

THE PALIMPSEST

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An Introductory Note

The traveler across Iowa by rail, road, or air sees millions of fertile acres dotted by hundreds of villages and towns and by a score of substantial cities. Though Iowa, happily, is free from the top-heavy urban influence of a great metropolis that obtains in most of the neighboring states, she has shared with the whole nation many of the effects of the profound change from farm to factory, from rural village to city, that has transformed American life in the past century. Like Howells, Dreiser, Lewis, and Marquand, Iowa writers have found in town and city life themes for fiction that well deserve thoughtful attention.

At the outset let us define our terms and agree on proper standards, for standards are necessary in any critical appraisal of fiction with a regional background. Good regional writing is, simply, good writing that uses distinctively regional materials. The presence of recognizable—even of firmly realized—local setting does not of itself make good fiction; but we are justified in demanding of

the writer who uses an ascertainable regional setting that he shall present it truthfully. The writer's work, granted he has an interest in the background he is using, a capacity for discriminating observation, and sincerity, will have significance as social record and commentary whether or not it has other merit. If within an environment clearly seen and honestly presented it reveals characters and experiences of universal human meaning, it rises into the realm of true literary value.

Ruth Suckow expressed the nub of the matter in her fine essay on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Oldtown Folks*, "An Almost Lost American Classic": "To sum up: the characters in *Oldtown Folks*, while sharply set in time and place — as all human life is set, whatever the particular setting may be — are treated as eternal souls."

For over half a century writers of fiction have been using Iowa towns and cities as backgrounds for novels and short stories. In surveying their work we can appropriately consider it in two aspects. Viewing it first as social history, we shall inquire as to its accuracy and its adequacy, its motives and its assumptions. Beyond these matters, we must try to form judgments as to the degree of genuine literary achievement attained by each of these many writers.

JOHN T. FREDERICK