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Vardis Fisher: Review Of An Idaho Writer

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VANDIE PISHER: REVIEW OF AN IDAHO WRITER

This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of English.

Presented to the English Department of Carroll College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for honors, with honors.

March 30, 1971

(Date)
VARDIS FISHER: REVIEW OF AN IDAHO WRITER

I became aware of Vardis Fisher when I was very young, probably no more than five years old. My father read Fisher's syndicated newspaper column and I remember that he usually discussed it with my mother.

Fisher remained in my thoughts as I passed through grade school. I was proud of my own area and wanted to live in our area. He was, to me, a shrine to uniqueness for southern Idaho, one that distinguished our rural area. Hemingway served the same purpose, as did our potatoes, the Basque people, and our main street, which is the widest in the world. Each time Fisher published a book I noticed the reviews in the papers and was reassured that he would remain important in the existence of southern Idaho.

Finally, ready to write my paper, I decided to think of Vardis Fisher. In college I have acquired a special interest in American writers and taken two semesters of American Literature, but Fisher was never mentioned. I read many of the critics and suggested readings; still Fisher was never mentioned and I began to wonder why. This project, then, has become a study of Fisher's life, the work of his work, and perhaps a reevaluation of both critics and the public to them. Except in instance I will not consider Fisher's works by comparison with other American authors, primarily because it would make my thesis too lengthy. I think...
PREFACE

I became aware of Vardis Fisher when I was very young, probably no more than five years old. My father read Fisher's syndicated newspaper column and I remember that he usually discussed it with my mother.

Fisher remained in my thoughts as I passed through grade school; I was proud of him since he was famous and chose to live in our area. He was, to me, a claim to uniqueness for southern Idaho, one that distinguished our rural area. Hemingway served the same purpose, as did our potatoes, the Basque people, and our main street, which is the widest in the world. Each time Fisher published a book I noticed the reviews in the papers and was reassured that he would remind everyone of the existence of southern Idaho.

In college I have acquired a special interest in American writers and taken two semesters of American Literature, but Fisher was not mentioned. I read many of the critics and suggested readings; still Fisher was never mentioned and I began to wonder why. This project, then, has been an attempt to review Fisher's life, the bulk of his work, and present the response of both critics and the public to them. Except in a few instances I will not consider Fisher's works by comparison with other American authors, primarily because it would make my thesis too lengthy. I think
such a comparison would be valuable, though, and should follow the work I have done, but could not precede it.

In preparing this presentation I found that not much has been written about Fisher. My research has included reading nearly all of the available material concerning Fisher and his works, and as a result the selected bibliography is almost complete. I am especially indebted to Joseph Flora's *Vardis Fisher* and Ronald Taber's work "Vardis Fisher: March 31, 1895 - July 9, 1968" in Idaho Yesterday's, The Quarterly Journal of the Idaho Historical Society. Mrs. Opal Fisher was very helpful in giving direction to my thesis research and in sharing with me her views of Fisher's works. I am especially grateful to her for the encouragement she gave when I became discouraged at the lack of resource material.

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. John Semmens for his patience and understanding, not only as the director of this work, but also as my academic advisor for the past three years.

Finally, thanks to my parents for providing a home that encouraged an interest in literature and one that allowed me to make my own decisions whether right or wrong. Lastly, anything I have done in my past that has been good or anything worthwhile I may do in the future is the result of the pride my parents have taken in me.
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A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

The early life of Vardis Fisher was the most significant influence upon his early literary work and perhaps upon the entire body of his work. The boyhood experiences of several of Fisher's works and the motivation for at least twelve books, a study of his works would be incomplete, if not impossible, without first considering the early life of Vardis Fisher. Of course, the events of later years affected Fisher's world view and consequently his art, but these seem always to be significantly and directly related to Fisher's childhood. It seems as though his life's work and his personality and philosophy are completely taken with the task of understanding his own background.

CHAPTER I
A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lecturing in 1953, Fisher said:

As I see it, the chief task of the novelist is sufficiently to liberate himself from his background to be able to see it in some kind of perspective... We have in some manner to break free, without on the one hand losing touch with the stuff that made us, without on the other mistaking our self-protective illusions for truth.

Consequently a large portion of Fisher's works was devoted to coming to terms with his early life and environment. Since the struggle to liberate himself from his background is the obvious theme of several of Fisher's works and the motivation for at least twelve books, a study of his works would be incomplete, if not impossible, without first considering the early life of Vardis Fisher. Of course, the events of later years affected Fisher's world view and consequently his art, but these seem always to be significantly and directly related to Fisher's childhood. It seems as though his life's work and his personality and philosophy are completely taken with the task of understanding his own background:

The early life of Vardis Fisher was the most significant influence upon his early literary work and perhaps upon the entire body of his work. The boyhood experiences

pervade all of Fisher's novels, giving them the great strength and powerful emotional content for which his fiction is known.  

Vardis Fisher was born in a one-room cabin made of cottonwood logs March 31, 1895, in Annis, Idaho. His grandfather, Joseph Fisher, had been part of the group of Mormons asked by Brigham Young to colonize Idaho's Upper Snake River Valley.

Vardis Fisher's father, Joe, tried to develop an orchard in the same area but found that he could neither make a good living nor be happy in civilization so he traded his land for an untried homestead on the South Fork of the Snake River. Vardis was barely six years old when he was loaded into a one-horse wagon with his mother, Temperance, his brother and infant sister for the two day journey through the desolate Antelope Hills. There they descended into Black Canyon—one and one-half miles deep—which Vardis did not leave for five years.

The Fisher's life in the canyon was characterized by the most severe pioneer hardships. Their home was a crumbling shack with earth floor and roof, the door hung with hinges made of old shoes. While they lived in Black Canyon Vardis' family ate wild fruits and wild flesh. "The children played with sticks, rocks and bones of slain animals. They were dressed in the re-sewed clothes of their father or in skins."  

\[2\text{ Ronald W. Taber, "Vardis Fisher: March 31, 1895 - July 9, 1968," Idaho Yesterday's, XII (Fall, 1968), p. 3-4.}

\[3\text{Ibid., p. 3.} \]
The deep canyon was crowded with fir, aspen, and chokecherry trees hiding wild animals unused to sharing their territories with humans. Young Vardis was often terrified by encounters with these wild animals, coming face to face, once, with a she-wolf protecting her cubs, and on another occasion, hearing a mountain lion scream in a tree beside the cabin.

Fisher was also horrified by the constant occurrences of blood and death, animals preying on other animals and the animals which his father shot for the family's food. Even when a grown man, Fisher remembered the clear but lifeless eyes of the slain deer and the wretched smell and sight of those same animals being skinned and gutted in the yard of his home.

But the most powerful natural force in young Fisher's life was the Snake River.

Undammed, it cascaded past the Fisher cabin on the east, north, and west. In the spring when snow from millions of acres melted, the swollen river swept past the place, striking rock canyon walls with such force and noise that dishes rattled and a thunderous roar filled the canyon for weeks. Fisher developed an intense fear of water from the river and from nearly drowning several times in bottomless springs.

All these things Fisher experienced when he was only six, seven or eight years old, and occasionally he experienced them without the support that his parents could offer. Each summer his mother would leave the canyon for two months to peddle the cheese which she

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4 Taber, Idaho Yesterday's, p. 3.
had made during the winter, and during these times Vardis not only
had to cope with his wild environment, but had the responsibility of
caring for his younger brother and sister while his father was
"Old Irascible" by refusing to go on a missionary call and leaving
gone to the fields.

Even when both his parents were present, Vardis was virtually
alone for he did not know the comfort of communication with them.
He saw little affection between his parents and they offered none
to him. Perhaps the reason for so little affection and the lack of
understanding in the Fisher home was the result of the tension
between Mr. and Mrs. Fisher. Joe Fisher was strong-bodied, strong-
headed, his childhood sweetheart, who was ill-equipped to meet
willed and hated civilization. Mrs. Fisher was a proud woman of
English descent who hated backwoods living and who continually
longed to make her mark in the world—a goal she decided to realize
for herself in her two sons. The desire to see her sons famous
sustained her less-than-ideal marriage and she persuaded her husband
to share her dream as well as the violent labor necessary to
achieve it. As a result, work became the highest virtue, for both
parents and children, in the Fisher household.

Vardis Fisher's daily battle with terror and poverty in
Black Canyon burned a hatred of the wild into Fisher that
made an escape to civilization necessary to the development
of his personality.5

Fisher made such an escape when fifteen years old by living in a
concrete hut outside Rigby, Idaho, and attending the high school
there. Vardis found that he was unable to mix with the other
youths and as a result he retreated into a world of books.

5Taber, Idaho Yesterday's, p. 3.
Before he had finished high school, Fisher showed some of the staunch independence that would later earn for him the name "Old Irascible" by refusing to go on a missionary call and leaving the Mormon Church. This action precipitated a major emotional crisis for Fisher and is early evidence of the emotional conflict which resulted from his strong-willed independence.

After high school, Fisher entered the University of Utah where he received much praise for the plays he was writing and decided that his future lay in teaching and writing. Fisher married Leona McMurtrey, his childhood sweetheart, "who was ill-equipped to meet the stern demands of her young husband's search for satisfying intellectual and moral codes." during his sophomore year.

Fisher received his B.A. from the University of Utah in 1920 and then entered the University of Chicago for his M.A. Complicated by marital problems and the demanding rigor of his studies, this was a dreadful period in Fisher's life, but he regarded it as necessary for his preparation to become a writer. While studying in Chicago, Fisher met four noted scholars who profoundly influenced his literary development: John Manly, Robert Morss Lovett, James Hulbert and George Sherburn. These men taught Fisher to "respect the integrity of a fact and the privileged position of a probability."7

Vardis Fisher received his M.A. from the University of Chicago in 1922 and began work immediately on his doctorate, which he was awarded, magna cum laude, in 1925. But on September 8, 1924, his

7Ibid., p. 19.
wife committed suicide, "a date which Fisher still considers the most decisive and most painful of his life, for as he makes abundantly clear, it was his own failure to make sense of his life that led Leona to this step."\(^8\)

The next few years of Fisher's life were dark and uncertain. Feeling responsible for his young wife's death, he considered taking his own life, reasoning that his own death would somehow make up for hers. Long afterwards, Fisher overcame his desire for death and with painful honesty examined his past in an effort to purge his life of all its pretenses. Perhaps it is the result of this experience that led him, in all of his writings, to deal with the uncovering of man's evasions.

Fisher returned to the University of Utah where he taught for several years, wrote his first three novels, acquired an infamous reputation for his unorthodox views of morality and left the University under pressure from a predominantly Mormon administration.

After leaving the University of Utah, Fisher went to Washington Square College of New York University where he met Thomas Wolfe, who became one of Fisher's closest friends and inspirations. Of Wolfe, Fisher has said: "I had more in common with him than I have ever had with another friend."\(^9\)

After teaching at Washington Square College for several years, Fisher returned to the Antelope Hills in 1933 where he worked at writing full time. By this time seven of Fisher's books had been published, including the autobiographical tetralogy, which had made Fisher known in literary circles. Fisher explained in his autobiography, "the University system and since his books had sold moderately well he probably thought he could rely on writing for adequate financial means."

\(^8\)Flora, Vardis Fisher, p. 20.
\(^9\)Ibid., p. 20.
published, including the autobiographical tetralogy, which had made Fisher known in literary circles. Fisher complained of being stifled by the University system and since his books had sold moderately well he probably thought he could rely on writing for adequate financial income.

In order to support his two sons, however, Fisher found it necessary to accept the position of director of the Idaho Federal Writer's Project. Under Fisher's direction, the Idaho Project published three books which exceeded the achievement of every other western state in number and literary merit. Idaho’s Guide was the first WPA guide in the nation to be published, and the reviews were universally enthusiastic, bringing the nation's attention to the little-known western state. Praise was lavish (Bernard de Voto exclaimed, "the final result is an almost unalloyed triumph,"10) and Fisher's national reputation grew.

Fisher resigned from the Writer's Project in 1939 when he won the Harper Novel Prize for Children of God. The $10,000 prize and the fact that the book was a best-seller gave Fisher the financial independence which enabled him to begin work on his twelve volume Testament of Man.

