



## THE AUTHORITY

**T**HROUGHOUT the literary centers of the country a controversy is raging over a proposal by James M. Cain for an American Authors' Authority. It appeared in the July issue of *The Screen Writer*, a publication of the Screen Writers' Guild, and is unanimously backed by the board of that powerful union. Until last week the controversy lacked substance because few people were able to get hold of the text of Mr. Cain's startling proposal. But on September 13, it was front-page news that fifty prominent writers had formed the American Writers' Association to combat what it charged was an attempt to establish a monopoly control over all the literary material in the country.

In essence, Mr. Cain's proposal sets up a five-man board labeled The Authority (a somewhat ominous title) that would control and coordinate the work of four writers' Guilds—those of the Authors, Screen Writers, Radio Writers, and Dramatists. The Authority would copyright in its own name all material produced by writers, except that not subject to the author's copyright. It would act in an advisory and legal capacity on all transactions, lease rights under the copyright on behalf of the author, furnish "aggressive" field representatives to deal with publishers, picture companies, etc., attempt to secure a new copyright law and through lobbies to reduce writers' taxes.

The Authority proposes to finance itself by a service charge of one per cent of the total take on all the transactions it clears, whether from magazines, books, newspapers, motion pictures, or the radio. Later it will add another percentage to be levied "relentlessly" on the purchasers which

is to be pooled into an American Authors' Fund and used for the benefit of member writers.

According to Mr. Cain, all four of the Guilds would profit immediately from the membership dues of writers who turned over their new and old copyrights to the Authority. As he says, "Writers will have to join up and pay up." Since the outright sale of any material whatsoever would be eliminated, screen writers, he believes, might eventually recapture the present holdings of the studios, which have been long ago bought and paid for. Authors and dramatists would see the end of what he calls the vicious trade practices from which they have suffered, and they might regain the rights to their old properties. Radio writers by the use of the copyright could look forward to the creation of properties that are now claimed by the corporations, and all writers would gain by the vigorous enforcement of their rights and by recurring contracts negotiated by the Authority. The Authority would presumably be in the ring fighting for the writer at all times, keeping track of his foreign and reprint rights and all the other rights and profits that Mr. Cain believes are now stolen from him by avaricious magazines, publishers, agents, the radio, motion pictures, and everyone else who takes advantage of his gullibility and lack of business sense.

This glamorous proposal is written with all of the enthusiasm and confidence of a wildcat oil company's prospectus. It even envisages an extension into other fields, as if the prospectively enormous revenue from percentages and dues was not enough. Why not accept the copyrights of songwriters, painters, designers, etc., it suggests? Mr. Cain's etcetera might include every field of artistic endeavor known to man. This is a "blue sky" proposal with a vengeance. Now that it has climbed out of the pages of a magazine of small circulation and has presented itself as a vital issue to the writers outside of Hollywood and radio studios, it will certainly meet with the opposition of all established businesses dealing with writers, all of the responsible authors' agents, and, it is to be presumed, of nearly all of the independent writers in this country.

It is obvious that any all-embracing Authority of this nature, owning the copyrights to the works of a majority of American writers, advising them and perhaps controlling their contracts and negotiations with publishers here and abroad, with the theatre, motion pictures, and the radio, financed by percentages taken from

every sale of any kind, could without much difficulty strangle free speech and free literary enterprise. Mr. Cain has perhaps naively explained the methods that could be used in his explanation of how the motion pictures might be forced to give back to the writers, in this case to the Authority, the screen rights they now control.

"Through the united action of the screen writers," he suggests, "this might take the form of announcing that as of a certain date they will not work on any material except that whose copyright is owned by the Authority. Then to get a script done on one of these old properties, even a modernized rewrite of a previous script, they have to employ a member of the Guild and to get him they have to get the copyright assigned, they are not sitting as pretty as they thought (*sic*)."

There is only a step or two from that to telling a magazine editor or a publisher that a member of the Guild will not sell his work to him while he publishes other writers whose copyrights are not owned by the Authority. Imagine, then, that any one of the four Guilds to which a writer belongs dislikes the political beliefs expressed in a manuscript which is sent to the Authority for copyright. As might be expected, questions as to the political ideology of the backers of this fabulous scheme have been raised. The newspapers have perhaps made excessive capital of the statement by the American Writers' Association that since "the Screen Writers' Guild has well known pro-Communists in its leadership, color has been given to the charge that it was communist inspired, as well as the fact that the *Daily Worker* and other communist publications are giving the project all-out support."

Whether there are Communists in Hollywood and in radio studios or not, it is our opinion that the American Authors' Authority is dangerous and unworkable. And that it is what we like to call un-American is obvious from the threats of intimidation invented by Mr. Cain in these sentences: "This will compel every writer in the country hoping for picture or magazine sale to send his work to the Authority for copyright before magazines or publishers get it." If this should ever come about, no fiction writer or popular non-fiction writer could escape. Of course they can retire to their farms purchased with the ill-gotten profits of magazines and motion picture owners, turn their swimming pools into asparagus beds, and devote themselves to cows and agriculture murmuring, "Give me liberty or give me death!" H. S.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## When Is a Pun a Pun?

