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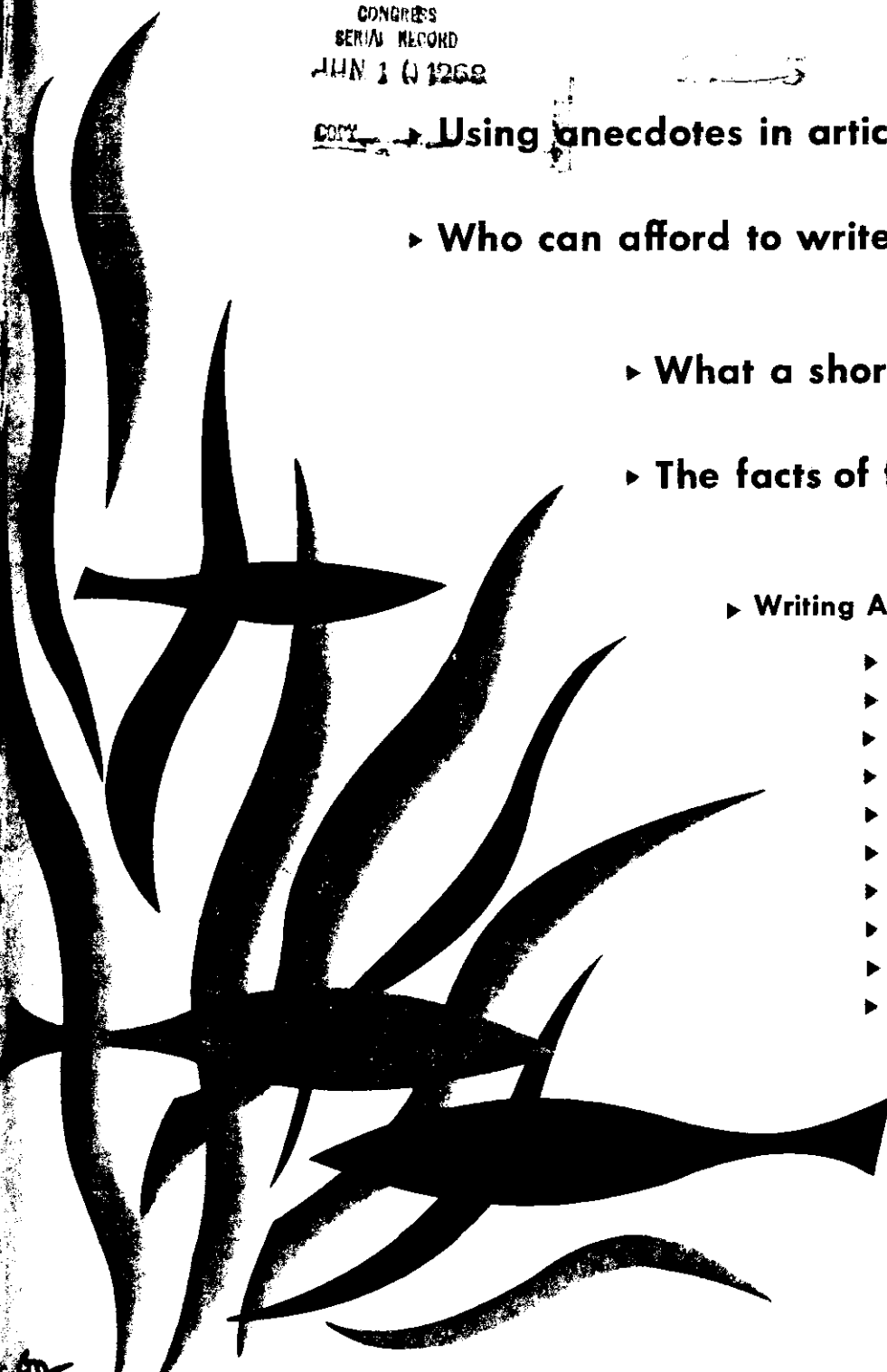
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Who Can Afford to Write for Money?

by DONALD HAMILTON

I WRITE mystery stories — novels of suspense, if you want to be fancy. Also, when the feeling moves me and the market is good (and sometimes even when it isn't), I write Western stories. I make my living this way. Sometimes I make a very good living. Sometimes my wife has to go to work to help out. I have been doing this for some twenty years, counting not from that remote moment when I first met a typewriter and fell in love, but only from the time I first broke into print and got paid for doing so.

