

# Frank Norris Studies

Edited by Joseph R. McElrath, Jr.

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## Charles G. Norris, Margaret Sanger and *Seed*

Richard Allan Davison

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On June 16th, 1930, shortly after receiving from Doubleday, Doran & Company three sets of galley proofs of his seventh novel, *Seed*, Charles G. Norris (1881-1945) sent one set back across the country to the world-renowned birth control advocate Margaret Sanger (1879-1966), eager for her "comments on his labor" and, no doubt, her approbation. He got more (or less) than he bargained for. If he hoped for a letter of endorsement or even a quotable quote for the advertisements to launch what Doubleday knew would be a very controversial novel, he hoped in vain.

The galley proofs Sanger read revealed a crowded novel with a cast of characters so large that Norris thought it necessary to include a genealogy chart of the central family (circa 1890), all twenty-nine of whom were affected in some way by birth control or the absence of same.

The novel's hero Bart Carter (who is also a novelist) lives in relative happiness with his wife Peggy and their five children until she banishes him from her bed for fear she will become pregnant again. Bart leaves her for a ten year affair with a more sexually liberal mistress who also furthers his literary career; but his love for Peggy remains undying. When at the novel's conclusion Peggy accepts him back, the sexual terms remain uncertain. Perhaps she thinks that menopause will eventually solve their problem. Perhaps they will continue to practice abstinence.

Sanger would have scorned either solution as dodging the main issue of birth control. Although she may well have approved of most of the novel, which does make a strong case for birth control (especially in the many subplots), the closing section would clearly have grated on her mightily. Here the highly respected and sympathetic dying priest argues unflinchingly against any kind of birth control other than abstinence. Such a stance was anathema to Margaret Sanger. Understandably, the toughminded advocate for contraception had battled this conservative belief too long to offer any kind of support to a novel (one that would be internationally reviewed and

read) that might do damage to her cause.

The written communications between Charles G. Norris and Margaret Sanger regarding *Seed* tell a dramatic story that, in the main, speaks for itself. Their exchanges appear below without emendation.

\* \* \*

LA ESTANCIA  
SARATOGA  
CALIFORNIA

June 16th, 1930.

Dear Mrs. Sanger:

The long contemplated publication of my book on the subject of Birth Control, "Seed", is about to occur. It is slated for appearance on August fifteenth<sup>1</sup> and I am working very hard on correcting the galleys now. I know how interested you are in this book and so I am sending you an extra set of galleys in order that you may be acquainted with the volume at an early date. Naturally I shall be interested in your reaction. I have tried to present the story as fair from both angles as I can, feeling that the more thought the public at large gives to the question, the more speedily may come the decision regarding the rights and wrongs of the matter. The compilations of "Seed" has taken me three years—very hard work—as you will see when you come to peruse its pages.

As an indication of my high regard to you and the cause to which you have dedicated your life, permit me to say that of the three sets of galleys which I have received from my publishers, I am sending you one.

With all good wishes and looking forward to your comment on my labor, I am,

Yours very sincerely,  
Charles G. Norris  
[signed]

Mrs. Margaret Sanger,  
Birth Control League of America,  
46 West 15th Street,  
New York City, N.Y.

CGN: W

\* \* \*

June 27, 1930.

Mr. Charles G. Norris,  
La Estancia,  
Saratoga, Calif.

Dear Mr. Norris:

Congratulations on your new book "Seed"!

I received the galleys and last night read the first five chapters. I shall doubtless finish it in the next few days. I greatly admire your style and the way you have marshalled together the material for the opening chapters. I am sure I am going to have a good time reading it.

Thank you so much for letting me have one of your precious galley sets. I shall certainly write you as soon as I have finished reading it.

Sincerely yours,  
[Margaret Sanger]

MS:al

\* \* \*

WESTERN UNION

1930 JUL 3 AM 2:45<sup>2</sup>

FA853 22 NM=SANJOSE CALIF 2

MRS MARGARET SANGER=  
17 WEST SIXTEENTH ST NEWYORK NY=

DEAR MRS SANGER DEEPLY INTERESTED IN YOUR REACTIONS TO SEED AND I AWAIT YOUR LETTER WHEN YOU HAVE FINISHED IT WITH IMPATIENCE=

CHARLES G. NORRIS.

\* \* \*

Mrs. Margaret Sanger, 17 West 16th Street  
WESTERN UNION

July 3, 1930.

