

THE AMERICAN WEST LITERATURE ◊ LANDSCAPE

Of Time & Change

FRANK WATERS

Foreword by RUDOLFO ANAYA
MacMurray & Beck, \$20.00 cloth, ISBN 1-878448-86-2

Frank Waters, born July 25, 1902, in Colorado Springs, became before his death on June 3, 1995, in Taos, New Mexico, America's most important living writer. Among his novels are at least three classics of American literature: *People of the Valley* (1941), *The Man Who Killed the Deer* (1984), and *The Woman at Otowi Crossing* (1966). As great a philosopher as he was a novelist, the nonfiction triad *Masked Gods* (1950), *Mexico Mystique* (1989), and *Mountain Dialogues* (1981) envisioned our common humanity in process of creative enlargement. Although he never had a bestseller and the national literary establishment has yet to admit him to the canon, he was seven times nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. True, he was often way ahead of his time. He rejected the dominant materialistic aspects of modern civilization; wrote about such unpopular subjects as the American Indian, Hispanic Americans, and the ancient civilization of Mesoamerica; eschewed political and religious ideologies; directly confronted the possibility of destruction of the world's ecosystem; and championed the universal cause of racial and ethnic reconciliation. That he stands in relation to the civilization of the American West as William Faulkner stood in relation to that of the South, and is thus the key titanic figure in what is coming to be called a "Western Literary Renaissance," is a scholarly valuation only beginning to come into focus. But there is no doubt that Waters is on the cutting edge of just about everything we now take seriously in our country, and so the day is not far off when he will at last be hailed as one of the great writers of the century he spanned with his life.

He did not so regard himself. At once humble and proud, obscure and well known, he was, as his longtime friend and chronicler Dr. Charles Adams once observed, "the rarest of all writers—one who is not bigger than his art." Although various of his two dozen books yield revealing glimpses of the man, most notably the semiautobiographical novel *Pike's Peak* (1987), he had no vulgar urge to advertise himself, no easy chair from which to sum things up. The "Self" in which he was interested was not the ego but its opposite, the still center of a spiritual essence immune to worldly encroachments. His quest for this transcendental reality, rather than his near-appropriation of it, preoccupied him to the end of his days.

The preoccupation gives *Of Time & Change*, Waters' last work and only memoir, a universal appeal. He will, he tells us, trace an

invisible reality that is ever working to achieve the interconnectedness, unity, and wholeness of all persons, places and events everywhere.

Perhaps some readers will flinch from what seems all too familiar spiritual boilerplate, and when he mentions certain mystics and philosophers who influenced him—Sri Ramana Maharshi, Dr. W.Y. Evans-Wentz, George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff, and C.G. Jung—they may lunge for the remote control and watch telly. *Of Time & Change*, however, does not pretend to be a book of esoteric wisdom or psychic healing. It is, honestly and urbanely, a book of love, and the persons to whom and the places to which we are introduced are summoned up for us to love.

As a resident of Taos since the late 1930s, Waters formed close friendships with some of the legendary characters of that small, charismatic mountain village: mover and shaker Mabel Dodge Luhan; her hard-drinking but amiable Pueblo Indian husband, Tony; Lady Dorothy Brett; Russian artists Leon Gaspard and Nicolai Fechin; and Taos artist Andrew Dasburg. Waters' reminiscences about them are bound to excite popular interest, even though he detours around Mabel's affairs, Brett's relationship with D.H. Lawrence, and the like. Actually, he varnishes nothing over, not even his own shortcomings, but unlike objective biographers he shares the humor and heartbreak, the joy and anguish, above all the spiritual triumph of friends. The domineering Mabel who enraged Lawrence is here portrayed as a person who found completeness. He recognizes in Brett's paintings and letters an uncanny and largely overlooked capacity for finding the pulse of life that is hidden behind objective realities.

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As for Gaspard, who engaged Waters to write his biography and then fed him "tall tales," one wonders if a lesser person than Waters could have remained loyal and loving, but Waters did, and the revelation that Gaspard suppressed a Jewish background gives the portrait a poignant touch. Human connectedness, though often frail and trying, wins the day.

And Waters himself is mirrored in his friends. Here, for example, is a passage about Dasburg:



He always held a tight rein on the horses that pulled his chariot. It seems clear, however, that Dasburg always regarded his personal life as less important than his paintings. And he expressed his own vision in the simplicity of line and form with the objectivity that was an essential part of his character. He was not concerned with the cosmetic beauty of the earth's surface, the yellow aspen groves and the flowering chamisa, the dark green pine slopes. But, like a surgeon, he probed the underlying skeletal structure of bone integument and ligament that integrated mountain and mesa into a living whole.

This passage reflects something of Waters' own compelling sense of strength and inner vision.

He outlived his friends, saw Taos change from frontier town to artists' colony to tourist resort, witnessed the sad breakup of traditional Indian life. Nothing, he learned, withstands the universal pattern "of growth, death, and transformative rebirth." To shock us into this realization, in the final chapters he abruptly jerks us away from Taos and exposes us to what is happening in Central America, to the last of the Mayas, and, in the Four Corners, to the Hopis and Navajos. The culture cycles of these peoples—and by implication those of all people—will vanish unless the forces of materialism are checked. Yet the essence of life remains unchanged. At one point Waters evokes with Conradian magic the spirit of the jungle along the Usumacinta River and notes on a sandy spit a "single, tall-stemmed, exquisite, lilylike tropical flower" that, he realizes, will soon be destroyed in the rainy season and vanish as Mayan civilization did.

