

## The Later Realism

The 1930's brought drought to Iowa, and the burden of a general depression to intensify the economic troubles with which farmers had contended all through the decade of the twenties. In the country as a whole, realistic fiction became increasingly critical in this period, with the work of John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and others, and sometimes took on a Marxist tinge. The body of writing about Iowa, and especially about Iowa farm life, in the 1930's and early 1940's was very large, far exceeding the production of any preceding period. Whatever leadership *The Midland* had provided (publication was suspended in 1933) was extended and amplified in this period by *The Husk* at Cornell College, under the editorship of Clyde Tull; by *American Prefaces*, in its short but brilliant career at the State University of Iowa, under the editorship of Paul Engle and others; and to some degree by other magazines. Their files are rich with significant stories and sketches of Iowa farm life.

The fiction dealing with Iowa farm life which was produced in the 1930's was as remarkable for its variety as for its abundance. This fact is strikingly illustrated by the first novel of the decade

to fall within our field, Phil Stong's *State Fair* (1932). Definitely romantic elements are mingled with the realism of this book — so shrewdly mingled that it became widely popular and has been recently reissued in a twenty-five cent edition. These romantic elements add nothing to the novel's literary stature; to my old-fashioned mind they are distinctly bad, not only artistically but morally. But after subtraction is made for them, there remains in *State Fair* a substantial body of fresh and sound and very much worth-while writing. Stong achieves the difficult task of presenting interestingly and without mawkishness a genuinely happy married couple — a phenomenon considerably more rare in fiction, I venture to say, than in fact — on the Iowa farm or elsewhere. The elder Frakes are moderately prosperous, modestly successful. They have encountered reverses, but they have not been floored by them.

There is humor in *State Fair*, too — a robust humor such as American fiction of recent years far too generally lacks. No other hog in literature can be compared with Abel Frake's "Blue Boy" — and that in itself, seriously, is no mean achievement. The novel holds, too, the highly individual and attractive character whom we know only as the "Storekeeper," of whom we see far too little. American fiction could do with more such characters, too, genuine originals sketched with gusto and sympathy. Finally, there is in *State Fair* a

deep and real feeling for the Iowa countryside, the land itself: a quality most clearly felt in the chapter which narrates the long night drive in a truck — taking Blue Boy to the Fair — which is the best part of the book.

Clear at the other edge of fictional motive and method is Howard Erickson's *Son of Earth* (1933), a grim novel of unlovely experience and unlovable people, but one marked by genuine insight and power. The story goes back to 1895, when Tolf Luvversen, who is just nineteen though he has been "working out" for years, decides to keep his earnings for himself instead of giving his money to his shiftless stepfather. The opening chapters give a strong portrayal of his family's bitter poverty, in contrast to the comfort and thrift of the Sondergaard farm where Tolf works. He is driven by a vague but earnest desire to "make something of himself," an ambition which centers itself on getting a job with an "English" (English-speaking) family, and making himself attractive to an "English" girl. He does get the job, and becomes infatuated with his employer's sister-in-law, a loose and shallow woman who laughs at him, plays with him, and finally repudiates him shamefully. Tolf goes to pieces, becomes a drunken bum, but in time achieves a partial regeneration. The book ends with his forlorn satisfaction in having, at least, the comfort of a riding plow, and some pleasure in his children.

The ugly detail in this novel is functional, not lugged in artificially. Tolf's life is genuine tragedy, and its elements are all pretty well accounted for. On the whole, *Son of Earth* is a sound rendering of significant aspects of Iowa farm life.

Farm material in Winifred Van Etten's *I Am the Fox* (1936) is largely limited to a single chapter — entitled, somewhat revealingly, "Saga of the Bible Belt." The heroine and her brother travel across southwestern Iowa in the depression years, living in a trailer, while the brother does repairing and construction work for the insurance company which has taken over most of the farms. "You don't really want to know these people," the brother accuses. "You'd rather not be bothered." The view we get, through the heroine's eyes, of the succession of slovenly homes and shiftless families is indeed fairly external and unsympathetic. But we do encounter the Fergusons, whose kitchen is "polished and cheerful" and whose children are in college, though they are tenants now on what had been their own farm; and we see the McKees, hauling the drought-ruined total crop of corn from twenty-five acres in one wagon box two-thirds full — and singing the tall corn song! Hence the total picture, though heavy with sordid details, does not fail of human truth.

Wallace Stegner's early novel, *Remembering Laughter* (1937), is inferior in every way to his highly distinguished and substantial later books,

*The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *The Preacher and the Slave*, neither of which falls within our field. *Remembering Laughter* presents a situation which is highly dramatic and highly exceptional: so far from the range of familiar human experience that all Mr. Stegner's psychological insight and all his artistry — by no means inconsiderable even in this early work — scarcely avail to give it validity and importance in the reader's emotion.

Certain details, of minor importance in themselves as they appear in this story, raise a question of some interest in relation to the whole problem of regionalism — and indeed of realism. On one occasion, the characters walk through a field of corn which is "forming ears plumed with green silk." Yet we are told explicitly that this corn is only "waist high" — rather puny corn, for Iowa. Ornithologists will be interested, also — and farm folks who know pigeons — to learn that Mr. Stegner's pigeons lay speckled eggs.

