

Forget writing for fun or profit

Seymour Epstein didn't expect to become a writer. And, given the state of the art today, neither should anyone else, he maintains.

"I stumbled into my life," says the writer-in-residence at the University of Michigan, implying as an afterthought that at least he was moving in the right direction.

"It's not as if it fell into my lap. I worked very hard for it."

Unfortunately, even precise proportions of luck and hard work may not spell success in today's writing market, according to Epstein. Publishers, he says, no longer regard fiction as a lucrative investment and the public is reading less, anyway.

Epstein is the author of "Love Affair," "Looking For Fred Schmidt," "The Dream Museum," "Caught In That Music," "Leah," "Pillar of Salt" and short stories.

NOVELS, HE says, are either so sensationalistic or esoteric that they fail to capture a broad audience, which is either resorting or choosing to watch more and more television.

To complete a vicious circle, "Television has become so atrocious that the nightmare for many Americans is finding themselves at 7:30 in the evening with nothing to do but read a book."

In a larger context, Epstein says, the demise of fiction as a leisure pursuit reflects a general apathy and disillusionment.

"There used to be the feeling that knowledge could somehow make a difference in one's life. Most people now are convinced that nothing is going to make a difference; if they approach a novel with that leaden certainty, why read it?"

Yet, ironically, ever greater numbers of people want to be writers to compensate for the absence of values that used to be valued by society, Epstein says.

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"Surely they (aspiring writers) must know the chances of their being successful are minuscule, but it doesn't seem in any way to quench the source of their enthusiasm."

THE SURGE of interest in writing "has to do with the fact that the center of existence is not holding together — there is no moral center, yet the desire to mark one's existence in the world hasn't diminished. . . it's as if people are saying that if they can't be part of a meaningful commemoration, they'll have to create their own."

Such impromptu soul-searching, Epstein concludes, leads to the production of writing that is more therapeutic than artful.

"Our constantly reaching out for a

new way of saying things is a way to guarantee quick obsolescence."

Fiction — like myth, its most durable form — needs a bedrock of beliefs to survive, he says. "Myth has always been important in civilization; in order to have a myth root, something had to remain around for 100 years, but the rate of culture now turns so fast, that there is no longer anything solid enough to nurture myth."

Epstein says he has deliberately insulated part of himself from what he senses as people's current desperation; he's written a book ("From the Sidelines") about a housewife-turned-writer who suffers the dilemma of people impinging on her life for answers which she cannot give.

A PROFESSOR of creative writing at the University of Denver, Epstein attended Central College of New York and New York University. He also has taught at Princeton University and been a regular staff member at the Breadloaf Writer's Conference in Middlebury, Vt.

Epstein has been a Guggenheim Fellow and in 1984 won the Edward Lewis Wallant Memorial Book Award for his novel "Leah." At Boston University Library, a special Seymour Epstein Collection has been established.

A dual career of writing and teaching always attracted Epstein, who didn't seriously embrace his vocation until after serving as a meteorologist in the military during World War II.

"Actually," he admits, "I did try my hand at a few short stories before that, but I almost welcomed the war as an almost acceptable excuse not to have to write."

Despite his disenchantment with a world in transition, Epstein describes himself as "a cheerful pessimist. . . I expect the worst to happen and tend to have a good time between one disaster and another."

New UM-D chancellor selected

William A. Jenkins, vice chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Colorado at Denver, will be nominated as chancellor of the University of Michigan-Dearborn by U-M President Harold T. Shapiro.

The U-M Regents will act on the nomination at their March 20-21 meeting. If approved, Jenkins would assume the chancellorship on July 1.

He will succeed Leonard E. Goodall, who left the U-M Dearborn last summer to become president of the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. Bernard W. Klein, U-M Dearborn professor of polit-

ical science, has been acting chancellor since then.

Shapiro said: "Dr. Jenkins' background is impressive. His past experience includes serving as a university vice president, college dean, a departmental chairman, editor of a national educational journal, and chairman of the board of a major metropolitan urban renewal agency."

"The Dearborn campus, which has grown from 3,000 students to 6,000 student within six years, is now entering a very significant phase of development."

Jenkins said, "My appraisal of the Dearborn situation is that it presents a great professional opportunity for me personally and for southeastern Michigan to develop a strong campus of the U-M. The possibilities there are almost unlimited."

Jenkins, 57, was named to his current post at Denver in 1978 where he also holds an appointment as professor of education. Before that he was vice president for academic affairs at Florida International University from 1974 to 1977.

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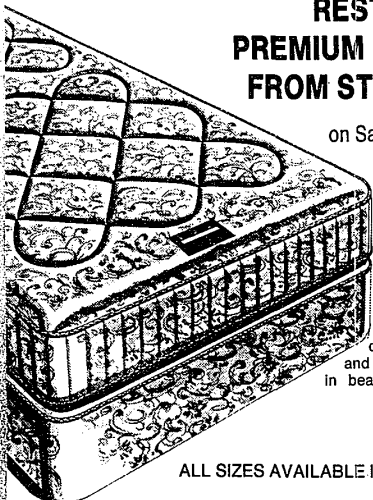
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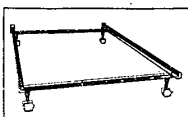
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