

Fremont Writer  
Warmly Praised  
For Comic Novel

## James Purdy's Humor At Its Best Against American Hypocrisy



Photo Credit: Fabian Bachrach

James Purdy

CABOT WRIGHT BEGINS by James Purdy. *Farrar, Strauss & Co.*, 1964. Pp. 228, \$4.95.

AUTHOR: James Purdy, a native of Fremont, is the author of several ardently acclaimed novels, including *The Nephew* and *Malcolm*.

REVIEWER: Arthur Darack, the Book and Art Editor of the Cincinnati *Enquirer*, and Editor of *Dimension: Cincinnati*.

JAMES PURDY is a novelist in the tradition of Nathanael West, with that writer's savage power, wild humor and the toughness to be tender when every false human relationship has been stripped away. Purdy, who has already made his mark with such novels as *The Nephew* and *Malcolm*, has aimed a blow at what he considers the American solar plexus; our hypocritical cringing at the idea of rape. He has treated rape as the object of championship performance, like baseball and boxing. Cabot Wright is the champion, with 300 to his credit, with a technique reported exhaustively in the daily press in that objective prose so calculated to shock when emotional neutrality is affected, where the strongest possible tone is more appropriate.

Cabot Wright begins as a species of the all-American boy. He has a pretty, emasculating wife; he has great prospects on Wall Street. He has a large inheritance in the offing, requiring only a fortunate obituary to be realized. He has vague dissatisfactions, however, and when he suffers a mysterious loss of energy, he consults a quack doctor, variously named as Dr. Bigelow-Martin, or Dr. Bugleford, who restores him to so excessive a vigor that he finds rape to be the only congenial outlet.

Wright masters techniques of rape that women find attractive, so much so that a pattern of expectancy rather than dread is repeated from "victim" to victim. Purdy obviously wants us to believe that Wright's relations with women are more

mutually satisfying than the customary situation in the U.S. It is only hypocrisy that makes it otherwise. Moreover, Wright's championship performance has given him status exactly similar to any other American champion. Much of Wright's career is described in hilarious detail, so that the book is sardonic, funny, satiric and humorous — quite the opposite of pornography.

### His Sensational Memoirs

Wright finally is caught and sent to jail. Once he is out, the publishing world beats a path to his door, in order to obtain his sensational memoirs.

Bernie Gladhart, with more ambition to write than talent for it, who is married to a Chicago floozie determined to have a writer for a husband, trails Wright to his Brooklyn apartment. Gladhart is contacted by Princeton Keith, a publisher to whom rapacity and publishing are synonymous. Keith needs a "big hit" to bolster a sagging career. But Wright is not so easily induced to surrender his story, not because of scruple or greed, but simply because he cannot reconstruct it. He has read the details of it in the press, where they were so lovingly and systematically presented, with so much disagreement and confusion among the various presentations, that he no longer knows what he is or what he has done.

Finally, a frustrated female writer, Zoe Bickle, who has been supporting a husband with writing pretensions, worms the story out of Wright. But it will not be written. Wright disappears, having discovered the truth about himself, and Mrs. Bickle says she won't write the story, because, having discovered that she has the talent for it, she finds the time and place too much out of joint for the truth.

### Stop Publishing

Mrs. Bickle thus joins Mary McCarthy in asserting that the best thing an honest writer can do nowadays is to stop publishing.

Purdy's characters, and his trim, taut writing style, evoke a wacky, slightly nightmarish milieu. It is not the absurd that Purdy sounds, but the hypocritical, the tendentious, the phony, the solemn. American society cannot face the truth, he thinks, and we must embroider it away, making it a false tissue of related but distinct construction. *Cabot Wright Begins* is aimed at exposing the falseness Purdy detects in us, with his almost exultant wildness of humor, his relentless attack, his wacky characters, and his sitting-duck targets. It may be questioned that rape is analogous to the more unbridled activities of Wall Street and the publishing industry. In fact, the law of the jungle, or the folkways of international diplomacy would seem a better comparison. But rape is so much more intriguing as the structural center for a compact novel, and if America will survive the Purdy assault, it must be admitted that he has placed rape in a most indelicate situation, from which it may not recover easily.