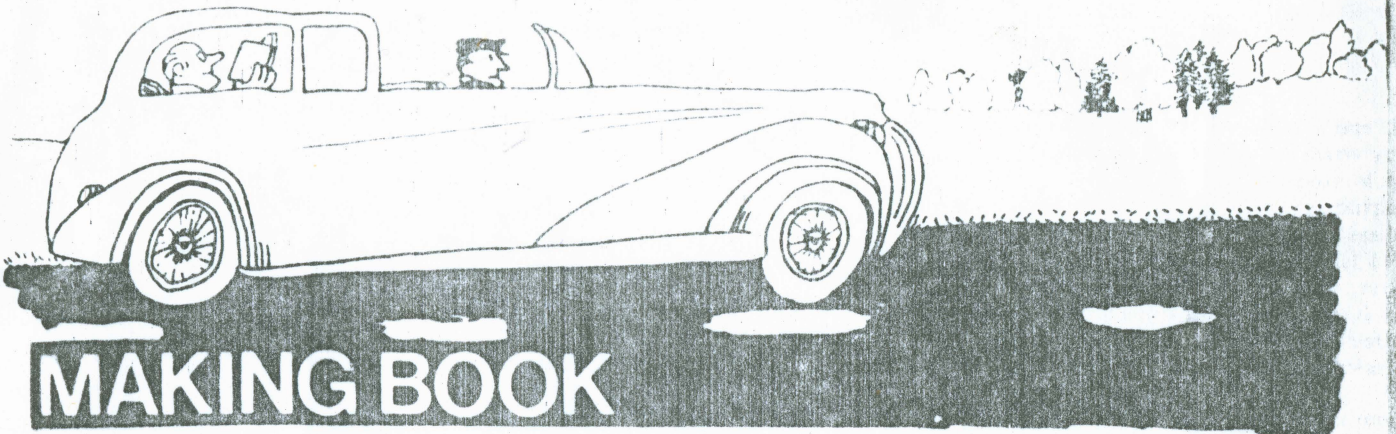


The Trickle-Down Theory of Uplift

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BLOOM



MAKING BOOK

The annual NBCC awards are the quickest. Four winners from 20 nominations will be picked next week. Plaques will change hands, but nothing vulgar like money.

By Elliot Fremont-Smith

There are three nationally recognized book award programs that each year endeavor to single out and celebrate the previous year's "most distinguished" or "outstanding" or simply "best" American books in several fields. The oldest of these programs is the Pulitzers, which is also the cloutiest. The newest is the two-year-old American Book Awards—the industry-sponsored and storm-toss'd successor to the National Book Awards—which is also the richest. The quickest is the National Book Critics Circle awards, which, bestowing plaques only, is also the cheapest (but my mother, her son being president, loves it). The first named two come in the spring; the last is in process right now.

The NBCC is an organization of 285 book critics and book review editors across the country. Each December (since 1975) it nominates—by a combination of weighted membership ballots and votes of its 22 director/judges—five books in each of four categories: Fiction, General Non-fiction, Poetry, and Criticism. Then, in January (next Monday, to be exact), the director/judges convene again to vote single award-winners in each category. (The voting procedures involve many trial votes with discussion in-between, and a final ratification vote, that has to be unanimous, on the procedure itself—which is more complicated in explanation than practice, but essentially rules out both "politicking" and mathematical "accident." I explained it once in this column, and my mother said "very interesting" and my editor said "never again"—so you'll have to take it on faith, but it's the best, if best is fail-safest

Awards voting is, of course, a somewhat idiotic exercise, and fraught with arbitrariness (only beginning with the limitations "American" and "published in 1980"). But it's also pleasing for those who do it and a cultural inevitability. Comes the revolution and all three of these award programs will be swept away—and immediately replaced by others. Meantime, the judges reassure each other that their opinions, however faulty, are doing good, that quality is being promoted. It's the trickle-down theory of uplift.

Anyway, following are the NBCC's 20 nominations, with comments. It may be unseemly of me to make book on them, but if there's a conflict of interest (the journalist versus the prey), it just has to be faced down for the greater good, say I (and somebody on the Transition Team should have said it to Reagan's Cabinet recalcitrants). Besides, NBCC's procedures being what they are, my beta carry not the slightest hint of guarantee, as we'll see next week.

FICTION

LOON LAKE, by E. L. Doctorow (Random House): This extremely calculated novel, set in the 1930s and contrasting tycoon and proletarian power, features an emotional epiphany that is always impending. The tension is terrific, the catharsis elusive. It's *Ragtime* (which won the 1975/76 NBCC Fiction award) in a more complicated context, though with the same pained twist that made that

book not at all the left-wing tract it was accused of being by neo-conservative critics: Social justice *loses*—to both individualism and "destiny." If a failure (we are very demanding of epiphany), *Loon Lake* is a most interesting one (the hows and whys), and my guess is that in this category it's the book to beat.

