

THE WRITER'S CHAPBOOK



A COMPENDIUM OF FACT,
OPINION, WIT, AND ADVICE

from the

TWENTIETH CENTURY'S
PREEMINENT WRITERS

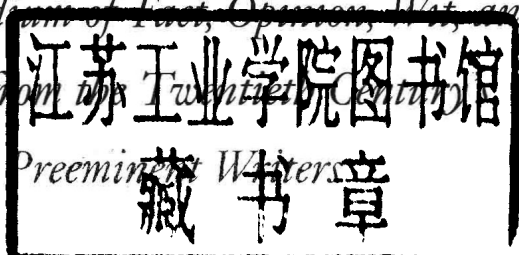


EDITED FROM *THE PARIS REVIEW* INTERVIEWS AND
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY GEORGE PLIMPTON



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*A Compendium of Fact, Opinion, Wit, and
Advice from the Twentieth Century
Preeminent Writers*



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GEORGE PLIMPTON

George Plimpton, the editor, essayist, sportswriter, humorist, and adventurer whose highly original brand of participatory journalism has earned him a singular place in American letters, was born in New York City on March 18, 1927. His father, Francis T. P. Plimpton, was a Wall Street lawyer who served as United States deputy representative to the United Nations. Plimpton attended St. Bernard's School in New York City and Phillips Exeter Academy, where he wrote for the student paper, *The Exonian*. He entered Harvard University in 1944, leaving soon thereafter for military service in the United States Army. He returned to Harvard in 1948 and became editor of *The Lampoon* before his graduation in 1950. Later he earned two additional degrees, a B.A. and an M.A., from King's College, Cambridge.

In 1953 Plimpton co-founded *The Paris Review*, a distinguished literary quarterly, with a group of young Americans, including Peter Matthiessen, Harold L. Humes, Thomas Guinzburg, and Donald Hall. Beginning in 1958, he has brought out numerous volumes of the *Writers at Work* series, acclaimed compilations of discussions with contemporary authors regularly featured in the magazine. According to *The New York Times*, Plimpton "developed a new kind of extended and articulate interview that combined the Boswellian aim with an exploration of the ideas of major contemporary writers on the art of fiction and poetry." Among the books Plimpton has compiled from the pages of *The Paris Review* include *Poets at*

Work (1989), *Women Writers at Work* (1989; revised edition 1998), *The Paris Review Anthology* (1990), *The Writer's Chapbook* (1990; revised edition 1999), a compendium of fact, opinion, wit, and advice from the twentieth century's preeminent writers, and *Beat Writers at Work* (1998). In addition he co-edited the first three volumes of *The American Literary Anthology* (1968–1970).

Plimpton's remarkable career as a sportswriter, distinguished by his competing in professional athletics he is describing, dates from 1961, the year he published *Out of My League*. It is a chronicle of every baseball fan's fantasy that recounts Plimpton's experience pitching to an all-star lineup of National League and American League players in a post-season exhibition game in Yankee Stadium. "Beautifully observed and incredibly conceived [George Plimpton's writing] is the dark side of the moon of Walter Mitty," said Ernest Hemingway. Plimpton first hit national best-seller lists with *Paper Lion* (1966), an engaging account of his seasoning as a third-string rookie quarterback at the summer training camp of the Detroit Lions. "*Paper Lion* is the best book written about pro football—maybe about any sport—because Plimpton captures with absolute fidelity how the average fan might feel given the opportunity to try out for a professional football team," explained *The Saturday Review*.

Several of Plimpton's other books similarly explore his exploits in various sports. Following the success of *Paper Lion*, he related his foray into the world of professional golf in *The Bogy Man* (1968). In his review of the book, critic Eliot Fremont-Smith, in effect, summarized all of Plimpton's chronicles when he wrote, "[Plimpton] conveys a tremendous sense of empathy which comes from his putting himself through the paces of a pro, so that he feels and gets to know intimately the emotions of the sport—despair, self-consciousness, suspense, boredom, yearning, panic and, every once in a while, exultation." And Gerald Clarke noted: "It is Plimpton's triumph that he has restored the word *amateur*—which today is so often a synonym for bungler—to its original and true connotation: someone who takes up an art or craft not for gain but for love."

