

**Vardis Fisher:  
An Essay in Bibliography***Mark Canada*

Interest in Vardis Fisher peaked in the 1930s, when his novels about Idaho pioneers, autobiographical tetralogy, and his historical novel about the Mormons drew extensive, favorable attention from esteemed reviewers, including Fred T. Marsh of the *New York Times* and fellow novelist Bernard DeVoto. After the Mormon novel, *Children of God*, won the 1939 Harper Prize for Fiction, Fisher went on to write two more historical novels of the American West before turning his attention toward a grander project, the *Testament of Man*, a twelve-volume series tracing human psychological and sociological development from Creation to the present day. With this series—buttressed (some would say encumbered) by extensive research in a number of fields—interest in Fisher declined but did not disappear. For this series, and the additional historical novels of the West he went on to write, he continued to attract interest from reviewers, fellow writers such as Frederick Manfred and Larry McMurtry, and even director Sidney Pollack, who adapted Fisher's last novel, *Mountain Man* (1965), for the 1972 movie *Jeremiah Johnson*, featuring Robert Redford. Today, the future of Fisher's reputation rests in the hands of literary scholars. Since his death in 1968, scholars such as Joseph M. Flora, John R. Milton, Ronald W. Taber, Barbara Meldrum, and Mick McAllister have produced a small but steady stream of critical articles, most of them treating Fisher as a western writer.

**Bibliography**

The most recent bibliography of primary and secondary works related to Vardis Fisher is also the most comprehensive. This annotated list, which appears in Martin Kich's *Western American Novelists, Volume 1: Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Dan Cushman, H.L. Davis, Vardis Fisher, A.B. Guthrie, Jr., William Humphrey, and Dorothy M. Johnson* (New York: Garland, 1995),

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ing *God or Caesar? The Writing of Fiction for Beginners* (1953), *Idaho Encyclopedia* (1938), *Idaho Lore* (Gordon Press, 1939), *The Mothers* (1943), *Pemmican* (1956), and *Tale of Valor* (Amereon, 1958). *Children of God* (Harper, 1939), Fisher's most famous book during his life, is no longer in print; however, in 1977 Opal Laurel Holmes, Fisher's widow, had it reprinted from the original plates. Others of Fisher's books in print are available from the Idaho Center for the Book and as reprints from the University of Idaho Press.

No one has published a descriptive bibliography on Fisher, but Kellogg's bibliography in *Western American Literature* (Spring 1970) includes an extensive list of the first editions published by Swallow, Houghton Mifflin, Harper, Vanguard, and other publishers, as well as the numerous deluxe editions published by Caxton and translations published in Iceland, Argentina, France, and other countries. Kellogg's earlier bibliography for *American Book Collector* (September 1963) includes two brief notes on the publishing history of *Passions Spin the Plot* (1934) and the *Testament of Man* series, along with pictures of six title pages from Fisher first editions. Scholars can find first editions, autographed copies, and other important Fisher items in the Clore and Gossett collections in the Special Collections Department at Boise State University's Albertsons Library. A list of the materials in these collections appears in *The Clore Collection of Vardis Fisher Research Materials: A Guide* (Boise: Boise State University, 1989).

#### Manuscripts and Letters

Collections of Fisher's papers are housed at Boise State University, the University of Idaho Library in Moscow, the Washington State University Archives in Pullman, and Yale University's Beinecke Library in New Haven, Connecticut. The most extensive is the Yale collection, which contains two file drawers of letters to or from Frederick Manfred, Alan Swallow, Harper and Brothers, and other associates and publishers, as well as typescripts for seventeen of Fisher's books. Other Fisher papers belong to Delbert Wylder.

Several letters between Fisher and Milwaukee bookseller Harry Schwartz appear in "Dear Mr. Fisher/Dear Mr. Schwartz: A Correspondence," published in the September 1974 issue of *The Bookmark*, a quarterly periodical of the University of Idaho Library. In addition to some mundane particulars related to a catalog introduction Schwartz asked Fisher to write and a limited edition of Fisher essays that Schwartz published, this correspondence contains evidence of Fisher's congeniality and humor, as well as the revelation that he "had to make a few minor concessions to the pure" to satisfy Doubleday, which was to publish *We Are*

covers one hundred and eighty works by Fisher—including novels, stories, essays, articles, and poems—as well as nine books and nearly two hundred critical articles relevant to Fisher scholarship. Among the latter are scores of articles that, because they refer only briefly to Fisher, do not appear in other bibliographies. Somewhat cumbersome in size and generally not evaluative, this bibliography nonetheless is invaluable for its extensive coverage, detailed annotations, and judicious headnote on the future of Fisher scholarship. It supplants an earlier, briefer bibliography in *A Bibliographical Guide to the Study of Western American Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), as well as lists compiled by George Kellogg for *American Book Collector* (September 1963) and *Western American Literature* (Spring 1970).

### Editions

For the first three decades of his career, Fisher worked with several eastern publishing houses, including Houghton Mifflin in Boston and Doubleday, Harper, and Vanguard in New York. During the same period, Caxton Printers in Caldwell, Idaho, came out with regular or deluxe editions of nearly all of his books. Reception to the first seven volumes of his twelve-volume *Testament of Man* series was lukewarm, however, and Fisher struggled to find a publisher. Alan Swallow of Denver took over the series in 1956 and published the remaining five volumes, as well as *Suicide or Murder? The Strange Death of Governor Meriwether Lewis* (1962) and *Thomas Wolfe As I Knew Him, and Other Essays* (1963). Although New York firms published most of his other books, even during this period, Fisher assailed the eastern establishment, which he accused of snobbery. A brief but interesting account of Fisher's troubles with eastern publishers and critics appears in an article by Swallow, "The Mavericks" (*Critique*, Winter 1959). In addition to speculating on several possible reasons for these difficulties—including Fisher's reactionary politics, his rough style, and his rationalist approach to fiction—Swallow makes the rather bizarre accusation that people at *Time* ordered an extra copy of one of the *Testament* novels so that their researcher could "break down the scholarship of the volume." He goes on to say: "When they could not, as I infer they could not, they chose to ignore the book."

Despite these difficulties, Fisher managed to publish thirty-seven books, including two reference volumes on his home state of Idaho written for the Federal Writers' Project. Thirty years after his death, *Books in Print* lists two dozen of these books, although only *Mountain Man* (Pocket Books) is a mass market paperback. *Suicide or Murder?* (Swallow) is available in a paperback reprint edition. Libraries can order a handful of Fisher's other books, includ-

*Betrayed* (1935). Even more interesting is a civil but intense debate that emerges when Schwartz, a Marxist, learns that the essays Fisher has produced for him savagely attack communists as quixotic brutes.

### Biography

By far the most thorough accounts of Fisher's life are the ones he wrote himself. *In Tragic Life* (1932), the first volume of his autobiographical tetralogy, tells the story of Vardis Fisher—almost comically disguised as “Vridar Hunter”—from ancestry to adolescence. *Passions Spin the Plot* recounts the next period of Fisher's life, when he studied at the University of Utah and married Leona McMurtrey, or “Neloa Doole.” Fisher continued his story in *We Are Betrayed*, an account of his graduate work at the University of Chicago and of a tragic marriage that ended in Neloa's suicide, and finally in *No Villain Need Be* (1936), an account of his second marriage and career pursuits. Still not satisfied, Fisher revised his life story in the gigantic *Orphans in Gethsemane* (1960), the twelfth and final volume of his *Testament of Man* series. Although these efforts have caused critics to compare Fisher with another confessional writer of the period, Thomas Wolfe, Fisher's autobiographical fiction stays much closer to factual reality than does Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*. Indeed, Fisher's obsession with facts exasperated John Peale Bishop, who wrote of the later installments of the tetralogy: “Honesty does not consist in telling all. And that is just what Mr. Fisher does. He tells all.”