Mr. Charles G. Norris  
La Estancia  
Saratoga, California

Mrs. Sanger absent city returning tenth Will communicate then

Secretary

\* \* \*

July 11, 1930.

Mr. Charles G. Norris,  
La Estancia,  
Saratoga, Calif.

Dear Mr. Norris:

I am very sorry that I kept you waiting and that you had to telegraph me about your proofs. I have been away on a lecture trip through Rhode Island and Connecticut and have just returned.

I took your galleys with me and have almost finished reading them. I am three-fourths of the way through, but have had to squabble with my family for every page. I will finish it in a few days and will be happy to write you at length about it.

You certainly have spent a great deal of thought on this subject and your pen is mighty. Just a hurried note of apology. More later.

Very sincerely yours,  
[Margaret Sanger]

MS:al

\* \* \*

July 21, 1930.

Mr. Charles G. Norris  
La Estancia,  
Saratoga, Calif.

Dear Mr. Norris:

I hope you will forgive my delay in replying to your telegram concerning your very interesting book "Seed". I have read it with deep interest and I am torn between two opinions—that of myself as a woman and that of my interest in a cause. I think women will be interested in this book.

I wish that the author would reveal himself in the theme. There are many points that I wish I had the opportunity to discuss with you and which, I am sure, will occur to more than the average reader: for instance, what is the purpose of having the Catholic Priest bring Peggy and Bart together after their long separation, when he gives no solution to their problem?<sup>3</sup>

Doubtless, one must assume that Peggy relinquishes her religious prejudices against contraceptive practice. If so, then the love theme is good; but I did not get from the story that

there was a solution to their problem except that Bart has become more worldly and doubtless knew more than when they separated years before.

It seems to me that the arguments for Birth Control are very weak indeed. I became bored to extinction to read the same old plea that the intelligent classes must enter into a cradle competition with the feeble-minded and morons in order to save the world. I think on that score you might have struck a much stronger note. The book shows a great deal of study but I should decidedly say that it favors the usual Catholic prejudices and upholds them.

I want to thank you again for your nice letter and for your kindness in letting me read the galleys, which I am returning to you under another cover.

Sincerely yours,  
[Margaret Sanger]

P.S. —I noticed you state that \$500. is the Federal offense; it is \$5000.<sup>4</sup>

Was it not Chesterton instead of G.B.S. who made that comment on Birth Control?<sup>5</sup>

M.S.

\* \* \*

After finishing the galleys of *Seed*, Margaret Sanger replaced her earlier "greatly admired" (in her 29 June letter) with the cooler "very interesting" as she seems not to have had "the good time reading it" that she had anticipated. One wonders how Sanger felt about Norris's portrait of Josephine, who, although a minor character, is a strongly drawn one. For his crusading character Josephine (the novelist-hero Bart Carter's cousin), Norris drew heavily on Sanger's own career, even using an address similar to that of Sanger's birth control clinic. The family rebel Josephine "took up birth control, associating herself with the work of a birth control clinic down on Fifteenth Street, that was the place the police raided last April" (*Seed*, 354).

The galleys of *Seed* are not available for collation with the printed novel and one cannot determine the extent to which Norris made changes; but Sanger is correct concerning his vacillations, especially in the concluding sections. *Seed* remains one of his weakest novels. His handling of the complicated issue of birth control is much less effective than, for instance, that of the then-complex matter of divorce in his third novel *Brass*. Regardless, Norris sold the film rights of *Seed* for fifteen thousand dollars. In 1931 Universal Pictures released the film version whose large Hollywood cast included a big-eyed young

actress named Bette Davis.<sup>6</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Doubleday, Doran & Co. placed an advertisement in the 2 August 1930 issue of *Publishers' Weekly* announcing that it was "publishing 57 books this Fall. . . . First among them is *Seed* by Charles G. Norris, a novel of birth control which enjoys the enviable distinction of being pronounced a big best-seller by everyone who has read it. Designed by Rockwell Kent—sells for \$2.00. Published August 15th." The contract Norris signed specified a printing of 105,000 copies of the trade edition (exclusive of those for the Book of the Month Club).

<sup>2</sup>Since his telegram is dated only six days after the date of Sanger's letter, Norris probably fired back his response as soon as he received her enthusiastic agreement to read the galleys. The "first five chapters" contain none of the controversial material to which she might object, and Sanger probably believed that she was "going to have a good time" reading the rest of the galleys. Sanger's secretary clearly responded to Norris's telegram as soon as she received it.

