

Fiction: Yes and No

By HERBERT MITGANG

ARE university presses trying to horn in on the fiction market? The answer is, yes, a handful dream of those big, undiscovered novels that might make a mint for their subsidized, nonprofit presses; but, no, the overwhelming majority aren't planning to rush in where many trade-book houses fear to tread these days — publishing the contemporary novel.

It's not that university publishers believe that a reservoir of great talent is out there, neglected and waiting to be found. However, there are always exceptions — literary works that go against the grain of popularity, experimental novels, works by new writers who do not write category fiction.

The legendary book that touched off thinking about the Elysian fields of fiction was John Kennedy Toole's posthumous first novel, "A Confederacy of Dunces," published with great success in 1980 by Louisiana State University Press after being rejected by many commercial houses. The book has sold 70,000 copies in hard-cover, including book club sales, and over a half million copies in its Grove Press paperback edition.

Explaining the philosophy behind his press or any other university press doing novels, L. E. Phillabaum, the publisher of L.S.U. Press, said, "During the last half-dozen years it has become increasingly difficult to place full-length serious fiction with commercial publishers, unless the author is a writer of very substantial reputation. It is, of course, nearly impossible to become a writer of such stature without having had books that have sold very well indeed. Catch-22.

"It seems to us that there is a proper role for university presses in this world: to provide an additional outlet, albeit a modest one, for works of serious fiction.

"At L.S.U. Press, we became convinced a few years before 'A Confederacy of Dunces' was published that the commercial situation of picking books for market and subsidiary-rights potential would not reverse itself. We therefore decided, as a matter of policy, that publishing novels of high literary merit, regardless of sales potential, was

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an appropriate area for a university press."

Still, out of the 60 books that L.S.U. publishes a year, only three or four are fiction. In addition, it publishes the winner of the annual Pegasus Prize, an award funded by Mobil Oil Corp. to introduce contemporary novels from abroad in translation for American readers. The 1982 Pegasus Prize winner is "Masseni," a first novel by Tidiane Dem of the Ivory Coast, translated from the French by Frances Frenaye.

While the royalty rates in its regular contracts for novels are comparable to those offered by commercial houses, there is one big difference: Though L.S.U. participates in subsidiary-rights revenues, it generally does not offer any advances. For many authors, that can mean receiving nothing unless the book sells — a Catch-22 of its own.

Some university-press directors believe that entering the fiction market goes beyond their mandate, that their basic interest is scholarship. Neither the Harvard nor the Yale presses publish novels. Princeton University Press is quite clear on the subject: "Submissions are not invited in drama or fiction, original or in translation."

Herbert S. Bailey Jr., the director of the Princeton press, put it straight: "What bothers me when university presses do fiction is that it makes headlines. An occasional book of fiction may be O.K., but things give way when people say, 'Isn't it wonderful? The university press is publishing novels.'

"I have professional misgivings about a university press being seen as doing 'wonderful things' instead of 'stodgy things' that we do all along. And I don't think it's really 'stodgy' if what you're doing is a specialized work of scholarship."

The policy at the University of Chicago Press is not to publish original works of fiction. Having said that, one notes that Chicago's backlist and forthcoming schedules do include works of fiction. "A River Runs Through It," the 1976 fictionalized memoir of Norman MacLean, a longtime Chicago professor, is composed of two novellas and a short story, and is the only work of original fiction the press has published. It has done well in hard-cover and paperback and stands as an exception rather than as a precedent. All other Chicago fiction falls into the categories of either previously published translations or paperback reprints.

John Gallman of Indiana University Press is in

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that handful of university-press directors interested in publishing original fiction: "About two years ago, we decided to encourage the submission of full-length fiction, and our press faculty committee warmly supported the move. Our assumption is that serious fiction is as important to our culture and society as scholarship, and our subsidiary concern is that fiction needs help, that novelists need the same kind of support as do professors of history, literary criticism or philosophy.

"If you wanted our rationale in 25 words or less, it would be this: We care about quality fiction. One must believe that there is an appetite, even a hunger, for serious, unpredictable new fiction. It is that very risk, the newness, the excitement that make it important. Serious fiction is always something more than entertaining, though in our judgment it must be entertaining as well. We are not looking exclusively for experimental or avant-garde fiction. Nor are we particularly interested in the highest of highbrow material. We want our books to be good reads, exciting, funny, distinctive and serious about life and feelings in the most fundamental sense."

And so Indiana is bringing out two original novels this fall: "The Twofold Vibration" by Raymond Federman and "Oxherding Tale" by Charles Johnson.