MORGAN'S PASSING, by Anne Tyler (Knopf): Tyler's eighth novel, and very adept—about the social ripples of an eccentric's visions. It's one of those accomplished fictions that's deserving of every runner-up acclaim, and just misses something more.

THE SECOND COMING, by Walker Percy (Farrar, Straus & Giroux): Satire defines (wars with?) Christian faith in the

continuing saga of Will Barrett, a retired southern lawyer who seeks the meaning of life, either more of it or transfiguration, and achieves a bit of both. There's a saving woman in it, and other ideas and symbols; a novel that was perhaps intended to be less bleak and more secular (more blasphemous?) than it is. It recently won a west coast prize; the next may be a Pulitzer.

SO LONG, SEE YOU TOMORROW, by William Maxwell (Knopf): An acute and affecting memoir of youth—a boy's first real encounters with betrayal and reconciliation (the yearning, the reverberations in time)—and very sweetly written. This was a ballot favorite; but last year, *Birdy*, a more memorable carillon on similar themes, wasn't even nominated. Which presents a psychological hurdle. An award possibility if the judges weary of

wrangling over *Loon Lake* and *Transit* and need a warm good place to huddle in.

THE TRANSIT OF VENUS, by Shirley Hazzard (Viking): A highly stylized novel about two Australian sisters in various emotional and erotic orbits in several capital cities in the '50s and '60s. There are those who are very taken with Hazzard's baroquely sensitive prose, and others who can't take it without Rolands. I confess I'm in the latter group; my guess is *Transit* will start strong and be finished fast.

Among the missing: Thomas Berger's funny-awful upsetment, *Neighbors* (strange about Berger—the better he writes, the less he's acclaimed); the fine collections, *Prize Stories: The O. Henry*

Awards and Pushcart Prize V, the late John Kennedy Toole's wild & crazy (and hard to find) *A Confederacy of Dunces*; Calvin Trillin's journalism spoof, *Floater* (humor has a very tough time with awards, being always thought "too light," as if art and laughter, or awards and laughter, weren't kissing cousins); and the most immediately arresting, funny, wistful, anger of the year, Barry Hannah's *Ray*.

GENERAL NONFICTION

ALICE JAMES: A Biography, by Jean Strouse (Houghton Mifflin): A work of literature in itself, some say about this life of William and Henry's neurasthenic sister (and namesake of a fine poetry publishing cooperative in Cambridge, Mass.)

But others ask, is the subject big enough for this book? Both views are right—why it deserves nomination and won't prevail.

CHINA MEN, by Maxine Hong Kingston (Knopf): A kind of sequel to *The Woman Warrior*, which won the 1976/77 Nonfiction award—about forebears, here and in China, in a mix of history, myth, and relentless whys. A marvelous meditation that doesn't need to win but could in a fluke of passion.

CHRISTIANITY, SOCIAL TOLERANCE, AND HOMOSEXUALITY: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century, by John Boswell (University of Chicago Press): A sleeper, right? Yet it was a close runner-up on over 150 ballots. Its theme is intriguing—why, after centuries of indifference, the Church quite suddenly codified hostility to homosexuality in the 13th century, with repercussions to this day—and it is very handsomely argued and written. A real contender, but look what it's up against. If Lippman fails.

WALT WHITMAN: A Life, by Justin D. Kaplan (Simon & Schuster): A work of biography, not poetry criticism, and a brilliant job by a master (and Pulitzer Prize-winner). But the other Walter seems commanding.

WALTER LIPPMANN AND THE AMERICAN CENTURY, by Ronald Steel (Atlantic-Little, Brown): The journalist—his career, love life, philosophy, influence, warts and all (and some warts are quite ugly), plus intellectual/political times—and, of this group, an offering that will be very hard to refuse.

Among the missing: Oh, in this category always so many books that the NBCC keeps wanting to make more categories—but I'll make a little list: Victor Navasky's *Naming Names* (a major moral composition, and my own first choice); Ann Cornelison's gorgeously written *Strangers and Pilgrims: The Last Italian Migration*; Stephen Jay Gould's evolutionist essays, *The Panda's Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History* (and why Creationism deserves no comeback); Barbara Goldsmith's *Little Gloria . . . Happy at Last* (I know it's about money and very tacky, but it glows); Richard Drinnon's *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian Hating and Empire Building* (this will last); Richard Sennett's elegant *Authority*; Jane O'Reilly's *The Girl I Left Behind: The Housewife's Moment of Truth and Other Feminist Ravings*; Charles Peters's *How Washington Really Works*; Joe Klein's *Woody Guthrie*; Todd Gitlin's penetrating look back on and analysis of the counterculture fade out, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, and about a dozen other titles. Again humor suffers; Russell Baker's *So This Is Depravity* had no chance of nomination—for reasons that have to be deplored. Such is life.