Plimpton returned to the subject of football in *Mad Ducks and Bears* (1973) and *One More July* (1977), and in *One for the Record* (1974) he told the inside story of Hank Aaron's chase for the home-run record. *Shadow Box* (1977), arguably Plimpton's most humorous book, is an amalgam of boxing lore that includes a vintage rendition of his own exhibition bout with

heavyweight champ Archie Moore. *Open Net* (1985) is the story of his experience on the ice as a goalie for the Boston Bruins. "Plimpton, the professional amateur, the dashing public hero, is first and best a writer," observed *The New Yorker*. "Plimpton's writing is so fascinating, not only for sports fans but for students of human behavior as well," said *People* magazine. "[He is] sincerely inquisitive, a receptive listener, and a fluid funny writer."

Plimpton's other books, which cover a wide range of intriguing subjects, make it clear why *The New York Times* praised his "endless curiosity, unshakable enthusiasm and nerve, and deep respect for the world he enters." He collaborated with interviewer Jean Stein on *American Journey* (1970), a narrative of the life and times of Robert F. Kennedy, and *Edie* (1982), an oral biography of Edie Sedgwick, the quintessential Andy Warhol superstar whose brief life mirrored the explosive 1960s. Plimpton also edited *Pierre's Book* (1971), a look at *jeu de paume*, the game of court tennis that was played by French royalty. In addition he wrote the text for *Sports!* (1978), a lavish album of photographs by Neil Leifer, and *Sports Bestiary* (1982), an amusing lexicon of sports terminology illustrated by Arnold Roth. In 1984 he brought out *D. V.*, the recollections of fashion editor Diana Vreeland, and *Fireworks*, a spectacular history and celebration of pyrotechnic displays from around the world.

Plimpton's belated first novel, *The Curious Case of Sidd Finch*, came out in 1987. At once a hilarious and suspenseful tale, it chronicles the adventures of an oddball mystic whose phenomenal pitching skills threaten to destroy the game of baseball. "Plimpton has written a funny, knowing, and poignant first novel," said *The New York Times Book Review*. "[The baseball] culture is splendidly rendered with an experienced insider's knowledge, and the whole saga of Finch's brief, astonishing passage through big-league baseball is at once a parody of every player's as-told-to biography, a satire on professional sports, and an extended (and intriguing) meditation on our national pastime."

Plimpton's recent collections include *The Best of Plimpton* (1990) and *The Norton Book of Sports* (1992), an anthology of sports literature. He worked with Jean Kennedy Smith on *Chronicles of Courage* (1993), a series of candid and revealing interviews with disabled artists, and in *The X Factor* (1995) he attempted to identify the qualities that enable a champion to consistently overcome his competitors. Plimpton's latest book, *Truman Capote*, a compelling oral biography in which the author's many friends

and enemies recall his turbulent career, was published in 1998. George Plimpton lives in New York City, where he continues to edit *The Paris Review*. He is a frequent contributor to *Harper's* and *Sports Illustrated*, and his humorous articles on birdwatching have appeared in *Audubon* and other magazines.

In gratitude to
E. M. Forster
and to both interviewers
and interviewed

I don't know exactly how it's done. I let it alone a good deal.

—SAUL BELLOW

A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.

—THOMAS MANN

There are three rules for writing the novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are.

—SOMERSET MAUGHAM

READER: Miss Moore, your poetry is very difficult to read.

MARIANNE MOORE: It is very difficult to write.

NOTE

Following, in alphabetical order, are the names of the authors interviewed with the names of the interviewers in parentheses. In many cases, the authors were interviewed by more than one person.

Chinua Achebe (Jerome Brooks), **Conrad Aiken** (Robert Hunter Wilbur), **Edward Albee** (William Flannagan), **Nelson Algren** (Alston Anderson, Terry Southern), **Woody Allen** (Michiko Kakutani), **Yehuda Amichai** (Lawrence Joseph), **Kingsley Amis** (Michael Barber), **A. R. Ammons** (David Lehman), **Maya Angelou** (George Plimpton), **John Ashbery** (Peter Stitt), **Margaret Atwood** (Mary Morris), **Louis Auchincloss** (George Plimpton), **W. H. Auden** (Michael Newman).

James Baldwin (Jordan Elgrably), **J. G. Ballard** (Thomas Frick), **Donald Barthelme** (J. D. O'Hara), **Simone de Beauvoir** (B. Frechtman, translator; Madelein Gobeil), **Saul Bellow** (Gordon Lloyd Harper), **John Berryman** (Peter Stitt), **Elizabeth Bishop** (Elizabeth Spires), **Harold Bloom** (Antonio Weiss), **Heinrich Böll** (A. Leslie Wilson), **Jorge Luis Borges** (Ronald Christ), **Paul Bowles** (Jeffrey Bailey), **Joseph Brodsky** (Sven Birkerts), **William F. Buckley, Jr.** (Sam Vaughan), **Anthony Burgess** (John Cullinan), **William Burroughs** (Conrad Knickerbocker).

