

CREATIVE WRITERS - WHITE SOUTHERNERS

Judgment and Rating of JuryGRADE ALists
1942

1. Jack Conroy (Group 1) I've thought a long time about this one, not wanting to be prejudiced by personal acquaintance, but I'll be switched if I can get him out of the number-one spot. Conroy is a sort of bashful giant in the literary field. His sponsors are people of the highest distinction, and all are enthusiastic. He is obviously a "writers' writer". I predict a book in every way equal to "A Southerner Discovers the South", but based on the plan he has outlined. He has a great understanding of his material and an intensely warm feeling for it.

He might have added such people as Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Dorothy Brewster ("Modern American Fiction"), and many others to his sponsor list - all have repeatedly gone all-out for his work.

In sum: "a natural".

2. Brainard Cheney (Group 1) Another top-flight performer of whose talents there can certainly be little doubt from any quarters.

He proposes a thoroughly interesting story.

3. Marian McCamy Sims (Group 25) This lady is Grade-A. Her references are tip-top, and her plan of work most impressive. Her previous novels seem to have done fairly well, though she is not too well known among the professionals. She must be given serious attention.

Aside: Isn't it a pity that the element of need can't figure in some of these cases. This woman must by age, accomplishments, etc., be bracketed with Cheney and Conroy, but compare their incomes! She's in God's pocket. Her husband makes \$3,000 a year, and she does \$1,600. She is established, as writers go. The others are even better known by critics, but they have dealt in less marketable goods.

4. Robert Ramsey (Group 1) Ramsey is THE first novelist of this season. He is cutting a real figure in literary circles.

He was discovered and first published by Jack Conroy. No later than this week (March 9) he was crediting Conroy with his start. But that is neither here nor there. Ramsey, in my opinion, can have any literary grant or fellowship he asks for at the moment. Jonathan Daniels and many like him have gone down the line for the boy.

I figure that he's "in".

5. Ed Bell (Group 25) A thoroughly interesting project by a gifted writer. It will be hard to deny him.

For sheer readableness Bell's work is hard to match. He belongs with the A-group.

GRADE A - Continued

6. Stetson Kennedy (Group 64) The fact that Stetson Kennedy was selected for the Cracker Country volume of the American Folkways Series is enough to put him in a high bracket. That is a good series, and many well-known writers were scrapping for the commissions to do various volumes.

His other accomplishments indicate little, but his references are all people who demand respect.

I rate him a very strong contender.

7. Frank Eppse Goodwyn (Group 1) The folks down around Austin are certainly high on this applicant. He must be good. But he is plainly not ready for such competition as Cheney, Conroy, Ramsey, or Kennedy - on the basis of the achievements he can show to date. The publications he lists seem to have been brought out by "vanity publishers". Maybe this is unjust - since some great books have been published at the author's expense - but one would have to read the books themselves to remove the stigma that such publication is inclined to give. (After The Devil in Texas was read, the following comment was made: His book is better than I guessed!)

Perhaps "promising" is the word for this writer.

GRADE B

1. May Justus (Group 1) Miss Justus is a first-string writer of children's books. Her project, however, is hard to judge. A professional in the textbook field might be able to say whether or not the reader she has in mind is needed. I should think that only assurance of considerable use would justify the preparation of a reader. But if the book is to be done, it would be hard indeed to find a better person than Miss Justus for the job.

Personally, and non-professionally, the plan seems to me a slender one on which to hang this application. I suspect it could be done in three months by one who has worked this field as long as Miss Justus has.

2. Harry Harrison Kroll (Group 1) An older writer of established reputation. What good it would do him at this date to sleep on the beds that sharecroppers sleep on and to eat their food is a mystery to me: he has already done several intimate books on the personal lives of such people. Some of his books have been made into movies. I suppose most steady, comfortable middle-aged writers sometimes get the notion that they'd like to rough it and "get away from it all", but this man is a puzzle. He's doing fine where he is. He'd only get lumbago and shorten his days if he carried out his project. Moreover, he has already written three times the books he proposes.

That he is a first-class writer is obvious.

GRADE C

1. Thomas Byrd Ham (Group 1) Tom Ham is the only romanticist (not counting Owen Dodson) among your serious contenders. He is going to write a juicy, readable, optimistic historical novel. It is going to be sold to the movies for thirty times the fellowship money. This is to begrudge him nothing, but merely to point out what he's got that the others ain't!

Ham is speaking for the blue bloods. The rest of your applicants, oddly enough, are on the side of the "no 'counts". But dirty overalls don't fool Ham; he knows good stock.

Frankly, I'm going to read Ham's book, but that's because I enjoyed (God forgive me) "Gone With the Wind". Still I doubt that he's "on our side", as it were.

He's made a go of everything he's tried, including his first attempts at creative writing. No books yet, but articles in The Mercury and Readers' Digest tell the story.

2. Josiah Walker Bancroft (Group 25) Mr. Bancroft, like several others among the applicants, has very big eyes. He plans to toss off a trilogy.

In this particular competition, however, he's just another little man.

GENERAL COMMENT

Of the creative writers above, only Bancroft is really below par. Conroy and Cheney are much alike in age and accomplishments, and both are former Guggenheim fellows. Sims belongs beside them in age and accomplishments - except for the fellowship. On the other hand, she has made considerably more money than either of them. They have had the reviews; she has had the sales. Her proposed book is given in fuller detail than theirs. Her need seems to be much less pressing. Bell is just about as good as these three, and he is younger. Ramsey and Kennedy are new stars, but excellent risks, most excellent. I would never be guilty of eliminating a single one from this group (except Miss Sims), and I don't envy the folks who have to choose between them.

Interesting to note is the number of these white Southerners who are re-thinking the Reconstruction period.

CREATIVE WRITERS - NEGROES

Judgment and Rating of Jury

Grade A

1. Langston Hughes (Reappointment Group 14) Mr. Bontemps unhesitatingly rates this candidate as the number one literary contestant. Mr. Hughes, however, has changed his plan of work and Mr. Bontemps' comments on the new plan will be sent later.
2. Claude McKay (Group 30) Claude is an exasperating individual; (a) he is sour and cantankerous; (b) he never seems to do the writing of which he is capable.

I doubt that a fellowship will help him, but one must admit (a) that he is a gifted writer, at his best, (b) that his references are of the best, (c) that he projects a fascinating book, and (d) that his talents are perfectly suited to this work.

But Claude has recently done a poor job on his book "Harlem", failed in a re-write job on "They Knew Lincoln", and I doubt that he's putting much heart in his work. I hope I'm wrong. Maybe a fellowship will revive him. God knows he needs the money.

Grade B

1. Owen Dodson (Group 30) This boy has won the attention of a number of people, some of them top-notch. He has shown real promise. Indeed, of all the hopeful playwrights among young Negroes, he seems to be the most likely to succeed.

On the other hand! His project is silly: epic drama in newspaper style. There is no reason to think he could bring it off.

In general, he is on the "arty" side. Now, here is the fellow who ought to live in a sharecropper's hut and hobnob with people.

He'd be a good risk if he promised to get down off his high horse and try to simply write for the stage. Why he must try to out-do Homer I can't see.

Yet I want to be among those who recognize his promise.

Grade C

1. Maggie Coleman Rodriguez (Group 30) Horace Cayton knows Mrs. Rodriguez better than any of her other references, and I agree with his estimate of her application. No soap.

GENERAL COMMENT

Hughes, McKay, and Dodson, in my opinion, rate consideration - none of the other three (two not sent to Committee). Hughes is miles ahead of the other two, everything considered, but Dodson is a prospect, and McKay used to be sort of a genius.