

America's 93 Greatest Living Authors Present

This Is My Best



OVER 150 SELF-CHOSEN AND
COMPLETE MASTERPIECES, TOGETHER WITH
THEIR REASONS FOR THEIR SELECTIONS



Edited by Whit Burnett

Burton C. Hoffman THE DIAL PRESS New York, 1943

*The publishers and the editor
wish to acknowledge their indebtedness to*

JOHN PEN

*for his editorial assistance and for the
original idea of this anthology*

Foreword

IN THIS book ninety-three American authors have chosen the particular work of their own that is closest to their heart. Thus while THIS IS MY BEST is an anthology, it is more than the simple personal preference of any one man, which is the usual anthology—it is a book by the leading living authors in America, each one of whom has, in a sense, “edited” his entire lifetime output to select the one unit which in his own, uninfluenced opinion represents him at his best creative moment. It is a book without precedent in America: a book composed over many years, the focussing of many lifetime viewpoints, a public revelation of the private opinions of our best authors on how they look upon themselves, and what, in their writings, they most value.

For the choice of the authors, the editor gratefully acknowledges, at the very outset, the help of the public. The names of 169 representative authors were sent in ballot form to many readers of books and magazines. Polls were taken among subscribers of *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harpers' Magazine*, and *The New Yorker*, and ballots were sent to librarians, literary critics and persons professionally connected with reading, writing, teaching or publishing. These individuals were asked to vote on those living American authors they deemed most fitted to be included in THIS IS MY BEST. The response was serious, intelligent, discriminating. And while the editor has not followed slavishly the results of the voting, he has been guided immeasurably by this response. It is interesting to note that on the first fifty authors receiving the most votes for inclusion, the editor, public and publishers were all in agreement.

In a book so essentially the work of many, any long comment by one editor must seem superfluous. It was the editor's job to get in touch with the authors—no mean task in wartime—and, once the authors were picked, to let them have free rein. And if the editor has had a rewarding time, with seemingly nothing to do but gather in the pieces, he seems to have had even less fun in the job than the authors themselves. An author is an author: he is familiar with his own work; why didn't someone think of asking him before? They were, in general, delighted. For this was the first time in their author-

lives so many diverse, important American writers had ever been asked to say, without influence or qualification (there was a minor one of relative length): "This is myself in my very best manner."

The task was full of odd surprises—that Cabell was tired of being anthologized for his famous essays in *Beyond Life*; that when someone dislikes a poem of Robert Frost's, it takes the poet a long time to regain his original affection for it; that Mr. Hemingway has been represented so many times for some of his things that now he can hardly bear to look at what every high-school student, through the usual anthologies, thinks is his only mood. It was interesting to learn that neither the publishers nor the author thinks the much anthologized "Paul's Case" by Willa Cather is either her best or her most representative work—she is here represented by a more rounded work, "Neighbour Rosicky"; and one was to learn that some authors cannot read their old works, or that when they do, they do so with the utmost pain and difficulty; and that still some others think the work they did twenty years ago is as good or better than their present writing.

There are, of course, some omissions in the book. T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein were in Europe and unavailable. And there are many authors in America not included who are equal to the stature, no doubt, of many here included. One book cannot hold all the good writing in America; a limit had to be set somewhere. And the editor and his advisors can console themselves with the hope that if an author has been omitted, a reader will find that another and perhaps even more representative writer in the same field has been included. Choice is an anthologist's eternal dilemma, and anthologists notoriously make more enemies than friends, since for twenty chosen, forty must needs be left out. For the sin of omission, we can only pray. Some of our best friends, heaven knows, are authors; and even some of those are not here with us. . . .

The editor has not in every case agreed on the author's own selection. But as this is a book of the authors', not the editor's, he has avoided influencing an author's choice. In shaping up the volume, he has likewise tried to avoid arbitrary groupings. He has meandered with the writers, following the main body of writing as the banks of a river follow the course of the stream. And even the divisions of the

book have taken their titles from the substance of the authors; there are no artificial dams in the stream. The book is frankly not intended as the best short stories, the best plays, the best essays, and the best bits of humor. Here is rather a panorama of time and place, presented to us by the best guides we have in America, the creative writers of our time. And it is more than a passingly contemporary view. For here are writers as long seasoned with us as Agnes Repplier, George Ade, John Dewey and Theodore Dreiser. And others as young as Clifford Odets, William Saroyan and Conrad Richter. What these authors see and what they write is as various as they themselves are various. And if a great novelist chooses to like himself at his best in poetry, that, indeed, is his prerogative. In this book we are privileged to return with the "known" and public figure back to the quiet of his study where he is with himself and writing was what it started out to be, his self-communion with his deepest experience. And sometimes the picture an author chooses as his favorite may not be the same the public has come to recognize but, since this is so, that very choice of the author, uninfluenced, may sometimes tell us more about the author than a dozen posed portraits.

