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“Tired Pens” a Review of Ronald Weber, *Hired Pens* - Professional Writers in America’s Golden Age of Print

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R E V I E W S

TIRED PENS?

Ronald Weber. *Hired Pen: Professional Writers in America's Golden Age of Print*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1997. Pp. 315. \$17.95.

Is it depressing or inspiring to discover that everyone works harder than you do? After reading *Hired Pens: Professional Writers in America's Golden Age of Print*, one will be forced either to the keyboard or the couch. Virtually every page of this excruciatingly detailed study chronicles people who measured out their lives by their word count. We learn that Zane Grey churned out over eighty books and was never off the best-seller lists between 1917-1925. Frederick Faust published 25 million words of fiction under at least 20 different names, not the least of which was Max Brand. Janet Dailey wrote at a rate of fifteen to twenty-five manuscript pages a day and managed to write thirteen novels in the year of 1980. Even when we are not being barraged by manuscript tallies, Weber indefatigably thrusts other numbers at us. If it weren't enough to know that Jack London tracked fifteen acceptances on a first try between August 1898 and May 1900, Weber also informs us that during this same period London had eighty-eight pieces rejected a total of over four hundred times. The rejection slips, skewered on wire, mounted five feet high.

The relentless statistics on prices, schedules, and word count which bulk up virtually every paragraph in this book represent a truly impressive scholarly task, even though they make the cumulative effect of the book a little overwhelming. It is a great relief to read Frank Norris parodying advice given to writers by noting that

"Conservatives estimate there are 70,000,000 people in the United States. At a liberal estimate 100,000 of these have lost the use of both arms; remain then 69,900,000—who write novels. Indeed, many are called but few—oh, what a scanty, skimped handful that few represent—are chosen." Weber quotes Norris to illustrate the parodic nature of literary advice at the time, as well as to note the wry and harsh assessments of the literary landscape at the turn of the century, but Weber seems not to have noticed the jab at statistic fatigue hinted at by Norris's comment.

To be fair, most of the writers Weber discusses were themselves profoundly tired of chasing numbers. The rise of the literary agent, which gets some attention in this study, was brought about in large part because the increasing complexity of the late nineteenth-century literary marketplace became unmanageable. Yet the "cast of thousands" approach taken by Weber in *Hired Pens* means that we confront numbers which become cumulatively indigestible. To make matters worse, the chronology of this book is generally, but not precisely, followed. In a valiant attempt to both thematically and chronologically organize his research, Weber begins with the magazinists of the early nineteenth century, works through the women writers of the mid-century, the late nineteenth-century dime novel fiction factories, the early pulp fiction industry, the turn-of-the-century journalists, and the newspaper syndicates of the same period. As he moves into the twentieth century, however, his chronology gets messier. In turn, his truly useful chapters on the rise of sports writing, the nonfiction market, writers' advice for one another, and a final chapter on the gatekeeping role of dominant editors during the "glory days" of magazines are filled with statistics and quotations from writers whom we had encountered several chapters previously, a

technique which can often make the subject at hand seem very confused. In chapter ten, "Gatekeepers— Dominant Editors in the Glory Days of Magazines," Weber quotes from Jack London on the appeal of leaving *The Saturday Evening Post* and free-lancing in 1913 but then segues to Mary Roberts Rinehart in 1931 on the appeal of staying with the *Post* despite a reduced pay scale. The comparison is telling and relevant, but rather than make the study seem more coherent, the jumpiness often sends the reader back among earlier chapters to recontextualize a given observation.

Nonetheless, for a literary historian this book certainly has value; it brings together a breath-taking amount of information about almost 200 years of American literary hustling. Weber provides intriguing juxtapositions by assessing writers rarely discussed, such as William Henry Herbert and Kenneth Roberts, alongside more commonly treated writers such as Poe and Fitzgerald. He justifies his selection by explaining that "for the most part the writers I mention were not quite common writers. . . , yet they were certainly common enough by the lights of most literary studies." He traces "the rise of the tribe of literary tradesmen." Weber sees *Hired Pens* as an examination of the writing profession rather than a study of the literary profession and hence is comfortable in moving among known and unknown denizens of literary history. While this technique is provocative inasmuch as it disrupts common assumptions about hierarchy and literary canonization, that seems to be more of an accidental side effect than part of the author's intention, for Weber himself seems fairly comfortable with ranking both writers and their works. His focus is unashamedly on "hack writers" and he certainly acknowledges that writers such as Poe "blur the distinction" among professional writers and literary art-

ists. But despite his tacit avowals that his choice of writers is "more a matter of focus than exact categorization," there is a rather frustrating lack of reflection upon the implications even such "focus" might have.