Erskine Caldwell (Elizabeth Pell Broadwell, Ronald Wesley Hoag), **Hortense Calisher** (Allan Gurganus, Pamela McCordick, Mona Simpson), **Italo Calvino** (Damien Pettigrew, William Weaver), **Truman Capote** (Pati Hill), **Raymond Carver** (Mona Simpson), **Joyce Cary** (John Burrows, Alex Hamilton), **Camilo José Cela** (Valerie Miles), **Louis-Ferdinand Céline** (J. Darribehaude; J. Guenot; James Sherwood, translator), **Blaise Cendrars** (William Brandon, translator; Michael Manoll), **John Cheever** (Annette Grant), **Amy Clampitt** (Robert E. Hosmer, Jr.), **Jean Cocteau** (William Fifield), **Julio Cortázar** (Jason Weiss), **Malcolm Cowley** (John McCall, George Plimpton), **Robert Creeley** (Lewis MacAdam, Jr., Linda Wagner).

Robertson Davies (Elisabeth Sifton), **Don DeLillo** (Adam Begley),

James Dickey (Franklin Ashley), **Joan Didion** (Linda Kuehl), **Isak Dinesen** (Eugene Walter), **E. L. Doctorow** (George Plimpton), **J. P. Donleavy** (Molly McKaughan), **John Dos Passos** (David Sanders), **Margaret Drabble** (Barbara Milton), **John Gregory Dunne** (George Plimpton), **Lawrence Durrell** (Gene Andrews, Julian Mitchell).

Leon Edel (Jeanne McCulloch), **T. S. Eliot** (Donald Hall), **Stanley Elkin** (Thomas LeClair), **Ralph Ellison** (Alfred Chester, Vilma Howard).

William Faulkner (Jean Stein), **Robert Fitzgerald** (Edwin Frank, Andrew McCord), **Richard Ford** (Bonnie Lyons), **E. M. Forster** (P. N. Furbank, F. J. H. Haskell), **John Fowles** (James Baker), **Robert Frost** (Richard Poirier), **Carlos Fuentes** (Alfred MacAdam, Charles Ruas), **Athol Fugard** (Lloyd Richards).

William Gaddis (Zoltan Abadi-Nagy), **John Gardner** (Paul Ferguson, John R. Maier, Sara Matthiessen, Frank McConnell), **William Gass** (Thomas LeClair), **Allen Ginsberg** (Gerald Clarke), **Nadine Gordimer** (Jannika Hurwitt), **Robert Gottlieb** (Larissa MacFarquhar), **William Goyen** (Robert Phillips), **Robert Graves** (Peter Buckman, William Fifield), **Francine du Plessix Gray** (Regina Weinreich), **Henry Green** (Terry Southern), **Graham Greene** (Simon Raven), **John Guare** (Anne Cattaneo), **Thom Gunn** (Clive Wilmer).

Donald Hall (Peter Stitt), **Elizabeth Hardwick** (Darryl Pinckney), **Jim Harrison** (Jim Fergus), **Seamus Heaney** (Henri Cole), **Joseph Heller** (George Plimpton), **Lillian Hellman** (Anne Hollander, John Phillips), **Mark Helprin** (James Linville), **Ernest Hemingway** (George Plimpton), **John Hersey** (Jonathan Dee), **John Hollander** (J. D. Clatchy), **Ted Hughes** (Drue Heinz), **Aldous Huxley** (Ray Frazer, George Wickes).

David Ignatow (Gerard Malanga), **Gillermo Cabrera Infante** (Alfred MacAdam), **Eugène Ionesco** (Shusha Guppy), **John Irving** (Ron Hansen), **Christopher Isherwood** (W. I. Scobie).

P. D. James (Shusha Guppy), **James Jones** (Nelson W. Aldrich, Jr.).

Garrison Keillor (George Plimpton), **William Kennedy** (George Plimpton), **Jack Kerouac** (Ted Berrigan), **Ken Kesey** (Robert Faggen), **Arthur Koestler** (Duncan Fallowell), **Jerzy Kosinski** (Rocco Landesman, George Plimpton), **Milan Kundera** (Christian Salmon), **Stanley Kunitz** (Chris Busa).

