

CHINESE LITERATURE

Fiction Poetry Art



Novella:

To and Fro by Chi Li

Culture:

Pingyao – An Ancient City

Special:

12 Writers' Thoughts as the Century Ends

本 期 目 录

小说

来来往往·····	池 莉	13
绝 钓·····	彭见明	64
公路从门前过·····	石 定	103

评论

论二十年来小说潮流的演进·····	丁 帆	何言宏	5
用灵魂写作·····	阿 成		119
世纪留言·····	张 欣		121
我讨厌我自己·····	贾平凹		123
把幼稚和天真留在心里·····	池 莉		126
我依然迷恋小说写作·····	周大新		128
倾诉是心灵的舞蹈·····	方 方		130
大作无界·····	郭雪波		132
我对世界所知甚少·····	刘震云		134
我的感激·····	梁晓声		135
我为何写作·····	余 华		137
挥手告别二十世纪·····	邓友梅		140
初始的激情·····	迟子建		143
北京纪念巴尔扎克诞辰 200 周年·····	本刊记者		178

诗歌

有的人——纪念鲁迅有感·····	臧克家	146
纪念碑·····	江 河	148
高 山·····	于 坚	151
中 国·····	吴 正	153

作家艺术家介绍

任颐《九思图》赏析·····	潘深亮	155
水墨山水与油画风景的互融·····	贾方舟	158

文化之旅

中国的古城平遥·····	郭来喜	162
今昔天安门·····	姜舜源	171

中英对照

听 箫·····	星 天	182
----------	-----	-----

《中国文学》1999年目录索引

小说

白煤·····	刘庆邦	1
喜鹊的悲剧·····	刘庆邦	1
走进琥珀·····	刘庆邦	1
心事·····	刘庆邦	1
方五妹和她的“我老头子”·····	杨 绛	1
等待星期六·····	裘山山	1
镖头杨三·····	聂鑫森	1
父亲是个兵·····	邓一光	2
心比身先老·····	池 莉	2
红狐狸·····	赵 恺	2
母狼·····	郭雪波	2
绝钓·····	彭见明	4
公路从门前过·····	石 定	4
来来往往·····	池 莉	4

诗歌

地平线·····	张学梦	1
新世纪·····	张学梦	1
蓝色纪实·····	张学梦	1
联合国减灾十年偶感·····	张学梦	1
地震废墟·····	张学梦	1
太阳·····	张学梦	1
蜡烛·····	李 瑛	2
白芙蓉·····	屠 岸	2
北京猿人头盖骨·····	朱增权	2
神女峰·····	舒 婷	2
裸体·····	韩作荣	2
飞来一只蜻蜓·····	张新泉	2
有的人·····	臧克家	4
纪念碑·····	江 河	4
高山·····	于 坚	4
中国·····	吴 正	4

散文

书桌·····	冯骥才	1
西部开始的地方·····	马丽华	3
沙原隐泉·····	余秋雨	3
莫高窟·····	余秋雨	3

红嘴鸦及其结局·····	周 涛	3
天山行色·····	汪曾祺	3

古典文学

古诗：《秋日二绝》（选一），《乐神曲》，《缣丝行》，《催租行》， 《后催租行》，《四时田园杂兴六十首》（选）·····	范成大	2
《孙臬兵法》选篇·····	孙 臬	1
《镜花缘》选·····	李汝珍	3
古今山水诗：《和徐都曹出新亭渚》·····	谢灵运	
《春江花月夜》·····	张若虚	
《宿建德江》·····	孟浩然	
《积雨辋川作》，《青溪》·····	王维	
《访戴天山道士不遇》，《渡荆门送别》·····	李白	
《逢雪宿芙蓉山主人》·····	刘长卿	
《望岳》，《绝句四首》（其三）·····	杜甫	
《经火山》·····	岑参	
《枫桥夜泊》·····	张继	
《兰溪棹歌》·····	戴叔伦	
《商山早行》·····	温庭筠	
《饮湖上初晴后雨》，《新城道中》·····	苏轼	
《游园不值》·····	叶绍翁	
《兴安》·····	袁枚	3

作家艺术家介绍

刘庆邦和他的小说·····	秦 岭	1
危难中站起挺拔的生命——评张学梦的诗·····	苗雨时	1
画坛新秀田忠利·····	夏硕琦	1
深切悼念叶君健先生·····	文 编	2
刘德润和李燕的油画创作·····	夏硕琦	2