There are, however, enough fascinating and troubling stories to be found in this study to make it well worth the while of any scholar looking to understand the nitty gritty of the working writing life. Weber's work on the newspaper syndicates is particularly good in providing an overview for how literary work was broadly distributed throughout the United States, and his analysis of how many seemingly discrete literary organs were deeply intertwined brings to the fore a compelling and persuasive way to map this history of American literary production. He explains, for example, how *Reader's Digest* originated in the 1920s as a forum for condensing reprints from leading magazines. In later years, however, *Reader's Digest* began to conceive of and plant articles in other magazines with which the *Reader's Digest* had a reprint agreement. As Weber sees it, "planting articles was a way of getting the material it wanted while maintaining the pretense of being a reprint publication; equally important, it gave reprint material a gloss of importance by virtue of its prior appearance in respected magazines such as *Harper's*, the *Atlantic*, the *Nation* and the *New Republic*." This strategy may have worked well for *Reader's Digest*, but it was perceived as dragging down the cultural capital of the "source" magazines. By 1944 the practice had become so common that Harold Ross of *The New Yorker* announced that *The New Yorker* would no longer consider manuscripts already bought and paid for by anyone else. Ross saw the effect of the *Digest's* policy as "beginning to generate a considerable fraction of the contents of American magazines," and "This gives us the creeps." Whatever effects this

break may have had on the fortunes of *Reader's Digest* and *The New Yorker*, it certainly had an effect on ways in which writers and the public began to perceive a hierarchy of Highbrow and Lowbrow culture. Weber's work with this sort of historical material is crucial to reconstructing American literary culture.

Wonderful stories and powerful details jump out from this study. Many scholars, for example, will be glad to learn about Jack London's experiences with The Editor Company, an organization that evaluated manuscripts and published listings of literary outlets. In his chapter "Brass Tacks: How to Succeed at the Writing Game," Weber recounts how London recommended that young authors subscribe to the *Editor* in order to master the trade, while the *Editor* logrolled right back and recommended that "if you want to follow the trail blazed by Mr. London, you should go about it by studying the profession." In *Hired Pens* we also get glimpses of how authors assessed one another. Although most literary histories comfortably discuss Stephen Crane as a fiction writer schooled in journalism, for example, Weber quotes Willa Cather as saying that Crane was no journalist. To her he lacked the ability to process details with the alacrity of a reporter. Instead, Cather remembered Crane admitting that "[t]he detail of a thing has to filter through my blood, and then it comes out like a native product, but it takes forever." Professional assessments such as this provide ample and often ignored material for re-assessing just how the much ballyhooed turn-of-the-century professionalism was really constructed.

We read that Howard R. Garis, a prolific writer who later wrote many of the Motor Boys and Tom Swift titles, composed a bitter story early in his career about a writer "who had been rejected so many

times he decides to inject a manuscript with a deadly drug that is released when inserted into a return envelope, killing the editor." We find out that Edgar Rice Burroughs was probably the first professional writer to incorporate himself for tax purposes. After his incorporation of 1923, Burroughs continued to write for twenty-seven more years as a salaried employee of his own business. Weber tells us that Irvin S. Cobb was so productive that his friend Robert Davis "claimed that Cobb was the only writer of his acquaintance who could turn out a story and hold a conversation at the same time." The young Sinclair Lewis sold plot outlines to Jack London, and we learn that London was not particularly forthcoming with extra royalties for his early collaborator.