I am, in other words, a professional writer, considered a low fellow in some quarters: a mercenary, common sort of chap who writes (ugh!) for money. At least this is a notion prevalent among people who don't know very much about writing. They seem to assume that money is the motive power behind all writing efforts on the popular level. I guess they feel that, since we're not creating great "serious" literature, we must be writing to get rich.

Well, nobody minds getting rich, but the fact is that I don't write for money. Paradoxically, I can't afford to.

I learned this lesson the hard way. Oh, I tried. I'd heard how it should be done if you wanted to hit the literary jackpot, and I sat staring at my typewriter for days, with an occasional glance at the bank book for bitter

encouragement. I told myself that now that I'd sold the *Post* — or whatever was my last big sale at the time — the thing to do, obviously, was to give them more of the same. There was no trick to it. I'd done it once; I could do it again. Only, it turned out, I couldn't.

IN TWENTY years of paid, professional writing, I've very rarely managed to sell a story that was written deliberately for a certain editor, a certain market, a certain audience, or a certain sum of money. On the other hand, I've done extremely well financially just about every time I've written something just for me alone, just because I had this screwy idea, and I simply had to get it down on paper and to hell with the current state of the exchequer. Let me give a few examples.

I have in my files a neat, well-constructed little murder story that was carefully slanted toward one of the better magazines. I wrote it on the advice of my agent, who said that was where the writing money was at that particular time — and money was what I needed, badly. I had already sold several stories to the so-called "slicks". I figured I had the technique well in hand. It was a pretty good story idea and, following the advice so frequently given to beginning writers, I read a lot of similar yarns first, to get a feeling for the market.

I got to work, and I think I wrote the piece pretty well, as well as I could write a story that didn't really interest me. As I say, it's in the files. It never sold anywhere.

On the other hand, on another impoverished morning some years back, I had a notion to write an off-beat story about a dude sea-captain in a bowler hat, a peaceful sort of Eastern chap who wouldn't carry a gun, who came out West in the nineties and got in-

DONALD HAMILTON was born in Uppsala, Sweden, and came to the United States with his family in 1924, later graduating from the University of Chicago with a degree in chemistry. After the end of World War II, Mr. Hamilton gave up chemistry to become a full-time writer, and he now has twenty Western and suspense novels to his credit, the most recent of which is *The Betrayers* (Gold Medal, 1966). Several of his books have been made into motion pictures, and in the three most recent films (*The Silencers*, *Murderers' Row*, and *The Ambushers*), Dean Martin has starred as Mr. Hamilton's detective hero, Matt Helm.

volved in some cattle-range troubles. He was an unlikely character, and the plot wasn't too solid. The story figured out to an unfortunate novelette length. The treasury was empty as usual, and I was busy on a book that was supposed to fill it, but suddenly I just had to get this new idea off my chest and onto paper. I knocked it out breathlessly, shoved it into an envelope, sent it off, and went back to work on the book that was supposed to be our bread and butter for the year.

Well, I tell you, friends, it was like blasting open the doors of Fort Knox. Everybody bought the crazy little novelette (it was called "The Big Country," and you may have read it in the *Post* or seen it in the movies), and the bread-and-butter book, when it finally got finished, barely made pin money.

Currently I am working on a series of novels dealing with a spy character you may have heard of named Matt Helm, whom I dreamed up one night when I should have been thinking hard about another story entirely. Again, the character looked unpromising (too old, too grim) but, again, I *wanted* to write that book and not the other, and by this time I'd learned my lesson. I dropped everything and concentrated on the story that intrigued me, and to hell with whether or not it would intrigue an editor. I'd worry about that when the time came to sell the thing.

As it turned out, my editor was delighted with the piece. I'd started with only one book in mind; it was he who suggested turning it into a series. I'm on the eleventh Matt Helm book now (the character still interests me) and the series is going great. My wife has quit teaching and gone back to school, preparing herself for some future year when maybe things won't be quite so good.

I can give many more examples of carefully researched, carefully slanted, carefully constructed yarns that didn't make the grade or made it just barely; and of wild ideas that I wrote simply because I had to write them, that coined money. Two additional examples should suffice to nail down the idea: my first sale of any kind, and my first Western book.