SIR: As one of your most devoted readers, I am sure you will not mind if I remonstrate with you about that rather awful pun sequence in Trade Winds this week (SRL, Aug. 24). Not that I mind such nonsense about Norwegian engineers. Far from it! But why not extract every bit of juice from it by altering the line to read "never the twains shall meet"?

May I take this opportunity to tell you how much pleasure we get from Trade Winds every week.

ROBERT H. MERRILL.

Detroit, Mich.

*The editors absolve Mr. Cerf of all responsibility for the missing "s." The "s" appeared in Mr. Cerf's copy and in the proofs that were corrected. How it disappeared is one of those mysteries that will never be solved; no one, perhaps understandably, is anxious to confess the boner that took the edge off a good story.*

## A Word for the Churches

SIR: If it is permissible to base a communication to the SRL on a Biblical quotation, I should like to take as a text for what follows I Sam. x, 11: "Is Saul also among the prophets?"

Since my initial subscription to the SRL (which goes back to Vol I, No. 1), I have occasionally found in it matter which seemed out of character, but I have never before had such a jolt as I experienced when I read "Their Brothers' Keepers" (Aug. 10). Editorially the SRL has rarely assumed any definite attitude with regard to institutional Christianity, but the tenor of the average article which touches the subject at all has been that the churches are nothing but the worst kind of bad jokes and that their supporters are either hypocrites or blockheads. These assumptions, it seems fair to suppose, would not be so constantly made if they were not believed to represent a pretty general consensus among the SRL's constituency.

Having read "Their Brother's Keepers" I, therefore, feel an astonishment similar to that felt by the Israelites at finding the materialistic Saul suddenly turned into a prophet. "Their Brothers' Keepers" is a story of prejudice and injustice met, and successfully met, not by any group of liberals, uplifters, or reformers but by the pastor of the local Methodist church, backed up by his parishioners and by his bishop. When the leading article in an issue of the SRL is devoted to telling how church people, and more particularly Methodists, made good, while the sophisticates were seemingly conspicuous by their absence, the phenomenon is worthy of comment. Would Mr. Neuberger, I wonder, object to one's finding in his narrative a suggestion that the self-assurance of the intellectuals has possibly carried them rather far and that the despised churches, after all, may have hold on something fundamental? Two thousand years ago a



THROUGH HISTORY WITH J. WESLEY SMITH

"But Mr. Greeley—I like it here in the East!"

similar self-assurance was expressed by asking: "Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him?" History, nevertheless, has not given a very high place to the men who framed the question.

HAROLD S. DAVIS.

Boston, Mass.

## Runs on Titles

SIR: E. T. Morneweck's letter in the August 10 issue and the editorial of the following week called "Little Book, What Is Your Name?" relieved me of writing an article about book titles, for both summed up the scope of the intended discussion except for one aspect:

Titles seem to be guided by fashions. "Gone with the Wind" sponsored quite a number of titles containing the word "Wind." After the success of "Stars Fell on Alabama," there followed quite a galaxy of stars. In order to verify this, I started a research in the *Book Review Digest*, but I got lost in the dark—literally—in the word *dark*. I found:

"Dark Danger," a spy story of World War II, by Horler.

"Dark Medallion," a tragic story of a Missouri family, told from a little girl's point of view, by Langley.

"Dark Night of the Soul," obviously borrowed from St. John of the Cross, a discussion of suffering and sin, by Harkness.

"Dark Prophecy," a detective story by Alan, which one reviewer labeled soporific.

"Dark Rainbow," a tragic romance of World War II, by Butler.

"Dark Sails," a historical novel of Colonial days, by Miller.

"Dark Rosaleen," a story of Ireland, by Blundell, and

"Dark Symphony," a Negro's autobiography, by Adams.

This bears out my theory that certain words become fashionable and

they are used in titles, regardless of subject. I don't think writers choose them consciously: perhaps a word or a phrase reechoes in the mind, and the author says: "That would make a good title"—and then he begins to make up a story, or a poem, or an essay. One thing is certain: it's very difficult to get a title after the poem, or story, or essay has been written.

SR. M. MARGUERITE, RSM.

Baltimore, Md.

SRL files disclose 102 titles beginning with "Dark" or "The Dark," including two "Dark Horses."—THE EDITOR.

## Hymns of Hate

SIR: I'd like to slay, and I'm not jokin',

Those who say "By the same token."

JUANA FOUST.

Alexandria, Va.

SIR: It riles me, I confess,  
When a thoughtless wight  
Replies "That's right!"  
Instead of simply "Yes."

GRETA SACKETT.

Farmingdale, N. J.

SIR: Although in prose and poetry I see it,  
I've never heard an author say "al-beit."

JUNE WROBLESKI.

Rocky River, Ohio

SIR: May mildew blight his every blurb

Who uses "contact" as a verb.

HELEN PLOTZ.

Brooklyn, N. Y.

SIR: I'll get a pain almost neuralgic  
Next time I read the word *nostalgic*.

NANCY BYRD TURNER.

Brandon, Vt.