And so, too, these selected writings, springing as they do from the best moments of the best minds in our contemporary literature, should tell us more than anything else about the environment of those authors, the country we are living in.

In no small, single way, this book is America. America in its many moods, its various colors, its many aspects. It is the New England of Frost and Coffin and Mary Ellen Chase; and the South of Glasgow, Stuart, Rawlings and Faulkner; the Middle West of Tarkington and Ade; and the Far West of Steinbeck's old pioneer, stopped and baffled forever at the Pacific Ocean and the end of the frontier, in a later day. It is dinner with the Babbitts, a scared Negro washerwoman in Mississippi, the stockyards of Chicago. It is a preface to a Saroyan fantasy, an editor in Kansas writing an editorial on the death of his daughter and projecting a wisp of a girl into a kind of immortality. . . . It is the goodly heritage of a more leisurely past, home in the nineties, the old coal furnace in the Hergesheimer home in Pennsylvania, and back as far as Hawthorne in Salem and Jefferson in Virginia. It is another side, less lovely, but exerting its power always throughout

the land, the America of the jungle, of wasted lives and lost illusion; it is America Was Promises, the American Dream, and contrastingly it is Studs and Bigger in the black slums of Chicago. It is the Old World and the old masters viewed here in contemporary essays distilling the values of the classics for our times and minds. It is poetry, drama, humor, history, biography, philosophy . . . and Europe at this moment in an upset world when all values have taken to hiding and a free survey of the life of the mind, by those who like these authors have spent their own lives distilling values, is more than a matter of superficial interest. The editor does not think it accidental that such a book, by such authors, appears at this particular time.

And so, the editor steps aside for those more qualified than he, the tellers of tales in *The Man's Story* . . . the broad viewers of America, and those who have particularized their love in a special place, or mood, or form, and the poet next the prose writer, the dramatist in the jungle. . . . Here is something serious, something light . . . Nobel prize and Pulitzer prize winners, and winners of all the other awards the country offers. And as these authors have their favorites, doubtless you have your favorite author. One way to read the book would be to start at the beginning and wind up at the end, for in such a way you would follow a kind of loose but interesting course, the way the editor followed it. But a simpler way is just to pick your favorite writer and find out what his favorite writing is. . . . And from there you go either to the rest of his books you missed till now . . . or on to the next author in the anthology.

Good reading!

WHIT BURNETT

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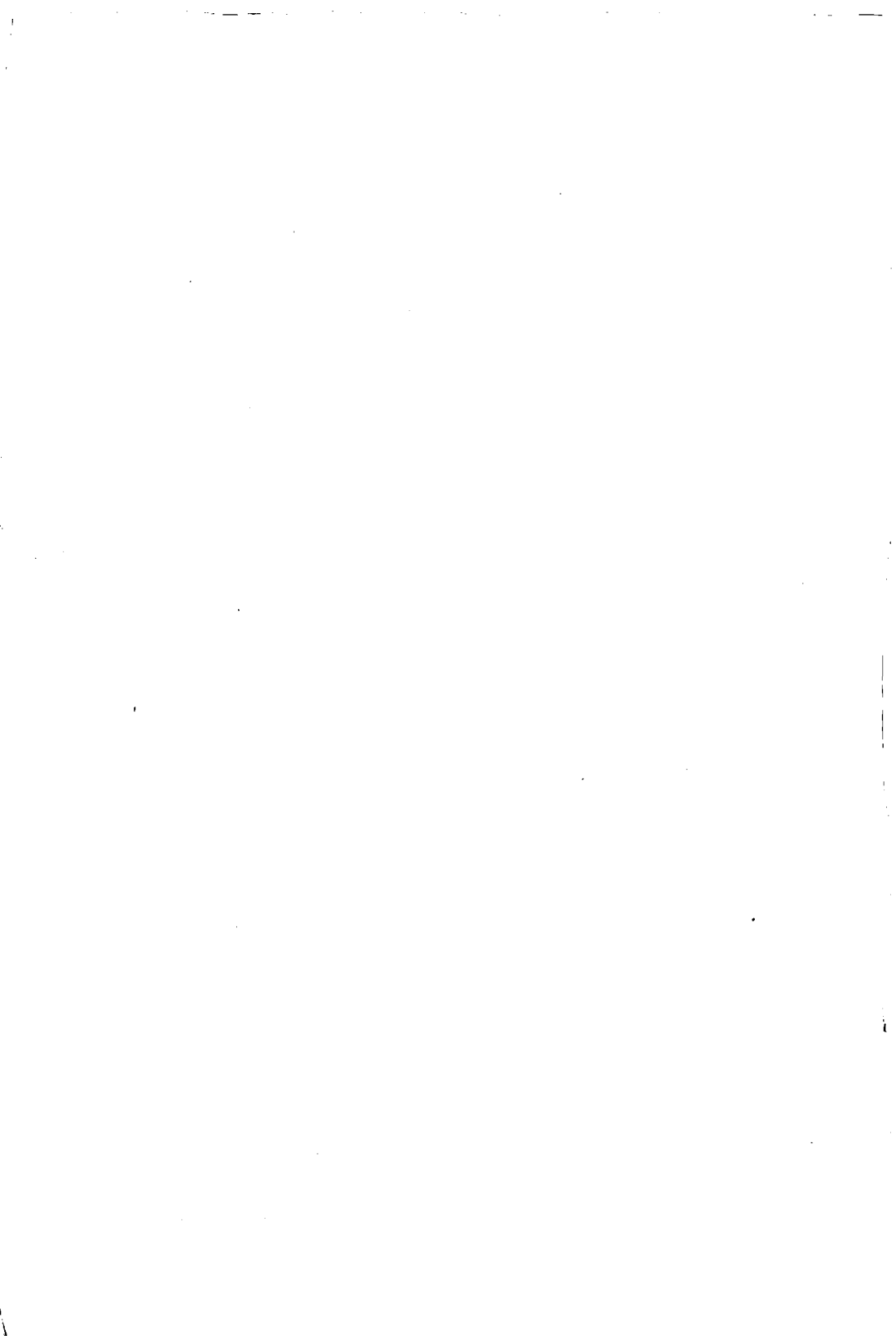
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I
THE MAN'S STORY



