

Mostly about People

By Wally Traling



How A Cannery Makes A Writer

A writer is a person who writes, and if what comes out of his head, through his fingers, is good, then this is good.

Peter S. Beagle, who has lived on Smith grade near Santa Cruz for the past two years, has written two books.

"A Fine and Private Place," published in 1960, sold 10,000 copies.

"I See By My Outfit" comes out Monday, via Viking Press, having already appeared in a condensed version in Holiday magazine.

His short story, "Come Lady Death," originally published in The Atlantic Monthly, appears in the new "Prize Stories from the 1965 O. Henry Awards" (\$4.75 Double-day).

Beagle is 26 years old.

"It supprises the hell out of me sometimes that I am able to do this," he said, which should answer a few questions by would-be writers.

He is soft-spoken, introspective and bearded, a condition which he plans to remedy soon by shaving.

A native of the Bronx, a stone's throw from the greenest part of that borough, the Woodlawn Cemetery, he was weaned in an atmosphere of education, both his parents being teachers.

Beagle said he was first inspired to write, not by any ethereal visitation, but by a news story that Johnny Weissmuller was discontinuing his role as Tarzan. He was 7 at the time and gave vent to his disappointment by writing his own Tarzan story.

He liked the feel of words, which soon necessitated a decision—whether to be an outfielder or a writer. "My incapacity to judge fly balls answered my question," he said.

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Beagle graduated from the University of Pittsburgh and while in college, wrote his first novel using the Bronx cemetery as a setting. It was about the only successful thing he



Peter S. Beagle

had written up to that time, he said.

"Most of the reviews were good, but Newsweek bombed me. That didn't bother me," he said. "What bothers me about reaction is people praising me for the wrong reasons.

"I simply like to tell stories. In 1963 I came across the U.S. on a motor scooter to California and what I saw and did is the text of the new book coming out.

"Yes, people often ask me how to become a writer. I say, read and write; sit and look at the typewriter.

"I try to average five to eight hours a day and every day I get discouraged and usually once during the day I'll quit the writing business and decide to become a cannery worker. But, I go back.

"It's difficult to explain how I write. How can I know what I think until I hear what I say, on a blank piece of paper, and that empty paper is my worst enemy.

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"I'm not much of a public person. I hate being taken for a writer and I hate being collected. Some people make a hobby of collecting writers like salt shakers. I'm not a hermit, but it bothers me that I'm expected to perform like I write," he said.

Beagle likes to talk about books and writing. Once during his college years he was given the task of explaining W. G. Auden's poem "Death of Yeats" to a football player. What a challenge.

"But when he finally understood the thing through my interpretation it made me feel wonderful."

The young author expects to leave soon for the south to do a piece for Holiday on Negro voter registration. "This will be interesting," he said, "because I never wrote about hate before."

Beagle is married and the father of three children.

His wife doesn't write. She is the prodder.

"When I start raving about the house about how lousy my writing is going she has a stock line that gets me back to work.

"Well, you can always go to the cannery."

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