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James T. Farrell: Worthy of Appreciation

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James T. Farrell: Worthy of Appreciation

A Chicago native son, James T. Farrell achieved a notable literary reputation. Students of American Literature today, however, might not know of him, for he was born over a century ago, and his major writing consists of novels that do not have the lasting power of those by Faulkner, Steinbeck, Hemingway, and a few other novelists who have retained their celebrity status into our current century. This is not to imply that he has been improperly appreciated over the years. Yet, in a display honoring Chicago writers on the top floor of what used to be called the Sears Tower (now The Willis Tower in the Sears Building), his name is not included—and this, to me, is an unwarranted oversight. Because of my personal experience with him, he has had a profound impact upon me as a person and a teacher, and it is very possible that he has affected many others in a positive way, as well.

Farrell's career as a recognized author began in 1932 with the publication of the first novel of the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy—*Young Lonigan*—which he followed with *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* and *Judgment Day* over the next three years. Like J.K. Rowling in our time, his plan from the start was to compose multiple books to tell an overall story, for he followed *Studs* with a tetralogy, telling the life of Danny O'Neill. These titles—*A World I Never Made*, *No Star Is Lost*, *Father and Son*, and *My Days of Anger*—were written between 1936 and 1943, and ten years later he made this work a pentalogy with the publication of *The Face of Time*. What ambition all of these books reflect! And after yet another multiple book series—*The Bernard Carr Trilogy*—he embarked on a most remarkable endeavor, one that never reached fruition before his death in 1979. This was a cycle of novels, tales, and poems which he labeled *A Universe of Time*, a series that he theorized would reach thirty volumes. From my perspective, Farrell's earliest two series were, and still are, his best. The stories of Studs Lonigan and Danny O'Neill, because they were based on characters he knew well in his growing up in the South Side of Chicago, make that city of a century

ago come alive. These books are easily readable and often riveting. The "Studs" trilogy follows the naturalism prevalent in American literature in the early portion of the century, while the O'Neill stories are not as "heavy" or depressing. I think these books would hold the attention of today's students as they did the students of previous generations.

I was introduced to Farrell's writing as a college student in the classroom of Mr. William Lynch, who was working on his doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania at the time, and whose dissertation was focused on the literary contribution of James T. Farrell. When the Twayne's United States Authors Series engaged Mr. Edgar M. Branch to compose the first full-length study of James T. Farrell, Branch acknowledged the help he received from Dr. Lynch's literary criticism of Farrell. A particularly noteworthy memory I have is being caught up in the reading of Farrell's *A World I Never Made* in a rented car during a 1963 summer visit to Germany, while the friends accompanying me chided my apparent disregard for the unique scenery we were passing through.

Prior to the start of the fall semester in 1973, while I was teaching full time at Cumberland County College, I learned that Farrell had agreed to be a visiting author at what was then Glassboro State College, and a graduate-level seminar course, entitled "The Fiction of James T. Farrell," would be offered and taught by a Dr. Donohue. Despite agreeing to teach a double overload of courses at Cumberland, I could not resist this opportunity, and so I enrolled, along with a disappointing number (to me) of fellow-students. There were only about six or seven of us altogether, and Dr. Donohue assigned a large amount of coursework over the span of sixteen weeks. Several short papers, a seminar paper, and frequent oral reports were required, in addition to all of the reading and the follow-up class contribution. With such a small number of participants, the oral reports kept us busier than we would have been with a larger enrollment.

Walter H. Johnson

Farrell himself was present in most of our classes, usually for a short while at the start, and we would have the opportunity to ask him questions and listen to topics our professor would place before him. About three-quarters of the way through the course, when it was once again my turn to report orally, the book assigned was entitled *The Silence of History*. This was the first of his proposed thirty-volume series under the composite title *A Universe of Time*, and I had no idea that it would be as overbearing as it was to me. My own schedule, as the semester was coming to a close, was as busy as it could be, and I was hard pressed to find the time to read my class assignments, let alone prepare an oral report for the class to analyze and react to. What frustrated me most was that, unlike his many previous books, this became difficult to ponder and very time consuming—time that I simply could not afford.

As a teacher myself, I could not settle for a mediocre report, and I was not going to be dishonest in my reaction to this book in front of the class. As a safeguard, I consulted the *Book Review Digest* for critical reactions to works published in 1963, and I took satisfaction in finding all negative reviews of *The Silence of History*. I felt a touch of revenge and copied down the phrase “colossal bore” from one of the reviews. I was angry at the amount of precious time I needed, and I felt a bit betrayed by this author who, prior to now, had been so easy and enjoyable to read.

On the night of class, Dr. Donahue approached me as soon as he and Mr. Farrell entered the room. He spoke *sotto voce* in explaining that “Jim” had asked him for a ride to class and that he apparently had no other way back, and so he was likely to stay for the entire class. He followed this with, “Do you still want to give your report?” I am sure that he assumed I would speak negatively about the book I was reporting on, and that it would prove a bit embarrassing to say this in front of the author himself. What a predicament I faced!