THEODORE DREISER



Why he selected The HAND

The piece which I would like to be used is "The Hand" a short story of mine published some time ago in a volume entitled *Chains*. I look upon "The Hand" as illustrative as well as representative of the diversity of my subject matter and my psychological interests.

Hollywood, Cal.

THEODORE DREISER

June, 1942

I

DAVIDSON could distinctly remember that it was between two and three years after the grisly event in the Monte Orte range—the sickening and yet deserved end of Mersereau, his quondam partner and fellow adventurer—that anything to be identified with Mersereau's malice toward him, and with Mersereau's probable present existence in the spirit world, had appeared in his life.

He and Mersereau had worked long together as prospectors, investors, developers of property. It was only after they had struck it rich in the Klondike that Davidson had grown so much more apt and shrewd in all commercial and financial matters, whereas Mersereau had seemed to stand still—not to rise to the splendid opportunities which then opened to him. Why, in some of those later deals it had not been possible for Davidson even to introduce his old partner to some of the moneyed men he had to deal with. Yet Mersereau had insisted, as his right, if you please, on being "in on" everything—everything!

Take that wonderful Monte Orte property, the cause of all the subsequent horror. He, Davidson—not Mersereau—had discovered or heard of the mine, and had carried it along, with old Besmer as a tool or decoy—Besmer being the ostensible factor—until it was all ready for him to take over and sell or develop. Then it was that Mersereau, having been for so long his partner, demanded a full half—a third, at

least—on the ground that they had once agreed to work together in all these things.

Think of it! And Mersereau growing duller and less useful and more disagreeable day by day, and year by year! Indeed, toward the last he had threatened to expose the trick by which jointly, seven years before, they had possessed themselves of the Skyute Pass Mine; to drive Davidson out of public and financial life, to have him arrested and tried—along with himself, of course. Think of that!

But he had fixed him—yes, he had, damn him! He had trailed Mersereau that night to old Besmer's cabin on the Monte Orte, when Besmer was away. Mersereau had gone there with the intention of stealing the diagram of the new field, and had secured it, true enough. A thief he was, damn him. Yet, just as he was making safely away, as he thought, he, Davidson, had struck him cleanly over the ear with that heavy rail-bolt fastened to the end of a walnut stick, and the first blow had done for him.

Lord, how the bone above Mersereau's ear had sounded when it cracked! And how bloody one side of that bolt was! Mersereau hadn't had time to do anything before he was helpless. He hadn't died instantly, though, but had turned over and faced him, Davidson, with that savage, scowling face of his and those blazing, animal eyes.