<sup>3</sup>Sanger's claim that "the Catholic Priest . . . gives no solution to their problem" is not quite accurate, though it is, of course, telling of her viewpoint. He does, predictably, suggest a method of birth control: abstinence.

<sup>4</sup>Sanger's familiarity with the figure is drawn in part from personal experience. In 1917 she was found guilty of distributing birth control information and given the choice of paying a \$5,000 fine or serving a term of thirty days in the workhouse. She served the thirty days. In *Seed*, the correction was not made.

<sup>5</sup>I have found no reference to either G.K. Chesterton or G.B.S., George Bernard Shaw, in the version of the *Seed* text that appeared in print.

<sup>6</sup>I am indebted to Alexander C. Sanger, Planned Parenthood of New York City, for permission to publish the letters written by Margaret Sanger. Esther Katz, Project Director and Editor, The Margaret Sanger Papers Project, New York University, identified the correspondence presented here and kindly provided photocopies derived from *The Papers of Margaret Sanger*, 145 microfilm reels (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress Photoduplication Service, 1976); reel 009, frames 0913-0918. Forthcoming is the Project's *Margaret Sanger Papers Microfilm: The Collected Document Series*, which will include a letter from Sanger to Norris dated 29 April 1926, the original of which is in the Norris Family Papers collection at The Bancroft Library. Sincere thanks as well are extended to Katz's colleagues, Cathy Moran Hajo, Anke Voss Hubbard, and Peter C. Engelman—and to Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., who put me in touch with this remarkable group of scholars.

## Frank Norris's Blackwood Tale

Eric Carl Link

North Georgia College

One popular form of Gothic story in antebellum America was the "Blackwood Tale," so named because the type came into popularity through its association with the early nineteenth-century British periodical *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. The Blackwood tale is known for its interest in sensation and predicament. In a Blackwood tale a protagonist is enmeshed in some form of bizarre, terrifying, and/or impossible situation (usually life-threatening)—such as being buried alive or enclosed in a room with the walls slowly closing around—and then proceeds to record his or her thoughts, sensations, and observations.<sup>1</sup> These stories commonly feature "lost" manuscripts, found by an "editor" who presents them to the reading world. Occasionally, the death of the protagonist is indicated by an abrupt ending in which the recovered manuscript breaks off in mid-sentence. It is common in these tales for the protagonist's observations to begin with a degree of verisimilitude and grow increasingly fantastic as the tale progresses. The description, then, moves from the purely sensuous to the supra-sensuous, even metaphysical, as the predicament pushes the protagonist closer to death and further into madness. Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Pit and the Pendulum" roughly follows the Blackwood formula, and Poe satirized the Blackwood tale in the diptych "How to Write a Blackwood Article" and "A Predicament."

Whether Norris was consciously adhering to any antebellum models or not is undetermined; nevertheless, his "A Memorandum of Sudden Death" follows the Blackwood tale formula closely. The tale is framed with an account by the "editor" of how the manuscript detailing the author's final days came into his hands. The "editor" received the manuscript from a harness-maker named Juan Tejada, who, in turn, had received it from a "bone-gatherer" named Bass. Bass, the editor speculates, found the leaves of the manuscript blowing about the desert in western Arizona. The author, a young writer named Arthur Staples Karlake, had published articles and fiction in a "famous monthly magazine of New York" under the pen-name Anson Qualtraugh, and his novel, *The Peculiar Treasure of Kings*, is, according to the editor, well-known because of its "controversial" third chapter. The value of Karlake's manuscript, suggests the editor, is two-fold: first, the narrative itself is interesting as a story; second, "it is a simple setting forth of a young man's emotions in the very face of violent death" (229).<sup>2</sup> Although Karlake was more interested in reporting observation than actual thought (so the editor claims), the reader is nevertheless encouraged to "read between the lines" in order to grasp the full

significance of the story (229-230).<sup>3</sup>

Karslake's manuscript records the events of several days during which four members of the United States Cavalry (Karslake, Bunt, Idaho, and Estorijo) ride across the Arizona desert toward La Paz. Along the way they engage in a skirmish with a band of nine Indians, and the Indians, after a long and bloody firefight, kill all four. The heart of the tale is inscribed in the midst of the attack when Karslake begins to record not only the description of the fight itself, but also his own impressions, which grow increasingly fantastic as the narrative progresses. The first substantial passage in which Karslake turns from mere description to philosophical speculation occurs just after both Karslake and Bunt are wounded. Karslake's wound is in the shoulder, and, though bothersome, is not deadly. Bunt, however, has been shot through his face and neck. Karslake relates:

