

Ohio Scenes Among the Best in Fannie Hurst's Autobiography



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ANATOMY OF ME:

A WONDERER IN
SEARCH OF
HERSELF

by Fannie Hurst. Doubleday, 1955
Pp. 367, \$5.00.

REVIEWED by Mrs. Depew Head of Columbus, who has been a professional book reviewer for thirty years. For twenty-four years she was Executive Director of the Ohioana Library and is now a Trustee. She holds several college degrees, earned and honorary.

The title of Fannie Hurst's autobiography, *Anatomy of Me*, has little reader appeal, but it is very apt, for Miss Hurst virtually puts herself on a couch, and, acting as her own psychiatrist, "anatomizes" herself, confessing "I am trying most of all to understand myself."

When the Ohioana Library was founded I asked Miss Hurst to place her books in this library for Ohioans and of Ohio. She replied, in part, "It was pure accident I was born in Ohio. My mother just went to *her* mother's home for my birth. Immediately thereafter we returned to our own home in St. Louis."

Some ten years later, when I had lunch

with Miss Hurst, she told me that in working on her autobiography she was surprised to find how often Ohio appeared. So I was not surprised to read of her happy summers spent in Hamilton with her grandparents, the Koppels, who emigrated from Germany a century ago, and put their roots down in Ohio. "The Koppels were simple people," (she writes), "they were crude but the good in them outweighed their shortcomings. I am glad that despite the vulgarities and petty violence of my background a modicum of the magnesium of Ohio soil is built into me." The Ohio scenes are some of the best in her book.

Though surrounded by a doting family, though she lived "as snug as a bug in a rug in middle-class security," Fannie hated most of the first twenty years of her life. As she presents her home and her parents she creates two of her finest characters. Papa, a poignant figure, she draws with a few telling strokes of her pen, but on Mama she heaps words and more words, paragraphs and more paragraphs. Personally, I could do with less Mama, but Miss Hurst is intent on giving an honest and whole picture of Mama, to prove to herself and to us that she loved her in spite of her loudness, her vulgarity, her endless nagging. "When Mama walked into a room filled with ladies she doused them like so many candles on a birthday cake." "Worlds divided us but something deep and tribal united us. I rode her stress and storm and have bitterness about neither."

Fannie had only one desire—one ambition—to write! She felt smothered by her parents' love, harassed by their bewildered nagging, trapped in mediocrity. She must escape! Like countless others she believed that only in New York could she find "the people composed of persons" about whom she must write.

The last half of the book tells how Fannie, "a gawky, over-weight, over-dressed girl" found her stories and fulfillment in New York. There were the usual rejection slips, but fame and fortune were not long in coming. At one time Miss Hurst was the highest paid fiction writer in America. She received \$70,000 for the serialization of one novel. It was an exciting era in American writing, studded with great names, and this book brings nostalgic memories of some of its distinguished editors and writers.

Anatomy of Me reveals much about the author's unconventional marriage to the late Russian-born pianist, Jacques Danielson. There is no question Fannie adored her husband. But one wonders if her determination to live her own life, go her own way—to be Me,—regardless—was as completely satisfying to her husband as she would have us believe. My reaction was—"the lady doth protest too much." The use of Me in the title is not without significance, for Me—Myself is very important to the author.

The autobiography is written in short, staccato-like paragraphs. Many paragraphs are just one line; often there are fourteen paragraphs on a page. This does not make for relaxed reading—and the book suffers from wordiness. Nevertheless, the reader (and there will be many) will enjoy its good stories, the excellent characterizations, and its various bits of real Americana as he follows an unhappy girl from her bourgeois home on Cates Avenue, St. Louis, to her present Renaissance triplex mansion overlooking Central Park, Manhattan; from her scribbling on Cates Avenue to her popular novels, many of them best-sellers and successful pictures; "from Cates Avenue still redolent with the warm fragrance of Mama's raisin-spiced schnecken, to intimate guest of the White House; from Cates Avenue to honorary degrees, citations and delegate to the United Nations; from Cates Avenue to guest of Canadian and Israeli governments; from Cates Avenue to life among so many of the doers and thinkers of my time." Miss Hurst would be the first to admit her story could happen "Only in America." *Anatomy of Me* tells this story.