Philip Larkin (Robert Phillips), **James Laughlin** (Richard Ziegfield), **John le Carré** (George Plimpton), **Rosamund Lehmann** (Shusha Guppy), **Doris Lessing** (Thomas Frick), **Peter Levi** (Jannika Hurwitt),

Primo Levi (Gabriel Motola), **Philip Levine** (Mona Simpson), **Mario Vargas Llosa** (Ricardo A. Settee), **Christopher Logue** (Shusha Guppy), **Robert Lowell** (Frederick Seidel).

Archibald MacLeish (Benjamin DeMott), **Naguib Mahfouz** (Charlotte El Shabrawy), **Norman Mailer** (Steven Marcus), **Bernard Malamud** (Daniel Stern), **David Mamet** (John Lahr), **Gabriel García Márquez** (Peter H. Stone), **François Mauriac** (John leMarchand, translator; John Train), **William Maxwell** (George Plimpton, John Seabrook), **Mary McCarthy** (Elisabeth Niebuhr), **Thomas McGuane** (Sinda Gregory, Larry McCaffery), **William Meredith** (Edward Hirsch), **James Merrill** (J. D. Clatchy), **W. S. Merwin** (Edward Hirsch), **Arthur Miller** (Olga Carlisle, Rose Styron), **Henry Miller** (George Wickes), **Czeslaw Milosz** (Robert Faggen), **Marianne Moore** (Donald Hall), **Toni Morrison** (Claudia Brodsky Lacour, Elissa Schappell), **John Mortimer** (Rosemary Herbert), **Iris Murdoch** (James Atlas, Jeffrey Meyers).

Vladimir Nabokov (Herbert Gold), **Pablo Neruda** (Rita Guibert, Ronald Christ).

Joyce Carol Oates (Robert Phillips), **Patrick O'Brian** (Stephen Becker), **Edna O'Brien** (Shusha Guppy), **Frank O'Connor** (Anthony Whittier), **Amos Oz** (Shusha Guppy), **Cynthia Ozick** (Tom Teicholz).

Grace Paley (Jonathan Dee, Barbara Jones, Larissa MacFarquhar), **Dorothy Parker** (Marion Capron, George Plimpton), **Octavio Paz** (Alfred MacAdam), **Walker Percy** (Zoltan Abadi-Nagy), **S. J. Perelman** (William Cole, George Plimpton), **Robert Pinsky** (Ben Downing, Daniel Kunitz), **Katherine Anne Porter** (Barbara Thompson), **Ezra Pound** (Donald Hall), **Anthony Powell** (Michael Barber), **Reynolds Price** (Frederick Busch), **Richard Price** (James Linville), **V. S. Pritchett** (Allan Gurganus, Anthony Weller).

Jean Rhys (Elizabeth Vreeland), **Alain Robbe-Grillet** (Shusha Guppy), **Barney Rosset** (Ken Jordan), **Philip Roth** (Hermione Lee).

Françoise Sagan (Blair Fuller, Robert B. Silvers), **James Salter** (Edward Hirsch), **Nathalie Sarraute** (Shusha Guppy, Jason Weiss), **May Sarton** (Karen Saum), **George Seferis** (Edmund Keeley), **Anne Sexton** (Barbara Kevles), **Karl Shapiro** (Robert Phillips), **Irwin Shaw** (Lucas Matthiessen, Willie Morris), **Sam Shepard** (Benjamin Howe, Jeanne McCulloch, Mona Simpson), **Georges Simenon** (Carvel Collins), **Claude Simon** (Alexandra Eyle; Magali Saporito, translator), **John Simon** (Davi Napoleon), **Neil Simon** (James Lipton), **Isaac Bashevis**

Singer (Harold Fender), **W. D. Snodgrass** (Alexandra Eyle), **Gary Snyder** (Eliot Weinberger), **Stephen Sondheim** (James Lipton), **Susan Sontag** (Edward Hirsch), **Stephen Spender** (Peter Stitt), **William Stafford** (William Young), **Wallace Stegner** (James R. Hepworth), **Gertrude Stein** (William Lundell), **John Steinbeck** (from his letters), **George Steiner** (Ronald A. Sharp), **Robert Stone** (William Crawford Woods), **Tom Stoppard** (Shusha Guppy), **William Styron** (Peter Matthiessen, George Plimpton).