More detached, if less comprehensive, accounts of Fisher's life can be found in several books and articles by scholars and acquaintances. Louie W. Attebery's essay on Fisher in *A Literary History of the American West*, ed. Thomas J. Lyon (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1987) treats important external as well as psychological events in his subject's life, which he divides into five stages called “the early years, 1895–1915; the university period, 1915–31; the Bridwell days, 1931–34; the Federal era, 1935–39; and finally the Hagerman years, 1940–68.” Of the university period Attebery writes: “First, Fisher received an education in a demanding graduate career, an education that prepared him for a life of the mind, encouraging his philosophical speculations and confirming his rejection of Mormonism. In addition, the discipline of scholarship became the servant of his maturing creativity. In the second place, his writing reached the public. The third significant element was Leona's death. For this Fisher blamed himself and subsequently identified her suicide as the great crisis of his life.” Joseph M. Flora's *Vardis Fisher* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1965) contains a brief biographical sketch that draws on Flora's acquaintance with Fisher and addresses the author's feelings about his work, family, and marriages.

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The only book-length biography of Fisher is *Tiger on the Road: The Life of Vardis Fisher* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1989), which author Tim Woodward notes in his foreword "is not intended to be a scholarly analysis of Fisher's work" or "a definitive biography of the man." Indeed, literary scholars will find few new insights in this popular biography, which relies heavily on Fisher's own writings, as well as on previously published books and articles by Flora, Ronald W. Taber, and others. Still, even the best-read Fisher scholars will want to read *Tiger on the Road* for its scores of interesting anecdotes and impressions, which Woodward painstakingly collected through interviews with Fisher's third wife, his sister, his brother-in-law, his neighbors, and other acquaintances. In a chapter called "Old Irascible," for example, Woodward paints Fisher as a curmudgeon, prankster, carouser, and friendly neighbor—a man who could accept an invitation to a book signing and then refuse to sign books; a man who would belittle an aspiring writer and entertain a groupie for six hours; a man who was called "generous," "sentimental and compassionate," and "abrupt, aggressive, tactless." In addition to these rare glimpses of Fisher's private side, Woodward's biography contains nearly twenty photographs, excerpts from Leona Fisher's letters written just before she committed suicide, an extensive summary of Fisher's work as a newspaper columnist in Idaho, and a brief investigation of the mystery surrounding his death.

Fisher spoke at length about his life and work, as well as his ideas about writing in general, in a television interview with John R. Milton in the mid-1960s. A transcript of this interview appears in Milton's book *Three West: Conversations with Vardis Fisher, Max Evans, Michael Straight* (Vermillion, SD: Dakota Press, 1970). In addition to his novels, particularly the tetralogy and the *Testament of Man* series, Fisher discusses religion, his relationship with the harsh environment of the West, his experience as a teacher, his work on the Federal Writers' Project, realism and romance, art and scholarship, politics, the eastern literary establishment, and several fellow writers, including Wallace Stegner, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe. In a particularly interesting portion of the interview, Milton reads several letters to Fisher from readers who responded enthusiastically to the *Testament of Man*.

Other materials have focused on particular aspects of Fisher's life, such as his religious convictions and his relationships with other writers. Fisher's faith has been a thorny issue because of the mixed signals he sent about the subject through his actions and works. While still a teenager, Fisher renounced Mormonism, the religion of his parents. Some twenty-five years later, however, Fisher published a complex treatment of the Mormons in *Children of God*, which both angered members of the church and

attracted converts to it. Later, he challenged Christianity as a whole in his *Testament of Man* series and allied himself with agnosticism and atheism. These mixed signals have left literary scholars and family members alike to speculate on what Fisher's convictions were at the time of his death in 1968. Flora opened the dialogue in 1969 with his article "Vardis Fisher and the Mormons" (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Autumn 1969), which argues that Fisher, despite his renunciation of Mormonism, showed a religious, even Mormon bent throughout his career. Citing details from *Children of God*, as well as from the essay "My Bible Heritage" and the *Testament of Man*, Flora notes that Fisher showed a deep appreciation of particular qualities of the early Hebrews and the Mormons, especially their righteousness and their similar vision of freedom.

Somewhat more strident is "The Mormon Heritage of Vardis Fisher" (*Brigham Young University Studies*, Fall 1977), in which Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt argue that Fisher's break with Mormonism has been exaggerated. Early in the article, the authors make their points explicit: "(1) Fisher was not an apostate: he never renounced his religion nor did Mormonism renounce him. (2) Fisher's outlook on life and history was religious, definitely Judeo-Christian and, as he saw it, broader than the Mormonism he was acquainted with, but definitely encompassing Latter-day Saint belief and practice. And (3) Fisher was a pioneer in applying modern psychology to the Mormon experience, both past and present, and in that sense he is very much a Mormon literary prophet. He foresaw conflicts his people would have, groped with them two generations before they did, and made some progress toward a resolution of them." Marked by solid research and analysis, the article goes at least partway in making these points. The authors point out, for example, that Fisher allowed his son Grant to be baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is significant, however, that other details they cite to explain Fisher's relationship with Mormonism come from his sister Irene, a Latter-day Saint who performed temple work for Fisher after his death and presumably wanted to see her brother as a Mormon at heart.

Arrington and Haupt are on firmer ground when they analyze Fisher's early novels: *Toilers of the Hills* (1928), *Dark Bridwell* (1931), the tetralogy, and, of course, *Children of God*. Citing evidence from *In Tragic Life* (1932), for example, they make a convincing argument that Fisher's hostility toward his faith had less to do with the religion itself than with his mother's puritanical attitudes: "In fact, there is no hope in Vridar anywhere in the religion of his youth; it would be impossible for him to rid it of all the ugliness on which he was reared; agnosticism is perhaps the only way out for him." Identifying *Children of God* as "a fine indicator of

Fisher's attitudes toward Mormonism," the authors suggest that the novel shows Fisher's appreciation of the Mormons' work ethic, individuality, and social conscience. They argue that Fisher's negative portrait of Joseph Smith, whose experience with visions closely resembles Vridar's experience in *In Tragic Life*, is actually "a projection of his own unloved self." The article is valuable for other reasons. Citing research by a historian working with church archives, Arrington and Haupt provide information about Fisher's ancestry not widely available in other sources. They also cite evidence of Mormon converts who trace their interest in the Mormon church back to *Children of God* and effectively summarize the reception of the novel by both the Utah branch of the church and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Finally, Richard Andrews, founder of the Utah Chapter of American Atheists, has followed the lead of Fisher's widow and claimed Fisher as an atheist. More polemical than scholarly, "Vardis Fisher: An American Atheist Author" (*American Atheist*, Summer 1997) attempts no detailed investigation of Fisher's thought and is interesting mainly for its account of the battle in the 1970s and 1980s over Fisher's theology. Andrews, who corresponded with Opal Laurel Holmes, notes that the author's widow responded to scholarly claims of her husband's Mormon heritage by distributing press releases about his atheism.