评论

敞开心胸，欣赏与接纳大千世界——王蒙访谈录·····	章德宁 静 矣	1
张渥与《临李龙眠九歌图吴睿隶书词》·····	立 群	1
文学运行的轨迹——鲁迅文学奖单项奖优秀作品述评·····	张 韧	2
《紫藤金鱼图》赏析·····	潘深亮	2
一幅飘逸着茶香的历史画卷·····	孙海雯	2
中国早期的咏贫、咏饼的赋·····	康达维	2
评曹植赋三首·····	罗伯特·乔·卡特	2
鲍照的《观漏赋》·····	苏瑞隆	2
展现民族历史的壮美画卷——介绍长篇小说《白鹿原》·····	晓 钟	2
关于中国西部散文·····	纪 成	3
关于中国古代山水诗·····	纪 成	3
中国古代奇书《穆天子传》·····	郭林祥	3

中国古籍中的瑰宝《山海经》	郭林祥	3
新疆克孜尔石窟艺术	西 莫	3
戴进的《钟馗夜寻图》	王瑞霖	3
论二十年来小说潮流的演进	丁 帆 何言宏	4
把幼稚和天真留在心里	池 莉	4
我讨厌我自己	贾平凹	4
用灵魂写作	阿 成	4
倾诉是心灵的舞蹈	方 方	4
我为何写作	余 华	4
初始的激情	迟子建	4
世纪留言	张 欣	4
我依然迷恋写小说写作	周大新	4
挥手告别二十世纪	邓友梅	4
我对世界所知甚少	刘震云	4
我的感激	梁晓声	4
大作无界	郭雪波	4
纪念巴尔扎克诞生二百周年	本刊记者	4
水墨山水画与油画风景的互融	贾方舟	4
任颐《九思图》赏析	潘深亮	4

国际汉学

王维的《桃园行》（法）	霍尔兹曼	3
-------------------	------	---

文化之旅

梅兰芳在护国寺街九号的宅院	西 文	1
法海寺的壁画艺术	金维诺	1
安徽民居上的雕刻	汪立信 鲍树民	1
北京平安大街上的孙中山公馆	西 文	2
席臻贯和《敦煌古乐》	王家达	2
内蒙古赤峰宝山辽墓壁画	张小舟	2
纳西文化的载体——丽江	李 旭	3
最后的东巴	李 旭	3
北京的恭王府	国 风 韩 潮	3
山西古城平遥	郭来喜	4
北京天安门的今昔	姜舜源	4

中外对照

惊雷	王京瑞	1
菩提树下	沈嘉禄	2
听到最后	薛 涛	3
听箫	星 天	4

美术插页

法海寺壁画选：《水月观音全身像》，《帝释天及其侍女》， 《大梵天三天女》，《西方广目天王局部》，《善财童子》·····	1
画选：《晚霞》，《绿风》，《大自然的歌》，《晨雾蒙蒙》·····	田忠利 1
临李龙眠九歌图·····	(元)张 渥 1
万岳之尊·····	刘德润 李 燕 2
来弟·····	刘德润 2
雪月·····	刘德润 李 燕 2
沂蒙晨曲·····	刘德润 李 燕 2
摇篮·····	刘德润 2
即将倒塌的磨盘·····	李 燕 2
蚀·····	刘德润 李 燕 2
辽代墓葬壁画选·····	2
紫藤金鱼图·····	(清)虚 谷 2
新疆克孜尔石窟艺术·····	3
萨缚燃臂引路	
本生故事	
长寿女听法	
树下诞生	
善爱健闼婆王及眷属	
飞天	
阿舍世王闷绝复苏图	
钟馗夜巡图·····	(明)戴 进 3
丛林老树·····	吴冠中 4
西疆雪城图·····	李宝林 4
风埔乡风景·····	林容生 4
巴山古道·····	施江城 4
夏木垂荫图·····	周石峰 4
梦里故乡·····	张祖英 4
知足者·····	张冬峰 4
山林云水图·····	陈钧德 4
湖·····	朝 戈 4
平遥双林寺自在观音·····	薛冠超 4
九思图·····	(清)任 颐 4