Peter Taylor (Barbara Thompson), **James Thurber** (George Plimpton, Max Steele), **P. L. Travers** (Edwina Burrell, Jerry Griswold), **William Trevor** (Mira Stout), **Calvin Trillin** (George Plimpton).

John Updike (Charles Thomas Samuels).

Helen Vendler (Henri Cole), **Gore Vidal** (Gerald Clarke), **Kurt Vonnegut** (David Michaelis, George Plimpton, Richard Rhodes), **Andrei Voznesensky** (Quentin Vest, William Crawford Woods).

Robert Penn Warren (Ralph Ellison, Eugene Walter), **Wendy Wasserstein** (Laurie Winer), **Evelyn Waugh** (Julian Jebb), **Eudora Welty** (Linda Kuehl), **Jessamyn West** (Carolyn Doty), **Rebecca West** (Marina Warner), **John Hall Wheelock** (William Cahill, Molly McKaughan), **E. B. White** (Frank Crowther, George Plimpton), **Edmund White** (Jordan Elgrably), **Elie Wiesel** (John S. Friedman), **Richard Wilbur** (McCloy Ellison), **Billy Wilder** (James Linville), **Thornton Wilder** (Richard H. Goldstone), **Tennessee Williams** (Dotson Raider), **William Carlos Williams** (Stanley Koehler), **Angus Wilson** (Michael Millgate), **Jeanette Winterson** (Audrey Bilger), **P. G. Wodehouse** (Gerald Clarke), **Tom Wolfe** (George Plimpton), **James Wright** (Peter Stitt).

Marguerite Yourcenar (Shusha Guppy).

INTRODUCTION

In 1953 *The Paris Review*, a fledgling literary quarterly, initiated a series of interviews with famous writers on their craft. For over forty years it has continued to do so—with frequently a pair of interviews in each issue. Nearly two hundred and fifty novelists, poets, biographers, and essayists have talked about their work and how they go about it. Viking Penguin has collected many of these interviews in a series of volumes entitled *Writers at Work*.

The purpose of this present volume is to cull what the various authors have said about specific topics and present these under a series of headings—the focus on subject matter rather than author. Thus, if a reader is curious about the importance of “plot” to the novelist, under that heading in the *Chapbook* are to be found any number of comments and views on that particular subject. It saves browsing through all the issues of the *Review*, which in sum would stretch the length of a twenty-five-foot library shelf.

In a sense that is behind the choice of “Chapbook” for the book’s title—that a volume is provided in which it is less time-consuming (and expensive) to find what one is looking for. There the comparison ends! The original chapbooks were sold in medieval times by a “chapman” (hence the common family name), an itinerant peddler who in the village square sold little rag-paper booklets about Tom Thumb, Reynard the Fox, and other such folk heroes.

This is the third revised and expanded edition of the *Chapbook*. The first was published in 1989, the second in 1992. Material from over forty interviews conducted for *The Paris Review* since 1992 has been added to the present volume.

A word about the arrangement of this book. It has been divided into four major sections. The first is a kind of general profile of the writer in which the major steps in a literary career are arranged chronologically—starting from earliest influences (childhood reading, early mentors) through the initial impulse for becoming a writer, then to the actual process of creation (the inspiration for a work, first drafts, work habits [the quintessential *Paris Review* question: Do you use a pen or a pencil?], and so forth), and finally on to publication and the effects of success or failure along with observations, quite pithy, on critics.

Next is a section in which the writers talk about the actual mechanics of writing: plot, characters, symbols, experimental work, writer's block, the use of artificial stimulants, among them. Here we discover that when W. H. Auden took LSD experimentally, "nothing much happened, but I did get the distinct impression that some birds were trying to communicate with me."

In the third section the writers are concerned with different fields of writing—journalism, the theater, children's books, the short story, writing for the film, free-lancing. Of this last, John Cheever describes an assignment from the *Saturday Evening Post* to do an interview with Sophia Loren. He accepted the offer. "I got to kiss her. I've had other offers but nothing as good."

The final section focuses on the social life of the writer (writers' colonies, readings, teaching jobs, grants, and the like). In the interviews authors tended to talk most engagingly about their contemporaries; this section contains a number of these "portraits"—Malcolm Cowley on Ford Madox Ford, Aldous Huxley on James Joyce, Robert Frost on Ezra Pound, James Laughlin on Gertrude Stein, among them. The section concludes with some views on the future of the written word.