. . . it astonishes me to note how *unimportant* it [Bunt's imminent death] seems. How little anybody cares—after all. If I had been told of his death—the details of it, in a story or in the form of fiction—it is easily conceivable that it would have impressed me more with its importance than the actual scene has done. Possibly my mental vision is scaled to a larger field since Friday, and as the greater issues loom up one man more or less seems to be but a unit—more or less—in an eternal series. (239)

In this, his first encounter with violent death, Karlake is impressed by the grand indifference of nature and with man's condition as a unit "in an eternal series," as though produced in a mold on an assembly line. This allusion to mechanized production at the end of the passage is paralleled by the discussion of creative production—writing—in the middle of the same passage. Through Karlake's reflections upon the power of fictional representation, Norris calls attention to the artifice of the story itself: just as Karlake is witnessing the violent death of Bunt, so we are witnessing the violent death of Karlake. Karlake speculates that the relative "significance" one attaches to an individual's death (or, by extension, any unusual or powerful experience) is a product of perspective. Had he read the story of Bunt's death rather than witnessed it, he might have responded to, or interpreted, it differently. As it is, his higher "mental vision" provides a perspective on Bunt's death that emphasizes its insignificance. In a sense, then, Karlake attaches a degree of significance to his own death by writing it down; presumably, as readers of "Memorandum," we will, ironically, invest more importance in his demise than we would have had we witnessed his death firsthand. The implication here is that "significance" is more often a product of "fiction" than "reality." Artistically

rendering experience through language—words—elevates that experience to a level of significance that the "reality" lacks. The question raised in this passage is whether Bunt's death carries any moral or philosophical value; or, put another way, is death a *mechanical* or a *creative* process? How one answers this question is largely determined by one's perspective (or "mental vision").

Karslake's expanded "mental vision," in conjunction with (1) an increased sense of hopelessness before the Indian onslaught and (2) a heightened sense of the indifference of nature, soon leads to a second, more fantastic and imaginative impression as the details of the fight blend with a sense of the sublime to produce a vision of man crushed under the weight of transcendent forces. The passage begins with Karslake noting that the location of the gunfight is like an amphitheater, with the cavalry in the center and the Indians parading around the raised edges. At a break in the shooting, the first thing Karslake notices is the "intolerable heat." The amphitheater wherein this drama of life and death is being played, Karslake writes, is

. . . oppressed with a benumbing, sodden silence—the silence of a primordial world. Such a silence as must have brooded over the Face of the Waters on the Eve of Creation—desolate, desolate, as though a colossal, invisible pillar—a pillar of the Infinitely Still, the pillar of Nirvana—rose forever into the empty blue, human life an atom of microscopic dust crushed under its basis, and at the summit God Himself. (241)

This sense of the complete insignificance of man, crushed under the primordial pillar of Nirvana (an impression brought on, Karslake imagines, by the "supreme exaltation of approaching death") leads him nearer to the ultimate revelation of the transcendent beyond. With his expanded "mental vision" Karslake believes that he is almost able to peer into the "secret of Life" itself.

I feel that the whole secret of Life is within my reach; I can almost grasp it; I seem to feel that in just another instant I can see it all plainly, as the archangels see it all the time, as the great minds of the world, the great philosophers, have seen it once or twice, vaguely. . . . Seeing thus I should be the equal of the gods. But it is not meant to be. There is a sacrilege in it. I almost seem to understand why it is kept from us. But the very reason of this withholding is in itself a part of the secret. (241)

Had the knowledge of this secret been revealed, Karslake would have been godlike; perhaps, he suggests, he would even have gained the ability to speak the Word of John 1:1, the "great Word for which the World since the evening and the

morning of the First Day has listened" (241). But as near as he comes to possessing the secret of Life, it ultimately escapes him, for he cannot both see into the beyond *and* record his observations. In the recording the vision is lost.