Lying half propped up on his left elbow, Mersereau had reached out toward him with that big, rough, bony right hand of his—the right with which he always boasted of having done so much damage on this, that, and the other occasion—had glared at him as much as to say:

“Oh, if I could only reach you just for a moment before I go!”

Then it was that he, Davidson, had lifted the club again. Horrified as he was, and yet determined that he must save his own life, he had finished the task, dragging the body back to an old fissure behind the cabin and covering it with branches, a great pile of pine fronds, and as many as one hundred and fifty boulders, great and small, and had left his victim. It was a sickening job and a sickening sight, but it had to be.

Then, having finished, he had slipped dismally away, like a jackal, thinking of that hand in the moonlight, held up so savagely, and that look. Nothing might have come of that either, if he hadn't been inclined to brood on it so much, on the fierceness of it.

No, nothing had happened. A year had passed, and if anything had been going to turn up it surely would have by then. He, Davidson, had gone first to New York, later to Chicago, to dispose of the Monte Orte claim. Then, after two years, he had returned here to Mississippi, where he was enjoying comparative peace. He was looking after some sugar property which had once belonged to him, and which he was now able to reclaim and put in charge of his sister as a home against a rainy day. He had no other.

But that body back there! That hand uplifted in the moonlight—to clutch him if it could! Those eyes.

II—JUNE, 1905

Take that first year, for instance, when he had returned to Gatchard in Mississippi, whence both he and Mersereau had originally issued. After looking after his own property he had gone out to a tumble-down estate of his uncle's in Issaquena County—a leaky old slope-roofed house where, in a bedroom on the top floor, he had had his first experience with the significance or reality of the hand.

Yes, that was where first he had really seen it pictured in that curious, unbelievable way; only who would believe that it was Mersereau's hand? They would say it was an accident, chance, rain dropping down. But the hand had appeared on the ceiling of that room just as sure as anything, after a heavy rain-storm—it was almost a cyclone—when every chink in the old roof had seemed to leak water.

During the night, after he had climbed to the room by way of those dismal stairs with their great landing and small glass oil-lamp he carried, and had sunk to rest, or tried to, in the heavy, wide, damp bed, thinking, as he always did those days, of the Monte Orte and Mersereau, the storm had come up. As he had listened to the wind moaning outside he had heard first the scratch, scratch, scratch, of some limb, no doubt, against the wall—sounding, or so it seemed in his feverish unrest, like some one penning an indictment against him with a worn, rusty pen.

And then, the storm growing worse, and in a fit of irritation and self-contempt at his own nervousness, he had gone to the window, but just as lightning struck a branch of the tree nearest the window

and so very near him, too—as though some one, something, was seeking to strike him—(Mersereau?) and as though he had been lured by that scratching. God! He had retreated, feeling that it was meant for him.

But that big, knotted hand painted on the ceiling by the dripping water during the night! There it was, right over him when he awoke, outlined or painted as if with wet, gray whitewash against the wretched but normally pale-blue of the ceiling when dry. There it was—a big, open hand just like Mersereau's as he had held it up that night—huge, knotted, rough, the fingers extended as if tense and clutching. And, if you will believe it, near it was something that looked like a pen—an old, long-handled pen—to match that scratch, scratch, scratch!

“Huldah,” he had inquired of the old Black mammy who entered in the morning to bring him fresh water and throw open the shutters, “what does that look like to you up there—that patch on the ceiling where the rain came through?”

He wanted to reassure himself as to the character of the thing he saw—that it might not be a creation of his own feverish imagination, accentuated by the dismal character of this place.

“’Pears t’ me mo’ like a big han’ ’an anythin’ else, Marse Davi’son,” commented Huldah, pausing and staring upward. “Mo’ like a big fist, kinda. Dat air’s a new drip come las’ night, I reckon. Dis here ole place ain’ gonna hang togethah much longah, less’n some repairin’ be done mighty quick now. Yassir, dat air’s a new drop, sho’s yo’ bo’n, en it come on’y las’ night. I hain’t never seed dat befo’.”

And then he had inquired, thinking of the fierceness of the storm: “Huldah, do you have many such storms up this way?”

“Good gracious, Marse Davi’son, we hain’t seed no sech glow en—en come three years now. I hain’t seed no sech lightnin’ en I doan’ know when.”

Wasn’t that strange, that it should all come on the night, of all nights, when he was there? And no such other storm in three years!

Huldah stared idly, always ready to go slow and rest, if possible, whereas he had turned irritably. To be annoyed by ideas such as this! To always be thinking of that Monte Orte affair! Why couldn’t he forget it? Wasn’t it Mersereau’s own fault? He never would have killed the man if he hadn’t been forced to it.