Fisher divorced his second wife in 1939 because of her staunch religious convictions and married Opal Laurel Holmes in 1940, who was "endowed with the patience necessary for companionship with the tireless Fisher who wanted to explore new intellectual frontiers. ..."11

With Opal, he settled in Idaho's Hagerman Valley (a canyon) and, ironically, he built a home re-producing part of the environment of the river-bottom home which brought the terror and tension into his childhood. Fisher was able to write his scholarly works in rural Idaho because "Some of the great libraries over the nation sent the books to my rural mailbox. . . . Now and then I left Idaho to read in large libraries." Fisher read constantly from his boyhood to his death and John Manly, an avid reader himself, called Fisher a "book drunkard" but Mrs. Fisher, in giving a personal glimpse of the artist, said that his greatest pleasure is to encounter a really brilliant scholar in a well-written book, a combination not easy to come by. He will almost cry for joy; he'll hug the book to him as if it were a warm, live thing—which, indeed, it is for him. During the years he worked on the Testament of Man series and wonderful books were sent to him by fine libraries all over the nation he was a supremely happy man, Not the kind of happy of light hearts and frivolous minds, but a deep, rich, warm kind of happy that's as close to grief as joy is. Fisher's production of thirty-seven books, numerous short stories, and a daily newspaper column has been regarded as remarkable by many critics. Even more remarkable than the result was the effort that produced them—hard work. Fisher rose at six-thirty each morning, took a brisk walk, and then sat at his typewriter until the day's work was accomplished. Afternoons were

12Vardis Fisher, "Vardis Fisher Comments On His Testament of Man Series," American Book Collector, XIV (September, 1963), p. 34.  
devoted to such hard labor that one of his best friends commented:

I am still amazed at the fierce physical energy of the man . . . It is my opinion that Fisher over-compensates . . . action with him, becomes excess of action; statement becomes over statement; and truth becomes excess of truth. Like Westerners in general, he speaks in exaggerations; but unlike many of them, he also acts the same way. 14

Many of Fisher's associates have offered similar opinions of the temperamental nature that possessed Fisher, the man, but none has ever considered him to be a temperamental artist. His wife attributes his artistic discipline to his being a scholar:

There's probably as little temperament in this artist as in any artist ever. It's probably because the artist has an impossible to separate Siamese-twin identity with the scholar, and the scholar refuses to budge in the matter of discipline. He would rather die than miss a deadline. When he's working on a book he goes to his typewriter religiously every morning and stays there until the work laid out is accomplished. He never has indulged himself in the luxury enjoyed by so many artists of waiting for a mood. He writes every day . . . even when he knows he will throw the material away next day and do a double allotment. 15

Vardis Fisher died July 9, 1968, en route to a local hospital from the effects of alcohol and barbiturates. No one, save Mrs. Fisher, 16 knows the circumstances of Fisher's death. A real mystery surrounds Fisher's death, since it could conceivably have been self-inflicted, yet Fisher was in good health and excellent spirits following the publication and enthusiastic acceptance of

16In an interview with Mrs. Fisher in July 1970 I asked her if Vardis Fisher had willfully caused his own death. She replied that she knew the answer to my question but that it was too painful for her to discuss. She did say, however, that one day she would publish the answer to my question.
his latest book, Gold Rushes and Mining Camps of the Early American West.

Vardis Fisher died in Idaho, which had given him a horrifying background from which he had to liberate himself, a refuge to return to when he became disillusioned with teaching and little recognition (Fisher, himself, remarked, "Idaho, as it does so often, fails to realize the greatness within its own boundaries.")

Indeed, Fisher was probably better known in the eastern United States than he was in the neighboring Idaho communities. Some commentators believe that Fisher was best known in European countries since his work has been translated into five languages and several of his novels have been best-sellers in Denmark and Germany.

Although Fisher gained little recognition from his home state, his experiences there seem to have been the motivation for most of his works: "The literary philosophy expressed in Fisher's stories of the West are the result of Fisher's reflections upon his own boyhood experiences in Idaho. The shock of impinging natural forces, the combat to overcome horror and dread of these forces... these Idaho experiences made the novelist the great writer he is." Fisher was used to being over-looked as a major American writer, after his first swell of popularity died about 1940. He also became accustomed to making his own way despite disappointments.

For instance, on four occasions Fisher was denied a Guggenheim fellow-
ship and once a Ford Foundation grant and a Newberry fellowship.

One book of the tetralogy that took two years to write earned only $400. His writing career was plagued by struggles with publishers.

Three publishers agreed to publish the Testament of Man series but dropped it when they found it to be a poor financial risk.

Fisher was often the victim of killer reviews. The following is an example of such a review.

Vardis Fisher's latest volume, the sixth in his ficto-stenographic history of civilization, is less a novel than a pedantic, purrrent diatribe against one of the best-publicized kings Israel ever had. Solomon... is presented as a sort of Old Testament Sammy Glick with chin whiskers, a tough little opportunist who elbows his way into the big money... It is almost as though there were some burning affinity between the old eater of stones and the howler in the waste places and the seer of Hagerman, Idaho, crying his confused and passionate evangel of history in the wilderness of American letters.19

The frequency of this kind of review was probably increased by Fisher's open scorn for reviewers: "my chief dislikes include... college graduates, who unable to find a job set up as literary critics."20

But Fisher kept on writing, encouraged by the few who wrote to him in appreciation of his work, and gladdened in his later years when American youth began reading his books and accepting his views. He must have been sustained by the conviction that his works would one day be valued—when the world had caught up to him.

Considering his view of contemporary humanity ("twentieth century man has intelligence, but does not use it; he is capable of love

but he scor ns it, he has had thousands of years in which to mature, but he is still in many ways a child."21) the energy Fisher expended must have been a manifestation of his hope for a more appreciative generation of readers.

Vardis Fisher made no compromises; he did not write to be popular, nor would he abandon his ideals of scholarship. He wrote what he wanted to write. Indeed he "inherited all the earth-breaking pioneer fervor of the Western Breed, and a typewriter, and decided to plow up the whole world with it from end to end."22


22Foote, p. 12.
CHAPTER II

THE ANTELOPE NOVELS

Fisher's beginning as a novelist was a propitious one. His first two novels (Toilers of the Hills, 1928, and Dark Bridwell, 1931) were widely praised, although they were not best-sellers; critics expected a rich, regionalist contribution to American literature. The tetralogy shot Fisher into fame with litterati and when Children of God won the Harper Prize in 1939, Fisher seemed to be in the forefront of young American writers; he was regarded by some critics as the most promising new author in the country.

However, The Testament of Man series did not receive nearly as much attention as one might expect and midway through the series, Fisher was receiving no notice at all; he had become an historical curiosity whose appeal fit the turmoil of the 1930's but had disappeared with the passing of that turmoil.

Fisher's literary works can be grouped in three distinct divisions: regional naturalistic novels (eg., Toilers of the Hills and the Vridar Hunter tetralogy); historical novels with a western setting (eg., Pemmican, The Mothers); and historical novels with a controversial evolutionary thesis (eg., The Testament of Man). Fisher's reputation varied with each of these divisions. "Of these three reputations, the second alone has been stable and..."
rewarding... although his most ambitious and penetrating work lies in the first and third categories."^1

The boyhood home of Vardis Fisher—Idaho's Antelope Hills—form the locale of all the novels of the first division. This was the country that had been his terror and from which he was trying to liberate himself. It served his art well, for in coming to terms with it, Fisher has drawn a realistic picture of pioneer life. The Antelope country possesses an alluring, though stark, beauty, but even today a sense of desperate loneliness and tragedy broods in the open spaces. Fisher has taken this wild setting and peopled it with real figures: the Wheelers, Mattsons, Homers, Killians, Bittons, Camerons, and Bridwells that we meet again and again in his novels and short stories. Fisher has made the region come alive with the pioneer life of the early 1900's that existed there—its comedies and tragedies. He has brought to the pioneer novel an authentic view because he had known the harshness of the frontier, and an historical accuracy, because he was a trained scholar as well.

The Antelope novels reveal nearly all of the themes which Fisher was to work with as an author, but they show, at the same time, experimentation with narrative technique, point of view, and plot presentation. The range and variety of Fisher's novels having a common setting is impressive, and the blending of the characters is superior to many of his historical novels which

gained far more critical praise and public approval
(eg., Children of God).

Fisher's first published novel was actually the sixth he had
written—the first five he discarded as inferior efforts.

Toilers of the Hills was an effort by Fisher to conquer his fear
of the frontier by writing of an uncle, Alma Fisher, who was able
to conquer the Antelope Hills. Fisher told of the agony and sweat
demanded by frontier life in Idaho. He showed, too, how the
ferocity of nature could produce degeneration—both physical and
mental—of womanhood and turn men into animals.

In Toilers of the Hills, Dock and Opal Hunter set out to
homestead the Antelope Hills. Dock works so much with the soil
that he ultimately sees it as an animate being which he must
overcome. Opal recognizes the obstinacy of nature, but differently
than Dock:

Everywhere between the wide lonely sky and the rolling
reach of this desert country men, invisibly grim at their
work, tiny things lost here and there among their efforts,
scarring the gray breast of the earth and sending up clouds
of dust. And this drama, when thus seen from afar, seemed
to her no less absurd than hopeless, seemed like the drama
of ants trying to build their kingdom in a plowed field.
For she had seen ants working eagerly, week after week,
carrying tiny sticks and leaves and bits of earth and
building themselves a home, and she had seen Dock come
with a plow and bury their kingdom or scatter it in ruins.
And she had seen the frantic survivors, building again
for weeks or months with their tiny and invincible courage,
and she had seen Dock come with a harrow and scatter them
again; and again she had seen them build. And somehow,
vaguely but certainly, the way of men here was the same,
a mightier and more terrible power over them, but under
their feet the same treacherous shifting of death. The
way was the same. In both there was the slow pitiless
tale...
Fisher emphasizes here the bitter reality of the pioneer life. Americans had been given, and accepted, a romantic view of the pioneer until Fisher presented his realistic treatment: "Most novels dealing with pioneer life have been steeped in a romantic nostalgia for the past... Fisher's accomplishment is something quite different. The raw, savage brutality of the frontier life is set down against the tangled and tumbled beauty and grandeur of the Antelope Hills."  

A trace of the romantic remains in Toilers in the perseverance of Dock, whom we must admire, but we wonder if he is human when we realize that his toil has been as witless as that of the ants observed by Opal. This mixture in Dock's character caused one critic to remark: "as Mr. Fisher... attains an extreme of naturalism, so his matter becomes an exasperated romanticism."  

Toilers of the Hills is significant for its presentation of frontier isolation. The narrative technique, point of view, vivid descriptions of the land, and the accents of pioneer speech combine to make the novel a realistic depiction of the pioneer experience. Fisher is able to achieve this simply because the story belongs completely to the characters which he has created. Because Fisher has probed the character's feelings and motivations and has given their views of nature, the novel escapes sentimentality and is more complex than most works treating the farmer's battle with the frontier.

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Toilers anticipates the other Antelope novels, setting up the theme which recurs in patterns throughout each work: the loneliness and isolation of frontier life. Toilers lacks conventional plot but contains conflict: the conflict between nature and human nature which is the focal point of all the later novels placed in the Antelope setting.

The theme of the novel is powerfully reinforced by the rhythmic patterns which grow from the author's treatment of the point of view. Although Toilers of the Hills is an account of Dock's struggle to farm the Antelope Hills it is told from Opal's viewpoint, and she, too, has her struggle. Like Vardis Fisher, Opal Hunter must overcome her hate and fear of the valley which she has never left and she longs to know the people who live as she does, whom she has never met. Opal's loneliness was so profound that she day dreamed of the people whom she had heard Dock mention. She knew only their names but these served her purpose: "All these people Opal wanted to know, their strange ways and the loneliness of their lives." (p. 216).

Dock's attitude is different than Opal's throughout the novel, but he is not left untouched by the desolation of his life and one day he confesses to Opal that he feels, "A great and strange loneliness everywhere about, in no way alive as he knew life, but brooding over the hills" (p. 59).

The isolation theme first explored in Toilers reappears in all of Fisher's early works and short stories as the Antelope characters weave their hopeless ways through the barren hills.
The starkness of the landscapes is a contributing factor to the isolation theme of the novels. Ella Hansen is typical: "When she first came here as a bride she nearly went mad; in the long afternoons she would look around her and see only hawks and dust."5

Finally, Toilers is important as the first significant utilization of Rocky Mountain materials, marking the inception of a new regional literature, and suggesting that a permanent literature from America's last frontier was entirely possible.

Dark Bridwell, Fisher's second novel, earned for him the title of the "American Hardy," the Antelope Hills being his Wessex. Some critics drew parallels between Fisher and Faulkner and Fisher did consider doing an Antelope series like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County fiction, but his vision of the time caused him to go beyond Antelope. It would have been nearly impossible for Fisher to draw from southern Idaho as Hardy had from Wessex for Wessex was fixed in meaning while the American West was still in an unconquered flux; neither did the West have a long past that could explain the present as aptly as the South did for Faulkner. It shouldn't be forgotten, either, that Fisher was primarily trying to "liberate" himself from the Antelope Country— not re-live the portion of his life spent there: "the critics never understood that I loathed and hated the Antelope country and was merely trying to come to some kind of terms with it, so that I could proceed to another more fertile area."6

Charley Bridwell's story is told in Dark Bridwell. A joyous pagan that hates civilization, Charley moves his beautiful young wife and children to the Antelope frontier, where he visions them growing up strong and clean in peace and contentment and uncorrupted by society.

Fisher attempted to create a more conventional plot in Dark Bridwell by focusing on a single action—the self-motivated isolation of Charley Bridwell for a life of philosophizing. This one action is the basis of the conflicts within the family: Lela's loneliness and confusion over Charley's simultaneous expressions of tenderness and cruelty and Jed's hatred of his father and love of his mother. Charley is ultimately defeated by those whom he has forced to follow his choice of life and share the loneliness which he prefers.

Fisher's narrative technique gives Dark Bridwell an overriding sense of inevitability, of fate. Charley's life can only lead to tragedy. The enigma that surrounds each of the Bridwells is accented by description of the wild setting. The country thus becomes as much a force in the action as any of the characters, for Charley's family hates the Antelope country and this hatred for the land brings them to destroy Charley. Even Charley is distressed by the Snake River, for he saw in it the "insane journey of unrest to nowhere."

8Crandon, p. 17.
Dark Bridwell received favorable critical attention:

Power, beauty and terror stalk through the pages, and the ensuing tragedy is almost too stark and brutal for the average reader's endurance. But the wild, weird beauty of the novel holds one spell-bounded. Fisher's great poetic and dramatic powers here reach to the highest. He has never surpassed this achievement, and only equalled it in the great love story that runs through the first three novels of the tetralogy. \(^8\)

Despite like praise from several other critics, Dark Bridwell sold only four hundred copies in its first printing.

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\(^8\) Crandall, p. 17.

\(^1\) Fisher, Idaho Yesterday!, p. 4.