Isolated by both geography and a fiery temperament, Fisher remained an outsider on the American literary scene his entire career. He did, however, develop relationships with or opinions about a few important contemporaries, and these connections have been the subjects of several articles by Flora. For example, "Vardis Fisher and Wallace Stegner: Teacher and Student" (*Western American Literature*, Summer 1970) notes the many similarities between Fisher, who taught Stegner at the University of Utah, and Paul Latour, a character in Stegner's story "The View from the Balcony." Both, for example, have sharp features, vision problems, and an affinity for hard liquor. Furthermore, both Fisher and Latour, Flora writes, use their keen, penetrating minds to analyze human behavior. Flora argues that these and other similarities not only indicate Fisher's influence on Stegner, but also point to the specific impressions Fisher left on his student. One particular characteristic that Stegner apparently noted in Fisher—and depicted in the character of Latour—is that of his penchant for detachment. Referring to Latour's brawl with a student named Charley, Flora writes: "It is an irony that Latour's animal action is really an intellectual favor to Charley and his wife. I think Fisher's own rudenesses were often attempts to prevent emotional dependencies. Fisher felt tempted to play the role of Father, but what he tried to say was: You need

to be an adult. I'll tell you what I know, but don't look for me to be Big Daddy for you." Flora points out that the problem of sons' dependencies on fathers is a central theme in the *Testament of Man*, particularly in *Orphans in Gethsemane*. Turning from "The View from the Balcony," Flora traces the similarities of tone, style, setting, and characterization in Fisher's *Dark Bridwell* and Stegner's *Remembering Laughter*. He concludes that the resemblance of Stegner's Alec Stuart to Charley Bridwell, in particular, brought about Fisher's claim that Stegner's prize-winning first novel owed something to his own, commercially less successful second novel.

Between 1929 and 1931, Fisher developed a friendship with Thomas Wolfe while the two worked together as instructors at New York University. Flora's "Thomas Wolfe at NYU: His Friendship with Vardis Fisher," published in *Thomas Wolfe of North Carolina*, ed. H.G. Jones, (Chapel Hill, NC: North Caroliniana Society, Inc. and the North Carolina Collection, 1982), analyzes Fisher and Wolfe's "brief but remarkable exchange," which Fisher himself describes in an essay called "Thomas Wolfe As I Knew Him." Flora notes that Wolfe scholars have been happy to ignore Fisher's somewhat unflattering portrait of his colleague in this essay and another called "Thomas Wolfe and Maxwell Perkins," but argues that a study of their relationship reveals a great deal about both writers. First, agreeing with Fisher's own confession, Flora writes that Fisher's depiction of Wolfe as introverted, self-pitying, and contemptuous is a self-portrait. Further, Flora suggests that Wolfe, who appears as the character Robert Clark in Fisher's novel *No Villain Need Be* (1936) and later as David Hawke in Fisher's *Orphans in Gethsemane*, served as a means by which Fisher could analyze the nature and the purpose of art and artists.

Flora writes that Fisher's isolation in Idaho after 1931 largely prevented him from associating with other writers. This isolation, however, did not stop Fisher from commenting on his fellow artists' work. In "Vardis Fisher and James Branch Cabell: An Essay on Influence and Reputation" (*The Cabellian*, 1969), Flora notes Fisher's allusions to Cabell in the tetralogy and *The Neurotic Nightingale* (1935), as well as thirty-one references in *God or Caesar?* and points out that Fisher appreciated Cabell's realism and irony. Indeed, Flora argues that Cabell "taught Fisher the importance of myth" and that Vridar's increased understanding and appreciation of Cabell in the final two volumes of the tetralogy signal his control of his romanticism. Flora offers additional links between the two writers in "Vardis Fisher and James Branch Cabell: A Postscript" (*The Cabellian*, 1970), in which he argues that *Forgive Us Our Virtues* (1938) is Fisher's "attempt to do a Cabellian comedy de-mythologized."



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Perhaps the most complex of Fisher's connections with fellow writers was one with a novelist who was, at times, closest to him in both geography and temperament. In "Vardis Fisher: Ernest Hemingway's Stern Idaho Critic" (*Hemingway and the Natural World*, ed. Robert Fleming, Moscow, ID: University of Idaho Press, 1999), Flora writes that Fisher "had an abiding antagonism toward Hemingway," who periodically lived in a house not far from Fisher's in Idaho. In *God or Caesar?*, Flora notes, Fisher criticizes his contemporary's reading habits and uses Hemingway as an example of a writer who sides with Caesar, pursuing fame instead of truth. In a less hostile but perhaps more perceptive section of *God or Caesar?*, Fisher calls attention to Hemingway's "essentially feminine" nature—predating, as Flora notes, Hemingway criticism by several decades. In *Orphans in Gethsemane*, Fisher writes, "Hemingway represents the child artist of the lost generation." In addition to taking cheap shots at sport hunting and bullfighting, Fisher refers to Hemingway as a boy whose rereading of his own work reveals enormous egotism. Drawing on his interview and correspondence with Fisher in the 1960s, Flora also shares some revealing anecdotes, including Fisher's expository comments on suicide and his slight of *The Old Man and the Sea*. While clearly demonstrating Fisher's antagonism, Flora's article also shows the writer's penetrating, if limited, insight into Hemingway. Indeed, he concludes that Fisher identified with Hemingway, particularly in his androgynous nature, castration complex, obsession with violence and death, anger toward his mother, and anxiety about his talent.

A handful of articles have illuminated other aspects of Fisher's life and personality. Ronald W. Taber's "Vardis Fisher and the 'Idaho Guide'" (*Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, April 1968), an interesting account of Fisher's work as director of the Idaho Federal Writers' Project, leaves one with a new appreciation of Fisher's renowned work ethic. Citing correspondence Fisher wrote to administrators in the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project, as well as other sources, Taber chronicles Fisher's success in overcoming inadequate and incompetent help, distrust in his own state, conflicting instructions, political pressures, and censorship to produce *Idaho: A Guide in Word and Picture* (1937). "Constant changes in Project personnel forced Fisher to travel thousands of miles on Idaho's poor highways and to write descriptive material about roadside views, special points of interest, and tourist accommodations," Taber writes. "In addition to these guided 'tours,' Fisher wrote all but two of the fifteen essays on Idaho history and physical attributes. He was, therefore, personally responsible for 374 of the 405 pages of text." The result, Taber shows, was the first and one of the finest of the state guides produced by

the project. In "Vardis Fisher and the WLA: A Reminiscence" (*South Dakota Review*, Summer 1990), C.L. Sonnichsen recalls coordinating Fisher's address at the Western Literature Association's first convention in Salt Lake City in 1966. In tracing the controversy behind the speech, which originally had contained anti-Semitic remarks aimed at the eastern publishing powers, Sonnichsen shares passages from correspondence and interesting anecdotes, which together provide insight into Fisher's character, particularly his independence and mercurial temperament.

Finally, the Special Vardis Fisher Number of *American Book Collector* (September 1963) is a generally unscholarly, slightly queer, and wholly delightful collection of reminiscences and other "Fisherana." Among the contents are a book collector's personal responses to the tetralogy and *Testament of Man*, an essay by Opal Laurel Holmes on her husband's personality and work habits, and a reminiscence by fellow writer Ellis Foote, who describes a visit that he, George Snell, Bob Arentz, and Ray B. West, Jr., made to Fisher's home in Hagerman, Idaho. Foote's remarks are eclipsed by Fisher's own footnotes, which provide a glimpse of his sarcasm and humor. To Foote's comments on the reasons for his subject's work ethic, for example, Fisher appends this note: "Low metabolism, low pulse, and sluggish circulation. The reader should bear in mind that three of these four visitors were so sedentary that going to the bathroom was for them a long journey." The issue also contains two items by Fisher himself, "The Novelist and His Characters" and "Vardis Fisher Comments on His 'Testament of Man' Series." In the issue's sole scholarly article, "The Early Power of Vardis Fisher," Flora looks back at Fisher's first two novels, both set in the Antelope country of Idaho. Giving most of his attention to *Toilers of the Hills*, he argues that these works deserve greater recognition. In a miscellany of observations, Flora credits Fisher with introducing "a new regional literature," praises Fisher's treatment of his lonely pioneers, and contrasts his characters with the more ignorant ones of Erskine Caldwell's novels.