I have told this tale to many of my classes since 1973, explaining how awkward it is for a teacher to deal with unprepared students or absent students when classes are built around their reports. I have added that, because I was a teacher, I could not back out of this assignment. So I told Dr. Donahue that I would, indeed, give

my report, and, when I took my place, Mr. Farrell was about three or four feet away from me. I knew my face was red, for I could feel my ears burning. I included that awful phrase I had copied from the *Book Review Digest*, averting my eyes from his throughout the report. Upon finishing, I glanced his way and saw that he was not at all flustered. He simply asked if I was aware of his overall purpose in this first volume of that super-ambitious endeavor. I do not remember any further outcome of the events of that evening, and I do not feel particularly valiant after my willingness to do what I felt I needed to do in that class. But I am proud and happy that I took that course, and I can honestly say that that one book did not diminish my esteem for James T. Farrell.

The body of work he published in his lifetime is very impressive, and his ambition is noteworthy. Unfortunately, he was as politically outspoken as he was prolific, and it appears that his activity in Trotskyist politics and membership in the Socialist Workers Party incurred the wrath of some critics of his time and after his death. This probably explains his missing out on that display of authors in the Willis Tower, and, though no one is likely to rectify that “oversight,” I feel he deserves to be there. Backing up my stand, I can offer the following noteworthy facts: the renowned author and Chicago-based historian “Studs” Terkel boasts that he replaced his first name, Louis, with the name of the protagonist of Farrell’s first published trilogy. Also, in the Modern Library’s list of the one hundred best novels of the twentieth century, *Studs Lonigan* is twenty-ninth. (If the books he published in the latter part of his life do not reach the level of those published earlier, this must not be taken as a limitation of his overall literary standing; one needs to look no further than Tennessee Williams to see that this phenomenon happens!) On the one-hundredth anniversary of Farrell’s birth, Norman Mailer, Pete Hamill, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. were panelists at the New York Public Library’s “James T. Farrell Centenary Celebration” honoring his life and legacy. Farrell had died in New York—perhaps another reason for Chicago’s apparent indifference.

My experience in that course at Glassboro State College made me realize the value of placing a person into the literary works that instructors present to students day after day in the classroom. To be able to see, hear, question, and even

James T. Farrell: Worthy of Appreciation

disagree with the writers of assigned stories can enrich students and teachers alike. One such outcome could be a unique idea for a follow-up critical analysis assigned after the reading and discussing are complete. The current practice of One Book, One College, or a similar approach wherein a town or an entire city takes on the selection of a single work for multitudes to read

and discuss can bring an author to the people and give them the chance to see the “person” behind the assigned reading. Even bringing authors to classrooms and to conferences can accomplish the same end. James T. Farrell’s presence enriched me and, hopefully, many of my students to whom I related my connection to him

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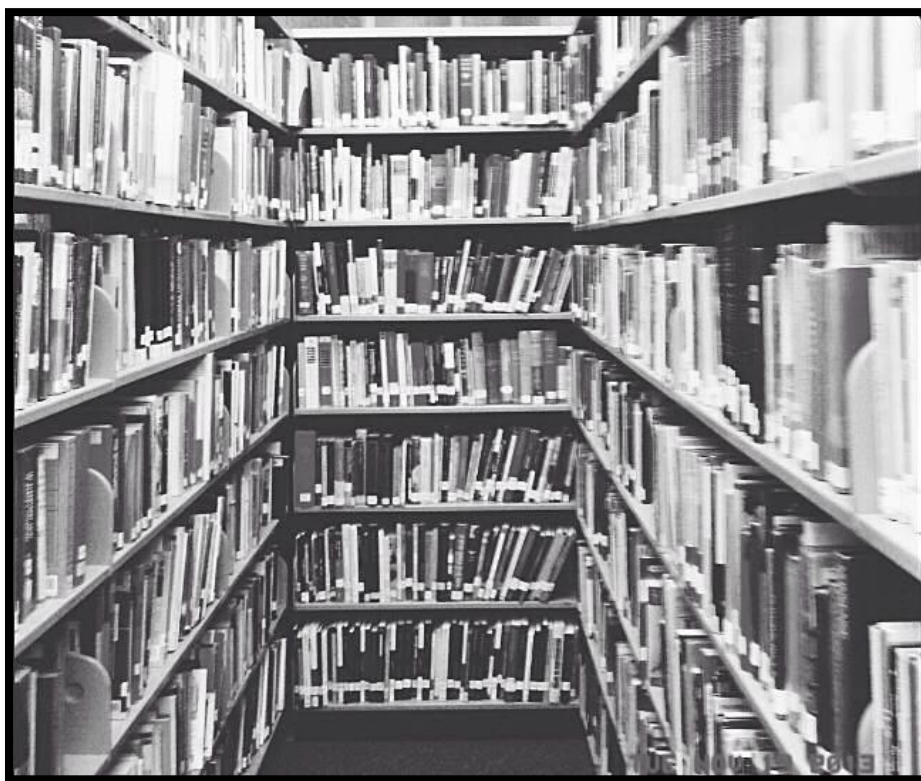


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