



THE  
COLOPHON

A BOOK COLLECTORS' QUARTERLY



## JAMES BRANCH CABELL

### RECIPES FOR WRITERS

FOR ONE I ALMOST ALWAYS  
almost enjoy meeting writers.

I like, anyhow, their reliability: and I have known in the flesh a great many writers of varying schools and degrees of talent. At one time or another anybody who has ever written anything appears impelled to visit Richmond: and during the last fifteen years I have thus met I know not how many hundred persons with more or less literary credentials. That which they had printed differed immeasurably. Their work displayed nothing in common, and its fruits clearly emanated from unreticently gifted beings whose minds had not anything in common. What pleased and yet puzzled me too was the fact that as private persons,—inspired by the second or third Ravished Virgin cocktail, and replete with sandwiches, and seated in the red-covered chair beside my library window,—these writers did all have so very much in common as to convert a conversation with any one of them into a virtually effortless matter.

It were idle to pretend that all the talk made in my library is thus uniformly successful. With the more solid citizenry who now and then get into the room I find social intercourse always to begin unhappily. The trouble is that they take charge of the matter, in their brisk way, by inquiring, with a soul-chilling sprightliness, whether I am writing anything nowadays? This gambit I admire: I have often planned to adapt it so that I myself might





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begin talk by demanding, say, of a lawyer whether he yet retains his practice, of a clergyman whether he is holding any services nowadays, or of a banker whether his bank is still running; but thus far I have not plucked up the requisite élan. I answer, then, that in point of fact I am at work on a book. They ask (with an appreciably sobered geniality, as of one who had hoped for better tidings) what am I going to call it? When I reply that I have not yet decided, the topic of literature appears exhausted; and conversation has to relapse lumberingly into the more fertile fields of Prohibition and the stock market. But I have never found the least trouble in making talk with my fellow writers.

This happy outcome springs from the fact that all the writers whom I have met in the flesh (and for that matter, I daresay, in the looking-glass) have agreed in their large vanity and in their inexplicable jealousy the one of another. These traits are not to be enregistered as cardinal virtues from the point of view of morality, but in social exercise they work out handsomely. That all-engulfing self-conceit (without which no writer, I most firmly believe, can be worth his salt) affords at once a pleasing topic for conversation. I know that the person opposite really does of necessity consider himself a pre-eminent genius—even in my library, with my Collected Works on full view—and that he requires only to be treated with appropriate deference in the while that we discuss his exploits and revere his books.

The jealousy comes nicely into play the instant that (with the dutifulness of a centurion introducing an Early Christian into the arena) I feed to this lion one or another mention of some other author in terms of artfully mild commendation. The things that a writer can and does very promptly say when any other living writer is tentatively praised continue, even after thirty years of hearing these things, to astonish and delight me. I am spurred to emulousness, and in a while I emule: I draw freely upon my own funds of moral indignation, of superior shruggings, and of derogatory hearsay. There is no possibility of the conversation's languishing until the overrated humbug under discussion is quite disposed of to his very last frailty and defect. Then we revert to talking of my visitor's fine work. By-and-by I feed the visitor the name of yet another contemporary writer. And in this way we get on famously.

I have not ever known this simple program to fail. Now and then I have encountered a literary visitor who declined to deviate for one instant in talk from that visitor's own writings even to vilify the work of others, but



such stubborn exceptions are rare, and in any case she keeps on talking. And I attend in utter contentment, because I have read of how my own dull eyes and drooping eyelids are informed with intelligence only when I am discoursing upon my own books in a fevered monotony of egotism, varied upon the least provocation by shriek after shriek of wounded vanity. I feel that one who carries the matter to that extreme ought to be patient with the likewise afflicted.

In brief, I almost always almost enjoy talking with writers; nor have I gravely held it against them that during my time they have tended toward broad-mindedness as devastatingly as did the clergy. There has been the difference that to my finding the majority of writers have been proselytizing atheists who have viewed with open acerbity my connection with the church of my fathers. The clergy have seemed merely resigned about it. But all my contemporaries in American letters, so near as I can remember, have from the first embraced agnosticism with deeply religious ardor; they have become zealots of unfaith, very ardently seeking to make converts to all indevotion, and they have seemed to live in an ever-fretful dread of their own not impossible collapse into some form of belief. In this way and in yet other ways they have convinced me that Americans have not learned in my time to be broad-minded with entire ease, no matter how steadfastly throughout the last fifteen years we of the literati have tried to achieve the urbane union.

