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The Perils of Publication

A SERIES of talks by English writers, described on page 14, will remind listeners of the different ways in which novelists approach their work. Some are resolved from an early age to write fiction, and if possible to do nothing else. They have no theories about this: it is simply their vocation. Others come to the task as if by accident, and go on writing because their novels are successful. Some are so stimulated or oppressed by private experience that it seems natural to seek relief in an outpouring of words; and they choose the novel because it has become the hold-all of modern letters. Men and women begin writing in early youth, in the middle years—even at the edge of old age. Only a few of them are able to reach the market-place.

For the young novelist, publication is like a promise that the future will be golden. But he is now embarked on another phase of the struggle which began when he was looking for a publisher. If he has an obvious talent he may go forward in a straight course. Graham Greene must have been about 25 when his first novel was published in 1929. *The Man Within* was well received, was noticed in all the best papers by eminent critics; and from then onwards its author's novels were looked for by a growing number of readers. But for one Graham Greene there are hundreds of writers who have talent without distinction, who develop slowly, or who pass unnoticed among craftsmen of equal ability. A novel may be well written and full of promise, but fail because theme and background have no interest for the public, though in another season they might be immediately popular. And although changes in taste or interest are of small concern to the true artist, who must say what he wants to say, his publisher cannot afford to ignore the public fancy. A first novel which aims at high standards will therefore go

out to an unpredictable market. If the writer is lucky, his book will have a modest success, and he can begin a second novel with the knowledge that publisher and public will both be interested in the outcome. A first failure, however, means that he has to start all over again.

A second novel has to be so good that the publishers will take another risk with their money; and to be "good" it has to be the sort of novel which people are expected to want to read at that particular time. A writer may need to work slowly towards full development, searching for the best way of resolving his conflict as an artist; but the market will not support experiments, and the names of those who falter after a first novel are quickly forgotten. It is better not to be published too soon. An early failure can turn a writer from his true course; and a premature success, coming more from the run of the season than the value of the book, may be followed by loss of public interest. Nowadays a writer can rarely live by writing alone. The struggle with a refractory talent can therefore be continued only while a man has enough energy to write at the end of his day's work. And to write hopefully, rather than for a waiting market, is a hard discipline. The young writer faces more than he realises when the good news comes that his first novel is to be published. He is getting his chance; but what he can make of it will depend on more than his own talent and tenacity. Writing has the immense wastage of all creative processes. It is sometimes said that good work is always published. Perhaps it is; but it can come out at the wrong time—too soon or too late for its ideas and style, or in a season when people are short of money. Only greatness can survive adversity in literature, and even the great must sometimes be fortunate.

N.Z. LISTENER, MARCH 5, 1954.