Karslake is then impressed by the grotesque incongruity of his situation. His mixing of philosophy and fighting is akin to allowing the "sublime" to degenerate into the "ridiculous" (242). Noting this incongruity, Karslake (like so many Gothic heroes before him) speculates that "perhaps I am a little mad. Perhaps I am supremely intelligent." In either case he is not even "understandable to himself" (242). Still, he writes, "be it of record that I, Karslake, SAW. It reads like Revelation: 'I, John, saw.' It is just that. There is something apocalyptic in it all. I have seen a vision, but cannot . . . bear record" (242). Then, using a machine metaphor that describes the incarnation of the Word in a manner at once divine, artistic, and mechanical, Karslake explains that his inability to record his vision lies somewhere in the fact that "the machinery of the mind that could coin the great Word is automatic, and the very force that brings the die near the blank metal supplies the motor power of the reaction before the impression is made" (242). That is, the force that has the power to impress upon the penetrating mind a glimpse of the infinite also has the power to withdraw the die just before the impression is made—thus allowing a glimpse of the mold, but not enough to allow for a copying of the mold. In Karslake's case, the heat of battle that provided a catalyst for his vision also provided the distraction that jolted him out of the reverie before he had an opportunity to record it. He writes: "I stopped for an instant, looking up from the page, and at once the great vague panorama faded. I lost it all" (242). With this lament the gunfight resumes. With the loss of his vision, the end comes swiftly, and the manuscript ends in mid-sentence.<sup>4</sup>

There is a tension in this story between the mechanical and the divine. Man is merely a "unit" in a series, an insignificant product of mechanical forces. God is the transcendent incarnator of the Word. The two are separated by a massive "pillar of the Infinitely Still." What helps bridge the gap is art. Just as Bunt's death might have taken on significance had it been artistically rendered in a story, so Christ's death takes on significance through the incarnation of the Word (related in the story of John's gospel). Now, himself confronted by death, Karslake is able to achieve a higher "mental vision." Thus elevated, Karslake catches a glimpse of the secret of life. Knowledge of this secret would give Karslake the power of the Word and make him the equal of God. It is through artistic creation that humans approach godhood. Still, the difference between human creative power and the creative

power of God is the difference between the base and the summit of the great pillar. Once or twice "great minds of the world" have been able to catch a glimpse of the "secret of life" that lies behind God's infinitely greater creative power. Although these occasional glimpses are allowed on rare occasions, the secret itself is unrecordable. What remains to complicate this story is the unsettled question of whether Karslake is madman or genius, and consequently whether his vision is a product of maddening illusion or of profound insight into the inner workings of nature.

The Blackwood tale is a form of Gothic short story that foregrounds the theme of communication: that is, it is founded on the idea that the protagonist is able to communicate, to record, his or her impressions when in extraordinary circumstances. Karslake, however, at the very moment when the reader is most interested in having him record his sensations and impressions, experiences a breakdown in his ability to communicate these same impressions. He cannot translate his "vision" into words—or The Word. Norris's tale, then, is written in the tradition of the "negative" romance as practiced by Brown, Poe, and Melville. Rather than conclude with the revelation and communication of a great insight into the mysteries of nature, Karslake's vision remains shrouded in mystery.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>G.R. Thompson, "Introduction," *Romantic Gothic Tales* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 45.

<sup>2</sup>Page references are to the text of "A Memorandum of Sudden Death" included in *The Complete Edition of Frank Norris* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928 [1929]), volume 4, 228-46.

<sup>3</sup>Norris may have had Stephen Crane in mind when he created Karslake. Karslake is a traveling correspondent for a major Eastern publication. He has amazing powers of observation and shows considerable promise of becoming a major literary figure, an outcome that his untimely death cuts short. When Karslake dies, the "editor" of "Memorandum" tells us, he is twenty-eight years old. This connection between the hero and Crane is further suggested because, prior to the fight, Karslake wonders if, when the Indian attack comes, he will prove cowardly or courageous. Unlike Henry Fleming, however, Karslake is relieved to discover that he is not frightened and does not run from the battle (see p. 234).

<sup>4</sup>In this passage Norris could have had in mind Proverbs 29:18: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

## A New 1902 Letter by Frank Norris Louis J. Budd

*Duke University*

By May 1902, George Sands Goodwin's letters to eminent literary personalities of the day, requesting their comments on the value of book-reviewing and their attitudes toward the reviewers, had succeeded. William Dean Howells, Thomas Nelson Page, Frank Norris, Cyrus Townsend Brady, Mark Twain, and Joseph A. Altsheler took the time to reply—providing Goodwin with the wherewithal to fashion "Certain Authors' Views on Book-Reviewing," which appeared in *The Critic*, 40 (June 1902), 537-40. Howells was as congenial as usual:

I think any sensible man likes his books fairly reviewed. English reviews of American books are apt to be fairer than our own, because, like American reviews of English books, they have no personal bias, for good or bad. A fair review is the critic's honest best. One can ask nothing more of him, though one might sometimes wish him wiser or kinder.