封面

春之歌·····	田忠利 1
黄河水·····	刘德润 李 燕 2
快目王施眼·····	佚 名 3
春山梦·····	杨国新 4

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CHINESE LITERATURE PRESS

中国文学出版社: 24 Baiwanzhuang Street, Beijing 100037, China
中国北京百万庄路24号 邮政编码: 100037
Tel: 86-10-68320635/68326678 Fax: 86-10-68326678 E-mail: Chinalit @ public.east.cn.net
Account No. 0980929210001, Zhanlan Road Branch, Beijing, China Merchants Bank

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CONTENTS

To Our Readers	4
----------------	---

FICTION

Chi Li	To and Fro	13
Peng Jianming	A Fishing Legend	64
Shi Ding	A House by the Highway	103

CRITICISM

Ding Fan and He Yanhong	Chinese Fiction in the Last Two Decades	5
-------------------------	---	---

SPECIAL

May Yee	A Bridge into the New Xintury	116
A Cheng	My Wish for the New Century	119
Zhang Xin	Words for the Turn of the Century	121
Jia Pingwa	Getting Down on Myself	123
Chi Li	Keep the Heart's Innocence	126
Zhou Daxin	I Still Love Writing Stories	128
Fang Fang	My Stories are the Dance of My Soul	130
Guo Xuebo	Masterpieces Have No Bounds	132
Liu Zhenyun	I Know So Little about the World	134
Liang Xiaosheng	My Thanks	135
Yu Hua	Why I Write	137
Deng Youmei	Adieu to the Twentieth Century	140
Chi Zijian	The Primary Sentiment	143
China	Celebrates the 200th Birth Anniversary of Balzac	178

POETRY

Zang Kejia	Some People — <i>In Memory of Lu Xun</i>	146
Jiang He	Monument	148
Yu Jian	Monumental Mountains	151
Wu Zheng	China	153

CONTENTS

CLASSICAL CHINESE PAINTING

Pan Shenliang	<i>The Nine Egrets of Ren Yi</i>	155
----------------------	----------------------------------	-----

ART

Jia Fangzhou	Chinese Landscape Painting: A Fusion of Inks and Oils	158
---------------------	--	-----

CULTURE

Guo Laixi	Pingyao — An Ancient Chinese City	162
Jiang Shunyun	Tian'anmen, Old and New	171

BILINGUAL CORNER

Xing Tian	Listening to the <i>Xiao</i>	182
------------------	------------------------------	-----

COVER

Yang Guoxin	Dream of Spring Mountain	
--------------------	--------------------------	--

History of the Character on the Back Cover:

冬 (*dong*) Winter

𠂇 is the thousands-of-years-old Chinese pictograph for "Winter," found in a Han-dynasty dictionary. The top part, 夂, means "final," as in the final season of the year, while the bottom 冫 was the ancient character for "ice." In the Han Dynasty (206BC-220AD), this appeared on epitaphs first as an official character 𠂇, and later as 冬, the character for "Winter" still used today.

To Our Readers



Since 1999 is the year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, while also standing at the threshold of a new century, this special Winter issue of *Chinese Literature* shows our readers new works which shed new light on people's changing lives and perspectives in China.

Chi Li's novella "To and Fro" has provoked a powerful response in China. It is a story about one couple's outlook on love and life, spanning different eras and stages of life. The middle-aged protagonist, dissatisfied with his conventional marriage after becoming a prosperous businessman, struggles to find ideal love. He, his wife, mistress and those around them are all caught in a complex net of quickly changing values. In contrast to this urbane tale of love found and lost, *A Fishing Legend* and *A House by the Highway* are simple yet poignant stories capturing the effects of recent reform and modernization on the lives of the older generation in rural China.

On the eve of the new millennium, *Chinese Literature* has invited twelve famous Chinese writers, names familiar to these pages, to each write a short piece concerning his/her literary creation. They share with our readers their thoughts on the phenomenal changes that have taken place in China's literary scene, such as: breaking away from overemphasis on politics (Jia Pingwa), appreciating a writer's "heart's innocence," "sentiment" and devotion (Chi Li, Chi Zijian and Zhou Daxin). This does not mean that writers have isolated themselves from society and the times — rather, they value thoughtfulness and "peace of mind" (Zhang Xin), and never forget their responsibilities as writers. They also show a clear awareness of and concern about international literary trends, translation and exchange. Their views, though at times quite personal, should reveal some of the current aspects and trends in Chinese literature.

