties. You couldn't walk down a dark alley without getting jumped on by a fad. You had to keep hiring different people to identify different fads. Then, too, fads and faddists were perishable. Talent, style, sensibility, personality became consumer items, freeze-dried, in disposable wrappers. The establishment was a fast-food franchise. What would Henry James have thought? Where there is no coherence, there can't be a mafia.

Now I must sigh. Just because there is no conspiracy against new voices, new talents, doesn't mean that anybody's going to hear those voices, or hear about those talents. With all the voices shouting at once, the result is static, jamming, interference, squawk. I wish there were a coherent establishment, a kind of Federal Communications Commis-

sion to regulate the frequencies along the cultural spectrum. Not one establishment, but many; not a hundred periodicals looking, in their desperate quest to be with it on a thousand different fronts, as though they had dressed at night in a burning building, but each defining its cultural space, insisting on its own standards, hierarchies, biases, obsessions. As it is, every magazine attacks the eye like a clutch of competing and contradictory advertisements, not like a coherent argument. It is as if they sold space according to one's emotional ability to pay for it, instead of editing according to any discernible principle or even prejudice. Yes, all these passions have fingers. But when they stick all their fingers in your eye at once, you can't see anything.

Alas, the nation will have to heal itself in a dozen different ways before any sort of literary coherence will be possible. Meanwhile, our job as clerks and critics is mainly to try to stay sane, to trust our one-on-one encounter with a book, and not the publicity machines that tell us what we are supposed to feel; to listen, as quietly and as generously as our temperaments permit, to the voice telling the story; to talk to the wary reader as though he or she were someone we loved, and knew to be busy, and hoped to persuade. Not exactly a heroic calling, I agree, especially at a time when most of the heroes seem to be terrorists, whether they are mugging the language or the flesh. But if we resolve to do as little damage as possible, we will at least be honest and might even do good.

The Story So Far . . .

Proceeding with caution, from a legally sound base, the NBCC has made heartening progress. Professional critics and editors from 42 major newspapers and news services and 22 magazines and journals have become members, and an 18-member Advisory Board and officers have convened regularly to establish bylaws and guidelines.

Beginning in May, inquiries and applications for Regular and Associate membership poured in from Maine to Florida to the West Coast and points in between. As letterhead stationery, prospectus and membership application cards became available, invitations went out to 100 book reviewers and book review editors on large and medium-sized

publications. (A longer list of prominent free lance reviewers and critics is now being compiled.)

Financially independent so far, The NBCC has a bank account raised solely on dues.

Before becoming formally incorporated as a non-profit organization last October, the Advisory Board engaged in prolonged and often heated exchange of opinion over the purposes, functions and framework of the NBCC. Revealing an unexpected legal intelligence, Eliot Fremont-Smith (with help from Larry Swindell) drafted a blueprint for a Charter that was short of brilliant. On the recommendations of his Committee on Membership, dues will be raised this April from \$10 to \$15 for Regular members, and from \$6 to \$8 for Associate members. At the Nov. 15 meeting of the Board, Susan Heath of Saturday Review was elected Treasurer (thus relieving me of one of my posts) and Jonathan Yardley of the Miami Herald was added to the Advisory Board.

Looming in the horizon for NBCC are the first annual general meeting and social event in April, coinciding with National Book Awards in New York; an anthology of best criticism from NBCC members and the presentation of its first annual book awards in January 1976. Toward these ends, the following Special Committees have been appointed.

Awards Committee: Co-chairmen, John Barkham and Barbara A. Bannon.

Publications Committee: Peter S. Prescott (Mr. Prescott also heads the Credentials Committee) and Eliot Fremont-Smith.

Funding: Susan Heath.

Radio and Television: Ivan Sandrof.

Coordinator of Annual Activities: Donna Schrader.

Chairman of the NBCC Journal: Larry Swindell.

This initial issue of the NBCC Journal is the first concrete evidence of the association's projected program of activities. In these pages the NBCC will find its true address — Critics, Inc. U.S.A., an authentic fraternity of writers in a field that has so far lacked professional solidarity.