The changing relationship between writers and their editors is chronicled in this study by the examination of frequently ignored historical phenomena. Rejections, for instance, were routinely published in the body of early nineteenth-century magazines, often in a "To Our Correspondents" column. Weber shows us how N. P. Willis publicly rejected Edgar Allen Poe's poem "Fairyland" by stating: "It is quite exciting to lean over eagerly as the flame eats in upon the letters, and make out the imperfect sentences and trace the faint strokes in the tinder as it trembles in the ascending air of the chimney. There, for instance, goes a gilt-edged sheet which we remember was covered with some sickly rhymes on Fairyland." While this quote tells us much about Willis and the context for Poe's reception during the 1830s, it also raises interesting questions about the implications such public approaches to literary gatekeeping might have had on literary culture for the period. When a *Godey's* column of 1856, for instance, declined "Wit" saying that there was "but little in the article," the performativity of such public rejection raises a

number of questions about editorial power. Might the prospect of such public humiliation have deterred literary tyros? What anxieties underlay the decision of the *Godey's* editorial staff to assert themselves in such a display? Weber doesn't really answer these sorts of questions but he does good service in chronicling the interactions of magazine editors and authors that were particular to that period.

Similarly, Weber raises difficult questions about the role of reputation and production by providing copious anecdotes about the reception of such prodigious writers. While Weber spends much of his text documenting how swiftly various writers seem to have produced copy, he also offers evidence for how being perceived as a swift and productive writer worked both for and against one in the literary marketplace. Richard Harding Davis, for example, was commonly seen as having been an overnight success on the literary scene. He was praised by Henry Mills Alden as the great American hope. "We have had no such writer in this country. The French have them but America has wanted them for years and you are the man." Yet, as Weber notes, while Richard Harding Davis was young at the time he became a big hit, he had nonetheless spent years revising and reworking rejected manuscripts. Davis's speedy ascent to the apex of literary culture, however, was a far more glamorous story, and his reputation as both overnight sensation and a speedy writer added to his manly and powerful persona. Conversely, a very young Upton Sinclair once collaborated on an adventure novel with a friend only to have it refused by an editor at Street and Smith. The editor suggested they write a more marketable work but was horrified when the two young men returned in just a week with another finished novel. Weber reports that the editor "refused to take

seriously anything written with such speed."

What might Weber's numerous stories about writers who sought to hide backlogs and writers who openly announced that they had scores of manuscripts suggest about the changing definitions of artist and literary worker during this time? In his excellent chapter on newspaper syndicates, "Writing for the Millions—Newspaper Syndicates Expand the Market," Weber cites James L. Ford's satirical study of McClure's late nineteenth-century literary syndicate, a business which acted as centralized distributor of literary material to thousands of newspapers nationwide. Ford's mockery of what he saw as a mass production of literary material took the form of a factory tour. Upon paying a visit to "the model village of Syndicate," Ford's narrator observes the foreman going from bench to bench in order to give each author an idea and then returning to pick up all of the goods for packing and shipping. Ford's joke reflects, however, a serious mystification over the changes in the literary marketplace; and, while Weber continually provides evidence of such palpable anxiety, Weber raises more questions than he answers by not probing how this anxiety may have been part of broader social concerns about industrialization and the role of the self in the 20th century.

Weber's chapter on women periodical writers of the nineteenth century, "Ca-coethes Scribendi," is rather curiously situated in the study. It gives an admirable and very readable overview of the careers of writers such as Sara Willis/Fanny Fern, Lydia H. Sigourney, Ann S. Stephens, and Gail Hamilton, but the chapter does not seem truly integrated with the rest of the book. While the particulars of these women's negotiations with the marketplace are recounted in lively detail (Sigourney, for instance, was so fond of sending unsolic-

ited copies of her works to the famous and powerful that her biographer claimed it wholly absorbed the profits of some of her books), I was left wondering about how the particulars of these women's experiences with the nineteenth-century marketplace were indicative of the experiences of professional women writers in the twentieth century. Since Weber does not specifically devote a chapter to women writers of the twentieth century, only the occasional references to Ida Tarbell's experiences or Mary Roberts Rinehart give us much basis of comparison about how the modern era changed the profession for women.

The immense amount of information found in this study concerning, say, the precise rates given writers could command for their works at different points in time provides a massive and unequalled backdrop for comparison and analysis of the business of writing. For example, Fanny Fern received the incredible sum of \$100, at the height of her career in the 1850s, for each installment of her novella from the *New York Ledger*, and, in the early 1900s, Richard Harding Davis received \$500 to cover the Yale-Princeton game. It is, therefore, perhaps unfair to complain about the glut of prices scattered throughout this book. On the other hand, while we are given exhaustive information concerning the methodology of marketing manuscripts throughout American history, Weber rarely slows down his stream of information for much analysis or speculation about any of the implication of such information. We learn, for example, that the dominance of George Horace Lorimer and *The Saturday Evening Post* in the magazine marketplace of the early twentieth century profoundly altered the way in which writers shaped their works. Weber provides copious quotations and illustrative incidents to demonstrate that writers such as Ring Lardner and Will