论二十年来小说潮流的演进

丁 帆 何言宏

Chinese Fiction in the Last Two Decades

Ding Fan and He Yanhong



Reviewing Chinese fiction of the last two decades of this century, we get a picture of extraordinary diversity with constantly emerging new trends as the most conspicuous sign. Needless to say, rapid social change in China in the New Era — namely, the period of reform and opening to the outside world — have been both somewhat accelerating and limiting the evolution of Chinese fiction, and under certain circumstances, non-literary influences may have greatly expanded or reduced the narrative scope of novels and stories. Nevertheless, internal literary and cultural factors exert a far more direct influence on the formation and growth of the various trends in fiction. In the past twenty years, Chinese fiction has undergone a transformation from revival of realism, introduction of stream-of-consciousness, to emergence of “modernist” fiction, “from root-seeking” fiction which has borrowed from Latin American “magic realism” to avant-garde fiction in the mid-1980s, and still later, to the “later generation” writers who have borrowed from European and American post-realism. There has been an echo of almost all the important schools and trends in Europe and the Americas since the mid-19th century. With hindsight, we see that today’s Chinese writers’ inheritance of and exploration in those Western genre of creative writing have their gains and losses. In the process of reviewing the evolution of Chinese fiction in the last two decades, this article attempts to give an academic assessment of those gains and losses from a new historical perspective.

1

At the end of the first ten years of New Era literature, literary critics summed up the main trends of that time with the terms “the conflict between education and ignorance,” “the rediscovery and remolding of the nation’s soul,” “the struggle against feudalism,” and “humanism.” These terms mainly refer to the fiction coming out of the literary trends of “trauma,” “self-reflection,” “reform” and “root-seeking” literature. Today, if we look back and give careful consideration to the general situation in ideological and cultural circles and writers’ motivations at the time, we may now encapsulate those trends with the more general term, “fiction of national enlightenment.” In fact, all the above-mentioned trends — from those reflecting the trauma in the wake of past political movements to those trying to unearth the roots of our national ethos — carried themes that were consistent with the ideological

emancipation being advocated among thinkers and cultural workers, and people's concerns in regard to rationality, democracy and humanity.

In general, "trauma," "self-reflection" and "reform" fiction represented social enlightenment. The chronological sequence of their emergence revealed the gradual deepening of this movement. "Trauma" and "self-reflection" fiction were both historical criticisms of the "Cultural Revolution" and reflections upon ultra-leftist political thought. This criticism and reflection were carried out under the guidance of the political trends of the time. Therefore, a great number of the "trauma" and "self-reflection" stories contained implicit or explicit narration about the struggle between different ideological trends: the disrupted psychology of ordinary people, the pain and poverty of peasants; the morbid mentality of intellectuals in political movements caused by incorrect policies on education or agriculture; and the persecution of veteran Party and state leaders and intellectuals during the "Cultural Revolution." After "trauma" fiction, "self-reflection" fiction carried on the political criticism of the "Cultural Revolution" and also deepened the theme of the earlier trend, extending its description to a much wider range of subjects than before. But the pain and hardship experienced by Party and State leaders, intellectuals and the masses under ultra-leftist political tendencies, and the distortion of basic human nature and interpersonal relationships, remained the principal theme. Thoroughly and comprehensively denouncing the wrongs of ultraleftism under the guidance of a correct political line was still the main issue. However, as the economic reforms were initiated and carried out in depth, writers began to shift their focus from history to reality and describe the progress of the structural economic reforms. This determined the dominant mode of "reform" fiction, characterizing the conflict between reformists and conservatives (see "Manager Qiao Assumes Office," *Chinese Literature*, Winter 1982, p. 25). "Trauma," "self-reflection" and "reform" fiction spoke in a political language typical of the historical stage of "bringing order out of chaos" and "reform and opening to the outside world." These literary modes provided enlightenment mainly on a political level. In other words, their main purpose was to expose social and political practices through literature.