Oncoming antiquaries, I suspect, will not ever give us sophisticated writers of the 'twenties our due credit for the pains with which we learned to converse in drawing-rooms about brothels and privies and homosexuality and syphilis and all other affairs which in our first youth were taboo,—and even as yet we who have reached fifty or thereabouts cannot thus discourse, I am afraid, without some visible effort. I have noted a certain paralytic stiffening of the features (such as a wholly willing martyr might, being human, evince at the first sight of his stake) which gave timely warning that the speaker was now about to approach the obscene with genial levity. Even that fine and strong artist who by common consent discourses bawdily with the most natural gusto, him, too, I have observed a little squeakily to raise his voice in the actual plumping out of each formerly unutterable word whensoever in the presence of ladies he over modestly conveys a general impression of not knowing anybody except bitches and bastards. The effect, in brief, is even here not free, not wholly free, from some visible strain. Yet we stick to it, none the less; and in all such affairs we older writers remain,

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if anything rather more untiringly broad-minded than are our juniors, in the same conscientious manner.

Moreover so many of the visiting literati have fetched with them to Richmond intense and generally queer looking young women, sometimes under the ægis of free love and sometimes merely as the man's legal wife for the current month, that I too have suffered from the need put upon the creative artist to be fickle and multiversant (and, for choice, priapic) in his amours. I am so eccentric as to lament this need. That the supreme literary court which is composed of the average readers of the average author's books should expect such doings of each fairly successful writer seems fair enough, since it is the comforting salve of the undistinguished citizen to believe that persons of much-talked-about achievement, or of superior social station, are at any rate his inferiors morally. My lament is rather that the artist himself is cowed by this superstition and is driven but too often into flat lechery to defend his genius.

I have known far too many writers who painstakingly honored this creed very much to the hurt of their business in life. Indeed I nowadays look with large wonder upon this onerous superstition and the havoc it has contrived in the doings of innumerable authors whose private affairs are more or less familiar to me, —alluring, as it has done, so many of them to marry indiscriminatingly and repeatedly; leading them (over and above the time squandered by their broad-mindedness in finding extra-legal bedfellows for their wives) to maintain mistresses long after the age when illicit love-affairs have become a nuisance; affording a robust anthology of fairy tales by stirring up a more than antiquarian interest in the old ways of Sodom; quenching all that quietness which is needed to beget a really fine phrase; and in general forcing the American author who in the least respected his repute as a writer very sedulously to avoid the appearance of any bourgeois virtue at the expense of mere reason.

Nor have our sisters in the scribbling trade denied at any rate their lip service to these hidebound conventions. Here of course the affair becomes delicate, and I dare accuse no gifted gentlewoman of continence. I merely remark that, although during the last fifteen years I have in private suspected one or two widely known female writers of personal chastity, he would have been a far bolder man than I who durst twit any one of them with such delinquency in the as yet sophisticated state of American letters.

Now here I think the postman is implicated. Through the postman



alone is an author kept in touch with inedited public opinion as it quite honestly regards his writing and his personality. How this affair also may speed with women writers I may not presume to say. I say only that day after day the postman brings to every fairly well known male author an invitation to succor one or another misunderstood wife adulterously and to assuage the carnal loneliness of this or the other unattached spinster: if I forbear to speak of those bright young men who desire (as a rule, in violet ink) to enact Antinous to his Hadrian, it is not for lack of subject matter. All these correspondents, then, presuppose the man's sexual piracies so very often, just as an affair of course, that the most unadventurous of penman may well come insensibly to doing that which seems expected of him. In but too many cases this leads to open iniquity such as upsets one's working hours; and after any serious practitioner of the art of writing has mastered his prose style he should be permitted, I think, to live superior to the jogtrot notions of morality.

I would so far honor the conventions that until the man is thirty-five or thereabouts I would bar him from no sort of loose living nor fornication nor crime, although it is better by and large to combine the last-named with an avoidance of the penitentiary. All such misbehaviors will by-and-by be grist to the auctorial mill; they will aid to establish his legend; they content his public; and it is likely the books which he writes meanwhile will not suffer materially, inasmuch as no prose book written before thirty-five is apt to be of relative importance.