## Criticism

### *Book Reviews*

No one has published an extensive study of Fisher's critical reception. The best source for this information, to date, is Kich's annotated bibliography, which contains summaries of and quotations from dozens of book reviews. Kich's bibliography shows that Fisher's books attracted more than three hundred reviews, including a handful written by esteemed scholars and fellow writers. Several of these reviews, especially the ones responding to his early novels in the 1920s and 1930s, hail him as a fine, even leading American author. His first two novels, *Toilers of the Hills* and *Dark*

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*Bridwell*, attracted favorable reviews from *The New Republic*, and the tetralogy caught the eye of Fred T. Marsh, who followed it eagerly. Writing in the December 25, 1932, edition of the *New York Times Book Review*, Marsh praises Fisher's ability to explore his own story, particularly the psychological one, without becoming sentimental. Marsh concludes his review by noting that "Mr. Fisher demands consideration as a serious and original American novelist who is blazing his own trail." Two volumes later, Marsh is still enthusiastic, writing in a review of *We Are Betrayed* that Fisher's novels have both regional and universal significance: "In their courage and rigorous honesty they are kin to the great works of confessional literature which know no national boundaries" (*New York Times Book Review*, January 20, 1935). Fisher received the consideration Marsh predicted, particularly after he published *Children of God*, which won the Harper Prize for Fiction in 1939. Praising its life and objectivity, Bernard DeVoto calls the novel "a deeply satisfying utilization of American material" and ends his review, "Millennial Millions," by saying: "It will be read for a long time, and Mr. Fisher has proved himself a mature novelist who belongs to the small company of our best" (*Saturday Review of Literature*, August 26, 1939). Alfred Kazin was more ambivalent toward the book. In "Our Last Authentic Frontier Novelist" (*New York Herald Tribune*, August 27, 1939), he notes the "superbly done scenes describing the Great Trek," but complains that "what lives in the book is, quite simply, the Mormon adventure, the Mormon suffering; but never the Mormon idea." Even the *Testament of Man* series, which some have blamed for derailing Fisher's career in the 1940s and 1950s, drew praise from high places. In a review of *Peace Like a River* (1957), in the December 8, 1957, issue of the *New York Times Book Review*, Frederick Manfred praises the series, particularly Fisher's talent for dramatizing history, and even goes so far as to say: "It is good to know we still have two more volumes coming."

The praise for Fisher's work was by no means unanimous, even during the first decade of his career. Writing in the January 6, 1934, issue of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, William Rose Benét admits that *In Tragic Life* "had its impressiveness," but that he is less impressed by *Passions Spin the Plot*, particularly its protagonist, of whom Benét writes: "God wot, I got thoroughly sick of Vridar, his hero, by the time I was through with Vridar's inhibitions and cowardly bullying and loutishness and pale-wormness." *Time* was so abusive of his later work that Fisher singled out the magazine for disdain in his book on writing fiction, *God or Caesar?* In a review that Fisher scholar John R. Milton has noted as particularly unprofessional, a *Time* writer openly ridiculed *Pemmican*, parodying what the writer saw as its gory details, ludicrous and unlikable protagonist, and "plot made of walrus blubber."

More serious and constructive critics, including fellow writers Wallace Stegner and Larry McMurtry, have recognized Fisher's achievements while also pointing out the flaws that, they believe, may have kept him from fulfilling Marsh's and DeVoto's early predictions about his great potential. In a review of *Forgive Us Our Virtues* (*Rocky Mountain Review*, Spring 1938), Stegner notes that Fisher's extreme idealism and affinity for preaching threatened his success as a novelist. Calling the tetralogy "a monumental contribution to American literature" and praising its author as "one of the two or three best candidates for the position of First American novelist," Stegner also compares his former teacher to Increase Mather and complains that his zeal for improving humanity not only is unrealistic but harms his fiction. "He deserves, whether one can agree with him the whole way or not, to be taken seriously," Stegner wrote. "The only qualification is that he should not, in my opinion, be taken as seriously as he takes himself." Decades later, Larry McMurtry also expressed ambivalence about Fisher's achievement. In "Icy Grief and a Fire of Vengeance" (*Saturday Review*, November 6, 1965), a review of *Mountain Man*, McMurtry commends Fisher's "narrative sense and his feel for the country." Glancing back at the novelist's earlier work, however, he voices a common complaint: "Fisher has a strong desire to be the scholar-artist, but his gift for narrative has not always been compatible with his yen for scholarship."

#### Books

Although many Fisher scholars have suggested that Fisher deserves more critical attention and appreciation, most of the book-length critical studies of his work have tended to be cursory. The exception is Joseph M. Flora's critical study *Vardis Fisher* (New York: Twayne Publishing, 1965). Combining breadth with depth, Flora covers almost all of Fisher's output while at the same time offering specific insights on individual passages and works, especially the tetralogy and *Testament of Man* series. For example, noting its similarity in form to both the novel of ideas and the Bildungsroman, Flora compares the tetralogy to the "intellectual apprenticeship" novels of James Joyce and W. Somerset Maugham. He goes on to analyze Fisher's framing device, which he notes is part of Fisher's attempt to psychoanalyze himself from a distance, and traces Fisher's application of "auto-correctivism," his psychologist brother's theory about humans' attempt to balance selfless and selfish urges in their lives. Noting Fisher's treatment of literature, puritanism, and education, Flora also argues that the "betrayal" depicted in the tetralogy "is not only Vridar's and Nelo's but the nation's as well." In a separate chapter, Flora analyzes

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*Orphans in Gethsemane* (the final volume of the *Testament of Man*, a rewriting and expansion of the tetralogy that carries Vridar's life to the 1960s), characterizing it as another, more deliberate attempt to find larger implications in Fisher's own story, indeed "to show the present state of Western man and to account for it in terms of the race's past." Flora shows, for example, that Fisher places Vridar in a long tradition of western men who have remained children by cowering before their fathers and the Father. Because of this dependence, Flora writes, those living in the modern era of religious skepticism feel like orphans in Gethsemane.

After this analysis of the autobiographical fiction, Flora turns in later chapters to surveying Fisher's *Testament of Man* series, regional fiction, and American historical novels. Although the scope becomes wider and the criticism more evaluative, these chapters contain a number of provocative observations. In his examination of the *Testament of Man*, Flora notes the intelligence and detachment of some of Fisher's central characters, including Wuh in *Darkness and the Deep* (1943) and Harg in *The Golden Rooms* (1944), and suggests: "Generally, but not exclusively, his method is to imagine what Vridar would have done in the times Fisher considers." In "Fisher's Wessex: Antelope of Idaho," Flora examines Fisher as a regional writer, comparing him with Thomas Hardy, Erskine Caldwell, and William Faulkner. In addition to praising Fisher's vivid characterization and convincing use of dialect, Flora traces the theme of loneliness that runs through *Toilers of the Hills*, *Dark Bridwell*, *April: A Fable of Love* (1937), and the short stories in *Love and Death* (1959). "Americana," Flora's chapter on *Children of God* and the other novels of the American West, credits Fisher with moving beyond historical romance to historical realism. Particularly interesting is Flora's treatment of the generally neglected novel *Pemmican*; he suggests that Fisher's rare deviation from "the strict chronicle method" in this book grew out of the novelist's equally rare desire for public acclaim: "Anxious to revive his reputation for the sake of the *Testament*, Fisher wanted *Pemmican* to sell." Flora goes on to identify important similarities in the characters of Vridar Hunter and *Pemmican*'s David McDonald—a philosophical brother to nature. While it does not treat *Mountain Man*, which was published later, Flora's study is the seminal book on Fisher and is widely used by later critics.

