

Never Struck by Lightning

Criticism by
Thomas Fox Averill



We all know William Allen White as the quintessential Kansan of the early 1900s—he even managed to die on Kansas day, in 1944. We all know White as journalist, too, for his editorials “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” and “Mary White.” But not everyone knows that he was an amazingly prolific author of literature as well, producing eight books in 25 years for a total of over 2,600 pages of fiction. I know, because I’ve read all 2,600 pages.

White’s literary career started in 1893 with *Rhymes By Two Friends* (written with Albert Bigelow Paine, later to become famous as a biographer of Mark Twain) and ended in 1918, with the publication of his second novel, *In The Heart Of a Fool*. In between came *The Real Issue* (1896), *The Court of Boyville* (1899), *Stratagems and Spoils* (1901), *In Our Town* (1906), *God’s Puppets* (1916)—all collections of short stories—and *A Certain Rich Man* (1909), a novel. After 1918, his 14 other book-length works were all non-fiction. In short, he gave up writing fiction, no longer trying to sustain the double life of literary artist and journalist.

White’s divided writing career, and his feelings about it, can be traced back to at least 1896, when he published what I think is his very best fiction, the stories, *The Real Issue*. Of his turn from poetry to fiction, he wrote in his *Autobiography*: “It was about this time Sallie (White’s wife) told me that any of a thousand men in America could write as good verse as I, but that I had a chance to do something with prose which might really carry me.”

With Sallie, in the evenings after his journalistic work, he wrote and re-wrote the stories that became *The Real Issue*. Upon their publication in book form, he was ebullient:

“It was a moment in life never to be forgotten. It was indeed the journey’s end of our struggles and hardships. We had entered into a new life. We were breathing another atmosphere. The printer, the reporter, the editorial writer on the *Star*, the country editor wrestling three days a week with his pay roll, with his petty cares and troubles—all these skins which I had worn were cast aside. I was a young author!”

**The double
writing life of
William Allen White.
Why did he not try
to sustain a reputation
as a literary artist
and journalist?**

He was author, yes, of a published book of fiction. But he was not to cast aside so easily the skin of country editor: another important writing event had also occurred in 1896, the publication of “What’s the Matter with Kansas?,” which was re-published nationwide, and made him doubly famous.

Thus White commanded national attention in two spheres, literature and journalism, in the same year. As he travelled the country in the Fall of 1896, he mixed with the literary society of his time. But, he wrote in the *Autobiography*: “Even then, I led a double life...that winter I went to a feast at Zanesville, Ohio, whereat Mark Hanna was the host. It was given for the men, who, he publicly announced, had helped to win the battle of 1896.”

Even White’s writing of “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” was closely linked with the beginning of his literary career. He had received the proofs of *The Real Issue*, from Williams and Way, his publisher, in August of 1896. His first

response was to take them to Sallie, who was then in Colorado, at the White’s summer cabin in the mountains. On August 13, dressed in his “best bib and tucker,” he was just coming from the post office when he was accosted by a group of Populists: “They ganged me—hooting, jeering, nagging me about some editorial utterances I had made. I was froggy in the meadow and couldn’t get out, and they were taking a little stick and poking me about.” Angry, White stalked to his office and wrote the editorial which would begin, if not make, his journalistic reputation.

So, the first journalistic fame came from an editorial written very hastily, as White was leaving town, bearing the gift of his literary career to Sallie, who had all but co-authored the stories in *The Real Issue*. Ironically, what was written in haste has survived much more vividly than the nights of labor which produced the stories. Another irony is that in theme and subject matter, *The Real Issue* might have been read sympathetically by the same Populists



White blasts in the editorial. The stories, after all, are many of them about the failure of dreams, about how difficult the Kansas environment makes it for the survival of towns, townspeople and farmers, and about the natural corruption of those in political life.

In the beginning, both the editorial and the collection of short stories were received quite favorably. White was seen in the literary world as one of the better local colorists (then quite fashionable), on a par with Hamlin Garland and Octave Thanet. *The Nation* wrote that White had a "right to speak for Kansas," and that his stories had "the accent of truth." And of "The Story of Aqua Pura," one of White's best: "If we remember the years of cruel drought in Kansas, it will not be for the careful accuracy which provided us with dates, but because of the four-year-old child who sat on the warped steps and asked, 'What is rain, Mr. Barringer?'"