\(^2\) David Rehm, Indiana Farmer: Challenges to Progress (Chicago, 1938), p. 60.
CHAPTER III

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TETRALOGY

Even after Dark Bridwell, Fisher hadn't come to terms with, much less liberated himself from, the Antelope Country which he hated. His recollections of his early life there were terrible enough to raise his flesh fifty years later, the "madness that had nearly engulfed him as a sensitive child." Consequently, his next book, In Tragic Life, focused directly on those childhood memories.

In Tragic Life was the first novel of a tetralogy which centered on Vridar Hunter (who had first appeared in Dark Bridwell).

Vridar is the victim of our hypocritical ideals. How they got into him, twisted him toward insanity and suicide, corrupted his relations with other people, particularly the women he loved, and how he fought his way out of these ideals. . . . 2

Fisher projected himself into the character, a technique that brought widespread criticism that the tetralogy was too autobiographical. But this technique enabled Fisher to write some poignant scenes, especially the last, where an unhappy and frustrated Vridar prays that he might one day have the power to laugh and be glad.

1Taber, Idaho Yesterday's, p. 4.
The Antelope descriptions of In Tragic Life are probably the most moving of any produced by Fisher. The countryside is again functional (as it was in Toilers of the Hills) since the plot consists of little action and is carried by conflict. At the very base of Vridar's own conflict is the loneliness of his Antelope home:

He did not know, he never realized until long afterward, how his prison home, with its variety of habits and moods, of wild passions and humors and secrets, entered into his blood and heart. He thought he hated the place, and he did; but even so he threw himself, time and again, upon the naked ground, feeling that within it lay the only friendliness, the only peace. He tried to hug it, to melt into it, to get hold of its great serene strength. He endowed trees with its power, and two of them, a huge pine tree near the house and a stately cottonwood in the meadowland, he came to love, almost as if they were his kin. And when a storm swept over making of the cottonwoods a pile of green boughs and a trunk of given flesh, he went off full of sadness and wept.

Because in this earth, loamy and sweet and deep, and in all the wonders growing out of it, he felt a personality not unlike his own. This home was called the ranch; but it was never the ranch for him. It was the center of the universe, with all directions leading from it; and so strongly did he sense this that when away, he felt out of bounds, uprooted, lost. He thought of himself, when in Annis, as being thirty-two miles from his life's center; and when in Poplar, sixteen. And in later years, after he had travelled far, he felt himself always as one on a circumference, so many miles from his life's root and core.

Vridar, as Fisher created him, could never leave his home, yet he seemed not to accept it. In Tragic Life establishes the character traits which make Vridar's life tragic for thirty years—sexual conflict, a tendency toward insanity, and a convic-

3Vardis Fisher, In Tragic Life (Caldwell, Idaho, 1932), pp. 381-382. Page references to In Tragic Life in the text will be to this edition.
tion that he had been betrayed, though he doesn't know by what or by whom. These traits were exaggerated by his lonely environment and the novel ends with a line from George Meredith's *Modern Love*:

"I see no sin. Tragedy is not a matter of sin but of a heritage..."

Although Vridar often seems ridiculous and inconsistent Fisher certainly intended to explore his conflict, his split personality, in order to reach the real reason for sanity. Vridar's biggest challenge of *In Tragic Life* is to "keep his sanity, not to lose touch with reality." 4

After deciding that his tendency toward insanity is caused by his split personality, 5 Vridar reasons that he must reconcile the two sides of his being, and when he has come to terms with both, his apprenticeship will have been served and he can become a writer.

In great measure, Vridar feels that he has been betrayed and he tries to understand his feeling by inspecting his past life. What he finds there causes him to assert that life needn't be tragic if man will accept what he is with emotional honesty.

Facing what he feels himself to be, Vridar, near the end of

4*Flora, Vardis Fisher*, p. 34.

5The dual personality theme of *In Tragic Life*, as well as the rest of the tetralogy, is really auto-correctivism; the individual is drawn in two directions by the demands of the selfless, or racial, drives, and by the selfish, or ego, drives. In a healthy individual these conflicting drives are balanced, but if out of balance, the individual will react auto-correctively to offset the predominant interest. Fisher used this theory frequently in his novels and essays since it struck him as one of the most meaningful explanations of the turmoil of the modern world.
In Tragic Life, comments

When we look back upon the long lone way of darkness, upon the magnificent heritage and birthright of our race, then we feel the humility, the awe, the pride in which is to be found our noble and mighty strength. In all that lies our certain knowledge that no villain need be. Out of all that, once we sense it deeply, will come a splendid fellowship, and fellowship when it comes will be enough (p. 389).

At this point Vridar truly seems serene, as though he had reconciled the rifts in his personality and was stable. But the next books of the tetralogy reveal how temporary a stability was achieved. The confusion returns to Vridar's life as he continually excavates his past in an attempt to understand himself.

The method of discourse in the novel is always that of analyzing things past:

Vridar was assured, again and again in a later time, that he was a remarkable child. He distrusted these tales, suspecting that they were largely the seed and growth of a mother's wish, but he listened to them with a shrug of contempt. He was told that he talked at nine months, walked easily and well before his first birthday, and counted to a hundred at the age of two. At the age of three, he knew his multiplication tables to the sixes; at four he could add and subtract, at six he was reading the Bible. Of this dubiously precocious while he remembered little. Of his life, indeed, before the age of six he could recall only three experiences. They were all darkly significant, from each he reaped the whirlwind (p. 32).

Fisher then proceeds to relate the three scenes Vridar remembered and account for the family's move to the Antelope Hills. Each is a short episode unified by the themes that Vridar considered as he examined his past, seeking order and patterns in his life. As a result of this technique, the reader is constantly reminded of Vridar in a later time psychoanalyzing himself, selecting
moments which reveal his character and giving variations of the major themes.

David Rein's view (Vardis Fisher: Challenge To Evasion) of *In Tragic Life* seems noteworthy since he is the first critic that has attempted to assign values to the symbols created by Fisher. Rein felt that Vridar's struggle was caused by puritanism and not by a split-personality as Fisher has led us to believe in his commentaries. Whereas Fisher, at the end of *In Tragic Life*, allowed Vridar to make his hopeful assertion of fellowship, Rein criticizes him for not carrying the puritan theme to a conclusion:

As the novel stands the damaging evidence against puritan evasions is presented eloquently, but the real villain behind it all remains undetected. If the social source of puritanism were revealed, *In Tragic Life* would have a certain scope it doesn't have now. It would show more clearly Vridar's relation to America.⁶

After Fisher completed *In Tragic Life* he found that the major eastern printers refused to print it because his first two novels had not sold well and they feared public reaction to this painfully honest book; they feared a violent reaction against the company that printed it. Caxton Printers of Idaho printed *In Tragic Life*, after Joyce's *Ulysses* had proven a financial success in the United States. As the publishers had feared, *In Tragic Life* caused a controversy primarily because of Fisher's vivid treatment of Vridar's sexual conflict, and Fisher found himself in the midst of a battle for a franker treatment of sex in literature.

⁶Rein, p. 44.
The second book of the tetralogy, Passions Spin the Plot, tells of the courtship and marriage of Vridar and Neloa, whom he had idolized and idealized throughout In Tragic Life. This work prepares us for the coming tragedy which will end this marriage of passion. Although the characters are strong, the plot is totally dependent upon the marital conflict for movement.

The third autobiographical novel, We Are Betrayed, takes the reader to the catastrophe signaled in the previous work and is a culmination of the betrayal theme. Vridar continues to try to re-create Neloa into his ideal; he is betrayed by books when he realizes that men are not either heroes or villains as his reading had led him to believe. With a certain sense of desperation Vridar then perceives that he will never write worthwhile books so long as he knows so little of human nature and he begins to search for a code of life that will make him a writer.

In the final volume of the tetralogy, No Villain Need Be, Vridar reaches his goal when he becomes increasingly better equipped to write books which would carry the truth of life. The introverted Vridar of the first three books of the tetralogy was incapable of knowing how others felt. He began to acquire this ability in We Are Betrayed, and in No Villain Need Be Vridar possesses a heightened sense of reality capable of gathering insights for writing.

Through Vridar's self-analysis in No Villain Need Be we come to recognize those things that have betrayed the sensitive young
man. Puritanism has betrayed Vridar and he tries to make Prudence, his mother, a symbol of the betrayal: "My mother represents one way of life that is the heart and core of this wretched country we live in." But this is ironical since Prudence herself is a betrayed woman and somewhat superficial since she can hardly be typed as a "villain". Prudence has, through her puritanism, given Vridar a much larger and profound problem—his problem in accepting women—for she had taught him that women are by nature noble and virtuous, unless corrupted by men. This training caused Vridar to idealize Neloa beyond human capacity to meet his expectations. Perhaps it was this conflict within Vridar that led to her death.

In *No Villain Need Be* Vridar recognizes the causes of his maladjustment. Although he still is unintegrated and the two halves of his personality are still out of balance, he has at least become aware of what his problem actually is:

You ought to realize at once that there are two quite distinct personalities in me. Let's call them X and Y. X is credulous; believes in human beings; seeks only what he calls the beautiful in human beings. Y is an ironic realist. He knows what human beings are like and looks at them in the detached spirit of a scientist. X sees the earth peopled with fallen saints, struggling heroically to regain their heaven. Y sees a vast spawn of apes with the jungle in their hearts. Humans, for X are generous and warm-hearted; for Y they are more ferocious than the tiger. . . (p. 320).

7Vardis Fisher, *No Villain Need Be* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1936), p. 151. Page references to *No Villain Need Be* in the text will be to this edition.
Vridar tries to destroy X which is impossible, since he must achieve a balance. He is X at one moment, Y at another and he cannot integrate them. Neloa has suffered the struggle between X and Y and finally is the victim of it. In searching for his own balance Vridar becomes a symbol of American neurosis, and finally reaches the affirmation that "no villain need be."
The young writer can at last face his art with confidence since he has become aware of his inner conflict.

As a result of his newly-gained confidence, Vridar realizes that what he thought was Neloa's failing was due to the standards which he had imposed upon her, much as Fisher felt that women in the Western world have been denied an honest fulfillment of their being. Vridar achieved his personality integration by a painful analysis of his past and the return to his home in No Villain Need Be symbolizes his success in unifying the conflicting sides of his nature, which had taken extreme forms during his frontier childhood. The joy, which Vridar desires at the end of In Tragic Life, and which he no longer denies himself, is at last his.

Fisher plainly discouraged identification with the hero in No Villain Need Be in an attempt to make his readers think. Fisher consciously rejects the kind of hero found in most novels and avoids creating characters with which there is easy identification. He felt that identifying with the hero brought catharsis and he hoped to avoid this emotional response to his works. We see Fisher's opinion of this in a letter that Vridar writes to a
friend, which appears near the end of No Villain Need Be:

... the vicarious urge today is so strong that if most critics read, let us say, a novel in which the hero is not glorified enough so they can identify themselves with him and in self-love fulfill his destiny, they are annoyed. They abuse him, and most likely they abuse the author too. This is not so if the "hero" belongs to poor white trash of the kind that critics patronizingly summarize as subhuman; but it is true if the protagonist is a person much like themselves who becomes "detestable" by revealing those traits which the critics themselves are trying to deny (pp. 351-352).

Understandably, the tetralogy made Fisher a well-known writer of the 1930's. But by writing an autobiographical series in which the reader was discouraged from identifying with the hero, Fisher assumed great risks, and many critics turned from him as the tetralogy concluded. Most of them did admit, though, that there was great power in much of Vridar's story.

Indeed, the books of the tetralogy seem more artistically satisfying if read as a whole, but "Nevertheless, the work is uneven, and the final volume is most certainly inferior dramatically."\(^8\) Many critics have observed that as the tetralogy progressed it grew weaker, "Unfortunately the largely successful balance of characters of In Tragic Life and Passions Spin the Plot is not maintained in We Are Betrayed and No Villain Need Be. This is not to say that Fisher does not continue to introduce interesting characters; he does, but he does increasingly less with them, and No Villain Need Be has little concern with any personality except Vridar's."\(^9\)

\(^8\) Flora, Vardis Fisher, p. 49.

\(^9\) Ibid., p. 68.
The critical consensus of the tetralogy is that it deteriorates as it progresses. Perhaps the reason can be found in Fisher, Himself:

Before I had completed my four novels about Vridar I was pretty sick of the task. There had been gathering in me a doubt so strong that it dismayed my intuitions and almost paralyzed my will.\footnote{Fisher, "Vardis Fisher Comments On His Testament of Man Series," American Book Collector, p. 32.}

While Vridar struggled with his split personality, Fisher was plagued by doubts of his own, and the weakness of *In Tragic Life* might have been the result of Fisher's coping with too many conflicts, dissipating his insights and energy. Ironically, Fisher was aware of this danger and had postponed work on the tetralogy for five years in order to circumvent it. When he began his autobiographical works, Fisher felt that he had waited long enough to gain the proper perspective, but he should have waited longer than he did. The tetralogy has its strengths, but it certainly is not what Fisher planned:

\footnote{Ibid., p. 32.}

Fisher had one other aim in the tetralogy—to give to other Vridars the direction he had failed to find in literature. He viewed himself as the teacher of aspiring writers and through Vridar

\footnote{Ibid., p. 32.}
he defines the teacher's purpose and duty:

... to arouse my students to an intelligent and alert interest in contemporary affairs and thought; to awaken them to the possibilities of their own minds; and to suggest to them the stupidity of believing in anything merely because it is the belief of someone else. I try to persuade them to think, .. as they must honestly think after they have examined the evidence (p. 90).

The introduction of the education issue allows Fisher to broaden the scope of the tetralogy's meaning from Vridar's personal story to one with significance for all Americans. Nevertheless, one of the chief weaknesses of No Villain Need Be is that Vridar continually falls away to let Fisher come through, which may not have happened had Fisher not been so closely related to his character.