These details are trivial, admittedly. To the reader of purely urban experience they do not matter. But for the reader who knows the life with which the book deals, I believe that these little slips go far toward canceling the effect of the whole work, making it seem false and artificial. The realist, especially the regional realist, cannot afford to take the chance of using material he does not know thoroughly.

Its firm grounding in fully assimilated experi-

ence is one of the impressive qualities of the work of Paul Corey. His *Three Miles Square* (1939) traverses the circle of the farm year and the full range of farm occupation and experience, with unflinching accuracy and authority. Nor are events and processes overwritten, overdramatized, or paraded in any way. They are presented as matters of course, as parts of the texture of farm living, properly subordinated to the more significant human experience to which they are peripheral and incidental.

For *Three Miles Square* is a book about people. To a remarkable, an amazing degree it is a book of many people. Warmly and firmly realized in flesh and blood as individual human beings, they live in its pages, not two or three or five of them but dozens, scores. In this novel Paul Corey undertook to portray a whole community, a whole neighborhood, "three miles square," with one family as the focus, the center of interest, but with every family, every person of the neighborhood, included in his own right as an individual and in the web of relationships — and with a score of transients thrown in. He achieved and controlled this multiple presentation to a degree rarely paralleled in the world's fiction.

Proportion and emphasis are admirably adjusted in this novel. The Widow Mantz and her children, the three sons and the daughter, dominate the reader's attention. It is their book. But

the Jensens, the Dugans, the Wheelers, the Crossbys, the Langs, the Jepsens, and many more are in the book too. Wisely, Mr. Corey did not attempt to devise a plot intricate enough to include all his characters in its web. The treatment of many of them is incidental, even tangential. But they and the occasions of their appearance in the narrative are integrated as parts of the whole life of the community; and that life is lifted into dramatic significance and intensity by the strong lines of conflict which run throughout the book — between the Mantzs and certain of their neighbors, and within the Mantz family itself.

One of the fine achievements of this novel is the indirect characterization of the Iowa farmer, Chris Mantz, with whose death the story opens. It is accomplished through revelation, bit by bit, of what his neighbors had thought of him, and by the force of his will, his plans, as felt in the family as the children grow up, in the years preceding the first World War. The social history of the times is adequately recorded — the mortgages and forced sales, the gradual rise in prices to the levels we now know as the basis of "parity"; the coming of the automobile, of alfalfa, of drainage projects. But always these are presented in the dramatic terms in which they presented themselves as part of the experience of Iowa farm people, without digression or undue emphasis. Difficult and essential elements in the story — the impulse of the

widow to remarry, for example, and the sexual conflict experienced by the oldest son — are handled with candor but with fine sureness and restraint. There are a few details which I suspect Mr. Corey might omit if he were writing the novel today: it might seem less important to be the uncompromising realist now than it did in the 1930's. But the flaw — many critics would not consider it a flaw — is trivial in relation to the whole effect of the work.

In *The Road Returns* (1940) and *County Seat* (1941) Paul Corey carried on the story of the Mantz family, and to a less degree that of the farming community presented in the earlier book, with the same sure grasp and wide range in characterization and the same authenticity in every aspect of the material. The trilogy as a whole constitutes the most substantial literary interpretation thus far made of Iowa farm life.

*Always the Land* (1941) is marked by the sure sense for the right detail, the certain knowledge of the right word, which readers of Paul Engle's poems would expect:

The light of the bare sun was leaving the sky faster than its heat. The gray of evening lay on the hill, but the sultry warmth of day hung in the tight air. Holstein cattle were moving out to pasture after the final milking, step by slow step, pausing to crop a mouthful of grass, or merely to stare with their empty eyes at nothing at all. Over their flanks the big white and black spots met in jagged lines like seacoasts on a map.



*Always the Land* is a story of an Iowa farm; but on this farm cows and fields and crops merely provide financial support for the breeding and training and showing of saddle horses. Jay Meyer, the partially paralyzed but still powerful man who owns the farm, is an "old horse guy"; and his grandson, Joe, carries on the tradition. From the first line of the first chapter, it is clear that Paul Engle knows and loves horses. Jay Meyer tells of a horse with a "chest deeper'n a well, low-traveling, easy-trotting, and a heart like God never puts in a man, the kind he keeps for race horses." It is equally clear that Paul Engle understands horsemen and their work. He tells us how Joe Meyer, training a horse, "merged with it, and they became a single intent animal, moving in precision around a circle of earth." Perhaps the finest characterization in the book is that of Henry Hope, another "old horse guy," who comes to work at the Meyer farm. I know of no other work of fiction that even approaches this novel of Paul Engle's in fullness and fidelity of portrayal of the men whose lives have been dominated by the love of fine horses. These men are members of a dedicated group, a special kind, somewhat like Conrad's men of the sea. They receive in this book the tribute of understanding which they deserve.