Irwin banked upon *The Saturday Evening Post* as a crucial outlet for their work. Yet he provides us with very little analysis, even by the writers themselves, about how such editorial control actually shaped their works. He notes that Lorimer wanted Lardner to stick to sports subjects and consequently turned down Lardner's "The Golden Honeymoon." This is useful information, and Weber quotes Dorothy Parker as saying that such a miscalculation "should send the gentleman down to posterity along with that little band whose members include the publisher who rejected *Pride and Prejudice*, the maid who lighted the hearth with the manuscript of Carlyle's *French Revolution*, and Mrs. O'Leary's cow." Yet aside from telling us that Lardner did eventually sell the story to *Cosmopolitan* for \$1,500, we don't learn if Lardner was discouraged from writing on non-sports topics or if such a rejection from a formerly reliable outlet for his work in any way influenced his future compositions.

Occasionally we get glimpses of how such editorial shaping, or the perception of such shaping, may have influenced the actual literary product. When discussing the literary culture of *Fortune* magazine Weber quotes James Gould Cozzens, who characterized the *Fortune* editorial policy as "the more similes, the better or more colorful the writings." Cozzens himself thought as follows: "a simile is a boob trap. What it amounts to is that the writer, unable to think clearly enough or write well enough to say what he means, gets around the impasse by cutely changing the subject." This observation by Cozzens provides a rare moment of analysis about writerly reactions to editorial policy. On the whole, Weber's study provides a valuable but frustratingly incomplete study of the interaction between literary creation and the literary marketplace.

Weber may be the perfect scholar for chronicling the lives and experiences of this dizzying series of workaholics. He has constructed a study which reflects a huge amount of secondary source research and a mastery of detail. This book does more than pick up where the eminent William Charvat leaves off. Rather, it provides an entirely new—albeit inconsistent—method of categorizing and analyzing a vast amount of information about what it has historically meant to be a writer. Despite the information glut and the rather disconcerting lack of analysis about the implications of some of his conclusions, *Hired Pens* is an important contribution to the history of American writing. The consolidation of information to be found in this study is unequalled in any current scholarship on the history of American authorship.

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PEACHES AND PICTURES

Mike Corbin. *Family Trees: The Peach Culture of the Piedmont*. Spartanburg, S.C.: Hub City Writers Project, 1998. Pp. 148. \$23.00 Paper.

Jerry W. Cotten. *Light and Air: The Photography of Bayard Wootten*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998. Pp. 253. \$37.50 Cloth.

For many of us returning along I-85 to South Carolina from North Carolina or parts further north, the first real sign that we have returned to the

South Carolina Piedmont is the looming, yellow-red Peachoid rising over the horizon on the right near the Gaffney exit. There is probably nothing quite like it anywhere else in the world. It is a visual emblem of a place. Building the Peachoid must have taken a lot of work, but not nearly so much work as tending to the commercial peach orchards it proudly represents. A book has now come out that documents in captivating prose and elegant photographs the way of life that created the Peachoid and the miles of fast-disappearing peach orchards that until recently lined I-85 from Greer to the North Carolina line. Mike Corbin has spent several years with camera and notebook, meeting the people and learning the life that are described in *Family Trees: The Peach Culture of the Piedmont*.

Corbin's book begins in the most logical place: among the peach trees as the picking season began in 1997. The orchard belongs to Kline Cash, and it is his story that Corbin follows throughout the book, giving a history of the Cash family's ventures in the peach business, a portrait of a single peach season, and a larger history of the peach business in the Piedmont. The 1997 season was not nearly as bad as 1996, when a freeze wiped out nearly the entire crop, but pressures from many directions are never far away for the farmer, and peach farming seems to be particularly precarious. There is, of course, always the weather. Freeze, drought, hail—any of these can wreck the best-laid plans of a farmer and leave him looking toward next year. More certain than the weather is the relentless land development along the I-85 corridor, bringing high-paying jobs but displacing thousands of acres of peach trees in the process. Competition from California in the last decade has not helped, either.

Peaches have been a part of the Up-state for quite a long time. The trees came in with the Spanish, and they were widespread