By Nona Balakian
Secretary

Membership Guidelines

MEMBERSHIP POLICY GUIDELINES RECOMMENDED BY THE

FORMAL ADOPTION BY THE ADVISORY BOARD AND ACCEPTED BY SAME.

The following articles have been incorporated in the NBCC Bylaws:

1. *Classes of Membership.* Membership is of two classes: Regular and Associate.
2. *Duration of Membership.* All memberships are for the period of one year (April 1 through March 31).
3. *Membership Dues.* Annual dues for Regular membership are \$15, payable on or before April 1 of the year of membership, or upon notification of Advisory Board acceptance of membership (both new and renewal). Annual dues for Associate membership are \$8, payable on or before April 1 of the year of membership.
4. *Regular Membership: Qualifications.* To qualify for Regular membership, a candidate must be: (A) a book critic or book reviewer or book columnist or book commentator who is regularly employed or self-employed as such and whose work is regularly published or broadcast; (B) a book review editor whose major professional occupation is to write or broadcast book criticism as outlined above, and/or assign books for review and edit reviews on a regular basis; (C) a freelance book critic or book reviewer or book columnist or book commentator or book review editor whose work over a period of time has come to professional recognition.
5. *Regular Membership: Procedures of Candidacy.* A candidacy for Regular membership is approved by majority vote of the Credentials Committee, subject to ratification by a majority of the Advisory Board. All Regular memberships are subject to annual review of qualifications by the Credentials Committee. Candidacies for renewal of Regular membership when such Regular membership has lapsed are subject to the same procedures that apply to new candidacies for Regular membership. In all cases, approval of Regular membership under these procedures shall not be unreasonably withheld.
6. *Regular Membership: Rights.* Regular membership entitles the member, during his period of membership, to all the normal privileges and services of the NBCC, including subscription to the *Journal*, to one vote on any and all matters that come before the membership, and to

Board.

7. *Associate Membership: Qualifications.* To qualify for Associate membership, a candidate must be professionally involved in books, literature, and book and/or literary criticism.

8. *Associate Membership: Procedures of Membership.* Any person may become an Associate member upon statement of qualification and payment of dues as specified above.

9. *Associate Membership: Rights.* Associate membership entitles the member, during the period of membership, to all the normal privileges of the NBCC, including subscription to the *Journal*, but not including voting rights.

10. *Credentials Committee.* The Credentials Committee, a Standing Committee of the Advisory Board, is composed of three Board members, plus the President of the NBCC. Credentials Committee is elected biennially by the Advisory Board and is responsible to the same. The purpose of the Credentials Committee is to consider Regular membership candidacies that come before it and to review annually all Regular memberships and to make recommendations on same for Advisory Board approval.

From A Place Beside The Sea . . .

By Edward A. Laycock

Ted Laycock retired in September, 1964 after 19 years as book editor of the Boston Globe.

What does retirement mean to a book reviewer, an editor of a book page? A chance to read only the books he wants to read, those he has put aside for his leisure days? A chance to travel? A chance to wear out his old clothes? The opportunity of going without shaving for a day or two?

It's a slow process to read the books he has set aside. In the first place he takes a book from the shelf and wonders "Why did I keep that?" In the second place, he takes a book to bed (it's early to bed now) and the next thing he awakens, puts on the light (his wife has put it out hours ago), sees that it's 1 A.M., 2, 3, 4 or 5, finds the book on the floor on one side and his glasses on the quilt or somewhere in the covers, and reads again for a short time.

When he was reading six books a week and skimming many more (a reviewer has to see every word of a

view), he didn't dare read when he couldn't sleep. The minute the book was in hand he suffered the occupational disease of book reviewers; he was wide awake and concentrated, no matter what kind of book, an academic tome, poetry, a whodunit (he disliked that kind), even a Western. He tried them all but none made him drowsy.

A chance to travel? He planned to spend a year drifting in a car all over the United States. It didn't work out. He and his wife went back to their ancestral countries, his wife's Finland, his England.