The hardness of change from old ways to new tends to be marked and dramatic on a farm. Joe

Meyer and his grandfather are in harmony on most matters, but they cannot agree about the propriety of accepting a government loan on sealed corn. The resulting conflict — matched in some measure on many an Iowa farm in the early years of governmental aid — gives *Always the Land* an immediate relation to social history. This conflict is not so firmly integrated with other elements of the novel as I could wish, especially in the later chapters. But the total effect of Paul Engle's novel is such as to make me wish that with his poetry he had also written more novels.

The ambition of farm parents for their children to have a life different from their own is a familiar theme in farm fiction — perhaps because it was a frequent phenomenon in farm homes in the years when most of our writers were growing up. In Don Jackson's *Archer Pilgrim* (1942), this ambition is contrary to the desires of the child, a boy who has decided at the age of seven that he wants to be a farmer, and has never changed his mind. The resulting conflict and the boy's defeat — at the hands of the girl he thinks he loves, as well as those of his parents — send him to a college experience largely sterile, then to wasted years of work in a garage, until at last he finds his way back to the farm.

The central figure of this story, whose name gives the book its title, is very finely drawn. He becomes real for the reader, and highly interesting.

His experience is authentic. When he goes out to shock oats, we are immediately sure that the writer not only knows how to shock oats, but how it feels to shock oats — which are slightly different matters. The one could be learned from watching; the other could not. The whole texture of farm experience is rendered with similar authority; and all the characters around Archer Pilgrim are presented with sympathy and consistency even in their opposition to him — his father most notably. But it is the reader's acceptance and liking of Arch himself, won in the first scene of his seven-year-old resolution, that gives the book strength and drive and weights its ending with meaning: "What a fool thing you have done, Pilgrim, he told himself. . . . Why have you done this. The answer was at his feet. As he tramped along the fence row with quick, alert steps, his shoes pressed into soft, brown soil."

Eleanor Saltzman's brief novel, *Stuart's Hill* (1945), is a fine example of a writer's recognition and realization of a significant theme in Iowa rural life which has been generally overlooked. This book tells the story of a country church, and more especially of its slow disuse, its decay, and its final destruction. This story is told in terms of the life of the neighborhood as seen and shared by William Stuart, who gives the land on which the church is built, and, later, by his son, James. Miss Saltzman had shown in her earlier novel,

*Ever Tomorrow* (1936), a peculiarly warm and easy rendering of the texture of farm and community life, with sparse but telling detail and a sure sense of what will reveal essential character. In the few and quiet pages of *Stuart's Hill* these qualities are intensified. It is the little church as symbol which one most remembers from this book, however: as symbol first of the close-knit and unitary character of the small farming community in the days of the building and constant use of the church; as symbol later of the weakening and dissolution of this sense of neighborhood, with the changes of the years.

Feike Feikema, in *This is the Year* (1947), found in his Frisian immigrants to Iowa a group not previously portrayed in fiction, with distinct cultural backgrounds. He pictures for the reader also a fresh geographical setting of exceptional interest, in the extremest northwest corner of the state. Ideas of contour farming and other methods of soil conservation are given expression in this novel. A few incidents attain marked dramatic power — most notably the “penny sale,” at which farmers, banded together to resist foreclosures, compel clerk and auctioneer to sell stock and machinery for a few pennies. The buyers then turn their purchases back to the former owners, whose debts have been cleared by the process. This episode in Mr. Feikema's novel achieves strong realization of group emotion.

The good things in Mr. Feikema's novel are all but lost, however, in a jungle of detail. Though so much of this detail is of a clinical nature that the book might prove useful as collateral reading in a course in veterinary surgery, it is less its quality than its quantity that weakens the book. Presumably striking or shocking details when multiplied indefinitely become simply tiresome. The attempt to startle the reader, endlessly repeated, defeats itself. A similar burden is laid on Mr. Feikema's story by its style, which maintains a shrill, oratorical level and makes extensive use of coined words and exclamatory sentences. Selection and restraint are worthy disciplines for the writer of fiction. Whether in disregarding them Mr. Feikema follows Thomas Wolfe or later models I do not know; but he has robbed his characters of much of their interest and convincingness, and *This is the Year* of its tragic significance.

Our record of interpretations and portrayals of the Iowa farm would be incomplete, it seems to me, without mention of certain books fictional in form but biographical or autobiographical in substance. Iowa literature is rich in books of this kind. Among them, *Grandmother Brown's Hundred Years* (1929), by Harriet C. Brown, excels our historical novels in its re-creation of pioneer days and the pageant of Iowa's history. MacKinlay Kantor's *But Look, the Morn* (1946) has the drive

and gusto, the dramatic suspense, and the memorable characterization of an excellent novel. Though it has little direct treatment of farm matters, it holds so much of the Iowa small town that it is relevant to the country too. Leo R. Ward's  *Holding Up the Hills*  (1941) presents men and women and children of an Irish and Catholic farming community in a series of sketches, subtly and strongly individual in flavor and sense. The same writer's  *Concerning Mary Ann*  (1950) focuses the same community in the long life of one of its people, set down quietly as a human chronicle, often amusing and always alive. It is a good book with which to round out our record to the mid-century.