Twain, on the other hand, amply merited the chastisement Goodwin gave him when he offered quotable material but refused to play the game:

I suppose I *ought* to take an interest in this subject, but really I don't.

I would have answered sooner, but I have been bedridden eight days with gout.

One has to wonder if Goodwin was so unfamiliar with Twain's public-performance personality as to expect anything else. One would like to think that he was merely ironic when upbraiding Twain for not taking seriously the reviews and reviewers celebrating him and his work for so long. But, the scolding by this straight-arrow appears to have been quite sincere.

Page, Brady, and Norris were the cooperative ones. Unlike Howells and Altsheler, who were pleasant but too succinct, and Twain, who played the bad boy, they answered the five questions that Goodwin posed:

(1) Would you rather have your books reviewed or submitted to the public without review?

(2) What, in your opinion, constitutes a fair review?

(3) Is there apparent to you a lack of conscientiousness in the criticism of modern books—if so, what remedy have you to suggest?

(4) Are English reviews fairer than those written by American critics?

(5) One writer has answered that in his opinion book-reviewing is an impudent intrusion on the business of authorship—do you agree with him?

In response to these queries, Page and Brady went on at considerable length, their letters proving veritable prolegomenas for full-scale essays on the topic. Norris, then completing his manuscript of *The Pit*, was more sparing of words, though he did exactly what Goodwin asked, answering directly each question.

His response is undated, and there is no salutation included in the printed text of Norris's letter. Thus, since we do not know how he addressed Goodwin, it is not clear how well they knew each other and why, specifically, Goodwin referred to "the clever author" of *McTeague* and *The Octopus*. But, thanks to Goodwin, we now have a record of Norris's views a few months before the second volume of his Wheat Trilogy would be subjected to the reviewers' tender mercies. Wrote Norris,

Having due understanding as to the nature of an oath, I reply to yours.

(1) *Would I rather have my books reviewed?*—Yes. It's half the fun of writing 'em.

(2) A fair review, in my opinion, is one in which you can discover the writer's sincerity and evidence that he has read the book.

(3) *Is there a lack of conscientiousness in the reviewing of modern books?*—Rather. (I've written reviews myself.) The remedy I have to propose is that book-reviewing should be a department by itself on the staff of any periodical or journal, so that reviewing should not be *anybody's* business, done at odd times, etc. Also that the reviewer should have the choice of what books to treat, and that he should take only two or three at a time.

(4) *Are English reviews fairer than American?*—No.

(5) *Do you consider book-reviewing an intrusion?* Of course not. As a novelist the man's work belongs to the public. Whoever said that about intrusion was an ass.

Sincerely yours,  
FRANK NORRIS.

Emended only is the placement of "Sincerely yours,"—which appeared in *The Critic* on the same line as last four words of the final sentence. The immediately apparent reason for the irregularity was the need to eliminate one line so that the two columns on p. 540 would be of equal height.

## Frank Norris as Aspiring Writer: The Would-Be Houghton, Mifflin & Co. Author

Joseph R. McElrath, Jr.

*Florida State University*

When William Dean Howells reviewed *McTeague*, he commented appreciatively on the "little miracles of observation" that he found in that book. In writings about—rather than by—Frank Norris, one does not find such miraculous moments; but there are many memorable ones. Some are pathetic: Benjamin Franklin Norris, Sr., deserting his family, and Mrs. Norris listing herself as "widow" in the city directory. Some are genuinely comic, as when a finger-wagging Bertha Monroe Rickoff preserves the image of Norris eating a macaroon that had fallen from the table to the floor. Others are attention-riveting, as when journalist Norris just happened to debark in South Africa immediately before the Jameson Raid.

Almost buried in the papers of Houghton, Mifflin & Co. at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, are two other stories, the first of which is rather touching because it reveals the naïveté of a young man with a manuscript, so green an author that he encloses a check for twenty dollars—not an inconsiderable sum in 1890—when requesting permission to send the manuscript to the editors. The reply to Norris by H.R. Gibbs is noteworthy in another way as well; for, given its dating, it is likely that we now know when Norris had a manuscript of *Yvernelle: A Legend of Feudal France* in what he may have considered final form. The much less plausible alternative explanation is that the still-fugitive but oft-cited "Robert D'Artois" romance that he began when in Paris in the late 1880s was circulated.