They went by cargo-passenger ship to Rotterdam, arranged through an association with Clare Leighton, author, wood engraver and designer of stained glass windows, spent a week in Amsterdam (no book connections there) and voyaged to Helsinki on a Finnish freighter. He had an assignment to write about the largest bookstore in Northern Europe (if not in the whole of the continent) in Helsinki but he wasn't impressed with the store. He was more impressed with the Finnish women; they all seemed to be beautiful.

It was bus travel to Turku, his wife's native city, and he discovered in the church she attended as a child in suburban Ravnistula the grave of Peter Kalm, pastor of the church in the 1700s, author of "Travels in North America," a study of American natural history and agriculture.

They flew to London by way of Copenhagen. In London he wanted to phone Margery Sharpe, the novelist, whom he had met, and ask her to prove that English women are good cooks, but he didn't dare. They hired a car in Rugby (every one of the 30,000 books in the school's library was out of place) and went by way of Shakespeare's Stratford to Cowling in the West Riding of Yorkshire where they found Gill Top where his father had lived and a broken wall of stone with two window holes, one above the other, all that's left of his grandfather's textile mill.

A chance to wear out old clothes? He still has some shirts left after 10 years, using them in the winter when collecting driftwood for the fireplaces every morning except Saturday and Sunday.

The pleasure of going without shaving? On winter days no one sees him with a beard on the beach. When he was working every day he never felt comfortable unshaven.

What does he miss most, the chance to get early information on new books, so he knows what's worth reading? No, there's only one great book in about 10 years and he has put aside enough to read.

Really he misses most the friends he made among authors and publishers. He still sees a few (where he lives the woods are full of writers, at least in summer.) Edmund Wilson lived here, Bennett Cerf is gone and so is Rachel Carson. Among book editors he misses the Court of Hissing Men, John Hutchens, Fred Babcock and Lon Tinkle, to name those.

Writing about retirement this early in the existence of the National Book Critics Circle brings a recollection of a visit of one of the bright young men who came one summer.

He had just received or was about to receive his master's degree. I asked what he was looking forward to in his career. "Retirement," was his quick, blunt answer.

Dialogue: Publicity Directors View the Critics

A number of publicity directors upon whom publishers depend more than they are generally willing to admit were asked to contribute here. Most accepted. The editor amalgamated their statements to avoid duplication. The result may be of interest and usefulness.

In the next issue of the NBCC Journal the dialogue, of course, will be: "The Book Critics Look at the Publishers." As of this writing, no critic has yet refused to contribute.

The griping order:

First came the breaking of pub dates, fore and aft. Aft drew more sting. Comments: "A few days in advance are O.K. If far in advance, often disastrous . . . Sunday book review media particularly liable. Case in point: major book held nine months; best-seller reviewed over one year after publication. Critics should not have to serve publishers but they should have to serve the public to whom their reviews are addressed."

". . . Reviewing the books before they are in the stores is not the worst sin. Often an excellent major review comes in a year or more after the publication when the bookstores have already sent back all their books." . . . "One of the old saws, and I'm sorry I have to repeat it, is begging reviewers not to break pub date. By that, I don't mean a few days

or even a week. I'm talking about a month. True, we send books out to reviewers and major books to bookstores well in advance of pub date to make sure they are in the bookstores ready to be sold when reviews do run."

Second leading gripe seemed to be on the unusual side — failure of book critics to review more first novels. One pub director highly commended "reviewers who review and encourage first novels." . . . Another in referring to "the necessity of encouraging quality first-novels," called the problem "one of our toughest jobs to get across."

Not exactly a bitch, but more of a longing, was a recurring theme — the failure of book critics to advise what books they were planning to cover. Some critics, it seems, do this through the ABA newswire; others do it on their own.

Here are additional complaints:

The great rip-off. Somewhere between the publisher's office and/or warehouse and the critic's lair, an estimated 18 to 23% of books mailed never reach their designation. No accusations are made, but one pd said "It's costing publishers a fortune!"

Not enough book space (with only one bringing up the irritant of no advertising); failure to return check lists in catalogs; the assumption that publishers have endless numbers of books for review and all you have to do is ask; lack of coordination (as many as three different people on one newspaper requesting the same book) along with repeat requests; failure to review more service-oriented or specialized books — those not straight down the middle of general trade publishing; failure to send tear-sheets if a book is reviewed in the run-of-the-paper; reviews of the book jacket instead of the book.