POETRY

A PART OF SPEECH, by Joseph Brodsky (Farrar, Straus & Giroux): Poems 1965-78 by the Russian exile (and U.S. citizen) translated by Brodsky and several hands overseen by Brodsky. The title poem is powerful, but some of the translations cloy. Were things otherwise, a shoe-in; but I think not this time, not in this guise.

BEING HERE: Poetry 1977-1980, by Robert Penn Warren (Random House): This was the top ballot choice, and the wish to honor Warren is palpable. Also correct. Also, my guess, not in the cards.

THE MORNING OF THE POEM, by James Schuyler (Farrar, Straus & Giroux): Schuyler is one of the (now middle-aged "New York Poets," and perhaps too much admired for the sharp wit of his "city landscapes." This new collection is Schuyler in maturity, with a new depth of feeling and determination to clarity. It would be a surprise award-winner in one sense, and perfectly natural in others.

SCRIPTS FOR THE PAGEANT, by James Merrill (Atheneum): The third and final volume of a narrative epic that began in *Divine Comedies* (which won a Pulitzer) and continued in *Mirabell* (which won a National Book Award). It's been called every superlative, from "demonic" to "angelic"; and if this volume fails of an NBCC award (as I think it will), it won't be for lack of ambitiousness of vision or

grace of rhetoric. The problem is one that has plagued serious poetry for many years—not ambiguity, but the purpose of ambiguity, and the assumption that purpose, at least, should be near-future accessible.

SUNRISE, by Frederick Seidel (Viking/Penguin): Thirty new and recent poems that address, joltingly and eloquently, a difficult decade of our history. Are titles harbingers? I think this year it's between *Morning* and *Sunrise*.

Among the missing: New collections by Galway Kinnell, Alfred Corn, Louise Gluck, Richard Hugo, and Sterling A. Brown, whose *Collected Poems*, on black themes, has just been published by Harper & Row.

CRITICISM

ABROAD: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars, by Paul Fussell (Oxford): Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* won the 1975/76 Criticism award, and *Abroad*, very sprightly and somewhat snippish, won't repeat. A good book and fine critical entertainment that irritates the way some good books are apt to do. The reviews have been generally admiring and specifically

peckish, and the judges will follow suit.

HENRY ADAMS, by R. P. Blackmur, edited by Veronica A. Makowsky (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich): A dense critical study by the late great critic whose best book, a seminal work in "New Criticism," was *Language as Gesture*.

LECTURES ON LITERATURE, by Vladimir Nabokov, edited by Fredson Bowers (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich): Yes—what he did at Cornell on Austen, Dickens, Flaubert, Joyce, Kafka, Proust, and Stevenson (!)—and wacky and brilliant and the most stimulating book about literary creation and the inspired reading of same that I have read this year. It was the top ballot choice, and I think will be the judges' too.

NATURE AND CULTURE: American Landscape Painting, 1825-1875, by Barbara Novak (Oxford): An important, pioneering study of 19th century American landscape realities, dreams, and the iconography of national expansion. It's gracefully reasoned, and has more analysis than punch—a fault only in unasked-for competitions like this one.

PART OF NATURE, PART OF US: Modern American Poets, by Helen

Vendler (Harvard University Press). Collected reviews and essays on 32 poets by a particularly astute and articulate critic — one of the most influential and perhaps the most most thoughtful now going in poetry. A deserving winner, except for Nabokov's *Lectures*.

Among the missing: William H. Pritchard's *Lives of the Modern Poets*; Geoffrey Hartman's *Criticism in the Wilderness*; Susan Sontag's essays (*Under the Sign of Saturn*) her *On Photography* won the 1977/78 award); Mary McCarthy's lectures in defense of traditionalism, *Ideas and the Novel*; William Hubbard's sharp critique of architecture, *Complicity and Convention*; William Safire's *On Language* (I know, but he's good); Selma G. Lane's *The Art of Maurice Sendak* (and it's literary art, too, not just pix); and Harry Levin's *Memories of the Moderns* (fine essays on Pound, Eliot, Aiken, Matthiessen, Ponge, Jarrell, the Manns, and 11 others), which *New Directions* published just in time for for Santa — and four days after the NBCC balloting for the "most distinguished" of 1980 was completed.

So you see.

