A Scoff of Reviewers
book Critics
Circle is Born
By Ivan Sandof
President

Keep this — it's a first of a first of a first! Your grandchildren may be proud of you and culture indebted to 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 as members the book editor of the 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 the free flow of ideas, in the spirit of the time.

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 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 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 scattered 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 in 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 Swindle) 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 Swindle.

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
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 vote on any and all matters that come before the membership, and to participate in all the affairs of the NBCC, but not including voting rights.
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 membership 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 review), 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 Ravinsula 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 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 new 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 gripping 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 15 to 20% 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 irritable 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. Reviewers 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; Lisel Cade, Norton; Catherine Donoghue-Hartman, Arco; William A. Guthrie, Little, Brown; Marian Behrman, Crown; Nosie Orente, Quadrangle; Jane Pasa­tinen, Dutton; Kay Radtke, Dodd­mead; 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
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.

OFFICERS

President
Ivan Sandrof
The Worcester Telegram-Gazette

Vice President
Digby Diehl
Los Angeles Times

Secretary
Nona Balakian
The New York Times Book Review

Treasurer
Susan Heath
The Saturday Review

Barbara A. Bannon
Publishers Weekly

John Barkham
John Barkham Reviews

Alvin Beam
Cleveland Plain Dealer

Alice Cromie

Martha Duffy
Time

ADVISORY BOARD

Elliot Fremont-Smith
The Village Voice

Elizabeth Hardwick
New York Review of Books

Herbert A. Kenny

John Leonard
The New York Times Book Review

Thorpe Menn
The Kansas City Star

Stanton Peckham
Denver Post

Peter S. Prescott
Newsweek

Larry Swindell
Philadelphia Inquirer

Jonathan Yardley
Miami Herald

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