Less insightful but still useful for the newcomer to Fisher's fiction is *The Uses of History in the Novels of Vardis Fisher* (New York: Revisionist Press, 1976), in which George F. Day argues that the thread uniting most of Fisher's twenty-six novels is his effort to understand himself and his fellow human beings through a study of the past. For example, Day points out in "History and the Autobiographical Novels" that Fisher's tetralogy

reads like a case study showing the impact of particular episodes on an individual's life, as well as some central themes of humans in general: love, sex, and religion. In "History and the Anthropological Novels," Day writes that the novels in the *Testament of Man*, while occasionally "top-heavy with scholarship," depict humanity's debt to inherent traits such as egotism, as well as to the ideas and impulses that have emerged over the course of history. For instance, the relationship of Ghee and Kughh in *Darkness and the Deep* portrays companionship growing out of human isolation. Day also treats Fisher's ideas about the origin and evolution of war, romance, art, power, religion, and attitudes toward sex and family. He finds the same exploration of human behavior in Fisher's novels of the American West. In "History and the Americana Novels," he notes that works such as *The Mothers* and *Mountain Man*, in which characters act outside the realm of civilization, draw attention to primitive impulses, such as a mother's love for her children, and celebrate humans' potential for courage and selflessness. As a whole, *The Uses of History in the Novels of Vardis Fisher* reads more like a distillation of the ideas already prominent in Fisher's novels, rather than a fresh interpretation of the works, and is useful primarily as a guide to Fisher's plots and themes for readers new to his large oeuvre.

Other book-length critical studies on Fisher have been less satisfying, usually because the writers have done too little by attempting too much. Instead of rigorously analyzing a particular theme or genre, as they might do in studying Faulkner or Hemingway, these writers have tried to survey whole series of Fisher's novels or his entire poetic output and, consequently, have sacrificed depth for breadth. Each does little more than summarize the novels, catalog techniques, or identify general themes.

Dorys Grover has written two such broad critical studies: *A Solitary Voice: Vardis Fisher* (New York: Revisionist Press, 1973), which consists of four essays covering subjects as diverse as Fisher's poetry and elements of folklore in *Pemmican*; and *Vardis Fisher: The Novelist as Poet* (New York: Revisionist Press, 1973), in which she examines *Sonnets to an Imaginary Madonna* (1927), the Antelope People sonnets, and poems in the tetralogy. Grover notes in her preface to *A Solitary Voice* that its essays originally were written for a popular audience. Aside from a few desultory remarks, such as speculation about the influence of Edwin Arlington Robinson and other poets on Fisher, neither book ventures far beyond summary and broad interpretation.

Similarly broad is Wayne Chatterton's *Vardis Fisher: The Frontier and Regional Works* (Boise: Boise State College, 1972), which surveys Fisher's Western novels, offering a brief analysis of each. For instance, Chatterton

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argues that *Toilers of the Hills*, though hailed by critics as a fine addition to the country's regionalist literature, is at center "a psychological study of people bound to the land, losing track of self and time, snared in their manifold ambivalences." With the toiling Dock Hunter of this first novel, Chatterton contrasts the central character of Fisher's next published novel, *Dark Bridwell*. Charley Bridwell, Chatterton writes, is "an opposite type of frontiersman," a primitive man who "comes to the untamed land, not to tame and use it as other men do, but to become part of it." The impact of the child's experience on the man is the subject of Chatterton's analysis of *In Tragic Life*; in particular, Chatterton notes that Vidar Hunter struggles with the conflict between sex and religion and with his fear of brutal nature. Finally, Chatterton celebrates Fisher's use of historical materials in his fiction, particularly his ability to unite historical truth and dramatic art in works such as *Children of God*. As do Grover's books, Chatterton's study offers loosely connected insights on several works, but does not develop a thesis for understanding these diverse works, or focus long enough on a single novel or story to provide a detailed analysis of Fisher's achievements.

By far the strangest of the book-length studies is David Rein's *Vardis Fisher: Challenge to Evasion* (Chicago: Black Cat Press, 1937), which concerns class struggle more than Fisher's fiction. After a lengthy explanation of the means by which the establishment has dominated the lower classes throughout history through Catholicism, the illusion of democracy, and conventional moral standards, Rein complains that Fisher's diagnosis of humanity's ills in his tetralogy focuses on psychological phenomena rather than on these social forces. More Marxist propaganda than literary analysis, Rein's book is interesting primarily because it provides a glimpse of the political climate in which Fisher wrote. Indeed, the book's most striking—and odd—component is Fisher's own preface, "In Defense of the Obvious," in which Fisher disputes the book's thesis, insisting that "evasions had their beginnings, and some of their development, long before a capitalist order got on its first legs." Sketching the basic tenets of his brother's psychological theory of auto-correctivism, Fisher goes on to argue that Marxists, as well as capitalists, suffer from psychological distortions.

#### CHAPTERS AND COMMENTARIES IN BOOKS

Chapters on Vardis Fisher are de rigueur for encyclopedias surveying writers of the American West. In *Fifty Western Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. Fred Erisman and Richard Etulain (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1982), Joseph M. Flora assesses Fisher's place in the academy fifteen years after Fisher's death, provides a summary of his life, identifies

the major themes of his work, and gives a brief analysis of the criticism on Fisher. Although Flora's chapter on Fisher in *Twentieth-Century American Western Writers*, 1st ser., ed. Richard H. Cracroft, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 206 (Detroit: Bruccoli Clark Layman, 1999) covers some of the same ground, it more forcefully describes the vicissitudes of Fisher's career and the limitations of the artistry than does the earlier chapter. In *A Literary History of the American West*, Louie W. Attebery offers a helpful analysis of Fisher. In a particularly strong section on *Toilers of the Hills*, Attebery examines Fisher's depiction of man and nature in "equilibrium," as well as his use of folklife, which Attebery compares with the undercurrents of folk traditions in Norwegian Knut Hamsun's 1920 novel *Growth of the Soil*. While he merely glances at the tetralogy, *Children of God*, and the first eleven books of the *Testament of Man* series, Attebery is more thorough in his analysis of *Orphans in Gethsemane*, where he finds an exploration of "the web of human relationships," an understanding of fear as "the touchstone in understanding man's continuing story," criticism of eastern literary snobbery, and opinions on writing the historical novel. Attebery also briefly notes Fisher's treatment of time and the West in *Mountain Man* and concludes with an assessment of his subject's literary achievements. Borrowing Robert Frost's term "realist," he suggests that Fisher treated universal themes in the context of his region. With perhaps some overstatement, he writes of Fisher: "As one who tried to write honestly about the West, either the West he knew or the earlier one he so carefully researched, he is close to the literary tradition of Hamlin Garland and Frank Norris, surpassing them both in range of intelligence, depth of perception, and ambition. He came to understand his region's history, its folkways, its dialect, its capacity to excite fear and terror as well as its power to inspire feelings of tenderness and rapture. Future scholars may find that in these he compares not unfavorably with William Faulkner, another realist." *A Literary History of the American West* contains several other, briefer references to Fisher. In particular, Joseph M. Flora's essay on Wallace Stegner examines Fisher's influence on Stegner, whom Fisher taught at the University of Utah.

Other books also have focused on Fisher's role as a Western writer, sometimes using his work to support a general assessment of Western literature. In "Western Fiction and History: A Reconsideration," a chapter in *The American West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), for example, Richard Etulain argues that Fisher, like A.B. Guthrie, Jr., and Wallace Stegner, reveals the Western artistic pursuit of a "useful or usable past." In Etulain's analysis, Fisher was less ambitious than Guthrie, who interpreted the past, or Stegner, who explored the nature of history. Fisher's tetralogy and his *Testament of Man* series, Etulain writes, are the

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analysis of the criticism on nineteenth-Century American literature. *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (1999) covers some of the vicissitudes of Fisher's life in the earlier chapter. In *American Literature*, Attebery offers a helpful analysis on *Toilers of the Hills*. The nature in "equilibrium," compares with the undercurrents of Fisher's 1920 novel *Growth of Children of God*, and the Attebery is more thorough in finding an exploration of the nature of fear as "the touchstone of eastern literary culture." Attebery also briefly discusses *Mountain Man* and its achievements. Borrowing from Fisher treated universal themes with some overstatement, he writes about the West, either researched, he is close to Norris, surpassing them in wild ambition. He came to the West, its capacity to excite the senses of tenderness and rapacity compares not unfavorably to *History of the American West* by Fisher. In particular, he discusses Fisher's influence on the West.