15 Nov. 90

Mr. B.F. Norris  
1822 Sacramento St.  
San Francisco, Cal.

Dear Sir:

We have your favor of the 6th inst., inclosing check for \$20.

We have always a considerable number of MSS. in our hands for examination, and we could not promise to give immediate attention to the MS. about which you write. So far as is practicable we take up all in the order of their arrival, and seek to avoid undue detention of any.

You do not indicate the nature of the book you

have, and we are therefore unable to judge whether there is any probability of our finding it adapted to our list.

We return your check herein. We are not accustomed to examine MSS. except with a view to publication by our own house, and then of course the examination becomes a part of our usual business, for which no charge is made.

Yours truly  
Houghton, Mifflin & Co.  
HRG

By the time Houghton, Mifflin had reason to write Norris a second time (for which there is a record), he was a considerably more experienced author. By 21 June 1895 he was the J.B. Lippincott author of *Yvernelle*, had seen the appearance of twenty-eight known shorter works in periodicals, and had been writing under the direction of Lewis E. Gates and his assistants at Harvard since the beginning of the fall 1894. What we did not know until this letter came to light is that, during his sojourn at Harvard, he had created a collection of "sketches and tales."

21 June 95

Dear Sir

We have read with interest your little collection of sketches and tales. Permit us to say that we find the work much in advance of what we saw before from your hand. We are however very conservative in the matter of volumes of short stories, for we rarely find them commercially successful and we cannot persuade ourselves that we should find it wise for us or for you, in our hands, to undertake this volume.

As we are in doubt if you will be in Cambridge tomorrow we send this by mail and will hold the package subject to your order.

Truly yours  
Houghton, Mifflin Co

W. Frank Norris.

"To-morrow" was a Saturday, when Norris might have been out of town, and thus another new datum: while he would be back on the west coast in August and contributing to *The Wave*, he had not yet left Cambridge.

The collection of short fictions was probably the same one that Coryell & Co. was to publish as of October 1896. But, this collection, like another which appears to have been assembled from his *Wave* publications by late 1897, never saw

print. A volume of the kind did not appear until several months after Norris's death in 1902. Sadly, he never became the San Francisco Kipling that he had called for in "An Opening for Novelists" in 1897, and—unlike many a lesser author—he never became a writer in the stable of the most prestigious American publisher of the day.

## Society News

Don L. Cook, Indiana University, varies the hectic pace of retirement by continuing to advise the editors of the ongoing, multi-volume edition of the writings of philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce.

Stanley Wertheim, William Paterson College, is now seeing through the press a *Stephen Crane Encyclopedia* in one volume.

Jesse S. Crisler's full-scale description of the William Dean Howells-Frank Norris relationship will soon appear in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Crisler now serves as the executive director of the William Dean Howells Society.

Donna Campbell, Gonzaga University, is the author of *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885-1915*, to be published by Ohio University Press in June.

Robert C. Leitz, III, L.S.U. in Shreveport, and Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Florida State University, enjoyed in April the publication by Princeton University Press of "*To Be An Author*": *Letters of Charles W. Chesnut, 1889-1905*.

Richard Allan Davison, University of Delaware, is the editor of a collection of the letters of Charles and Kathleen Norris. *The Courtship Year*, published by the Book Club of California, provides—among many other pleasures—a rather full measure of the distinctive personality of Gertrude Norris and numerous cameos of Jeannette Black Norris that do not quite square with the quasi-biographical portrait seen in *Blix*.

*Frank Norris Studies* is published for the members of the Frank Norris Society. Dues of \$10.00 are payable each November. Submissions—on diskette in Word-Perfect and in one printout—should be addressed to the Society at Department of English, Florida State University, Tallahassee FL 32306-1036. Please make the endnotes section a part of the continuous text rather than use the program's endnote function. Editorial board members are: Robert C. Leitz, III, Louisiana State University in Shreveport; Donald Pizer, Tulane University; Jesse S. Crisler, Brigham Young University; Charles L. Crow, Bowling Green State University; and Richard Allan Davison, University of Delaware. The Assistant Editor is Laura Fletcher, Rice University.