But after thirty-five, or by forty at latest, the elect writer has really not the time for the frivolities of broad-minded and artistic conduct. He has reached the season wherein, if at all, he must harvest of his baser passions and of his evil doing; even in the teeth of public opinion he may now, I think, avert from sexual immorality with a clear conscience, esteeming it his fairly won privilege to lead that sober and immured life wherein alone he may find full opportunity to pursue his sedentary trade. It has now become his main duty to write, and to give over all to his art, without any further corporal truckling to the vices which his constitution is no longer able to support with distinction. Nor will his fair repute suffer by this in the long run, provided only that his writings survive him; the vicarious lecheries and the mental masturbations of the professors who will edit his remains may be safely counted upon to provide the final years of his biography with the requisite misbehavior.

Meanwhile it occurs to me that these observations as to the natural

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history of prose writers may be robbed of any large significance by the fact that I may have encountered no authors of profound or enduring worth. About that I of course do not know. For one matter it has been the fate of my prolonged diversion, in the Biography of the life of Manuel, to fare always an appreciable way apart from the fields wherein my contemporaries were at play; our interests were not ever quite the same; and as one result of this I have very often applauded my confrères with a certain conscious lack of sympathy. I perceived their manifold merits, that is, perforce and with a rather distasteful clarity. There has always been present, just around the corner, the notion that if these so obviously talented persons were selecting their themes and the proper treatment of them with intelligence, then I must be making of myself, in my Poictesmes and my Lichfields, a spectacle which I preferred not to consider.

It has followed—no doubt, as a result of this very ugly and unworthy notion—that even nowadays I do not regard any one of my contemporaries quite so seriously as to believe that during my time Shakespeare and the Bible have been hopelessly dispossessed from their rumored supremacy in our literature. Yet I admit too that every current book is unfairly handicapped by its manifest failure to be the book which the publishers describe on the dust jacket: and I know that each era has over modestly believed itself to be bereft of literary genius.

This belief is not wholly due, perhaps, to the polite pretence of every reviewer that the especial author upon whom he is now operating is the reviewer's equal. I suspect the author may be far more to blame, in that he only too often permits his reviewers, and even his potential readers, to see him and to know him personally. He does not with a shrewd humbleness remember that, in the judicious words of Trelawny, "to know an author personally is to destroy the illusion created by his works; if you withdraw the veil of your idol's sanctuary, and see him in his nightcap, you discover a querulous old crone, a sour pedant, a supercilious coxcomb, a servile tuft-hunter, a saucy snob, or, at best, an ordinary mortal."

Edward John Trelawny had known a number of admittedly great authors: and I think that he spoke the truth as to every gifted writer who is yet alive. Living, the writer who has genius gets hourly in the way of his own ability and obscures it. Living, he does but too often, and far too willingly, illustrate what Keats meant by his cryptic saying, "Of all God's creatures a poet is the most unpoetical." Living, he exhibits, not merely in my library



but to his beholders at large, that childlike yet that wholly necessary self-conceit and that vivacious jealousy as to which I have spoken: and he in many other ways, and upon every possible occasion, arouses strong doubts as to his exact mental balance.

Yet every writer of fiction comes among us, let it be remembered, from out of a land in which he is God: he comes from a very high ordaining of love and death and of all human affairs in this more familiar land, which his characters inhabit, to make civil talk for us in our trim drawing-rooms or to foster those more hardy platitudes which alone may flourish upon the bleak lecture platform. We should always remember in our dealings with literary people that each author is in every essential a foreigner but lately emigrated from the one land which is comprehensible to him; and that also he goes among us perforce in a half-sleep, preserving as best the poor man can the amenities of our physical dreamland by pretending to believe in us. So does he become ludicrous in our eyes, because he perceives only too plainly that no one of us is an important or an enduring phenomenon. And about the importance and the enduringness of that world wherein he is God—here also—he may of course be quite right, provided only he has made the grave error of being born a genius.

For this reason I often wonder if ever among these visiting literati I have encountered authentic genius as it went incognito, veiled by the rude requirements of food and pocket money and yet other fleshly foibles. It well may be that this exceedingly boring person, or this seemingly insane person, will bulk largely in to-morrow's literature, with a *Life and Letters* and a very dull host of commentators. The circumstance may even be mentioned, in his *Authorized Biography*, that on such and such a date he was in Richmond and then visited me, with a footnote to explain who I was. Each visitor who comes me-ward may be that predestined person; I have no possible way of telling; and with the eternal survival of my full name and address (at least, perhaps) thus inexpensively purchasable, I find that I almost always almost enjoy meeting writers.

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