



My Poor Boy . . .

MY Poor Boy,—So you want to be an author. O, my poor boy. I wonder why you want to be an author. Your letter, in common with almost all the, I'm afraid very many, other similar letters that I have been sent, tells me everything but that. It says that in your schooldays you frequently discovered the ecomium V.G. written in the margins of your essays. It says that you would like me to tell you how you can find a publisher for the novel that you have in mind, but of which you have not yet written the opening chapter. You add that whenever you think about beginning your novel you feel disheartened because you can't be sure it will ever see the light of day and that, as often as you are visited by this depressing notion, the fount of your inspiration dries up and you are unable to make a beginning. You say in parenthesis that your sister, who sounds a detestable girl, has a habit of picking up your poems and of reading them aloud with grotesque gestures and serio-comic inflexions to the ill-concealed amusement of your family. You ask if I think this is fair. You enclose a piece you have written on the sexual behaviour of blind eels which you submitted without success for publication in a New Zealand monthly. You say that you dislike your present job. Finally, you offer to collaborate with me in the writing of a detective novel for which you have an original plot. You say that on receiving my acceptance of your offer you will be glad to arrange a meeting, outline this plot and come to an appropriate business arrangement. O, my poor boy.

NGAIO MARSH (above) offered some sage advice to young writers in one of a series of admonitory talks heard recently from 3YC. There are four speakers in the series, which is being heard currently from 1YC and will be heard later from other YC stations



Shall I try to answer your letter in reverse, beginning with its concluding offer? To this offer my answer is no. I hope the reason for my refusal will declare itself as I go on and shall merely point out that if your plot is as good as you believe it to be and you do in fact want to become a professional writer, it would be an excellent point of departure. Why not use it for an attempt at your own first detective novel? Believe me, one can't enter this particular arena on the back of one of the old staggers. Either you go in under your own steam, as every published writer has had to do in the beginning, or you decide that you don't feel like

You dislike your present job. That's a depressing state of affairs, but it doesn't necessarily mean that the alternative is authorship. Please don't entertain for a moment the utterly mistaken idea that there is no drudgery in writing. There is a great deal of drudgery

in even the most inspired, the most noble, the most distinguished writing. Read what the great ones have said about their jobs; how they never sit down to their work without a sigh of distress and never get up from it without a sigh of relief. Do you imagine that your Muse is forever flamelike—breathing the inspired word, the wonderful situation, the superb solution into your attentive ear? Not at all. Not at all. She can just as often appear as some acidulated schoolmarm, some nagging, shrill-voiced spouse or sulking girl-friend. "You got yourself into this mess," she points out. "All right. Get yourself out of it. How many words have you written today? What's the latest excuse for taking a day off? You're not, I hope, depending on ME to do it for you? I'm your Muse, not your stand-in, and I'll thank you to remember it." Believe me, my poor boy, if you wait for inspiration in our set-up, you'll wait for ever. It's true that on good days the minor miracles do tend to crop up but one generally finds in the long run that one's best work is the stuff that has been ground out between the upper and nether millstones of self-criticism and hard-labour. Of the antics of your sister I have little to say. Unless, with your indulgence, I may tell you that I wrote one of my most successful stories within the bosom of a family whose favourite pastime was to add chunks of nonsense to my manuscripts and shout aloud, with shrieks of laughter, the words they read over my shoulder as I was writing them.

WHICH brings us to your not-yet-begun novel. What I have to say about this follows upon what I have already said. If you wait for fair weather, inspiration and no external interference, you will never begin it. You may be able to write a novel, you may not. You will never know until you have worked very hard indeed and written at least some part of it. You will never really know until you have written the whole of it and submitted it for publication. You talk about detective fiction so I will assume that it is in this field, or an associated one, that you hope to work. May I draw your attention to one or two points? Nowadays, a good plot, an amusing anecdote and a string of lively episodes larded with a certain amount of factual information will not get you very far in any field of writing. These are essential ingredients, but they can be ruined in the hands of a bad cook. In other words, you must be a craftsman—I will not say an artist, since my purpose is to avoid the grandiose. You must be able to write. You must have a sense of form, of pattern, of design. You must have a respect for and a mastery over words. The writer of a thriller has no need to haul down his stylistic flag a quarter of an inch. Indeed, he has every reason not to do so. He will be read by persons of the educated sort—by university dons, by professors, doctors, clergymen, scientists, lawyers, serious novelists, poets, journal-

ists and members of the nobility. He will not be read by people whose interest in the written word is confined solely to the racing news, the football results and the scandal columns. Quite on the contrary. He is writing in a genre and an exacting, difficult genre at that.

Do you think you can do this? All I have to go by is your rejected article on the sex-habits of blind eels. I have read it and I have also read a copy of the New Zealand journal that rejected it. Now, in the first place, literary merit apart, it is by no means the kind of thing these people are looking for. So, however well you may or may not have written it you have made your initial mistake in sending it to the wrong market. But suppose you sent it to some appropriate scientific publication. Is it sufficiently well-informed and authoritative to find a home there? Knowing nothing of blind eels, I venture to suggest that it is not. So perhaps you have written an unsaleable article. Never mind. It was an exercise. Let us examine it purely as a piece of writing. To my mind it contains two sentences that have some distinction, some feeling for your instrument, some flavour of individuality. Two sentences are not enough to make it a good piece of writing, but they are enough to make one wonder if, after all, you may not have a gift of words. Let us suppose that you have.

We arrive at your first question. How can you hope to find a publisher? My poor boy, by doing in a big way precisely what you have already done in a small one. By writing your novel. By sweating it out. By setting yourself the highest standard and by re-writing whenever you have fallen away from that standard. By preparing yourself to take the mortification of rejection slips. And also by remembering one or two points about publication which I shall now try to set out.

Publishers are continually on the lookout for authors. They do not exist in a constant state of haughty rejection. They yearn for authors. Every spring and every autumn they lavish thousands of pounds upon launching a new author in whom they have faith. They are even prepared to lose terrifying sums of money on a first novel if they think the author will ultimately command a public. Contrary to some opinions, they also have a standard to maintain, and in many cases, the standard of a great tradition. They are not unapproachable.

On the other hand, most publishing houses are not prepared to risk launching more than a limited number of unknown authors in a year. So that, suppose, my poor boy, you send your first novel off to Messrs Format and Serif and they think it well up to publishing standard, they may still reject it on the grounds that they have already signed up as many new authors as they can comfortably manage for the publishing season.

If, however, you entrust your book to a reputable agent he will know which publishers are on the lookout for a new author and will offer your book to them. He will not undertake to handle it unless he thinks he has a good chance of selling it. He will, if he succeeds in doing so, take 10 per cent of everything you earn. If, in the ripeness of time, he finds an American publisher, he will watch your contracts there and protect you from piracy and raw deals. He will also try to get pre-publication serial rights and will have an eye on broadcasting, television and the cinema. He is an expert. There are reputable agents and there are disreputable ones. The good agents are listed in the

(continued on next page)

Parking Metres

OMEN WANTED

THIS is the question I ask as I read—
Should I declare myself non-volcanic,
Renounce for ever the filthy weed,
Or is there perhaps no need for panic?
I say to myself as I puff my briar,
The news in the paper is quite provoking.
Tomorrow I'll use it to light the fire,
And see if the chimney gives up smoking.
—R.G.P.