

The writing of from here to eternity

My father liked to read. My father never made it out of high school but he wound up spending three years in another institution much better suited for developing powers of concentration and the narrowing of interests: Attica state prison. His preference was for books on crime and the mob and bios of people like Capone and lucky luciano and Meyer lansky etc but he also enjoyed some history and the occasional novel. One day he came home from the library with a copy of from here to eternity. I was 13. at this time I was emerging from the comic book stage and beginning to read writers like Mickey spillane and Irving Schulman and erskine Caldwell and so forth.

I saw this book on the coffee table and picked it up and started to read and went into my bedroom and stayed there for three days. When I emerged my head was spinning. I was 13 and the thought of becoming a writer had never occurred to me and wouldn't occur until some years later but it may have been at this time and by this book that the seed was first planted.

The writer of eternity was James Jones And there is an interesting story behind the book . Jones grew up in a small town—Robinson Illinois. He was a small town boy who wanted to be a big town boy. He wanted to be a writer—and a particular kind of writer. He wanted to be a Thomas Wolfe kind of writer. Wolfe—another small town type—had a taste for the 900 page novel—less of a problem for the reader in those days before the invention of TV and the VCR—and suffered from a an

acute form of adjectivitis. It was Mark Twain who said of the adjective: when in doubt—throw it out. Wolfe said: the adjective be damned.

But they were good books—written from the heart. They had power. I read them myself—*Look Homeward Angel, The Web and the Rock, Of Time and the City*. Those were my college years when I could hole up in my room and knock off a 900 page novel in three days.

Jones was self taught as a writer. He never attended college. War broke out and he was drafted and , four years later, returned to Robinson. He started work on a book—Eternity. There are three problem with writing:

- 1) the writing itself.
- 2) getting published
- 3) selling books

One is by far the easiest.

He banged on the book and at some point sent a few chapters to an editor at Scribners named Maxwell Perkins. Maxwell Perkins was the editor of Thomas Wolfe—also Hemingway--and a legendary figure in the publishing world. Jones had never met Perkins, had never corresponded with Perkins, had never talked to Perkins on the phone. He did not exist for Perkins. But he sent the manuscript to Perkins because in his enfeebled brain he, James Jones, was the next Thomas Wolfe.

What are the odds of an unsolicited manuscript submitted by some mental case from a town called Robinson Ill working its way out of the slushpile at the office of a major New York publishing house like Scribners and landing on the desk of a man like Max Perkins who actually proceeds to start reading this thing, and to like what he is reading, and to like it well enough to mail off a letter to the mental case encouraging him to continue work on the book?

The odds are high—astronomical

But there you have it. He writes Jones a letter and if Jones had one quality—beside a similar taste for the use of the multiple adjective acquired from Thomas Wolfe—it was a capacity for work.

Perkins was aging and in poor health and at some point, halfway thru the book, Jones was turned over to another editor—Burroughs Mitchell.

The writer/ editor relationship is critical and fragile. Writers are difficult people. They are loners, they are neurotic, they are obsessive. They are a pain in the ass. In addition, many of them lack talent.

Jones had the talent but was otherwise a splendid example of the breed—a stubborn cuss who considered the words

golden and getting one of these types to delete a single word, let along a paragraph—or chapter—is like pulling teeth. Its an endless struggle—exhausting. But Mitchell had a gift for nursing these people along. He was a class act—a gent. He was kindly, forgiving, *patient*. He was the man for this job.

The book got finished—a hell of a book—flawed in ways and badly overwritten in places—but it had the one thing that no other thing can substitute for—that irresistible thing that grabs the reader and keeps him glued to the page. It had that power. You started this book—all 300,000 words—and once started you finished it. That's writing.

And the timing was right. The war was still fresh in everyones mind and the publisher were desperate to get their hooks into the writer of the great novel of World War 2—the blockbuster they knew was out there and being written at that very moment.

That book was *From Here to Eternity*

There is a famous picture of Jones—in front of Scribners Bookstore—on Fifth Ave in New York, the mental case from Robinson Ill, self taught, a loner from out of nowhere, the reader of Thomas Wolfe, and behind him, filling up the display window of Scribners, stacks upon stacks of copies of *From Here to Eternity*.

He was 31.

This is called happiness