

# How To Write

With Apology to Henry S. Canby, Department of English, Yale

By WILLIAM SAROYAN

EDITOR'S NOTE: Bad writing may be due to a bad idea, or it may be due to a failure in expression that comes from bad thinking or bad English or both. If the idea is bad, nothing can be done except burn the manuscript and discourage the writer from inflicting more wandering words upon a society already written and talked to the point of distraction.

Page 25 of Mr. Canby's book, *Better Writing*.

FIRST you must have a bad idea—something trite, such as a man falling in love with a chorus girl. Next, of course, these two people must be given names. The matter of names is simple, almost anything will do. So the man may be disposed of as John Brown and suitable comment made upon him, such as, "He was one of those men who believed that even if you couldn't fool some of the people some of the time, you could certainly fool yourself all of the time."

Next the girl, although her mere identification as a chorus girl is something of a name in itself. But then she *does* have to have a name and in a sudden burst of inspiration you christen her Maisie, adding that it is none of the reader's business what her last name happens to be. Maisie's moral nature may be revealed by stating that she had been loved twice; once by the Army; once by the Navy. (This, of course, will make the reader laugh, or at least, smile, as it will indicate that the chorus girl isn't much when it comes to several of the more important commandments.)

If you like and you find you have the space, you can jot down a few lines about Maisie's girl and boy friends. Tell where she was born, but not why. Have her pass a few remarks so that her English will remain in history as one of the various kinds of American being spoken by the flaming youth of her time. And you might add, should you care to, that as far as love is concerned Maisie has ideas of her own without ever having read Madame Glynn.

Now you are well started. Your foundations are in. Here is a man, John Brown or Hopkins by name, who is among other things a bookkeeper and an ignoramus; and here, on the other hand, or more correctly in the first row, second from the left end is Maisie, who among other things is a chorus girl. Now every male reader above the age of eleven has at some time or other

fallen in love with a chorus girl, or with a whole front row of chorus girls. To read about some poor, deluded victim who is in exactly the same dilemma as he was once at one time, pleases him immensely. From the vantage point of his superior sophistication, he will anticipate in high glee the spectacle of John Brown making a damned ass of himself.

## PLAN FOR A SMALL GARDEN

By ANITA DAY HUBBARD

*I sow my fields with proper grain  
Against the winter's needs.  
I dig the tares from out the wheat.  
I'm ruthless with the weeds.*

*But in a little hidden place  
I grow wild oats and yew,  
With primroses along the paths,  
And rosemary,—and rue.*

So far so good. You have disposed of this much with neatness and dispatch. What to do with Maisie and John? That will be the meat of your story. Now as anybody knows, who has ever read *about* writing short stories, all that has to be done is to get these characters to do and say things. Their actions and conversation must tell the story. What they do and say must explain itself to the reader and its part in the tale and its plot *sans* trimmings, embellishments and explanations by the writer. Ah yes, but it seems to you that in most stories the writer himself says considerable that his characters have nothing to do with. Is there any reason why you can't do the same? Apparently there isn't and you proceed to do just that, writing a little of something about very thing.

Several paragraphs may be accounted for in this fashion. Splendid! You are getting on fine; you warm up. You haven't as yet brought in any action, but at the same time your plot shows symptoms of beginning to unfold itself. Now there ought to be some psychology in the story at this point. Nice sounding word, psychology, an erudite acquisition to one's vocabulary about the second year in high school, and it is a word and idea that goes over big with readers who

likewise achieved the second year in high school, or who go in for that sort of thing.

So you have a feeling that the best part of your tale, or at least one of its best parts, is when you mention that John Brown, the bookkeeper, has to see the show twice to fully convince himself that it is Maisie he is in love with, rather than the red-headed, adorable young thing next to her. Aha, that's psychology for your reader—pure, simple, unadulterated. There will be readers who will stop reading when they come to that and look around to see if anybody is watching them. At this point, you have to have something to bring them back. Some remark, conveying the idea that this fellow Brown is a poor sort, or—shall we say of questionable intentions? That never fails to hold wandering readers. They will go on in spite of themselves and spectators to see what happens to Brown.

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AFTER the second show John has to do something to attract the little chorus girl's attention, so what does he do but sneak up on her as she leaves the stage entrance and ask her out to lunch or something of that kind. This is really about the best way to have the would be suitor attract the attention of his admired lady of the chorus. Thus this method is recommended in preference to any other. It is safe.

The chorus girl, Maisie, of course, is or isn't overcome with joy; or she immediately does or doesn't fall madly in love, according to what you intend to take place or what effect you intend the story to have. It is bound to have some kind of an effect one way or the other, whether you intend it to or not.

If you are a good Baptist, or even if you are a down-right bad one, you will have Maisie identify herself as a lady—emphasis on the lady, and with suitable remarks she will send John Brown back to his little mother, who lives in a small cottage (the cottage must always be small) somewhere or other. Don't try to describe the cottage small, or tell a long story about John's mother, because the story happens to be about her son such as he is.

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