Fisher fails to distinguish between those ideas that come from the story and those that are his own.

The tetralogy provides the rationale for what Fisher tried to achieve in all of the Antelope works, but by the time he had completed three books of the tetralogy he had reached the conclusion that most of the writing about mankind has as its unconcealed and unabashed purpose his glorification. In nearly all of it the ugly, the brutal, the stupid, and the areas with no apparent meaning, have been glossed and glamorized or ignored. When someone tries to give a picture of the whole of it he is called a debunker or muckraker and is accepted only by the few who have the courage and mind to demand the whole of it.12

Fisher has termed the tetralogy a "monumental wail" which failed to explain the man Vridar. After completion of the four books Fisher realized that he had taken the wrong approach: "Those

who attempt to find the man in the child are unsuccessful because the man is not there. The man is in all the centuries of our past history. Fisher then decided that the problems within the tetralogy had been caused by his own lack of knowledge and devoted several years to exploratory reading to make up for this deficiency. The Vridar Hunter tetralogy did not make Vardis Fisher wealthy or famous but it did make him known. A few critics praised the tetralogy, but the majority criticized it. Probably the most common criticism of the tetralogy was its autobiographical nature. One critic wrote, "These novels are the life story of Vardis Fisher up to his fortieth year; for it is clear that the same Vridar Hunter is only a thin disguise for the author." Fisher's response to this critic was:

Don't make a common mistake in criticism; don't confuse the protagonist with the author. The protagonist is always some aspect of the author but that aspect, at the time of the book's writing, may have in the act of recreation itself suffered an almost complete death.

Perhaps Fisher wrote of his childhood terrors, his wife's suicide and his split personality to be sure of their death through his recreation of them. The same critic recognized, however, the significance of Vridar's life—that it shared something in common with that of everyone else:

It challenges the serious attention of those who would know what has gone into the making of their present-day America. Here may be found the causes of our split, restless and unstable personality as a nation. Vridar Hunter suffers from soul-flora, Vardis Fisher, p. 27.
"Crandall, p. 19.
Ibid., p. 19.
sickness, but it is the soul-sickness of his country and his time.\textsuperscript{16}

Fisher believed that the assimilation of the feelings of an entire nation in one person was entirely possible.

As for the autobiographical novel let's say that all tales are autobiographical in the sense that authors have nothing to write about except their own experiences and fantasies. Let us suppose that they may put persons in books in the sense that they may consciously or unconsciously use things they have observed in them or have heard about them. But in a deeper sense the characters of artists in books and plays are little more than projections of themselves into human types.\textsuperscript{17}

Perhaps the most harsh critical dismissal of the tetralogy due to its autobiographical nature came from those critics who considered Fisher's four works a gigantic confession. These critics felt that only \textit{In Tragic Life} could be the subject of literary criticism or could even be called a novel, since this was the only one of the works giving the reality of the imagination instead of the illusion of real life.

After that (\textit{In Tragic Life}) Mr. Fisher's honest work steadily deteriorates. It becomes a confession. And since it is a confession, it would be wrong to leave anything out, for any omission might endanger, or indeed destroy, that hope of expiation in which it is set down.\textsuperscript{18}

Critics recognized that many of Fisher's scenes were authentic, having been set down by one who had participated in them and had first-hand knowledge of them. An example of this would be the problem that Fisher had accepting women, which he instilled in Vridar. In fact, Vridar shows many of Fisher's problems; he was morbidly sensitive as Fisher had been as a youth; he, like Fisher, was sexually and socially inhibited, and he thought that his was a split personality. Vridar attempted to solve these problems by introspection as Fisher had done.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{16} Crandall, p. 20.
\bibitem{17} Fisher, "The Novelist and His Characters," \textit{American Book Collector}, XIV (September, 1963), p. 25.
\bibitem{18} Bishop, p. 358.
\end{thebibliography}
was sexually and socially inhibited; and he thought that his was a split personality. Vridar attempted to solve these problems by introspection as Fisher had done.

Fisher's personal habits influenced his manner of characterization to such a degree that his approach has often been described as Freudian. It does appear that Fisher had been influenced by the Freudian procedure, although he denied that he had:

Again, it is not true that I am a Freudian. I am not and have never been; and the fact that many have declared me to be after reading No Villain Need Be argues in my mind that they approached the book with the conviction that I am what I am not. 19

Nevertheless, No Villain Need Be has many conclusions popular among Freudians and arrived at in a Freudian manner.

The limitations of this method as applied to characterization are obvious since the explanations given are those of the author rather than those that have evolved from the characters. An example of one such Freudian conclusion is Fisher's explanation of our regard for chastity that appeared in No Villain Need Be:

"It's because of reverence for mothers; adolescence; male vanity — and all that adds to fear of ourselves as lovers..." (p. 328).

The claim that Fisher makes is broad, lacks proof and we are never sure whether it is derived from the characters and situations within the novel, or from outside, i.e., Fisher.

One of the minor themes running through the tetralogy that Fisher did not develop was the approach to the capital or Vridar's

19Rein, p. 56.
movement from Idaho to New York City. This theme fails to attain any but the slightest significance in the novels, primarily because Vridar cannot understand a complicated social background since his own orientation is not outward, but inward. He is primarily a man not of society, but of self. As a result, Fisher fails to give Vridar's movement from his pioneer life to the city any meaning, and Vridar remains nothing more than a case study of introspection.

Fisher was often criticized for his failure to develop his characters into tragic heroes. He avoided this for the same reason that he discouraged identification with the hero—he wanted his audience to remain detached and view his works intellectually. Fisher made this reply to those that insisted his tetralogy was intended to be a tragedy:

As a matter of fact, my books, save possibly Dark Bridwell, are not tragedies. They are, in plain truth, high comedy; because they show persons chastised or defeated by an assumption of virtue entirely in excess of what human beings have. But the symbols of tragedy, as established in our tradition and folklore, are the symbols, it would seem, of frustrated vanity and stupidity, and not of that fate, which anciently and today still, often reduces us to humiliation in which our vanity played no significant part. Of my books it is apparently asked, Does anyone suffer? Does anyone fail to get what he wants? If so, then, damn it. Your books are tragedies.

Even though we are aware, throughout the tetralogy, that the whole pioneer movement has exhausted its people and left them morally and emotionally depleted; that these Idahoans are still held by

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20 Checklist of First Editions (Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1934).
the examples of their fathers and must forever and futilely be making
a fresh start: that courage and hope have become in this unpromising
land, cruelly meaningless, the novels do not comprise a tragedy, nor
were they meant to be by their author.

The titles of the novels of the tetralogy came from Meredith's
sonnet "Modern Love," which, like Vridar's story is a review and
analysis of a tragic love experience. The title of each work
suggests its meaning as well as the truths which Vridar finds as
he reflects on his destructive love for Neloa:

'Tis morning; but no morning can restore
What we have forfeited, I see no sin:
The wrong is mixed! In tragic life, God wot,
No Villain Need Be! Passions spin the plot:
We are betrayed by what is false within.

The tetralogy was indeed different from anything he had yet done. Usually,
though clearly it has the same sensitive feeling for the
country and the people of Antelope. One feels the same
penetrating mind cementing on the realities of life that
created the tetralogy and the other Antelope novels. The
April is a short fable, about half the length of any of
Fisher's earlier works. This novel lacks the force, the violence
of the tetralogy and failure; it is more delicate than those first
novels in which he recounted the masculine aspects of the frontier.

Fisher is still the explorer, however, and the meaning of April is

1Flora, Vardis Fisher, p. 110.
CHAPTER IV

APRIL; AN INTERLUDE

When the story of the sickly, brooding Vridar comes to an end we might expect Fisher to launch into an even more ambitious exploration to seek the cause of Vridar's problems. But he did not. Instead, Fisher wrote his last novel set in the Antelope Hills, April: A Fable of Love.

The tetralogy had been compared by critics to the works of Hamlin Garland, Erskine Caldwell and Theodore Dreiser, but April was in a completely different vein and critics likened this work to the fantasies of Robert Nathan and James Branch Cabell. Even though Fisher was working with a new form and a subject that was unlike his previous studies of introspection, the most notable characteristics of his writing were evident in the fable:

April was indeed different from anything he had yet done, though clearly it has the same sensitive feeling for the country and the people of Antelope. One feels the same penetrating mind commenting on the realities of life that created the tetralogy and the other Antelope novels.⁴

April is a short fable, about half the length of any of Fisher's earlier works. This novel lacks the ferocity, the violence of the tetralogy and Toilers; it is more delicate than those first novels in which he recounted the masculine aspects of the frontier.

¹ Flora, Vardis Fisher, p. 110.
found in June Weeg's imagination, from whose point of view the entire novel, except one chapter, is presented. Unlike the other Antelope women, June, a young, ugly and lonely farm girl, was not distressed by the Antelope Hills; she loved them. The desolate country gave her all the security and happiness she knew:

And mountains she loved, too, with their stupendous shoulders, with their backs to the stars where winds poured over and spilled. The sky above also was a wonder of color and curve. The sun laid its burning path from east to west or clouds heaped their masses of wrath and spoke in thunder and flame. Or a deep blue veil would spread over all, a vast blue tenting all living things and coming down softly to the skyline; or a blue that was mellow with golden glows and mists; or a blue with the sun in its inverted bowl like a melon of fire. . . and clouds, too, and winds: they were full of unpredictable mad designs. They could be politely cool or they could be cyclones of insanity and wrath. Sometimes a wind was full of moanings and prayer or sometimes it rolled across the sunlight in shimmering valleys of peace.2

June's greatest barrier to happiness was her ugliness; she was "a perfect hunk of homeliness" (p. 165). Short and dumpy, her only redeeming feature was her smile. June has an opportunity for companionship in Sol Incham, who is the homeliest man on the Antelope, but she rejects him because he does not meet her expectations and, further, everyone feels that she should marry him simply because they are both so ugly. June refuses Sol's love because he seems to her prosaic, and she dismisses him as a fool for being faithful to her after she has scorned him.

2Vardis Fisher, April: A Fable of Love (Caldwell, Idaho, 1937), p. 15. Page references to April: A Fable of Love in the text will be to this edition.
June lives a life of dreams, picturing herself not as homely June Weeg, but as lovely Miss April, and she waits for someone exciting to rescue her from her dreary life.

April is pervaded by a sense of irony. June wants a romantic fulfillment, despite the fact that she has observed what love means in Antelope and found that it does not mean fulfillment, but baby after baby and hardships. Still June clings to her ideal—her fantasy—that enables her to bear the drudgery of her life, but as she develops June comes to realize that love is not overwhelming romance and those who expect it to be are likely to create a life of ugliness. Perhaps this is what Fisher wanted to communicate about the love story within the tetralogy, but April presents the idea more clearly and more subtly.

There is more humor in April than in any of Fisher's novels to this date. It is not the rollicking homespun humor which we might expect; instead it is grimly sardonic humor, with bite in every syllable. "It is as if the long quest of Fisher in search of his soul had left too many scars for laughter, except of the sardonic kind."³

April is concerned with one of the central themes of all Fisher's works: the unfulfilled woman. But in his fable he gives a more delicate treatment to the problem and consequently this work was more favorably received than any of Fisher's novels

since his first, Toilers of the Hills. Few of Fisher's books were praised as highly as April. (For example, "In terms of simple beauty few novels have surpassed this...")

Vardis Fisher's greatest fame and financial rewards came as a writer of historical novels on American, especially Western, themes. Because Fisher was raised on one of the last American frontiers he had known the primitive conditions and the view of life fostered by hardship, and was especially equipped to write convincingly about the American West. Many writers of Western historical novels have failed because they exploited the Western themes, or bound by Eastern culture and background, they could not picture life in the West as it had been lived. Fisher needed the kind of life about which he was writing. Although Fisher's American historical novels are carefully researched, the characters, right up to the last page, are as they were in the beginning, come from Fisher's having known them. The women are neither veiled virgins nor Calamity Janes; the men are not typical gun-slingers.

The term "historical novel" covers a large area, and the authors of such novels have diverging views about the intention or purpose the historical novelist should accomplish:

If a novelist is going to portray that time as it was he will have to put aside practically all his views, beliefs, values and nearly all his knowledge. He will have to strip off, as it were—strip down and go back, culturally naked...
Vardis Fisher's greatest fame and financial rewards came as a writer of historical novels on American, especially Western, themes. Because Fisher was raised on one of the last American frontiers he had known the primitive conditions and the view of life fostered by hardship, and was especially equipped to write convincingly about the American West. Many writers of Western historical novels have failed because they exploited the Western themes, or bound by Eastern culture and background, they could not picture life in the West as it had been lived. Fisher necessarily had an advantage over the Eastern authors for he had lived the kind of life about which he was writing. Although Fisher's American historical novels are carefully researched, the characters, one can tell, come from Fisher's having known them. The women are neither veiled virgins or Calamity Janes; the men are not typical and significant apprehension of history than the historian who is gun slingers.

The term "historical novel" covers a large area, and the authors of such novels have diverging views about the intention or purpose of the genre. Fisher had definite ideas as to what the historical novelist should accomplish:

If a novelist is going to portray that time as it was he will have to put aside practically all his views, beliefs, values and nearly all his knowledge. He will have to strip off, as it were—strip down and go back, culturally naked. . .
this writer, if he is to be serious and an artist, will have to try to get inside the minds, souls, habits, superstitions, fears, and ignorance of this people; and then, further, inside the minds and souls of a few of them, as individuals, apart and unique. . . He is a historical novelist only as measured by the depth and completeness with which he leaves his world and enters this other world. All the rest is tinsel, trappings and Hollywood.  