To transcend politics, to dive into history and ponder the state of the Chinese nation and its characteristics from a cultural and anthropological angle — this was categorized under the "root-seeking" fiction that bloomed around 1985. The emergence of this trend was attributed to the mentality of certain intellectuals who, against a background of a society in transition to

modernity and of Chinese and Western cultural exchange, tried to stress their national identity and developed an obsessive cultural nationalism. In line with their cultural and literary ideology, "root-seeking" authors created a number of works affirming and eulogizing the Chinese cultural spirit and the traditional personality. This is exemplified in A Cheng's "King of Trees" (see *Chinese Literature*, Winter 1986, p. 44) and Li Hangyu's "The Last Angler" (see *Chinese Literature*, Autumn 1984, p. 40). Yet, while these "root-seeking" writers appeared to lack self-confidence, in the mid-1980s when "enlightenment" literature prevailed alongside the large-scale invasion of modern Western culture, their cultural "root-seeking" was by no means only cultural nostalgia. With the national culture being shaped by modernity and fully enjoying its fruits, purist nationalist identities and efforts to prolong national culture inevitably met with difficulty. This gave rise to the feeling of "cultural shame" as expressed in Li Hangyu and A Cheng's complaint: "On one hand, I clearly feel how poor my national consciousness is, but on the other hand, I have to defend it, fearing that without it I would have nothing at all." This suggested that the root-seekers' preoccupied search for national identity was illusive and their nationalist absorption held intrinsic contradictions. Despite this, "root-seeking" fiction has a particular significance for the evolution of Chinese fiction in the last two decades. It developed a way of viewing history from a cultural angle, since by conceiving whole works as symbols, it shook off meticulous realistic descriptions of social phenomena in fiction and the assimilative nature of modern art. All these have helped to bring about a pluralism in the creation of fiction in the New Era.

Of course, "root-seeking" fiction was not the only trend to challenge realism which had prevailed until then. The modernist elements emerging in New Era fiction, their antagonism to realism, as well as their incorporation of realist techniques in new fiction, are all just as admirable. Modernist elements first made their concentrated appearance in the "Eastern stream-of-consciousness" fiction of Wang Meng and others at the beginning of the New Era. The mid-1980s found a prospering of fiction with genuine "modernist" characteristics in consciousness, in literary spirit and in expressiveness. Liu Suola's "You Have No Other Choice," Can Xue's "Pallid Clouds" and Xu Xingye's "Themeless Variation" have been regarded as the works of "real modernist writers."

"Root-seeking" fiction's exaltation of basic life forces and denunciation of certain deep-rooted negative characteristics in our nation and "modernist" fiction's depiction of non-rational experiences show their ardent humanist passion. They reveal a desire to sublimate human nature and transcend current existence.

Yet almost at the same time as "root-seeking" and "modernist" fiction reached their height, a radical method of narration, calling itself "experimental" fiction emerged, with Su Tong, Yu Hua, Ge Fei and Ye Zhaoyan as the leading figures. Having deprived fiction of its subjective judgment, human values and reliability in recounting of history, the "experimentalists" bestowed upon the content of their writings a blank nothingness. They held that reality is abstract and contingent, hence empty. "All beings are fictions," they say. For them, creation of fiction is no more an art; it has deteriorated into a drill of various skills. Anticipative descriptions, deliberate absence of detail, parody, irony and fragmental description of senses together make up a playing with words.

Because of this playing with words, "experimental" fiction lost its readership. And that is why it quickly declined after a short boom. But this does not negate its legitimate place in history. It not only has given a sign of what's to come in the modernization of China's own fiction, but one cannot ignore its significance in enriching the modes of expression in contemporary fiction and widening its vistas for development, as well as in influencing later trends in fiction.

Post-realist narration in "experimental" fiction lost its readership because of its obsessive adherence to technique and its divorce from social reality and the times. So it was only too natural that in reaction, its rival, "new realist" fiction, rose in popularity.

Emerging in the late 1980s, "new realist" fiction, with its realistic descriptions, simple plotlines and tentative experiments in form, showed marked differences from previous realist schools of fiction. Nevertheless, the close intrinsic connection between them exposed the new as virtually identical with the old.

The publication of "new realist" writings such as Chi Li's "Trials and Tribulations," Fang Fang's "Landscape" and Liu Zhenyun's "Unit," provoked a considerable response. While talking about the motives in writing "Trials and Tribulations," in her essay "The Meaning of Writing," Chi Li pointed out

that good literature must "remove" those "old labels attached on to life" and "tear up" "traditional literary attitudes." In "new realist" fiction we witness an overwhelming power that engulfs everything in society and everyday life. Just "surviving" becomes ordinary people's greatest aspiration.