One of the most complete yodels of reproof: "Unconscionably late reviews; a review that is only a flat resume is only a waste of time; a review that is an essay on the background of the book; reviews that use the book "to sound off."

More from the same source:

When a review seems to be a review of the author, or the author's earlier book — or even a review of the publisher. Reviewers who don't understand the fundamentals of publishing. Reviews — even good reviews — which patently misrepresent the book and praise the wrong

things. Reviewers who spend time telling what the book is NOT about. Reviews which tell how the reviewer would have written the book. This doesn't help the publisher very much.

"I deplore reviewers," said the pd, "who are authors preparing to write a book, or who have written one (with occasional exceptions). Reviews that are obsessed with the inbred world of New York publishing. The review seems to be an inside joke of those in the know. Reviews of non-fiction where politics of reviewers intrude. In recent years this is happening more and more.

Reviews that overpraise — that promise too much — are as damaging as reviews that underpraise. Reviewers who cater to books of their special interest and bias. The Emperor's Clothes Syndrome: The reviewer who takes issue with "cult" books — books that are touted by the publishers as the "in" book of the year. Reviews should say, "There's less here than meets the eye." Clever reviews — where the reviewer is more interested in clever remarks than in the review, or content.

Had enough?

The editor is grateful to the following for their contributions: Harriet Blacker Algrant, Random; Carolyn Amussen, Houghton-Mifflin; Sherry W. Arden, Morrow; Marian Behrman, Crown; Rosalie Brody, Crowell; Lisl Cade, Norton; Catherine Donoghue-Hartman, Arco; William A. Guthrie, Little, Brown; Rose Orente, Quadrangle; Jane Pasanen, Dutton; Kay Radtke, Dodd-Mead; Susan Richman, Scribner's; Donna Schrader, Dial; A. Richard Barber, Viking.

The Critical Scene

Three women recently assumed editorship of three leading book review media: Susan Heath at Saturday Review, Margaret Manning at the Boston Globe and Kathleen Moloney at Chicago Tribune's Book World . . . Two widely known editor-reviewers have retired: Herbert A. Kenny (Boston Globe) and Alice Cromie (Book World), both still free-lancing . . . Eliot Fremont-Smith moved from his post at New York Magazine to editorship of The Village Voice's book section . . . Alden Whitman, noted for his erudite and elegantly written obituaries on The New York Times to which he also contributes book reviews, will henceforth cover news of the book

world-as well . . . Ernest Cady, book review editor of The Columbus Dispatch for 30 years, received an Ohioana Citation Award for service to books and letters in the Central Ohio community, and former Times book reviewer, Orville Prescott received the Ohioana Library's Career Medal Award . . . Nash Burger, widely published book reviewer and staffer of The New York Times Book Review retired and is living in Virginia . . . John Brooks is the new president of Author's Guild.

NBCC BOOK AWARDS IN 1976

At the November 15 meeting of the Advisory Board, the NBCC voted to establish four annual literary awards starting with books published in 1975. The winners in Fiction, Poetry, general Non-Fiction and Criticism will be announced early in 1976.

Judges for these awards will be the 18-member advisory board and officers of the organization, with members contributing nominations.

Plaint Of The Literary Editor

By Herbert A. Kenny
Advisory Board

Never has entomologist pursued
Such bugs as these, spawned by a printer's curse,
That jumble prose and gut the heart of verse,
That make an innocent remark sound lewd,
Some nicely turned civility sound rude,
That make the good word bad, the bad word worse,
That bitch the headline, evilly reverse
The decency of man to turpitude.

Evil enough when some reviewer's pen
Is fouled by typos! How the bastards gripe
To have their prose defiled. We let that pass.
To hell with them! But, oh, the anguish when
The typos turn our elegance to tripe
And make us in one sentence twice the ass.

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The National Book Critics Circle, Inc. is an independent non-profit organization whose purpose is to encourage and raise the quality of book criticism in all media and provide for exchange of information among professional reviewers in the United States.

Edited by Ivan Sandrof

The National Book Critics Circle

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