As a Western writer, the assessment of Western literature in "consideration," a chapter in *Oklahoma Press* (1979), by A.B. Guthrie, Jr., and the title of a "useful or usable history" is more obvious than Guthrie, who discusses the nature of history. In *Etulain* writes, are the

author's attempts to comb the past for "answers" to individual or universal questions, whereas *Mountain Man* shows him forging connections between past and present. In general, Etulain writes, Fisher's historical fiction betrays his commitment to thorough research: "Fisher seldom wrote about a subject that he had not researched as if he were writing a doctoral dissertation (he received a doctorate in English literature with high honors from the University of Chicago in 1925)." *Children of God* is among the novels Frank L. Stallings, Jr., discusses in "The West: Perpetual Mirage in Literature" (*Myths and Realities: Conflicting Values in America*, Memphis: Memphis State University, 1972). Stallings highlights the difference between settlers' visions and the severe realities of the West; he contrasts, for example, Brigham Young's illusions when he stares at the Salt Lake valley for the first time with the desiccated land and vegetation the Mormon leader finds upon closer inspection.

Barbara Meldrum examines the conflicting frontier experiences of men and women in three of Fisher's early novels in her "Vardis Fisher's Antelope People: Pursuing an Elusive Dream," a chapter in *Northwest Perspectives: Essays on the Culture of the Pacific Northwest* (Eugene: University of Oregon, 1979). Meldrum begins with the premise—developed through references to the work of Jean de Crèvecoeur, Frederick Jackson Turner, and other commentators on the pioneer experience—that the male pursuit of independence and freedom on the frontier often has stunted women's aspirations for family, civilization, and agrarian production. In her analysis of *Toilers of the Hills*, *Dark Bridwell*, and *April*, Meldrum succeeds in identifying these contrasting impulses of Fisher's men and women; but her argument that the women sacrifice their goals for those of their men is less satisfying. Meldrum turns to a more general subject in "Women in Western American Fiction: Images, or Real Women?" (*Women and Western Literature*, Troy, NY: Whitston, 1982), in which she analyzes two of Fisher's female characters alongside those of Willa Cather, Wallace Stegner, and other writers. Calling *Mountain Man* "one of the most eloquent tributes to woman that can be found in fiction," Meldrum notes that the novel's protagonist, Sam Minard, sincerely appreciates his wife, Lotus, respects the heroic mother Kate Bowden, and even learns from Kate's peaceful ways. On the other hand, partly by contrasting these female characters with the women on whom they were modeled, Meldrum shows that both Lotus and Kate are mere images and come across in the novel as passive and dependent. The best example of a real woman in Fisher's fiction, Meldrum writes, is Lela Bridwell, who in *Dark Bridwell* becomes "something of a protagonist herself—a thwarted artist, an individual who finally asserts herself and makes her own way in the world."

John R. Milton devotes an entire chapter of his book *The Novel of the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980) to Fisher, particularly his efforts to combine rationalism and literature. Milton points out that Fisher's drive to dissect and understand humanity could make for unsatisfactory novels and obscure the better, more poetic parts of his work. This assessment—particularly Milton's criticism of Fisher's "excessive reliance upon the use of scholarly sources, an almost irrational passion for what he considered historical and psychological truth"—comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with the *Testament of Man*. Milton, however, shows that Fisher's rationalism shaped his other novels as well, and indeed was a guiding principle behind his literary method. Writing about *Tale of Valor*, for example, Milton points to Fisher's rationalistic tendency to examine actions from the outside: "Fisher's method is to pile it on, have three incidents do the work of one, rather than to explore the significance of the action." This observation helps explain other works as well, particularly *Children of God*, where the reader is likely to feel like Sam Minard at the end of *Mountain Man*, viewing the migrating Mormons from such a distance that they seem merely a line on the land, rather than a group of complex individuals grappling with their faith, families, and future. Milton goes on to suggest that Fisher, in writing his historical novels, chose to be "rational rather than imaginative" and so created "a feeling of distance between reader and character."

Other critics have placed Fisher in different critical camps. In his "Freudianism and the Stream-of-Consciousness," a chapter of *Lucifer at Large* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1937), C. John McCole briefly mentions Fisher, calling him one of the most "consistently Freudian" writers of the era. Focusing on the tetralogy, McCole notes Vridar Hunter's psychoanalysis of his students and his efforts to conquer his repression by giving himself over to sexual indulgences. In "The Freudians," a chapter of *Intellectual America: Ideas on the March* (New York: MacMillan, 1941), Oscar Cargill actually says little about Fisher's identity as a Freudian writer, but does voice a provocative criticism of the tetralogy: "Are there ten Vridar Hunters in the world? Nay, is there any other Vridar Hunter?...Vridar Hunter is Vridar Hunter only, and not an eye through which society may be glimpsed or evaluated" (736). George Snell places Fisher among the "Realists" in his book *The Shapers of American Fiction, 1798-1947* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1961). In a section called "Erskine Caldwell and Vardis Fisher: The Nearly-Animal Kingdom," Snell provides an insightful overview of Fisher's themes and style, focusing on *In Tragic Life*, *Children of God*, and the first volumes of the *Testament of Man*. Calling his subject "the least read of the major American

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tical camps. In his chapter of *Lucifer at the Gate*, C. John McCole notes most "consistently" that McCole notes Vridar's efforts to conquer his lands. In "The Freudian March" (New York: Doubleday, 1961) but Fisher's identity of the tetralogy: there are any other Vridar not an eye through George Snell places *of American Fiction* (1961). In a section "Animal Kingdom," and style, focus—volumes of the *Testa*—the major American

novelists," Snell also speculates productively on the reasons for popular and critical neglect of Fisher, citing his avoidance of the literary social scene, his obstinacy on matters of belief, the variety of his work, and his apparent "perverse wish to outrage" readers with his bold treatment of human weaknesses. Finally, in "Mormon Storytellers" (*Rocky Mountain Reader*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1946), Dale L. Morgan treats Fisher as one of the numerous authors who have written novels about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Morgan calls *Children of God* the most ambitious—and, therefore, the most important—in the flood of Mormon novels published from 1939 to 1942. He offers a unique explanation for the "lifelessness" that has bothered some readers of the book, complaining that Fisher made the mistake of "peopling his pageant with a congregation of Dock Hunters" and thus omitting the "personal fulfillment and deep spirituality that were profoundly important in the inception and growth of Mormonism."

#### *Articles in Periodicals*

Although Fisher dabbled in everything from sonnets to travel guides, the bulk of his literary output can be divided fairly neatly into regional fiction, autobiographical novels, and historical novels. Likewise, most of the Fisher criticism that has appeared in periodicals has focused on one or another of these genres.

#### REGIONAL FICTION

Fisher's first two published novels, *Toilers of the Hills* and *Dark Bridwell*, were set in the Antelope Hills of Idaho, a region to which he returned in the autobiographical *In Tragic Life* and *April*. One of the earliest and best studies of this regional fiction is John Peale Bishop's "The Strange Case of Vardis Fisher" (*Southern Review*, Autumn 1937). Although brief, this essay provides useful insights on Fisher's pioneers—Dock Hunter, Charley Bridwell, and Joe and Prudence Hunter—whom Bishop describes as pioneers on "a very late frontier." Fisher, Bishop writes, "has explored the possibilities that open to the pioneer once he has stopped"; among those possibilities are Dock's attempts to exploit the land, Charley's atavism, and Joe and Prudence's investment in their children. Bishop is also articulate on Fisher's literary contribution, which he places below those of William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell. Showing a particularly keen eye for Fisher's shortcomings, he writes: "His resources as an artist are limited, his taste is uncertain and his sense of form is not strong enough to allow him with impunity to discard the common conventions of the novel." Still, Bishop praises the early novels and insists that Fisher merits attention

because he explores the central question for any novelist: "Granted such and such circumstances...how shall a man conduct himself so that his soul may not sicken and die?"