In writing historical fiction, the author must utilize the facts of human experience the same as he would for any other type of fiction, but in addition he must be historically authentic in his presentation of those facts. The historian is bound not to vary from literal adherence to the physical and temporal facts as he writes; his comments must be limited to those scientific deductions drawn from his material. The novelist, on the other hand, tries deliberately to create an illusion in the reader's mind and make him feel as though he has had a living experience of the past. The justification of the historical novel is the capacity to produce an illusion of reliving the past. Since neither historian nor novelist can reproduce the real past we might say that if well done, the historical novel, by presenting the past dramatically, can give the reader a more vivid, adequate and significant apprehension of history than the historian who is bound to relate only the facts or the novelist, who attempts to create an illusion from fictitious circumstances.

Fisher's historical novels accomplished these ends. He never looked to the past to sentimentalize it, but to give as faithful a picture as was possible. His primary interest was in making the

past come alive—not idealized—but as it actually was. Fisher did not exclude bravery and high ideals from his histories, but he presented them only where they were a part of the men and women which he had carefully studied.

Fisher's basic rule in writing historical novels was to leave the past undistorted and present it as it really was.

He felt that many writers had not abided by this rule:

The dishonest exploitation of the Old West, in magazine stories, articles, books and on the motion picture screen and television is one of the strangest American phenomena of the past century. An entire era has been largely falsified, misrepresented, distorted. The story of the old West has been turned into a kind of circus entertainment for adults. Probably the most dishonest aspect of this shameful matter is the extent to which historical episodes and individuals of the past have been deliberately misrepresented to us. . . 2

Fisher had a great desire to tell Western American history exactly as it was. His insistence upon historical, cultural and psychological fidelity in his historical novels has been his greatest contribution to that genre:

Fiction and falsehood become so hopelessly mixed in the course of time, with the true circumstances of the past, that some of the more credulous scholars have accepted as facts many of the half-truths and myths that clothe the flesh and bones of Western history. 3

Fisher began his successful career as an historical novelist with the publication in 1939 of Children of God which became Fisher's only best-seller and won the $10,000. Harper Prize for

3Ibid., p. 8.
that year. As usual, Fisher prepared himself thoroughly for the
task of relating the Mormon saga by reading all that he could about
them and then postponing the actual writing for ten years while
he read even more. Possibly because he had left the church about
which he was writing, Fisher determined to be as objective as he
could to allay criticism that he was writing with vengeful motives.
To assure himself of staying neutral in presenting the history,
Fisher kept books by Mormon authors and anti-Mormon works
constantly at hand.

Winning the Harper Prize brought fame to Fisher, but it did
not make him nearly so famous as the controversy which immediately
followed publication of Children of God. Although the book was
for some time a best-seller, its merit did not long go unquestioned.
As soon as the book was published many people wrote to Fisher: some
attacked a good deal in trying to reveal all of it in one work.
Since he had to treat so many persons and events the result is
not as even as it might be. For the same reason, he often
crowds too many events into a single chapter and makes transitions
much too sudden. Fisher divided the saga of the Mormons into three
large sections, a device which helped him to control the action.

The Mormon Church officially condemned Children of God, which
seems surprising since many praised the work as being fair—neither
exalting nor abusing the Saints. Perhaps the Church's repudiation
was a result of the fact that Fisher did not begin with the basic
assumption of the Mormons, i.e., God restored his kingdom through
Joseph Smith. The Mormons might also have been angered by the
novel's final movement which shows the Church as setting aside
much of its uniqueness and taking its place with the other protest-
tant denominations. "Varlis Fisher and His Testament of Man".
American Book Collector, XIV (September, 1963), p. 20.
Fisher added to the Children of God controversy by announcing that it was one of the poorest novels he had ever written. Perhaps this could be attributed to his indignation at being remembered as the author of a single book, which for some time did seem to be the case.

In critical circles (and Mormon ones) the debate over Fisher's intention in Children of God is yet unresolved; there are as many who believe he was objective as believe he was maliciously unfair to the Mormons:

Children of God, the story of the Mormons, proved Vardis Fisher's ability to write objectively. As usual his complete and utter honesty got him into trouble with those who believed that he was maligning the Mormon Church. This penchant for being misunderstood has plagued Fisher all his life and is, I believe, primarily responsible for the lack of recognition on the part of many reviewers.

The history of the Mormon people is a long one and Fisher attempted a good deal in trying to reveal all of it in one work. Since he had to treat so many persons and events the result is not as even as it might be. For the same reason, he often crowds too many events into a single chapter and makes transitions much too sudden. Fisher divided the saga of the Mormons into three large sections, a device which helped him to control the action of the sprawling epic. The need for describing the action so central to an epic leaves little room for detailed character development. Still, Fisher developed the primary characters in some detail, and the portrayals are convincing. In limited space, and giving primary attention to action, Fisher imbued his characters.

with a lifelike quality—the portrayals convey a sense of life—especially through Fisher's skill in dialogue. The Mormons speak the language of the frontier which Fisher knew so well.

In relating the story of the Mormons, Fisher indicates that it has its epic dimensions—but he does not preach as he did throughout the tetralogy. Fisher, here, has succeeded in presenting the story objectively. In fact, Fisher so reversed his manner of writing from that employed in the tetralogy that many critics were astounded: "Children of God is, on the basis of his earlier books, an astonishing novel in both kind and quality for Mr. Fisher to have written. He had published... six earlier novels... the most completely unbuttoned fiction of our time in America... It is hard and firm, devoid of analysis, and rigorously contained inside the events it records. Its emotions are those of its characters, not its author... The fable follows the history so closely that only a specialist will know where Mr. Fisher has departed from it."  

The second novel in Fisher's Americana was *City of Illusion* (1941) best described as the study of a time, a place, and an atmosphere: Virginia City, Nevada, in the days of the Comstock Lode. Fisher's novel often seems too extravagant in its episodes, but these do allow him to catch the spirit of the camp which suddenly became a town, then a city that caught the world's attention, and

almost as suddenly became a ghost town. Fisher carefully studied the history of Virginia City and found in miniature the story of human-kind. History teemed with drama so that his problem as a novelist was not to invent, but rather to find a meaningful way to arrange the fantastic record. As the vehicle of his story Fisher chose the story of Eilley and Sandy Bowers, comic but pathetic figures whose fortunes mirror the history of the entire city. Against the larger background of the story—the struggle for the wealth of the Comstock Lode—Fisher was able to create in Eilley Bowers his most fully developed woman character next to Neloa of the tetralogy.

Some critics complained that this novel was not as forceful as it might have been. Perhaps the reason was that the psychology of these characters did not interest Fisher, and further, much of Fisher's attention at the time was focused on the Testament of Man, which he was planning.

One of Fisher's best historical novels, The Mothers: An American Saga of Courage, his third, clearly illustrates his technique in American historicals. It tells the story of the Donner expedition across the Sierra Nevadas in 1846-47. Fisher saturated himself in the records of the ill-fated journey before he began to write. He employed the method of a chronicler—when the record was unclear, he did not invent. Neither does he invent characters, but focuses directly on known historical persons and events; his goal is to communicate the emotions and feelings of people whose record he has studied, and to keep from misrepresenting them, he does not even introduce minor characters. Fisher believed that such introductions led the historical novelist to distortion, of the facts.
To create the illusion of reality, Fisher presents dialogue that is consistent with the characters which he found in the historical records, and selects only the events that make the outlines of their story and his theme clear. Fisher here avoids one danger to which many historical novelists succumb: that of being so occupied with facts that the story is often lost beneath details.

The *Mothers* was well received by both critics and the public but it neither sold as well nor caused controversy as had the earlier *Children of God*. That Vardis Fisher had succeeded in creating an illusion of history, without romanticization or distortion, is evident in the reviews of literary critics:

Vardis Fisher's story of the Donner Party is cast in fictional form, but it adheres to the known facts almost as closely as the historical account. ...6

Fisher's first historical novel to abandon the chronicle technique was *Pemmican: A Novel of the Hudson's Bay Company*, (1956). This novel vividly describes the conflict between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company for the Western fur trade. The Pemmican War of 1815-1821 was the result of this rivalry and is the subject of Fisher's fifth historical novel. Although he dropped the chronicle technique, inventing characters and incidents, the outlines of the war presented by Fisher are clear and accurate.

Since the characters of *Pemmican* are Fisher's inventions he needed some central point around which he could construct the plot. He chose a love story, for what might have been purely commercial

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reasons. Pemmican appeared in 1956, the same year that the first volume of the Testament of Man was published, and Fisher, anxious to revive his reputation so that the Testament would sell, decided that the way to produce a best-seller was to write a love story. Thus, Pemmican is the only one of Fisher's historicals to revolve around a love story. But Fisher found that a popular love story was beyond him, and he came to give more attention to the grim aspects of the war which the historian in the author could not gloss over or sentimentalize.

Although Pemmican did not become a best-seller as Fisher had hoped, it was highly praised by critics:

Mr. Fisher is a writer of skilfully cadenced prose, a practised novelist who believes that historic narratives should be liberally salted with extremes of action, and an honest believer in presenting the past as it really was regardless of possible effect upon his readers. He has, moreover, a remarkable gift for deducing from his sources many a convincing and corroborative detail. In spite of the lavish amount of informative material this novel contains it is held together by the author's continuous emphasis on the love story. Even the conflict between great forces seeking power over the wide land is subordinated to the way of a man with a maid. Mr. Fisher has woven his amazingly detailed knowledge of the period into a satisfying artistic whole. 7

Unquestionably many readers rejected this work because of the ferocity and barbarity of the company men and the Indians. But this could not be helped— it is the record of the Pemmican War. Perhaps the novel was not popularly well received for yet another reason i. e., Fisher did not reconcile the two completely different

centers of interest: the love affair and the war. The love affair is intended to be the dramatic center, but it is hardly in keeping with the violent dramatic pace of the war. Thus, Pemmican has no central action to the plot; Fisher wants it to be the love story, naturally it seems that the center should be the war, and finally it is neither. The potential for a great story has been divided.

Fisher's final historical novel of this period was A Tale of Valor: A Novel of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, a story that has been well documented and drawn upon many times for literary works. Fisher's recounting of the journey succeeds where many of the other novels failed precisely because Fisher was able to penetrate more deeply into the minds of these great leaders and to reveal their leadership against an authentically depicted frontier.

Fisher utilized the chronicle method in this work because he felt that to record the journey would be enough since the story is so constantly on the edge of high adventure. For this same reason, the novel lacks plot in the conventional sense, and is instead an episodic work, presenting escape after escape and discovery after discovery. Fisher's ability in imaginative reconstruction allowed him to go beyond the mere historical record and explore several of the characters of the expedition in a manner that was beyond romantic historical novelists since they had not experienced these hardships as Fisher had.

Tale of Valor is the best example of Fisher's philosophy and methodology concerning the historical novel. There are no contrivances in the story to distort the picture of what actually took place.
He depended on fact, not invention. Fisher used Thwaite's edition of the *Journals* of Lewis and Clark, consulted most of the authorities on the expedition, and travelled most of the route personally.

"Fisher laid the groundwork of knowledge—the points of fact between which he would interpolate and intuit—that allowed him to write a novel which is at once good history and good literature."  

Fisher chose to write of the past, not merely to explain the facts of an historical period, but because he felt that the past is so intimately connected to the present that if man can understand the past it will help him in his quest for knowledge of himself. Fisher's objective, it appears, was to understand man; who he is, why, and what his capabilities are. But it has often been observed that Fisher held historical accuracy paramount:

Fisher brings to the American historical novel exciting new possibilities for the form. The novels, after extremes of research, were written in the spirit of achieving the greatest historical accuracy. As few novelists have done, Fisher has made historical accuracy his prime consideration, and he has proven the stuff of history is adequate for a moving novel.  

The Americana gave Fisher a chance to develop a genuine talent for characterization, giving American fiction convincing portrayals of the pioneers of the West to replace the romantic heroes and villains of previous western fiction. Part of Fisher's successful characterization stems from his effort to reach complete historical accuracy. After Fisher had studied the historical situation which he wished to dramatize he tried to recreate each character's thoughts

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based upon what was necessitated by the evidence. By projecting himself into his characters, trying to think and feel as they might have, Fisher "has given future authors a new concept of fiction—careful, painstaking research and a cultural immersion into aspects of the past that are still a very real part of man today."  

Fisher's historical novels present an impressive body of research and writing. Though the five books are not equal in achievement they are perhaps his best work, individually and considered together. "These novels give Fisher an honored place among American historical novelists."  

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10 Taber, Western American Literature, p. 118.  
11 Flora, Vardis Fisher, p. 139.
Fisher prepared himself thoroughly for his attempt to explain man's background. For years he read standard works in a number of fields: then, he studied the primitive mind, and at last undertook a systematic course of study dealing in comparative religions, anthropology, and scholarship. Yet, he felt that he had reached deeply enough into the past to explain Vridar satisfactorily. "The matter, I had come to suspect, was not the simple one of the adult's childhood; it was the complex matter of his entire history, which is the history not only of mankind but of the whole... world."  

Although Fisher's historical novels had been very successful, he considered them his minor contribution to literature. Yet, he was still concerned with Vridar, his autobiographical protagonist, because he realized that he had not reached deeply enough into the past to explain Vridar satisfactorily. "The matter, I had come to suspect, was not the simple one of the adult's childhood; it was the complex matter of his entire history, which is the history not only of mankind but of the whole... world." Fisher decided that the answers he sought were not to be found in a single individual, and he began to feel that nothing short of the entire course of history, which reveals the development of man, would suffice in the understanding of an individual. But rather than write of the past's wars and philosophers or ideas, Fisher chose to investigate symbols and myths, for he had come to believe that the mind of the past had "developed a vast variety and richness of symbols which still shape and direct all of us in ways we never suspect." 