The University of California Press also publishes fiction — but not contemporary original novels. Its list includes fine novels, many in translation, such as Nikos Kazantzakis' "Serpent and Lily"; Sibilla Aleramo's "A Woman," an early 20th-century Italian feminist work; Giovanni Verga's "Mastro-Don Gesualdo"; and Kenneth Burke's only novel, "Towards a Better Life."

Southern Illinois University Press publishes reprints too, in

a series called "Lost American Fiction." Its latest novel was "Salt: Or the Education of Griffith Adams" by Charles G. Norris, brother of the more famous Frank Norris. Others include Caroline Gordon's "Aleck Maury, Sportsman," Robert M. Coates's "Yesterday's Burdens" and Janet Flanner's "The Cubical City."

The University of Illinois Press sticks to its short-fiction series. Richard L. Wentworth, the director, says the press began to publish four story collections a year in 1975 and all 28 books are still in print. Among them are Mark Costello's "The Murphy Stories," John Bovey's "Desirable Aliens," H. E. Francis' "Naming Things," Robert Henson's "Transports and Disgraces" and Robert Henderson's "Into the Wind."

The University of Iowa Press has been doing one book of short fiction a year for 13 years. The program is managed by the Iowa Writers Workshop; the Iowa School of Letters Award assures publication by the university's press. In October, the press will bring out Diann Benedict's "Shiny Objects."

At the Johns Hopkins University Press, John Irwin, director of the Writing Seminars at the university and series editor of the fiction and poetry program for the press, explained: "We publish short fiction rather than novels because collections of short stories are becoming an endangered species." The Hopkins short-story and poetry authors include Guy Davenport, Jack Matthews, Stephen Dixon and John Hollander.

"At the University of Georgia Press," says its editor, Charles East, "we are not doing original full-length fiction, but the short story is alive and well. Two collections will be published every year in our new short-fiction series; the first volume is 'Evening Out' by David Walton (the winner of an award we've named in honor of a distinguished Georgian — the Flannery O'Connor Award) and the other is 'From the Bottom Up' by Leigh Allison Wilson."

The University of Pennsylvania Press may head toward new fiction soon. Maurice English, the press's director, says, "We're prepared to publish contemporary fiction of compelling merit in the future, but first we feel a need to make a comeback as a scholarly press."

The University of Nebraska Press also eschews original fiction at the moment but is "re-thinking" its position. Meantime, it makes sure that novelists of the Plains and the American West are kept in print. David H. Gilbert, the director, mentions that some authors in its Bison Books editions include Willa Cather, Wright Morris and Wallace Stegner.

"Of course," Mr. Gilbert says, "publishing original fiction is a great temptation. I like to edit fiction and drama myself. I'm concerned about the novel, and we're thinking about picking up our share of overlooked fiction."

At the University of Michigan Press, Walter E. Sears, the director, says that "submissions are not invited in fiction or autobiography. This is simply a device to help divert the flow of memoirs sent to us — especially around graduation time. However, every editorial guideline exists to be broken, and we are no exception."

The University of Texas is publishing contemporary Latin American authors in translation; Ohio State is doing all of Nathaniel Hawthorne; the State University of New York is bringing out new editions of

James Fenimore Cooper; the University of Missouri is doing novellas, which its editors say are hard to come by; Syracuse University does not publish new fiction but does folk stories relating to New York State; and other university presses feel an obligation to keep regional novelists of the past and present in print.

Richard Koffler, executive director of the Association of American University Presses, observes: "I have a hunch that the university presses will increase their interest in contemporary fiction, because commercial presses are nervous about first novels. A university press is delighted to be able to sell 3,000 copies of a book; the average run of a work of pure scholarship is 1,500 copies. So if a work of fiction can sell 3,000 copies, it doubles the average."

"Of course, university presses are subsidized and operate on a narrower gross, but because of the economy the subsidy from the universities is smaller. If a book has real literary value and isn't just written for the movies, if there is a strong English department at the university or an editor who is savvy about fiction, there is a stronger chance for publication. The university presses don't care how the author will look on television — or, in fact, if he ever goes on the tube to sell his book."

NO matter what the university presses say in their literature — and the overwhelming majority warn authors not to send them novels — they still receive them unsolicited. To discourage submissions of novels and to amuse his colleagues, Roger G. Clark, associate director of the University of Illinois Press, recently invented a special form for persistent novelists to fill out. Though it hasn't been approved by the university's press lords, here are some of the rules:

"Entering novelists must have published no previous novel and demonstrate that the manuscript has been rejected by no fewer than seven (7) publishers; manuscripts will be placed — unopened — in a safe-deposit box, with only the director holding the key; entry fees will be held in an interest-bearing account and used to subvene publication costs; those who submit novels will be required to attend dinners at which they will be required to listen to the reading of one chapter from someone else's novel." ■