Since the various headings are fairly arbitrary and the authors' statements so often discursive, a cross-checking index has been provided so that under the heading "plot," for instance, the reader will find additional references in other parts of the book. The reader will also note that to provide even further insight into the various topics, each subject is prefaced

by a collection of epigrams and quotations from authors as far back as Aristophanes (c. 450 B.C.—c. 388 B.C.).

A word about *The Paris Review*. The magazine, planned as a literary quarterly, was first published in the spring of 1953. Its policy from the start was to concentrate on publishing fiction and poetry rather than the critical essays which were the mainstay in almost all the literary magazines of the time. Its one concession to critical evaluation was that rather than getting a third party to provide an essay on a contemporary author, it would go to the authors themselves and, using the interview form, ask them firsthand about their work and their working methods. The first author *The Paris Review* went to see was E. M. Forster, then a senior fellow at King's College, Cambridge. He was an admirable choice. Perhaps the greatest living author at the time (*A Passage to India*, *Howards End*), in fact he had not published a novel since 1924. The interview, which was conducted by P. N. Furbank and F. J. H. Haskell, one scribbling down the answers while the other concentrated on the questions (tape recorders were still a few years away), was a feature in the first issue of the *Review* and raised an immediate stir. For in it Forster talked about the problems that made it so difficult for him to write fiction, namely what he called "fiction technicalities." The result furnished the best of patterns for the interviews that followed.

In the introduction to the first volume of *Writers at Work*, Malcolm Cowley suggested why such famous authors as Forster devoted so much of their time to a project from which they had very little to gain. "Some of them disliked the idea of being interviewed," he wrote, "but consented anyway, either out of friendship for someone on the *Review* or because they wanted to help a struggling magazine of the arts, perhaps in memory of their own early struggles to get published. . . . Authors are sometimes like tomcats: they distrust all the other toms, but they are kind to kittens."

Of particular importance to the series was that so many of the writers turned out to be absorbed by the writing process and glad to talk about it—almost as if they had never been asked, and perhaps thought it too self-indulgent to write about. In many cases they added additional material on their own; they were free to make what changes they wished since the intention of the editors was never to think of the interviews as inquisitions but rather as documentations of the authors-at-work.

The series gathered momentum. Because a number of distinguished writers agreed to be interviewed in its earliest numbers—E. M. Forster,

François Mauriac, Graham Greene, Irwin Shaw, William Styron, Alberto Moravia, Joyce Cary, Ralph Ellison, Georges Simenon, James Thurber, Nelson Algren, William Faulkner were all in the first four years—the series began to assume the aura of a Pantheon. Writers were pleased to be asked to contribute. There were exceptions, of course—writers who made a point of their reclusivity: Samuel Beckett, J. D. Salinger, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Thomas Pynchon—but many others agreed who rarely granted interviews: Faulkner, Hemingway, Henry Green. The length of the interviews increased. E. M. Forster's required only fourteen pages of the first issue. Many since have run to forty or fifty pages. The record is the interview of James Laughlin, the poet/publisher, whose reminiscences about his immersion in the literary world ran through two numbers of the magazine.

There is such diversity of opinion in the *Chapbook* that it may be hard to construct a composite writer out of the material at hand. The working habits are different: Hemingway rises at dawn to work; James Baldwin works late at night after the hour is quiet. Truman Capote, Paul Bowles, and Evelyn Waugh often work in bed. Robert Frost takes off a shoe and uses the sole for a desk. John Dos Passos rewrites a chapter seven or eight times. William Kennedy's rewrites of *Legs* stacked up to match the height of his six-year-old son. Yet Eudora Welty only corrects or changes an occasional word; to do more would make her feel that "someone would start looking over my shoulder." Writers have divergent views about the importance of plot. Norman Mailer doesn't work from plots. Neither does Elizabeth Hardwick. She says that if she wants a plot she'll watch the TV series *Dallas*. John Irving disagrees. So does Kurt Vonnegut, who doesn't believe a reader can be satisfied unless the rudiments of an old-fashioned plot are smuggled into the book someplace. Joseph Heller sees his novels in an astounding blast of insight provoked by a first line which evolves into a whole series of scenes, characters, resolutions. For a time James Merrill used a Ouija board for his creative impulses. E. M. Forster loses control of his characters. They wander away like disembodied puppets. John Cheever is contemptuous of this. So is Nabokov. He refers to his characters as galley slaves.

All this may be confusing to readers who hope to find direction for their own work in fiction or poetry. But then the vast complexity of material suggests that it is possible to come across ideas and comments with which associations can be made: "Ah, that seems to fit," and a key will be provided.