

Philip Wylie, American novelist and short-story writer, has had a wide and varied life. He has worked as press agent, advertising manager for a publisher, was for a time one of the editors of the *New Yorker* and a studio writer in the movies. He worked on farms, in Manhattan stores, in factories, on ships and elsewhere. Intending to be a doctor, his education was largely scientific, and his travels abroad gave him a knowledge of three foreign languages. He collaborated on several books with Edwin Balmer and others were anonymous or written under a pseudonym. The following article was written exclusively for *The Star*.

MOST "constant readers" reach a point in their lives at which, incensed by a book or an article, they take their pens in hand and inform the author that he is a liar, a fool, a malicious person, misinformed, or a menace. I have written such missives myself and I have received such. Of them, some were justified and many gave me insight into overlooked categories of thought and opinion. But the other day, while I was lying meditatively on the Florida beach, there flew into my range of vision five pelicans. The birds were at first strung out in a line; as I idly watched (I am something of a pelican buff), one took the lead and two fell behind each flank so that the birds proceeded in a "V" formation.

This commonplace occurrence reminded me of a letter I long ago received from a gentleman who quoted from a magazine story of mine the description of pelicans flying in a "V" and who asserted that, in his long experience as a pelican-watcher and resident of the west coast of Florida, he had never seen pelicans take that formation. He stated that he was, in consequence, positive the birds always flew in a line and that I was a nature-faker. The magazine, which got the letter first, was naturally depressed and referred the matter to me with some petulance. Now, for all I know, pelicans on the west coast of Florida never fly in "Vs"—but I watched them do it on this coast, where I live, for the umpteenth time, only day before yesterday. The chuckle-head who gave me the lie put me to some pains and

A Word to Constant Readers

By Philip Wylie

trouble simply because he did not know enough about pelicans, but was nevertheless certain he knew more than I did.

Niggling Dopes Who Heckle Authors

In the course of 20 years of writing such things as books, magazine stories, articles, criticism and a newspaper column, I received several thousand letters of this and other quibbling sorts. Each one usually goes to an editor first. Editors dislike errors—writers do sometimes make them—but the result is often a tart, unjustified order from editor to writer to make amends. I have had to spend more than enough time to write a whole book in the egregious business of corresponding with dopes who were engaged either in niggling over a point not worth discussion or in a fallacious attempt at correcting me.

There was, for example, a gentleman who said I had used the wrong common name for a fish. This cost me a trip to the library, several phone calls to learned persons, two letters, and considerable irritation, before I could prove to his and the editorial satisfaction that I knew my stuff and he did not. There was a gentleman who wrote me five letters from Texas over the alleged failure by me to use the subjunctive in a contrary-to-fact condition. I wrote, "was"; he said it should have been, "were." Even when I summoned a famous English professor to the judgment and when he decided in my favor, the self-appointed Texas purist kept on writing! Whenever I publish a book, I know that I will soon be showered with missives, both cute and bitter, from the spelling and punctuation correctors. These people as often as not assume I set the book in type myself and hold me to blame for every printer's error as well as trivial blunders of my own. And legion is the number of individuals who have both the energy and time (not to mention the egotism or the neurotic compulsion) to write four or five pages of disagreement over the definition of a word.

All authors are similarly heckled. All are annoyed, when they have poured grey matter and



—Sketch by Newman Sudduth.

heart's blood into their work, to receive endless communications from readers who say exactly nothing about their reactions to the opus, but merely point out

with smug glee that on page 148, line 23, two letters have been transposed in the fourth word from the right-hand margin.

The plague of trifling is certainly a poor comment on general education, which is shown by it to make of multitudes, not readers in any sense of the word, but mere amateur proof-readers. And the scale on which the author-corrector operates is limited only by his purse and leisure. I have had sent to me, with no comment, a copy of a book of mine, neatly reproof-read and annotated with suggestions for "better" words than those I used.

In the case of a book I wrote some years ago on the poor subjective condition of modern man, I had mailed to me five "condensations"—five shortened, new versions of my humble effort. Three of these were more than twenty thousand words in length—representing an enormous voluntary labor—and one had actually been set in type! It is very flattering that five persons should think enough of my intellectual effort to execute an abbreviation of it; but from my standpoint, the

fact remains that if I had found a shorter way to say what I wished to say, I would have used it myself. The person who reads an exegesis or a syllabus of a book has in no sense read the book. All five digesters assumed I would be overjoyed to drop everything, read their translation of my English, and send lengthy comment.

They Are Like a Cloud of Mosquitoes

The season at which this essay will be published has put a happy suggestion in my mind. I would like to use the opportunity to give each and every one of the five thousand free lance writers in this great nation a Christmas present in the form of a discovery I have made, partly out of sheer brilliance, but partly, I confess, from driving necessity. For I have solved the problem of these BB-shot critics, these piddling and usually mistaken theme-markers, who, if they looked at the Mona Lisa, would look first, last, and only, for a fly-speck. Whenever I open a letter from one of them, I instantly flick it into the wastebasket. I make it my goal to see the sort of letter it is without seeing just what the exact nature of the midget gripe may be; thus it never haunts me. Fifty people wrote me that, in one of my books,

(See HUMOR, Page 35.)

Just for Fun

Among the humorous books of the year the following are recommended as likely to lend a riotous touch to your Christmas list:

THE BEST OF DON MARQUIS, with an introduction by Christopher Morley (Doubleday & Co., \$3.00). "Those who can bear the nostalgia—read these tales and weep."—Mary-Carter Roberts.

THE PSYCHOPATHIC DOG, by John Philip Sousa, III (Doubleday & Co., \$3.00). "If you are an admirer of individuals and a lover of dogs, you'll find a good evening's entertainment here."—Martha Lewis.

KEEP IT CRISP, by S. J. Perelman (Random House, \$2.50).

THE LEACOCK ROUNDABOUT, by Stephen Leacock (Dodd, Mead & Co., \$3.50).

The book that
DREW PEARSON
urged you to read:
**THE SHORE
DIMLY SEEN**

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ELLIS G. ARNALL

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