John R. Milton analyzes some of these same regional works in "The Primitive World of Vardis Fisher: The Idaho Novels" (*Midwest Quarterly*, 1976). Although all were written before Fisher began his *Testament of Man* series, Milton treats *Dark Bridwell*, *April*, and the tetralogy as if they pick up where the *Testament* left off, depicting humans' continuing struggle to rise above their animal fears and impulses. Charley and Jed Bridwell, Milton writes, "symbolize the dark origins of man, the primitive spirit, evil in its ancient sources of ignorance, base desires, and lack of intelligent control." According to Milton's analysis, even the comparatively civilized Vridar Hunter of *Passions Spin the Plot* must cope with irrational impulses, such as shyness and moral reservations. In another article, "The Western Novel: Sources and Forms" (*Chicago Review*, Summer 1963), Milton uses *Dark Bridwell* to illustrate uses of myth and treatments of nature in Western fiction.

In "Western Writers and the River: Guthrie, Fisher, Stegner" (*The Pacific Northwest Forum*, Summer 1979), Barbara Meldrum offers a brief analysis of the role of the Snake River in *Dark Bridwell* "as an indicator of change and as a reflector of personal experience." Finally, in "Vardis Fisher's 'Fierce Silent Drama' of Idaho Pioneering" (*The Redneck Review of Literature*, Spring 1990), George F. Day marks Idaho's centennial with a tribute to *Toilers of the Hills*, noting that Fisher's first published novel sketches a consummate pioneer in Dock Hunter, the complex relationship between humans and nature, and—in Dock's relationship with his wife, Opal—"a classic conflict between faith and doubt, imagination and reality, hope and fear."

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVELS

Although also set in rural Idaho, Fisher's third novel signaled a move in a slightly different direction. With *In Tragic Life*, the novelist turned to telling his own story in a series of autobiographical novels that also included *Passions Spin the Plot*, *We Are Betrayed*, *No Villain Need Be*, and *Orphans in Gethsemane*.

In "Naturalism in American Farm Fiction" (*Journal of the Central Mississippi Valley American Studies Association*, Spring 1961), Roy W. Meyer argues that the pessimism, neurotic protagonist, and dominating environment of *In Tragic Life* make it part of a tradition of naturalistic farm fiction stretching from Harold Frederic's *Seth's Brother's Wife* in 1886 to Frederick Manfred's *This Is the Year* in 1947. Speculating on the tendency

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of farm fiction to be naturalistic. Meyer makes two observations relevant to Fisher: he notes that most of the authors of this fiction grew up in rural settings, where they experienced nature firsthand, and that their artistic sensibilities probably did not suit them for life in such a potentially harsh environment. "Artists tend to be sensitive people," Meyer notes, "and some of those who spent their early years on the farm may have felt toward the manure pile much as Hawthorne did at Brook Farm."

In "An Early Stage of Fisher's Journey to the East: *Passions Spin the Plot*" (*South Dakota Review*, Spring 1980), Beatrice K. Morton uses Jungian ideas about the anima, an archetype representing feminine impulses in a man's psyche, to illuminate the second of Fisher's autobiographical novels. Agreeing with Joseph M. Flora's observation that protagonist Vridar Hunter suffers from a conscious internal conflict, Morton argues that Fisher's character also experiences an "unconscious projection of his anima onto Neloa."

Flora also weighs in on the autobiographical novels in his article "Concealment in Vardis Fisher's *Orphans in Gethsemane*" (*The Redneck Review of Literature*, Spring 1990). Focusing on a handful of important incidents that Fisher omitted or underplayed in an otherwise exhaustive fictional version of his own life story, Flora suggests that these incidents—as well as Fisher's "concealment" of them—reveal much about his character and work. He notes, for example, that Fisher's early dabbling with sentimental short fiction, sententious poetry, and plays set in World War I—a writing experience not chronicled in *Orphans*—reveals a writer still learning his craft: "The chief value of looking at Fisher's first published efforts in *The Pen* is to remind us how tentative he initially was about genre. His juvenilia also make clear that he had not found his subject matter—first his homeland, then himself—until after Leona McMurtrey's death." Fisher also devotes little attention to the Harper Prize for Fiction he won in 1939 for *Children of God*, and Flora speculates that the reason for this concealment is the true state of Fisher's—and Vridar's—confidence in his talents at the time. "The prize does not, in fact, lead Vridar to new confidence," Flora writes, "and this concealment is crucial to our understanding *Orphans* as an autobiographical novel." Flora suggests that by focusing on the lukewarm reception of his proposed *Testament of Man* project from an editor and publisher, Fisher emphasizes Vridar's crisis of "self-doubt" at this stage in his career rather than the surge of confidence one might expect to follow the reception of a national writing honor.

#### HISTORICAL NOVELS

In 1939, Fisher published his first historical novel, *Children of God*, a prize-winning epic on the origin and development of Mormonism. For the

rest of his life, he wrote historical fiction almost exclusively. Many of these novels—including *The Mothers*, *Tale of Valor*, *Pemmican*, and *City of Illusion* (1941)—were similar to *Children of God* in their accounts of human survival in the American West. Others—namely, the first eleven novels of the *Testament of Man* series on the evolution of human psychology and civilization—were a dramatic departure, not only for Fisher, but for American literature in general. Whatever the discrepancies among these historical novels or the value of his other works, it is primarily as a historical novelist that Fisher is known. The large number of articles dealing with his historical novels has confirmed and perhaps even helped create this reputation.

A provocative study of Fisher's historical fiction as a whole is Ronald W. Taber's "Vardis Fisher: New Directions for the Historical Novel" (*Western American Literature*, Winter 1967). Taber notes that the work of Fisher and other novelists in the 1930s signaled a move away from historical romance and toward historical realism. He goes on to suggest that the method by which Fisher reconstructs the past resembles the ideas of British historian R.G. Collingwood, who described the role of imagination in filling the gaps between known historical guideposts. Noting Fisher's renowned research in religion, anthropology, and other fields, Taber argues that this research led Fisher to "intuitive insights" about his historical subject matter. Although Taber's analysis of this method in *Tale of Valor* is sketchy, his claim opens possibilities of research into the link between Fisher's scholarship and his historical fiction.

Fisher's best-known historical novel, however, has given at least one scholar reason to question his methods. In "Children of God: An Historian's Evaluation" (*Western Humanities Review*, Winter 1953), David Brion Davis cites contemporary newspapers and other sources, including correspondence and journals written by Mormon leaders Parley Pratt and William Clayton, and notes several discrepancies between Fisher's novel and the historical record. He argues, for example, that Palmyra, New York, was not a frontier settlement at the time Joseph Smith formed his church, that Smith was not a "humorless mystic," that Brigham Young knew that the Mormon settlement in the West would become part of the United States, and that the mountain man Jim Bridger actually promoted a Mormon settlement in the Great Basin next to the Great Salt Lake. More than simply a critique of Fisher's talents as a historical novelist, Davis's article helps illuminate Fisher's themes and motives. Fisher's depiction of Bridger as an outspoken critic of Young's plan, for example, supports his characterization of Young as a stubborn, persevering visionary, and his suggestion that the Mormons sought to escape the United States rather than join it, as Davis's sources imply, heightens the tragedy of the novel.