Personally, I think White's first book of fiction showed incredible promise. Dis-

playing some of the good writing going on at the turn of the century in America, it focusses on the individual psychology of interesting characters, their secrets, their obsessions, their intense inner lives, their guilts. It shows quite forcefully the negative effect of Kansas on the hopes and aspirations of those who came to live here. Some of the stories are justifiably cynical, pessimistic and despairing. Finally the stories are dramatically rendered, under-told, and shown, rather than being obvious, moralistic studies told by a philosophical narrator, as is the case with much of White's later fiction. This is true even of his powerful *A Certain Rich Man*, which is wide in historical scope and intermittently wonderful in its characters and writing.

One critic wrote about a *A Certain Rich Man* (1909): "So long as there is an abundance of neatly bound sermons on the market, this particular sort of fiction seems not merely superfluous, but not quite honest." *The New York Times* wrote: "It

is such a big book, one must wish it were actually great." After the publication of *A Certain Rich Man*, White took a seven-year break from fiction until the 1916 short stories *God's Puppets* and the 1918 novel, *In the Heart of a Fool*. But with each book in between *The Real Issue* and the final novel, the critics became more critical. They were never harshly so, especially at first (*The Court of Boyville*, *Stratagems and Spoils*, *In Our Town*), but by *God's Puppets* they felt strongly that White had lost the drama and the individual characters, that he in fact had moved from literary author to journalist:

"The characters have the vividness of convention-bound melodrama and movie rather than the reality—the embodiment of type in individual—which marks the higher art of the novelist." (*Bookman*)

"Mr. White's present tales show every sign of having been prepared for consumption by that magazine reading public which is so much given to gloating over evil in high places." (*The Nation*)

"Five short stories of which all but the last are less fiction than social studies of a middle west town. The qualities which *A Certain Rich Man* showed—sympathy, tolerance and understanding of human nature—give them interest to the thoughtful student of life, but they are not specially successful as fiction." (*Wisconsin Library Bulletin*)

Within two years after those reviews, White had given up his career as literary author. Perhaps in his busy life he had to choose the journalistic and political. When he decided to focus his energies, fiction was not a top priority. Perhaps he did not have the sensibility to become a lasting literary artist—being finally too self-important, too social, too successful in other areas. Perhaps, too, it is significant that he wrote no more fiction after the death of his daughter, Mary: some of his life's whimsy was gone. And perhaps he realized, by 1918, that (as Sallie had told him about his poetry) a thousand men in America could write as good fiction as he, but he had a chance to do something in journalism which would really carry him. Of course he had been already, and continued to be, carried by his journalism: that is what accounted for his sense of having a double life. He had won Pulitzer prizes, gained fame and notoriety, met with and influenced presidents. His literary career is even nicely bordered by his two most famous editorials, "What's the Matter with Kansas?" and "Mary White."

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William Allen White
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I once heard a poet say that to be a vital part of literary history, to be considered great and remembered, one had only to be struck by lightning a couple of times. He pointed out that the reputations of most of our great poets are substantiated by a large body of work, but that there are always those one, two, maybe six poems which, if not written, would leave the rest of the work unremarkable. He used Robert Frost as an example. Poems like "Mending Wall," "Stopping by a Woods," or "The Road Not Taken" really *make* his reputation, set him above the thousand others who were writing good work.

In his work as literary artist, White never was struck by lightning as he was in his work as journalist. He was writing good work in his 2,600 pages of fiction, he was substantial and prolific. But it is important to note that with the exception of a few very expensive paperback copies of *A Certain Rich Man*, left over from a reprint by the University of Kentucky Press "Novel as Social History" series, none of his fiction is even in print.

I think White came closest to lightning in *The Real Issue*, and that is the book, and really the only book, I would recommend to anyone who wanted to sample White's fiction. Otherwise, I like to apply the criticism of *A Certain Rich Man* to all of White's fiction: It is such a big body of work, one must wish it were actually great. It is not great literature, but it showed great promise. It reveals White's tremendous gusto for the written word in all its forms.

What a nice coincidence that White published two of his very best pieces of work in 1896. If you want White's best fiction, find *The Real Issue* and read "The Story of Aqua Pura," "A Story of the Highlands," "The Reading of the Riddle" and "The Story of a Grave." If you want to start the sampler of White's journalism career, read "What's the Matter with Kansas?" Finally, White quit the double life, and he most definitely chose the right road. Had he chosen literature, he would have been known only as someone whose literature degenerated into journalism. But he chose journalism, and made literature of it, creating a body of work actually great, a body of work that we Kansans return to again and again, and rightfully so. **KS**

Contributing Editor Thomas Fox Averill teaches creative writing and Kansas literature at Washburn University. He has published stories and poems, reviews and critical articles, most of them set in or focussing on, Kansas and the Midwest. His first collection of short stories, *Passes at the Moon*, was published earlier this year by the Bob Woodley Memorial Press.