2Taber, Western American Literature, p. 286.
Fisher prepared himself thoroughly for his attempt to explain man's background:

For years I read standard works in a number of fields; then studies of the primitive mind; and at last undertook a systematic course of intensive reading in comparative religions, archaeology, anthropology, not overlooking along the way such fields as music, medicine, geography, climate and customs. I hoped to find the answer to some questions that had troubled me. Why, for instance, did most persons seem to be hostile to the unflattering facts of their history? The more I read and pondered the more I became convinced that facts are their best and strongest friends, and standardized errors their most deadly enemy.

Fisher began writing the Testament of Man series with two aims in mind: 1) he wanted to highlight those periods in man's history which most affected him and his development, and 2) he felt that the years of study spent in preparing for the Testament would give him a better understanding of himself, allowing him to rewrite the tetralogy, with which he had become dissatisfied.

Fisher chose eleven periods preceding the present, starting with that of the apeman and progressing through the prebiblical, the biblical and the historical periods down to the present day.

Fisher stated that he knew from the first that the Testament would include a novel about the apeman. But in spite of his intense desire and his years of study Fisher was not satisfied with his ability to project himself into the small, dim world of our stooped ancestors: "I think I was not half as successful as I had wished to be." Nor was Fisher satisfied with the results of his attempts to describe the prehistoric apeman.


\[4\] Ibid., p. 34.

Page references to Darkness And the Deep in the text will be to this edition.
of his labor in the other Testament volumes:

The second novel, with its theme (a magnificent one) of the ghost and the grave, satisfied me no more; nor the third, with its attempt to adumbrate various female qualities, which an evolving and triumphant patriarchy forced into perversions of their natural goodness, nor the fourth, with its intimations and forecasts of those distortions of the male psyche that are so obvious a part of the modern world. I felt that I was no more successful in the fifth. . . All the while I made attempts . . . to show different faces of the emerging Male and Female, . . . as well as to suggest if not the origin at least early phases in the development of various ideas and forces, myths and distortions, in our modern world.  

The first volume of the Testament of Man series, Darkness and the Deep, begins Fisher's study of our past with an account of the earth's creation according to scientific evidence of the time.

Upon the geography of space, there are no boundaries where all is infinite, nor age where time is only the measure of change within the changeless, nor death where life is the indestructible pulse of energy in the hot and the cold.

There is no morning or noon or evening for what has always been and always will be. There has been no beginning and there can be no end. But there is and has been and always will be that continuous change in the appearance of things which, in the small catalog of finite perceptions is known as birth and growth, evolution and progress, and death.  

Fisher then goes on to describe the prehistoric apeman, wandering, groping through thought, memory and language, motivated by fear, hunger and lust. We see man when he first learns that a club could be a deadly extension of his arm, stones could be weapons, and the three men with a single purpose more powerful than one. In depicting these early men, Fisher, achieves a master-piece of characterization for the apemen are varied and completely

5Fisher, "Vardis Fisher Comments On His Testament of Man Series," American Book Collector, p. 34.
convincing even though they are primitives, despite Fisher's feeling that he was unable to project himself into their epic and to think and feel as they must have. The achievement of this work can be attributed not just to the enormous research done prior to Darkness but to Fisher's ability to imagine what life must have been like then.

Fisher presents, in this first volume, one of the greater themes that consistently reappears throughout the series—that of hope. He also points out that nature, in creation, exhibited a vast amount of waste and a sardonic humor in her creation of grotesques. He shows that killers made the greatest advancement and as a result have come to have dominion over the earth. Fisher stresses his belief that man is one of the killers—but that he has also become a creature of hope. Vardis Fisher has great hope for man and trusts that something more precious than the world has yet seen will emerge from his history:

The insatiable hunger of human striving would have it so. The price we have paid for a little beauty and a little good would have it so. The long pilgrimage out of darkness towards light, out of slime towards cathedrals of the soul, declares not only that nothing is lost but that something is gained from each cycle of senate things through birth and age and sleep. Being what we are by no will of our own, by no wisdom or no ignorance that is ours, in that feeble hope we must find our meaning and our destiny, or there must be only folly and futility of creatures driven by universal laws to seek and denied by those laws the eventual goal.

If we are only the blind driven down to the seas, it would be a senseless pain to look back upon the dark and bloody trail which we have followed. If beyond our perishing in our present form, when our earth shall have finished its cycle, and shall have had its cold stone drawn back to the incandescent womb—if, then, all that was best in us shall become part of another world in another time, using not the pettiness of our personality but the stuff of our dreams,
we can believe that nothing we have suffered has been in vain. If this is so, then a look backward becomes an adventure in self-discovery which the intelligence of man owes to his spirit, and the dark and brutal past becomes a searchlight that we can turn upon the future (p. 78).

In prose such as this the didactic dangers are great, but Fisher successfully avoided them. The novels avoid being heavily didactic through the sympathetic imagining of experience. Few authors have taken the time to identify with earliest man, but Fisher has, and write convincingly of them.

The second work of the Testament, The Golden Rooms, sees man progress to the time when he learns to make and control fire, an event which Fisher sees as unquestionably one of the greatest milestones in our ancestor's development. Fisher also illustrates man's emotional development—the prejudice that makes him feel the impulse to hate those that are of his species but different from himself. Fisher shows the intellectual progress of early man by the rationalizations which they produce concerning events and dreams that cannot be explained, leading to man's invention of the supernatural.

Throughout his history, Fisher is concerned with the role that women have played in the development of the race. Fisher felt that this point in his history was significant because man's fear-ridden existence had always been broken by one wonderful event—birth. And since this miracle was the province of the female—the primitive had no idea that the male needed to cooperate—women assumed a special place in society. The grandmother assumed dictatorial powers, and special taboos around female functions took root.
This second novel of the Testament series, The Golden Rooms, was one of the most tightly knit books Fisher had written. Although the book treats two distinct societies, the Neanderthal and the Cro-Magnon, the novel has a marked concentration, and the book is one rather than two. The Golden Rooms was Fisher's second successful attempt to penetrate the minds of early men to tell us how they must have thought. Critics appreciated his effort:

The Golden Rooms is so different from his earlier books... that it might be the work of a different writer. They were heavily written, with occasional inspired passages. The Golden Rooms is simple, skillful, steadily interesting. Through the simple, subdued prose of Author Fisher's novel, some quietly ironic points appear though no preaching is done to make the reader sure of the author's intent. Here and there through the book some readers may suspect that Author Fisher is actually writing a modern allegory, placing his story in pre-historic times because its picture of humanity would be too harsh if he laid it in the here and now.7

Intimations of Eve and Adam and the Serpent, volumes three and four of the Testament, describe life in a matriarchal society. The reader is prepared to believe in the societies due to Fisher's conditioning intimations in Darkness and the Deep and The Golden Rooms.

In Intimations of Eve the characters have only rudimentary aspects of humanity. Man had groped his way to the point of questioning the terrifying aspects of nature as manifested in his body and the forces about him. Our ancestors rationalized these forces by the creation of a belief in evil spirits, which necessitated the invention of ways to propitiate these spirits so that they would

not harm them. As a result, shrewd old women became masters of magic, both good and evil, which put them in a dominant position over the community. A completely matriarchal society developed with the grandmother ruling the family unit. This societal structure clearly illustrates that the miracle of fertility was the hub of the primitive life; the female was decidedly superior, assuming special duties in both the community as well as in the family.

In the fourth volume, Adam and the Serpent, the world is still beset with good and evil spirits, but the strong taboos that centered in the previous novels around the functions of the woman have by now hardened into custom. The old women still are the dominant wielders of magic, but the male sun-god emerges and heads toward supremacy, if not complete invincibility, and the dominant struggle of the book unfolds in the battle of male against female and concludes with the emergence of the male as dominant.

The matriarchal novels seem less satisfying than the first two volumes of the Testament. There are probably several reasons for this. First, the characters in these novels are not as clearly defined as in the first two since emphasis on the events forms the center of the work and Fisher's greatest talent lies in characterization. Some critics felt that at this point the Testament just got bogged down:

There are characters who contribute nothing but to reveal that Mr. Fisher has read Malinowski on the sexual life of primitive peoples; there are events that serve no purpose but to portray the background, which in any really carefully worked-out novel should be inherent... the significant events are not allowed to lie quiet but are repeated in slightly different form lest their impact should be missed. This combination not only slows up the story but
gives the things that do happen to the people that do matter an effect of monotony and triviality.  

The Divine Passion carries the Testament to the dawn of recorded history and of Hebraic culture, which has much significance for Fisher's series since it has so profoundly affected the history of the Western World. This fifth novel of the series is a direct reversal from the previous novel, Adam and the Serpent, since in The Divine Passion the established social order dissolves under a sterner and more complex code. Remaining consistent to his interest in the position of the female in society, Fisher interrupted this portion of the history to portray the degraded position to which women had been forced. The old problems of society that were evident in the earlier works can be seen in this novel, but in more complicated forms since man, himself, has become more complicated.

Fisher's characters become well-rounded in The Divine Passion, and are now figures with whom the reader can relate. For the first time, we see the emergence, and eventual domination, of the fanatic prophet. His influence on the development of our history is one of Fisher's major themes, and he associates this influence with man's linking of sex and sin and with women's developing wiles to combat the continuing and hardening domination of the male.

In this fifth volume of the Testament Fisher takes up his major goal: to tell readers what they are and why. The first four volumes of the Testament had the same aim, but their implications for the present day were not directly developed by Fisher. Perhaps

another reason that this volume finally achieves Fisher's purpose could be that after the disappointing matriarchal novels, The Divine Passion "raises the level of the Testament as literary creation."^9

The Testament of Man series emerges into biblical times with the Valley of Vision: King Solomon and His Times. The sixth book of the Testament is distinctive for several reasons. First, it is a novel of ideas far more than the previous Testament works had been, and the most convincing action, therefore, is on the level of philosophical discussion. This is also the first of the novels to be based upon an actual historical figure. After consulting the best authorities available Fisher portrays Solomon as he probably was and not as recorded in the Bible. Fisher attributes the usual tales of exaggerated wealth and wisdom to the work of very capable public relations agents.

Throughout the work, Fisher makes it very clear that he believes the struggle between the King and prophet in the times of Solomon and the victory of the fanatic prophet was of great consequence in shaping our present world. To present this belief, Fisher juxtaposes two cultures; the infant Hebrews and the established Egyptians. By comparison and contrast, Fisher shows the brutality and ignorance of the age, the minor position of Israel as a nation, the early gropings for religious unity, the advanced Egyptian civilization, and its influence on ancient Israel.

This work resulted in a furor in both literary and critical circles that surpassed even that caused by Children of God.

^9Flora, Vardis Fisher, p. 86.
"...my novel about Solomon led most of the 'Jewish' critics to wash their hands of me." Their indignation was understandable, if undeserved, for Fisher had shown that the isolation of the Jews in the Western world had been a conscious choice, and he quite pointedly implies that modern history would be much different than it is if the Jews had chosen to follow Solomon. Fisher challenges his readers to imagine the possible forms that civilization might have assumed if the Jews' decision had been otherwise. Many religious and some critics were angered by the conclusions that Fisher had drawn, but none could dispute the obvious documentation of the historical data presented:

The author has based his materials upon the highest authorities, departing from them in no matter on which they have spoken, except in the view of Solomon himself. His painstaking research is evident in the extraordinary background presented here of ancient Israel and her neighbors.

Valley of Vision is a powerful and provocative story. But it has one major flaw, one that is unusual for Fisher—the pace of this work is uneven, mainly because the background of Solomon's reign is not clearly established and long sections of philosophical discussion detract from the dramatic action.

The Jews are once more the center of the drama in Island of the Innocent, seventh work in the Testament series. The Jews in a struggle with the Hellenists create the framework for a deeply moving love story. The greater part of the volume is devoted to

the conflict between the cultures and beliefs of the Greeks and Jews of the period from the third to the second century B.C. Fisher consciously chose to dwell on the philosophical aspects of the struggle because he believed that ideas, more than military conquests, shape the world. Consequently, the Maccabean revolt, which is the primary concern of the period in most histories, plays only a minor role in Fisher's work.

Again, Fisher annotated his work with source material. Some critics felt that he did so to the detriment of his study. The events of Island of the Innocent cover some fifteen years—and although Fisher carefully traces the action, we expect to see more character development than we do. The background of the work is more successfully established than that of the Valley of Vision, but it is often broken up by Fisher's interruptions to present historical data. At times it seems as though his didactic intentions overwhelm him and he must interrupt to make sure that we do not miss his intended lesson.

Fisher intended the eighth book of his series to be a parable. But Fisher gives his own interpretation to the story of the Jesus, as distinguished from what he calls the "Christ myth." Fisher's story does not at all resemble the biblical version; he has created this story from the merest thread of history and his own fertile imagination.

The notes which annotate this parable indicate that there is absolutely no mention of Jesus in contemporary writing. Then Fisher poses two alternatives—either to deny the very existence of Jesus or to accord him an exceedingly minor role in the history of

12Varian Fisher, Jesus Came Again: A Parable (Denver, Colorado, 1956), p. 285. Page references to Jesus Came Again in the text will be to this edition.
his day. Fisher chose to accept the latter. He felt that the message of Jesus was a necessary one and that there should be more people living the same philosophy as Jesus, who advocated the true religion of compassion and free intellect and love for humanity. Jesus Came Again ends with these words:

No, not that. Don't you see that he has come again? Can't you understand it now? He has come in the only way he will ever come—as he came a hundred or a thousand years ago; as he will come again next year, or a hundred or a thousand years from now. Don't you see? He has come, he will come again, he will keep coming, until in this world there are no more Lucias hunting for their lost children, no more soldiers with lances by dead men in the night.12

Fisher firmly believed that Jesus must come again to show man how to live with man, to come as a symbol of all good men who come to teach and die. "How many times has he come and under what names? How many times will he have to come before mankind accepts his message? (p. 216)"

In the ninth novel of the Testament, A Goat For Azazel, the hero, Damon, goes to inspect the origins of the Christian religion and this journey comprises the dramatic basis on which Fisher develops a novel of ideas. Plot and setting are reduced to the barest minimum. A Goat For Azazel can hold the reader's interest only as he is concerned with philosophical discussions of religion and of Christianity in particular.