3

"Later generation" fiction was born in the 1990s. The main authors of this school are He Dun, Xu Kun, Liu Jiming and Bi Feiyu. "Later generation" fiction covers a wide range of subject matter and represents various ideological tendencies. But all such stories have a common kernel — an emphasis on describing current social reality and people's states of mind in relation to this reality. With their pens the "later generation" writers vividly reflected on deceit and corruption in economic activities, confusion and the deterioration of intellectuals, the irrational eruption of desire in modern metropolises, the debauchery and rambling lives of urban vagrants, and the struggle for success of Julien Sorel-like adventurers and their fall — all these aspects of reality and life in the 1990s are far more vigorously expressed in "later generation" fiction than in "new realist" fiction.

Almost simultaneously alongside "later generation" fiction, sprang up "feminist" fiction represented by Chen Ran, Lin Bai, Hai Nan and Xu Kun. "Feminist" fiction carried on the tradition of Zhang Jie, Zhang Xinxin and other women writers who portrayed the awakening of women's consciousness in their works at the beginning of the New Era. This tradition was greatly reinforced in the mid to late 1980s and became fully realized as "feminist" fiction in the 1990s. If women's fiction of the 1980s bespoke only women's "gender consciousness," "feminist" fiction of the 1990s went much further. "Gender consciousness" in the former meant women's awakening to their existence, the affirmation of their worth, the experience of their own feelings, and their demand for equality with men (in society, in daily life and in relationships); in the latter, this consciousness was transformed into a "gender narcissism." In expressing this "gender narcissism," "feminist" fiction imparts a powerful verbal consciousness. But the "gender narcissism" of women is not the whole message that feminist fiction conveys. Feminist writers have also depicted the struggle between men and women with rich social and humanist implications. Getting out of the closed world of women and engaging in a dialogue or battle with a male-centered culture endowed "feminist" fiction with a deeper and broader social and cultural significance.

If "later generation" fiction was helpless in resisting the nihilism extant in the society of the 1990s, then the "shock-wave realism" that flourished around 1996 reflected the real life of the broad masses in the 1990s with an unambiguous sense of social commitment.

Representatives of "shock-wave realism" are Liu Xinglong, Tan Ge, He Shen and Guan Renshan. In fact, there has been no discontinuity in the creation of realist fiction since the revolution in the forms of fiction of the mid-1980s. Writers like Chi Zijian, A Cheng and Zhang Wei have persisted in writing realist stories and have achieved remarkable success. Even today in the 1990s, the realist works of Lin Xi, You Fengwei, Li Guantong, Liu Qingbang and other realist writers still exert considerable influence. However, thanks to its panoramic view of current society, "shock-wave" fiction reflects reality and our times more closely. All social problems, like state enterprises in transition, laid-off workers, corrupt officials, prostitution, confusion over values in a time of transformation, demoralization and other harsh social conflicts, are all mirrored in these "shock-wave" stories. Since the mid-1980s Chinese fiction has never showed so strong a sense of social commitment and concern for reality, and drawn so much attention from society. However, "shock-wave" fiction has gradually revealed its shortcomings in the last two years. It's true that many "shock-wave" works take their stand with ordinary people and uphold their point of view. For example, Liu Xinglong's "Going to Beijing Carrying a Load of Tea" exposes the injury inflicted on farmers by the privileged social strata and the general mood of the society, and castigates the inherent flaws of our nation. Liu's "Life is Labor and Human Kindness," "Singing in Solitude" and Tan Ge's "Lean Year" express their sympathy for workers at a grassroots level. In his "Returning Home in September," Guan Renshan represents the new city-countryside conflict, praises the countryside and calls for its protection. However, sometimes "shock-wave" writers call on the victims of social evil to "share hardship" with the wrongdoers and be tolerant, understanding or even appreciative of the latter's base behavior. This shows that they lack appropriate values while surveying social reality.

The continuous evolution of "shock-wave" fiction, the public's love of it and hopes placed upon it give us a responsibility to be "nit-picking" about its aesthetic quality. We have found that some "shock-wave" writers need a more thorough understanding of literature, some of them need more cultivation, and above all, "shock-wave" fiction has so far not created "archetypes," which is a must for realist literature. "Shock-wave" writers tend to be content with description of events and neglect the depiction of the personalities and