

Letter

5-14-1966

To the Editor:

It would take months for me to bring to light again as to where I got the names for my novels. I'm still barely halfway across all the work I've projected for myself and feel I shouldn't take the time to make an exhaustive paper.

However, I thought it might be interesting if I were to write a little on where I got the names for one of my books, in particular *BOY ALMIGHTY*, which is "about half-autobiographical."

I was working on both *THE GOLDEN BOWL* and *THIS IS THE YEAR*, when I began to notice an odd thing. I'd been a patient in the Glen Lake Sanatorium for two years, 1940-42, and every now and then, as I walked the streets of Minneapolis, I would run into one-time fellow TB patients. To my considerable embarrassment, I sometimes couldn't remember their names, even the names of roommates. Now no two or three people live more intimately together, short of sexual intercourse, than do roommates in an institution where the inmates are bedridden. Yet for the life of me, every now and then I couldn't remember their names. One evening, having some friends over, I suddenly couldn't remember my wife's name upon introducing a friend to her. My wife had also been a patient. Well, sir, that was enough.

I wasn't too excited about running off to a psychiatrist for help. So I decided to use my own resources. I liked to write. I would write myself out of my problem by putting down a sort of post or after-the-fact diary. This worked. After I got down about a hundred pages, I never again had any trouble remembering the names of one-time fellow TB patients; certainly not remembering my wife's name.

But what to do with the hundred pages? I'm one of those who hates to "do anything for nothing." I showed the hundred pages to a friend. He thought they were pretty good. "But why don't you recast this in the form of a novel? It could be a knockout." I liked that idea. I was already a writer of one accepted novel, *THE GOLDEN BOWL*.

In the diary version, I'd named myself Frederick von Engen, the von Engen being my mother's family name. (Now that was an

interesting dodge in itself, wasn't it?) After some thought, I decided to drop the von Engen and to get a new name out of Frederick. I cut Frederick in half, flopped the halves over, and had Eric Frey. This put the hero "out there," away from me at some distance, so that I could look at him (me) with some objectivity. It also helped me invent over and above the "given" experience.

For the two women involved in the book, I chose Biblical names, Mary and Martha, Mary being the spiritual one that Eric will eventually marry and Martha being the crass one that Eric rejects. For Eric's doctor's name I chose Abraham, since the original was both a father to me as well as being Jewish. The original was full of true Biblical "fatherly love." Eric had two roommates, Huck Olson and Theodore Fawkes. I had a roommate named Huck Johnson, who died, and I wanted to save part of him for aftertimes, so took his first name, Huck, and took Olson because he had the feel of a Nordic "Ole" in him. While in the sanatorium I met, briefly, a young man with the first name of Theodore, who also died while I was there. He had a certain look in his eye which I couldn't forget, so in his case too I tried to save him for aftertimes by taking his first name. His last name, Fawkes, came from what I felt his spirit to be, both fierce and hawklike.

While in the San, I'd come to see that the old chronics, men who'd been there for ten, twenty, thirty years, with no hope of escape, took a malicious, even devilish, delight in tormenting new patients, and from this came both Satan and Deeble, or Satan Deeble who makes it a point to lead Eric through the dark side of the sanatorium. Calisto Sly was a name I spotted in a newspaper and it fit the well-read smoky-souled janitor who swept out my room every day. And of course, Phoenix, the name I gave the sanatorium, is obvious, since I was one of those full of hope for the future and believed that in going to the sanatorium I rose out of the ashes of my own past mistakes to become what I became: a writer of novels.

Writing the book *BOY ALMIGHTY*, I came to "love" the institution. It had saved my life. It had become, so to speak, my mother who had mothered me back to life. But while I was there, I thought I hated every moment of it, because I lay abed instead of being out in life, struggling and enjoying and rising. I'd unblocked myself, alone.

Frederick Manfred