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Fisher's famous Mormon novel is also the subject of the brief article "Vardis Fisher's *Children of God: A Second Look*" (*SunStone*, January–February 1979), in which Levi S. Peterson assesses Fisher's identity as a "Mormon author" and his general literary merit. While recognizing Fisher's talents, Peterson finds his subject lacking on both counts. Noting that *Children of God* emphasizes the Mormons' physical journey and largely ignores their "inner conflict," Peterson argues that Fisher lacked "the inside feel of Mormonism." Widening his scope, Peterson suggests that Fisher will not have lasting literary significance because he lacked "the fecundity of imagination and richness of intellect that makes for enduring literature" and because his fiction does not adequately treat human complexity, such as the psychological depth of Joseph Smith. Intended only as a glance at an author recently brought back into the spotlight, Peterson's article raises important questions without seeking to explore them in any depth.

Fisher's *Testament of Man* has inspired a handful of articles. In "The American West and the Archetypal Orphan" (*Western American Literature*, Fall 1970), Louie W. Attebery juxtaposes this series, Fisher's autobiographical tetralogy, and novels by James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, and A. B. Guthrie. In addition to identifying the orphan, territoriality, and other archetypes in these Western novels, Attebery argues that melancholy and solitude often plague the characters involved in these archetypes, illustrating his point with passages from *Orphans in Gethsemane*. Part personal reminiscence and part literary analysis, Lester Strong's "Vardis Fisher Revisited" (*South Dakota Review*, Autumn 1986) traces the evolution of human culture and psychology, as Fisher records it in the *Testament of Man*. More interesting, though he makes it only briefly at the end of his essay, is Strong's assertion that the series "is precisely Fisher's attempt to 'embrace the totality' of twentieth century Western humanity's world, to 'mirror' that universe by showing 'its basic and essential principles' within the scope of twelve novels." The second installment of the *Testament of Man*, a novel called *The Golden Rooms*, inspired Kirby L. Duncan to make a rare case for Fisher's influence in "William Golding and Vardis Fisher: A Study in Parallels and Extensions" (*College English*, December 1965). Noting similarities in plot and characters, Duncan suggests that *The Golden Rooms* was a "possible source" for Golding's *The Inheritors*, but credits the latter writer with an innovation: "Fisher portrays a moral progress parallel to progressing evolution; but Golding's Neanderthals, in their mere innocence, represent a morality preferable to that of the Homo Sapiens who overcome them."

Mick McAllister takes up the subject of Fisher's female characters in "Survival of the Blood: Vardis Fisher's *The Mothers*" (*Vardis Fisher Newsletter*,

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1990). Noting the neglect of women in historical writing and popular novels about the West, McAllister argues that Fisher routinely sketched complex female characters, including many noteworthy for their mettle. Singling out *The Mothers* for its impressive "assemblage of heroic women," McAllister notes, for example, the decisiveness and sensibility of Mary Graves, who but for the sexism of her time could have provided the leadership the Donner Party needed to survive. Quoting Fisher's comment on a woman's fierceness "when driven to the protection of her children," McAllister focuses on this motivation for heroism in the title characters of the novel.

*Mountain Man*, Fisher's last novel and perhaps his best known behind *Children of God*, has inspired several articles, including two by McAllister. In "Father to the Man: An Apology for Fisher's Indians" (*Vardis Fisher Newsletter*, 1990, and included in this anthology), McAllister takes on the daunting task of analyzing Fisher's treatment of his Native American characters. McAllister declares that Fisher has painted them as "the ugliest stereotype of their race that the white man has imagined." Pointing out that Fisher's view of Native Americans changed dramatically during the same period when he was composing the first seven installments of the *Testament of Man*, McAllister argues that the stereotypes in Fisher's Western novels reflect his belief in cultural evolution, the notion that cultures become more advanced over time. McAllister points out, for example, that the superstitious Native Americans in *Mountain Man* resemble the superstitious prehistoric characters of *Adam and the Serpent* (1947).

One reason for the popularity of *Mountain Man* is the 1972 film *Jeremiah Johnson*, which McAllister deftly analyzes in "You Can't Go Home: Jeremiah Johnson and the Wilderness" (*Western American Literature*, Spring 1978). Primarily an analysis of the movie, McAllister's article briefly treats two important transformations in his comparison of Fisher's book, Pollack's film, and the book on which both works were based, *Crow Killer: The Saga of Liver-Eating Johnson*, a biography of John Johnson [Johnston] by Raymond Thorp and Robert Bunker. First, he notes the evolution of the central character from the "uneducated, unprincipled, insensitive" and barbaric John Johnson into Fisher's Sam Minard, "a disgusted fugitive from civilization," and finally into the film's Jeremiah Johnson, "the man of good spirit and good intentions, not Everyman but the tragic hero, who carried with him into the wilderness his romantic illusions and with them the seed of the very civilization he sought to repudiate." McAllister also suggests that Native Americans, fairly portrayed in the biography and film, become in Fisher's hands mere instruments to demonstrate the author's ideas about cultural evolution.



In "The Art of the Mountain Man Novel" (*Western American Literature*, November 1985), David Stouck examines *Mountain Man* alongside A.B. Guthrie's *The Big Sky*, Frederick Manfred's *Lord Grizzly*, and other works. Stouck provides a useful summary of conventions of the mountain man novel—including the use of legend, dialect, and the journey motif—but focuses on this genre's aesthetic achievements in the areas of form, morals, psychology, and philosophy. Stouck notes, for example, how Fisher and his fellow novelists treat the question of humans' role in nature, tending to favor a primitive existence while admitting that such an existence became difficult or impossible with the exploitation and settling of the West.

Finally, Flora contrasts treatments of women in "Westering and Woman: A Thematic Study of Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and Fisher's *Mountain Man*" (*Heritage of Kansas*, Spring 1977; reprint, *Women, Women Writers, and the West*, ed. L. L. Lee and Merrill Lewis, Troy, NY: Whitston, 1979). Seeing both books at the end of a long line of literary treatments of women's role in the American frontier by the likes of James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner, Flora notes that Kesey's novel, primarily through the character Big Nurse, depicts the female as the domineering figure who restricts man's freedom; the novel "vehemently cries out that Huck Finn did well to strive to escape Aunt Sally and her kind." Flora contrasts this treatment of women with the one found in *Mountain Man*, in which the characters of Lotus and Kate represent an Edenic helpmate and a motherly teacher, respectively. "Lotus does not threaten Sam's manhood," Flora writes, "but she allows him to express aspects of it hitherto subdued." He goes on to show that it is Kate who teaches Sam to forsake his quest for vengeance.

#### Summary Observations

At around eighty, the number of books and articles that offer substantial criticism of Fisher is still relatively small—indeed, small enough that nearly all of them could be treated here. After peaking in the 1930s—the decade of *Dark Bridwell*, the tetralogy, and *Children of God*—interest in Fisher dropped in the middle of the twentieth century, and it is now clear that contemporaries such as William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe, with whom he has been compared, have eclipsed him in literary reputation. More than these writers, who also became identified with particular areas of the United States, Fisher seems destined to be regarded primarily as a regional writer. Especially in recent years, when a biography and several new articles have appeared, Fisher's writing continues to inspire insightful criticism, but much of this criticism has focused on his novels of the

American West or has appeared in journals such as *Western American Literature* and books such as *Women and Western Literature*. Even within this realm, Fisher's reputation as a writer worthy of scholarly attention will depend on critics' willingness to follow the lead of Flora, McAllister, and others in producing precise, thorough analyses on individual works and specific themes. Fisher's large, rich body of fiction invites such studies. Ultimately, his reputation as a leading Western writer of the twentieth century will depend on them.