

ARE WRITERS HUMAN?

By Nan Maury Lightfoot

IN an impromptu speech made at a very literary luncheon, a southern college president proclaimed that writers were "just like other human beings". I am holding no brief for this gentleman's viewpoint, but only making three statements which seem to uphold it. To prove these I will use as evidence some notes made by me as secretary of the Virginia Writers Club while James Branch Cabell was president, and Margaret Montague and Kate Langley Bosher were vice presidents. The club is composed of forty members, twenty of whom have published books, the rest being magazine writers of more and less renown — altogether a fairly good body from which to draw conclusions.

First. *Writers have differences of opinion, like doctors, and other human beings.*

This became evident at one of our

earliest meetings during a discussion of how to write poetry — one member advocating a lack of preparedness, while another not only believed in preparedness in this life, but asserted that to be a poet one must have poetic ancestors. A third said that the greatest inspiration for writing poetry came while listening to a thoroughly dull sermon.

The chairman had previously requested that members having favorite poems to read aloud should not bring anything longer than "Paradise Lost". The opinions on the poems read were widely divergent also, one writer admitting that he liked humorous verse, while another said he enjoyed old, very sad poems, similar, I suppose, to that one positively forbidding the curfew to ring tonight. He confessed that he had shed many tears over the fate of little Casabianca until comforted by learning that he was "eating peanuts by the peck". (It seems to me, that occupation might be equally as deadly as a burning ship.)

It is not from lack of further evidence as to differences of opinion that I go on to the next subject.

Second. *In politics, writers are like human beings.*

Our second election of officers took place one night after an address by Mr. Reilly, the Chicago publisher, who has patronized our wares to the extent of publishing books by four of the members. An excellent plan had been devised by which new officers were to be elected, but the unruly members refused to conduct things in an orderly manner. When the secretary began to pass around the voting slips she was met with:

"What are you giving us these *pieces of paper* for?" "We're not going to do it *that way*." And, "Here take this back — I don't want it."

Meanwhile, it seems, the Bolshevik in the club had, by a rising vote, reelected the old officers. When the crestfallen secretary returned to her seat she was greeted with these gracious words from President Cabell, "Of course I knew you would *engineer* it so as to get yourself reelected." And he further insinuated that she had bribed the voters with a campaign fund of 34 postals (a recent gift) to keep herself in this profitable position. I trust the reader sees the similarity between these literary and lay politicians.

Third. *Writers are no more insane than other human beings.*

On one occasion we had two neurologists to speak to us, the subject being "The Subconscious Mind in Literary Work". It must have amused the public no little to see in the papers the following morning that the Virginia Writers Club had called in two specialists in diseases of the brain. And the readiness with which these doctors accepted shows they thought our club no barren field for future patients. Yet the discussion which followed proved beyond a doubt that the writers were not controlled by the subconscious mind but used it to do their work for them from time to time. One member even asked for a prescription to make her subconsciousness work, not just occasionally but all the time, like an industrious servant. (A mind, I suppose, that would not even ask for Thursday afternoon off or expect her to get Sunday night supper!) The president alone expressed amazement at the idea of another mind working for you while you slept, and said it "sounded like cheating" to him.

Although I may have proved in part that writers collectively are human, it is not easy to prove them so individually, and particularly is it difficult to

decide in one instance. Many reviewers have insisted that James Branch Cabell is one, or all, of the characters in his books, but if this be true, then who is it that has been president of our club for three years and bears no resemblance to Kennaston, Charteris, or the Duke of Logreus? It will take careful analysis of our association with this unrealist and his attitude toward the club, to decide whether he is a character in a book or a human being.

Mr. Cabell is the shyest man imaginable. He came to the creating of the club, and upon arriving evidenced all the misery of a captive delivered over to the enemy — yet still a captive at bay. He was elected president that night, and read aloud in a low voice a paper — part of the manuscript of "Beyond Life" — then hastily retired into the background, giving place to Margaret Prescott Montague.

The first very inhuman trait noticeable in our new executive was his modesty, showing in an inability not to blush when complimented. This became most apparent one night after "Beyond Life" had been published, when the writers gave up a whole evening to its praising. As this praising progressed it became more and more evident that Mr. Cabell, who was facing the audience, was not "born to blush unseen".

He was far from an ideal president in many ways, even though he turned much of the management over to a friend whom we soon christened "the Mr. House of this administration". One trait which did change Mr. Cabell into a book character was his habit of becoming detached while listening to the program. Then Jurgen's biographer, as he was busily engaged in being, was far, far away, in Leukê or Poictesme, "dreaming dreams no mor-

tal ever dared to dream before", leaving a shell of himself in his chair.

In other ways, however, our executive took a very human interest in the club. He arranged for his friend Mr. Holt of McBride's to speak to us; and induced Ellen Glasgow to come to the club, suggesting the reception we gave her when "The Builders" was published. He planned to bring in Joseph Hergesheimer who was coming to visit him, but unfortunately Mr. Hergesheimer had to hurry home. Later when Hugh Walpole made a special trip to Virginia to see the author of "Jurgen", Mr. Cabell gave a reception at his home, Dumbarton Grange, so that the Virginia Writers might meet his English guest. Yes, James Branch Cabell has taken a kindly, human interest in the club members, treating each one, regardless of age and his own youthful years, with a sort of grandfatherly benevolence. Is this the Heartbreaker of Hamadryads? To my mind, certainly not. Yet, though he is not a character in his own books, candor compels me to add that, in some ways, his resemblance to "other human beings" is extremely slight.