The major characters of A Goat For Azazel are only sketched, but one cannot help but see them as autobiographical projections, as Vridar and Neloa had been. One can hardly fail to recognize L'Vardis Fisher, Jesus Came Again: A Parable (Denver, Colorado, 1956), p. 245. Page references to Jesus Came Again in the text will be to this edition.

12L'Vardis Fisher, Jesus Came Again: A Parable (Denver, Colorado, 1956), p. 245. Page references to Jesus Came Again in the text will be to this edition.
Fisher's anguished search for an abiding faith. Damon is especially, impelled by the demon that drove his creator.

Some of the harshest criticism directed toward the Testament was a result of the didactism of this ninth novel. Fisher was also criticized for his failure to limit his material. He repeatedly has Damon ask questions when that character already knows the answers so that Fisher can bring in more material, which makes the novel didactic with a vengeance. In addition to the lack of selectivity, Fisher fails, in the second half of the novel, to vary the narrative pace and one feels the oppressive bulk of the novel. Neither does Fisher allow his characters to speak in a convincing manner because he tries to crowd in too much material and as a result he overloads the novel with philosophical discourse.

Although each of the twelve Testament books can stand alone as a novel complete in itself, each is also a tile in the mosaic which Fisher has created in the Testament series. A Goat For Azazel is one of the largest pieces of this mosaic, playing a most important part in the over-all design. A Goat For Azazel echoes the message of the whole Testament of Man: "So we must ask if a myth is worth the horrors which it calls down upon those who believe it... myth is a vehicle for truth. It may be a vehicle for error."  

Fisher's purpose in writing A Goat For Azazel was to expose the myths surrounding Christianity. As he had for the eight previous books, Fisher researched his ideas, prepared a bibliography, and

documented his boldest assertions with concurring historical data. Fisher searched for a basis of Christianity other than in legend. The traditional story of early Christianity and its origins let those think a great story who must; I think the true, the historically factual, story is a thousand times greater. I think it one of the great stories of human history. I have tried to tell it in A Goat For Azazel, a novel of Christianity's origins and of transfiguration. The distaste and horror with which some readers have viewed my story compels one to wonder how long man will persist in measuring himself by the usually false, often childish, and sometimes evil explanations of the primitive or the ancient mind. After more than thirty years studying his record I can tell you this; that the truth and the facts flatter him more than the myths and the fantasies which he has spun out of ignorance and fear. The traditional and accepted story of Christianity's origins and emergence is an insult to man's mind and spirit, when compared to the astonishing creative act, in both selectivity and synthesis, of the actual inception and growth. The true story is as much greater than the story which Christians revere as the scope and complexity of this universe is greater than the primitive concept of its origin and nature as set faiths in Genesis.

The contrast between A Goat For Azazel and Fisher's next novel, Peace Like A River, is great, for this tenth novel is highly dramatic, even melodramatic; through it the Testament comes alive again. Fisher deals here with the age of Christian ascetics: with their interpretation for the doctrine of original sin and insistence on mortification of flesh, and renunciation of all physical comforts as means of attaining salvation and the consequent glorification of ignorance and superstition. Finally, Peace Like A River announces Christianity as the religion of the Western World.

As a novel, Peace Like A River, brings a quickened dramatic pace to the series—reviving it, in fact, after it had been nearly smothered by A Goat For Azazel. But it is still not Fisher at his
best because the symbols are overdramatized, and Fisher intrudes too often to reaffirm his basic doctrines. But criticism of this tenth novel was generally favorable, the critics agreeing that Fisher had handled his material skilfully.

Fisher's eleventh novel, My Holy Satan, was considerably more successful than Peace Like A River as a combination of the novel of ideas and of action, and as a result the series approaches termination on a crescendo. This novel of terror, set in the Middle Ages when the church was at the peak of its secular power, has a dramatic situation capable of bearing the lengthy discussions of ideas. As a result this novel reaches a smoother narrative pace than the middle volumes of the series. The use of fewer characters and a developing protagonist results in a concentration that is lacking in many of the other works of the series.

A large part of the discourse in My Holy Satan is the defense of the Jews that is also prominent in both A Goat For Azazel and Peace Like A River. Anti-semitism is a notorious aspect of the Middle Ages, and Fisher certainly could not have written a novel of medieval life without treating this facet, but he over-compensates for Jewish persecution from the Christians by continually presenting these persecutors in the wrong light and by making the demonstration of compassion almost the essence of the Jews.

Although not the last book of the series, Fisher summarizes many of his views here. Throughout the Testament the author has strained to show that religion—specifically Christianity—has been a detriment to man. For Fisher, the Middle Ages, when the
clergy and nobles kept the masses in servitude through tyranny inspired by religion, when ignorance was the norm and intolerance and bigotry the highest virtues, most evidenced the dangers of religion. Fisher felt that religion in any age does these things to man, only more subtly. At the end of My Holy Satan, Fisher shows man pitted against the organized and malicious ingenuity which he believed characterized the church in the Middle Ages, but which he feels is characteristic of any organized religion in any age.

Fisher's conclusion to the Testament of Man is Orphans In Gethsemane and since the impetus for the entire series had been to reach an understanding of Vridar—which could be found only by an understanding of the history of man—this final volume is simply the tetralogy rewritten, and condensed into the first half of Orphans In Gethsemane: "Once again I walked with Vridar through the child hell of a sensitive highly intelligent boy amidst the lonely, brutal, vulgar and harsh life of an Idaho pioneer family. I lived again with Vridar, his fears, his frustrations, his urges and his loves. . . . 15

The Orphans version of Vridar's story surpasses the tetralogy in many ways: as the story of the man who wrote the Testament of Man, why he wrote it, and what conclusions he draws from it. This version of Vridar depicts him as more intellectual and aware of his desire to be a scholar. He decides that he wants to write books

15 Magarick, p. 23.
searching for the influences on man and he seeks this in an artistic approach which he has longed to express for most of his life:

he sensed his ageless heritage; now and then intimations came out of it and were hauntingly familiar, yet strange. Now and then he seemed in dreams to wander deep in it, to go far back, to lose himself in the primeval, where only his muscular self had meaning and use; where his only hungers were the eternal hungers—food and female; and his deepest emotions were fear and terror. Sometimes when awake he tried to project himself back into the black night of it; to imagine himself sitting in idolatrous worship by a fire, reading in its flame the soul of the world around him.16

In retelling Vridar's story in Orphans In Gethsemane, Fisher drops the Meredithian frame of the tetralogy, but still retains the four books as structural units, renaming them for mythological characters resembling the events of the story: e. g., Book I - Aphrodite Pandamos (Sensual Love of Body); Book II - Ourania Aphrodite (Intellectual Love of Mind). Orphans, as a result of the condensation is a dramatic work rather than a psychoanalytical case study as the earlier volumes tended to be.

The concept of Vridar in Orphans In Gethsemane also changes. Whereas Vridar in the tetralogy was often an anti-hero, he assumes significant stature in Orphans as we see him in reference to myths which hold profound truths.

The tonal difference in Fisher's later Vridar story also makes an important artistic difference. By treating Vridar consistently as the hero of a more conventional narrative much of the textual

16Vardis Fisher, Orphans In Gethsemane; A Novel of The Past In The Present (Denver, Colorado, 1960), p. 609. Page references to Orphans In Gethsemane in the text will be to this edition.
uneveness of the tetralogy is avoided in Orphans In Gethsemane.

The second half of Orphans is a rambling introduction to the Testament of Man series. Here Fisher tells, in detail, of the factors which motivated his writings, the reading, study and preparation that he poured into his novels and the difficulties he had getting them published. Fisher tells of the pains incurred in creating this giant and, in so doing, he reveals himself completely:

... it (the second half of the novel) is in effect a dissection. Layer by layer, he reveals tissue, fat, muscle, nerve and cell. He lays himself bare with a thoroughness and candor seldom previously equalled. When he sets out to accomplish something, be it physical or mental, his single-mindedness and drive is almost frightening for the average person to contemplate. He continues to wrestle with his fears, but is never free of his frustrations—the frustrations brought about by an honesty that permits no compromise, least of all with himself.17

The tetralogy showed how Vridar, an American writer, equipped himself for life and his craft, accounting for the apprenticeship in terms of self-psychoanalysis, especially on subjects concerning his childhood. Similarly, Orphans In Gethsemane attempts to show the present state of Western man and to account for this in terms of his past. In the tetralogy Vridar is supposed to be an American symbol, whose larger Occidental meaning is but suggested; in Orphans, though, he is less an American symbol and primarily a product of his Judaic-Christian heritage. Vridar comes to realize in Orphans what he is as a result of his heritage, a realization Fisher thinks necessary if the race is ever to reach civilization. Vridar's great vow in Orphans is not just to find the joy he longed for at the

17Magarick, p. 23.
tetralogy's beginning, but to be a great scholar, to trace the Christian dogmas to their sources, to help the race build somethingsolid and certain. Fisher had Vridar doing what he felt every man must do:

If mankind is ever to build a civilization worthy of that devotion which it seems richly endowed to give, it will first have to accept in full light of its mind and soul, the facts of its past, and the mutilations and perversions which its hostility to those facts had made upon its spirit (p. 15).

It almost seems as though Fisher set himself a nearly impossible task. Some of Fisher's assertions in the Testament of Man cannot be accepted by many readers with an open mind. Yet, Fisher believed that he must open people's minds and then get these same readers to understand history in the light that he sheds on it and accept from his interpretation the lessons to be learned. This seems a most difficult task, but add to this Fisher's attempt to create novels that would live as literature—and his goal becomes almost beyond reach—but this was his goal in creating the Testament of Man.

The thesis of Fisher's Testament finale is captured in its title: Orphans In Gethsemane. At its completion Fisher summarized the meaning of the novel:

After projecting himself into many situations and sets of values, and making a long study of the lower animals, the protagonist is forced to conclude that few persons are adult. He sees a world of children. The reasons why children don't mature and become adult, as the children of all other animals do, he finds in the religious systems which are essentially an idealization of the family relationship. 18

Fisher found the reasons that we are orphans in our historical background and in our social environment. Vridar's explorations reveal that sons in the western world have consistently been capitulating to fathers, which accounts, in Fisher's opinion, for the modern world being one of children and the twentieth century an age of violence.

Finally, man is an orphan because the Judaic-Christian system has placed the western world in darkness. Fisher doesn't deny that the western system once served western man; he does feel that the time of the service has ended because scholarship has shown the bases of the system to be untrustworthy. But since Fisher feels western man has become dependent on his heritage, he sees him groping for father substitutes. Fisher believes the father is gone—which he expresses in the title of Orphans, and since the Judaic-Christian religion has denied to man a mother, he is in the fullest sense of the word an orphan. So Fisher sees modern man in his Gethsemane—alone and in sorrow.

Despite such views, Fisher is ultimately hopeful since he believes that an awareness of heritage can yet lead man to a firm affirmation that no villain need be. Fisher's thesis of the twelve volume Testament is that intelligence has not been used as the standard for the western world, but when it is, the race will be on its way to becoming adult. Orphans in Gethsemane shows the irony Fisher sees in Hamlet's eulogy: "What a piece of work is a man." Much closer to the truth is Jurgen's judgment; that man is bound by cowardice, made feeble by disastrous memories; and
crippled by old mistakes. Still, there can be detected in man something that is permanent and rather fine. This, too, is the vision of Orphans In Gethsemane.

The twelfth novel of Fisher's Testament of Man was published in 1960 and the presentation of the imaginary experience of the evolution of man's soul was complete. Fisher realized the immensity of his project at its inception but he thought he was pioneering in a fruitful direction since the novels would help the general reading public to become aware of its heritage. The twelve volume Testament, which has been called one of the most ambitious projects ever completed by an American author, deals with the psychology of emotions and the religious superstitions of man.

Many readers will disagree with Fisher over the answers to his questions and with the interpretations of some of the historical data, but any fair-minded person must recognize the honesty of his search and respect the vast amount of scholarship that guided it. The Testament of Man, not only explores the fundamental questions of existence but challenges the noblest aspirations of the modern world.

Fisher did not hope to please everyone by what he wrote, nor did he try. He encouraged his readers to challenge his writing and think for themselves. Some critics recognized his efforts:

Vardis Fisher is one of the most remarkable of American authors. Viewing himself, in effect, as the reincarnation of conflicting personalities of many generations, the recipient of the transmitted subconscious memories of centuries, Fisher went back in his Testament of Man to the ape-man progenitor and came up the long, uncertain booby-trapped path. He projected himself into the emerging, rising human being, and went with him
through thousands of years of progressions, crises, set-
backs, emotions, surges to get at understanding, if he could, 
of the basic motivations today in the conduct of the heir 
of all the human race... the whole sequence is one of the 
most extraordinary feats in imaginative divination in 
original Occidental literature.19

One of the major conclusions drawn by Fisher from his Testament 
research was the theory that revolutionary ideas rather than mil-
tary battles shaped our world of today. He also shows that 
certain basic concepts and drives which existed in prehistoric 
times, and were handed down through the generations, helped to 
mold man of today. Perhaps the most provocative thought running 
through the later volumes is the realization of how different the 
present would be but for the victory of some of the ideas of the 
past and that the victorious ideas were not necessarily the best.