My first sale came at a time when I'd tried hard to break into the pulps (remember the pulps?) and had finally given up, defeated. I'd written one mystery novel that I knew, upon

rereading it, wasn't even good enough to send out. I had just finished another that I thought was a little better, barely passable. This was making the rounds and actually garnering a few hints of encouragement. You know what I mean: personal letters from editors to the effect that this book wasn't quite it, but they'd like to see my next. Obviously I was on the right track. Obviously the sensible thing to do was get right to work on another novel in the same style.

Obviously. So what did I do? Why, I sat down and dashed off a young-love short story about a boy returning from the wars who suspected his girl-wife of misbehaving in his absence. I shot this off to a slick, and after some revisions they took it and paid me seven hundred and fifty bucks for it — which seemed a fortune at the time and still ain't hay. (As a matter of fact, it was almost as much as I was paid for that first mystery novel when it finally did sell, a few weeks later.)

Now, I'm not a short story writer, and I have no notion of where that little piece came from — I've done very few since — but if I'd been sensible and mercenary and stuck to the literary line that promised a quick payoff, rejecting all irrelevant ideas, I might not have made connections with the big magazines for years.

Some years after this, when I was selling mystery serials with reasonable regularity, I got on a kick of reading Western stories, always favorites of mine. One night I woke up suddenly with my head full of a Western I wanted to write. This was strictly ridiculous. While I knew the country out there fairly well from childhood camping trips, I was no American history expert. Furthermore, by this time I was reasonably well established as a mystery writer, and had heard that one of the big magazines was eager for a suspense novelette along the lines of one I had sold them a year or two earlier — and as usual, the cupboard was pretty bare.

I fought it out with myself, lost, and disappeared into the local library. A good many hungry months later, I sold my first Western as a serial, it went as a book, and was taken by the movies (*The Violent Men*) for the largest

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What a Short-Short Is

(Continued from page 18)

"Why not?"

"I dunno."

"You must have done something."

"I didden."

"We're going home soon. Go on back there and say you're sorry."

The child walked slowly back to the crowd around the fountain.

The little girl has told her mother quite clearly that she has done nothing wrong. Yet, the mother orders her to go back to her friends and apologize. Communication has failed. The child goes off as she is told to, confused and miserable. But, as we say (with nonchalance), *that's life* . . . still (now I say it sincerely) life is precisely what to listen for.

One shot, one spot

All of which, of course, is equally true for long stories, novels, plays, or any other form of fictional writing. But it's particularly true for the short-short, because the short-short is a "one-shot" in the truest sense of the word. While its source of material lies in life, you're only allowed to aim at one spot, and you have to hit the bull's-eye to make it come through.

Who Can Afford to Write for Money?

(Continued from page 20)

sum of money I'd seen in one heap up to that time (and I've only seen a few as big since — twenty-five-grand piles of dough are still, unfortunately, not commonplace on these premises).

The suspense novelette? Well, you've already heard about that. It never sold, to the magazine I tailored it for or anywhere else.

WHAT is the moral of all this? It seems to be very simple: at least in fiction, how you write is considerably more important than what you write. Most stories have been told before; telling them again isn't going to get you very far, unless you can find a new and fresh way of doing it. But even the tireddest old plot clichés can take on new life, written by someone eager and enthusiastic.

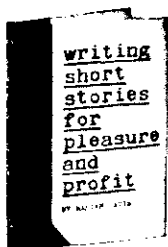
This being the case, you can't ever afford to pass up an idea that really excites you, no matter how far-out and unprofitable it may seem at first glance, because this is probably the idea you'll put your finest writing into. And your writing, in the last analysis, is all you have to sell.

If you truly want to be a professional writer, you simply cannot afford to write for money or security or anything but the sheer pleasure of writing what you really like, and writing it well. It is a theory beloved by the literati that the man who writes to get paid operates in a different and more mechanical way from the man who writes just to write. This is bunk. We all write to write, and we all just hope to squeeze out an adequate living in the process, so we can keep on writing. And the only way I've found to do this is to give the editors, and readers, not what I think will interest them, but what I know interests me.

So put your efforts into the stuff that fires *your* imagination, and to hell with what you think — or have been told — that the market requires. With a little luck you'll find, as I did, that the market requires exactly the stuff you turn out when you're working feverishly for yourself alone.

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