Perhaps no other human beings had seen or would ever see it again, but its impending fate was of no importance. Proclaiming the fullness of its present moment, it stood there proudly affirming the transcendent life and beauty given it without the need of any human admiration. Like lovely Yaxchilan, it would stand for its own hour before being erased by the wind and the rain of worldly time.

As we approach the millennium and experience anxiety about personal extinction and the fate of the earth, we need a book like *Of Time & Change*. In it, Frank Waters invites us to proclaim the fullness of our present moment and to realize that the source in which everything is interconnected in one harmonious whole "does not exist somewhere among the splendor of the midnight stars, but within ourselves." The reader who seeks the essential Waters will find him here in his last, gracious book, resting between the lines, tranquil on his pillow of faith. ■

The following Frank Waters' books have been reissued by Swallow Press/Ohio University:
Brave Are My People (1998, reviewed in TBR, May/June 1993) • *People of the Valley* (1998) • *The Woman at Otowi Crossing* (1998) • *Masked Gods* (1991) • *Mexico Mystique* (1998) • *The Man Who Killed the Deer* (1991) • *Pike's Peak* (1987) • *Mountain Dialogues* (1981)

The Way It Is

New & Selected Poems

WILLIAM STAFFORD

Graywolf Press, \$24.95 cloth, ISBN 1-55597-269-1

Crossing Unmarked Snow

Further Views on the Writer's Vocation

WILLIAM STAFFORD

Edited by PAUL MERCHANT & VINCENT WIXON

University of Michigan, \$13.95 paper, ISBN 0-472-06664-1

Down in My Heart

Peace Witness in War Time

WILLIAM STAFFORD

Introduction by KIM STAFFORD

Oregon State University, \$14.95 paper, ISBN 0-87071-430-9

Despite being the most popular major American poet since Robert Frost, when William Stafford died of a heart attack at his home in Lake Oswego, Oregon, in August of 1993, his poetry was nearly out of print. A few years earlier, his New York publisher, HarperCollins, had commissioned Stafford's friend, Robert Bly, to edit the book that became *The Darkness Around Us* (1993). The Harper volume was published posthumously but so very near the time of Stafford's death that Bly's introduction still refers to Stafford in the present tense. "William Stafford is a master," Bly wrote. "He belongs to that category of artists that Japanese have named a 'national treasure.'" The book's primary virtue—Bly's rigorous editing—also remains its vice. The volume contains an even 100 poems selected from Harper books, but Bly's selection completely ignores the hundreds of poems Stafford published in small press collections and limited editions. There are other problems, too, with the Bly volume, not the least of which is Bly's spurious contention that William Stafford was literally "part Indian."

By contrast, *The Way It Is* presents readers with 404 poems selected from 3,000 poems scattered throughout the 67 volumes Stafford published during his lifetime. This generosity of scope restores a lost balance to William Stafford's work, for he was no less a remarkably consistent and prolific poet than Emily Dickinson or Thomas Hardy. Consequently, for those unfamiliar with Stafford's work, *The Way It Is* will make an excellent introduction while providing his fans with two new "books" within the book: *Sometimes I Breathe* and *There's a Thread You Follow*. The first originates from a manuscript Stafford left behind at his death but intended for publication; the second compiles poems from his daily writings and includes the last poem he wrote. It is important to note, however, that the publication of *The Way It Is*, as well as the publication of *Crossing Unmarked Snow* and the reprinting of *Down in My Heart*, is largely due to the tenacity and persistence of three people: Paul Merchant, a British scholar and poet expatriated to the U.S.; Vince Wixon, an Oregon poet and teacher; and the author's son, Kim Stafford, whose brilliant introduction to his father's memoir, *Down in My Heart*, gives us almost as much insight into being a conscientious objector during World War II as the book itself.

William Stafford's readers commonly assume that his first book was a collection of poems, *West of Your City* (Talisman, 1960), published when he was already 46 and when his poetic style was already fully mature. In fact, William Stafford's first book, published when he was 33, was a prose account of his daily activities as a conscientious objector in government work camps. (Today, we call them minimum security prisons.) Indeed, *Down in My Heart* is not only Stafford's first book, but in some ways it is his most important book because it lays out the radical social and moral code by which he lived his life as a pacifist, a code that underlies every poem he ever wrote. It was also in the work camps that Stafford began to perfect his method of writing with its emphasis on process as opposed to correctness, a method so influential that it now dominates the teaching of writing in our nation's schools. Forced in the work camps to rise early in order to write at all, William Stafford formed the lifelong habit of waking up about 4 in the morning. "Most places," he writes in a poem called "Freedom," "you can usually be free some of the time if you wake up before other people."

Editors Merchant and Wixon devote two sections of *Crossing Unmarked Snow* to the subject of Stafford's writing methods and to writing in general, but this book also differs in important ways from its two well-established predecessors in the same University of Michigan Press series, *Writing the Australian Crawl* (1978) and *You Must Revise Your Life* (1986). For one thing, the editors include a generous number of Stafford's (Continued on page 21)

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