

The Rigors of Writing

Longview News-Journal (Longview, TX, USA)

01.07.1931, Seite 2

Standort Original:

Signaturen: R-A 2.1.013/004

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Erich Maria Remarque, famous author of »All Quiet on the Western Front« and »The Road Back,« has not found the profession of letters an easy one. He recently told an interviewer in Germany:

»The public often believes that a book is written at one stroke in a kind of ecstasy, but I have to make extraordinary efforts to finish what I have begun. Sometimes I have sat at my desk from 9 in the morning through the entire day without being able to write a single line.«

All of this is more than ordinarily interesting to the reading public, chiefly because of the odd misconception that commonly exists concerning the writing of books.

Most people, as Herr Remarque says, believe that a book comes into being with a rush. There is glib talk of »getting an inspiration,« as if the writer sat, moonstruck, until a divine afflatus filled his being and set him frantically to work writing down the words that welled up from within. Similarly, on a lower plane, people talk of »getting an idea for a story« – as if, once the outline of a plot were conceived, all the rest were simple.

As a matter of fact, the job of writing – if one is trying to create anything with any pretensions to dignity – is one of the most arduous, soul-killing jobs a man can tackle. Each page has to be dredged up laboriously, to the tune of much sweating and self-castigation. The man who produces a book, if it is above the »hammock literature« grade, does so only by dint of hard work and mental suffering.

For that reason it must be peculiarly discouraging to be an author. For the book that is brought into existence with so much trouble generally gets very cavalier treatment from the public. Reviewers have an insufferably airy way of dismissing it with two paragraphs; and the reader can never be trusted not to desert it after five minutes' trial in favor of something more exciting.

Still, things are probably all for the best. Even as it is, too many books get published every year. If it were not for the weeding-out process that the difficulty of writing imposes on the ranks of the would-be authors the number would be simply overwhelming.

And the man who really has something to write which is worth writing never gets discouraged. He plugs along in spite of doubt, boredom and discouragement; and sometimes, as in the case of Herr Remarque, he has the satisfaction of knowing that his book has worked mightily on the minds of people all over the work.