In the Testament of Man, Fisher pioneered in what must be 
regarded as one of the most ambitious of modern literary undertakings; 
the desire to show the past in the present by tracing the devel-
opment of man's religious consciousness. In so doing, Fisher has 
again surpassed the average historical novelist because of his 
painstaking historical research and deep reading in anthropology 
and psychology. The resulting novels command attention, though most 
of them probably will not appeal to the popular imagination.

Readers may even be irritated by their excessive exposition, abrupt 
transitions, and didactism. Even sympathetic readers would probably 
agree that Fisher never captures the dynamism of Christianity and 
that Fisher has not revealed the whole of the Western religious

19 Clark Kinnaird, American Book Collector (September, 1963), 
p. 24.
heritage—the ring of history is not present. Furthermore, the convincing picture of an area is never drawn satisfactorily and devices for presenting factual background are lacking.

But Fisher knows people and because he frequently presents basic human hungers as convincingly as possible, the art of the Testament sometimes runs very high. It is no small tribute to Fisher that the most elemental characters come to life. Indeed, Darkness and the Deep and The Golden Rooms are the best novels of their kind. Fisher's excellence in showing action and violence as well as compassion marks the Testament, as well as the Antelope novels and the Americana. And nowhere will the historical novelist find the challenge to penetrating study greater than in the Testament nor will its readers find a greater spur to thought.

"As a work of art, the Testament novels must of necessity be less exciting than the scheme that gave them birth. They are also sometimes less than Fisher's best." Perhaps Fisher did the series for the Testament. Finally, Allen Sewall, who is especially interested in letters of the United States west, approached Fisher about letting him publish his novel. It seems, too, that sometimes Fisher was overwhelmed by his historical data and tried to crowd in too much. Like his characters, Fisher is often impatient which prevents him from making each scene sustained and vital. There are some repetitions but these are tolerable since the whole is varied.

When Fisher sent the first novel of the Testament, Darkness and the Deep. to the publisher in 1943, he confessed to a feeling that the task was too big and that he was approaching it experimentally after many years of study:

20 Flora, Vardis Fisher, p. 142.
21 Ibid., p. 97.
I thought my efforts would be no more than a piece of pioneering in a difficult field. I said that as long as the field lay fallow to the artist, writing fiction about the present, unless merely to entertain, seemed to me too much like trying to understand the adult without exploring his childhood. Now that the task is completed I feel, looking back, that it was too big for me. I think that if a writer were to attempt what I attempted his preparation should begin early and his education should be directed toward his future goal. I started late, very late, and so abused my eyes and health realizing more clearly as the years passed that I'd never write as many novels for the series as I had hoped to write. Worse than that, I never had enough time to assimilate and reflect on the countless wonderful facts and implications in the... articles and more than 2,000 books that I read. I developed a case of chronic mental indigestion.

Fisher was to find that the researching and writing of his series were perhaps the lesser battle for he could not find a publisher. Fisher's reputation had diminished since the publication of the tetralogy and no publisher cared to risk responsibility for the Testament. Finally, Alan Swallow, "who is especially interested in belles lettres of the United States West," approached Fisher about letting his small firm bring out the novels. It was a considerable gamble for Swallow, but he was convinced of Fisher's literary merit.

Ironically, when Fisher began the Testament series, he felt that the controversial nature of the works would cause them to sell and create interest among critics and the public:

...my novel of Solomon led most of the 'Jewish' critics to wash their hands of me. By the time I began to write about what some people call the Christian era most reviewers had had enough of me. That of course was their privilege.

I have no quarrel with their interpretation of the Jesus or any other symbol, for that matter, but I do feel that my side, on which are so many of the world's greatest men and women, has a right to be heard. Long ago it should have been said that when all the facts are in the truth of any matter turns out to be greater, and usually far greater, than any of its explanations to be found in myth, legend, and tradition. This is because the myth-makers have had so little knowledge to stand on. If those who believe in "God" look for proof I suggest that that fact would stand exploration.24

The complete neglect which the later Testament novels have received is surprising considering the general, positive response the first volumes received. The point that the reviewers, such as Diana Trilling, Clifton Fadiman and Fred T. Marsh, made about the early Testament books is that they are exciting reading despite such comments, the later volumes did not sell well. It is true that not all of the novels have the same power, but they have deserved more attention than they have received.

Fisher is not bitter about his popular neglect, simply because his mail brings substantial numbers of intelligent letters from appreciative readers of the Testament. It always pleased Fisher that most of these letters were from college students. He consoled himself, too, in his belief that he wrote for future generations, not the present one. But Fisher's sensitivity to some of the harsh criticism levelled at him was well-known:

Certain people, clinging in fear to old forms, obsolete ideas, and closed systems, have called me a misanthrope. Others have called me a cynic and atheist. They should have gone back with me. I have spent many years back there, and all along the way found evidence not only of man's previous errors and infinite capacity to make a fool or a brute of himself, but also of his potential for growth and greatness.25

25 Ibid., p. 36.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Vardis Fisher died in 1968, having written thirty-six books, an average of one full-length book per year for the last three and one-half decades of his life. Fisher's work was ample and his subject matter tremendously varied which would seem to have made him widely known, if not read. But, Fisher was not appreciated by the public, critics or scholars.

The reasons that Fisher was and remains neglected are numerous and varied. One reason for this neglect was offered shortly after his death:

Fisher was never meant to be very rich or very famous through his writing. He lacked the romantic sparkle of the popular novelist; he wrote factually in a field that had been distorted by fiction; he wrote with often brutal realism in fields that had been popularized through light-hearted insanities; his style was truly unique, but clearly not "best-seller." Fisher was an intelligent and honest writer, traits that don't always appeal to the general reading public.¹

Most of Fisher's works involve brutality and unrelieved tragedy, which may be a reason for his not being accepted:

... the great masses of the reading public... look for novelists who create heroines to cry over, heroes to love, villains to hate... denied life, they live vicariously in what passes for literature.²

² Crandall, p. 13.
If this really is what people generally seek in literature, then Fisher was bound to be a disappointment to them since he wrote idea-novels and in his efforts to encourage his readers to think he discouraged identification with the characters.

Throughout the years, Fisher's attitude remained impassioned; he never felt at home on middle ground. Perhaps it was Fisher's frank and often vehement statements that caused protest and then neglect for his books. Fisher often pursued truth with such fury that he shocked those with a more tolerant outlook—an outlook which Fisher usually labelled as evasive.

Wherever one looks in Fisher the same drive can be found, the drive to discover and to do. "His capacity for work and his writer's ability to dig and then put the shards together, these were extraordinary. And he knew it. He outworked men of little talent whom society rewarded a thousand times more generously. This added to his rage."

Sustained indignation seemed to be Fisher's long suit in journalism; nothing infuriated him more than being forced to accept what he thought was unacceptable. For example, to him, the idea of devoting all his time to writing American historical novels, which he considered his least contribution, was one such intolerable idea, and characteristically he devoted his time to what he felt was the more worthwhile project—the Testament of Man series. It is probably indicative of his spirit that Fisher would

insist on writing an historical series which no publisher wanted. Fisher disdained pandering to commercial book publishing companies and attacked them bitterly in public. No doubt Fisher's contempt for the "publishing houses whoring for the masses all the way down" was provoked by their overlooking him as a serious writer on many occasions. Likewise, we can be fairly certain that his slanderous outbursts against the companies encouraged them to ignore him. Fisher felt much the same about literary critics: "Because. . . I wrote frankly about their want of education, their immature judgments, and their self-adoration I paid dearly in review space." A good example of Fisher's derogation of the publishing and critical worlds is contained in his advice to fellow writers:

If you're an honest writer you'll realize that the important thing is not whether you outrage the medievel scruples of an emotional illiterate on the Times, but whether as creator you have the talent to put yourself aside and enter the personality. . . of your character. . . If you have that kind of talent, it won't make you rich. . . but it may put you in the company of those who have gone deep enough to find a piece of the truth. The truth is what any artist is after, but most people. . . are far more interested in being right. In all the years of recorded history right and truth have been implacable enemies, and the seeker of truth a social outcast.°

It is little wonder, in view of such comments, that Fisher was not befriended by publishers—for to have done so would have been an acknowledgment of his allegations. But, perhaps Fisher

was justified in his assertions of the "emotionally immature, intellectually sterile, and morally bankrupt literary establishment in the Northeast" because he had been criticized unfairly; a case in point would be a comment by William Benét, "a high priest of the establishment," in a review of one of Fisher's Antelope novels, "If Fisher thinks life is like that, I am here to tell him it isn't!" Benét knew little of pioneering in Idaho, but he was unwilling to accept any picture of the West other than his preconceived notion. Fisher could not tolerate such presumptuousness:

To bury most of the serious writing in the West by trying to discredit it, not with knowledge, of which they have too little, but with adolescent wit or malicious distortion, has been the objective of the Establishment's critics as far back as I have looked at the records. I think it would be a good thing for every young serious writer, if early in his career he were to know how ignorant, sometimes how frustrated in their own literary strivings, and always how fallible his judges are.

I think the moral of it all is this, that writers waste time paying attention to most of their judges, except to study their ignorance, prejudices, and pretensions, for I am sure that more bad writing than good has come of following their advice.9

Alan Swallow, Fisher's publisher, suggested that Vardis Fisher has not received his due because he wrote novels of ideas, a form not currently popular. The novel of ideas, traditionally, has little plot and very little action. Many of Fisher's works, especially his autobiographical novels, involve lengthy discussions

7Fisher, Western American Literature, p. 244.
8Ibid., p. 244.
9Ibid., p. 245.
of ideas which may have caused the general reader to avoid Fisher's works.

I rather think that a great deal of the indifference toward Fisher's work is simply because they are tedious. They are tedious in length—the tetralogy would have benefitted if each book had been edited to eliminate about one-fifth of the material, and if the final book had not been written. After a time the Vridar story, too, becomes tiresome. He is completely believable, and an excellent vehicle for Fisher's novel of ideas, but after the four long volumes of the tetralogy to have Fisher continue the story, although revised and greatly improved, in the final volumes of the Testament, one tires of Vridar.

Fisher seems to have the problem of not being able to let anything rest, or rather, to let the reader gather and assimilate his message. The final book of the tetralogy is bulky, and a terrible anti-climax, but Fisher has written it primarily to reiterate the important lessons Vridar has learned, and to make sure that the reader has understood the significance of Vridar's story. In some instances such summation might be necessary, but the reader who is interested enough to read a novel of ideas will also be contemplative enough to realize the importances of those ideas. In short, Fisher failed to realize that the very select group of intelligent readers for whom he was writing did not need to be preached to. Perhaps this was the author's most obvious short-coming—he was aware that he wrote for those with intellectual interests, yet he approached his material
as though he wrote for the masses.

Fisher often felt a need to labor his point, and this frequently lends tedium to his otherwise accomplished works. The tetralogy is not alone in showing one deficiency of Fisher's; it is evident in the Testament of Man as well. Fisher needn't have told the thoughtful reader why and how the race's history is significant, as he has done in Orphans In Gethsemane, yet he does. The reader not interested in the novel of ideas certainly wouldn't have completed the previous ten volumes, so to point out the significance of the Testament theme for these people seems absurd, at best.

A consideration of Fisher criticism cannot be complete unless his religious views are discussed. Much of the horror surrounding his name and some of the animosity toward him resulted from the popular notion that Fisher was an atheist. He did attack Christianity, but he did so because he felt that it worked more harm than good on its believers. He was opposed to dogma and fanaticism in any form, which he felt derived from organized religion and he thought that by relying on a symbol (Christ), as we do, much of our own will is taken from us; our initiative toward fulfillment is replaced by belief in a myth. Necessarily, in a Christian nation, and a Mormon neighborhood, views such as these would make a man unpopular—even hated.

But, Fisher "is also a profoundly religious man in the only satisfactory sense of the word."

Christ: he did believe in man, though. Fisher viewed man as innately good, and saw hope for the race in each of us. Fisher was also profoundly moved by suffering, either that of animals or humans, and being an activist he usually tried to alleviate it. For this reason, too, Fisher rejected Christianity—he thought it caused people to suffer guilt, alienation and remorse, needlessly. Christianity embodied too many negative values (e.g., self-denial, sin and fear of death) and Fisher preferred to dwell on man's positive capabilities: his intelligence, his goodness, his compassion.

Aside from his scholarly work perhaps the greatest of Fisher's achievements is the depths of humanity which he has explored. He felt that a detached novelist could never reach excellence; and that the dedicated novelist should live not in his own being, but in the beings of others, a sort of creature "who through a process of emotional osmosis became a chameleon to those he lives around." Fisher often declared that it put stresses and strains on the writer who forced himself to reach as deep as his insights go:

It may be more of an erosion of his mind and spirit when he works in a remote time, for the reason that back there nothing is familiar to him and the terrible strange face of it he takes with him to his dreams. For the serious writer working in his own time the erosions of mind, soul, and sanity are severe enough—too severe for many, as the statistics on alcohol, insanity and suicide declare to us.  

Fisher felt that an author, in trying to reach sources and motivations and create a human landscape with many minds and

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12 Ibid., p. 28.
personalities, quite literally loses his own. He admits candidly that in his works he has drawn a number of schizoids and he attributes this to "having a lot of this type in me."\(^{13}\) (This point is best illustrated by volumes VII, VIII, IX and X of the Testament of Man series.) "Possibly you can imagine what a wrenching of personality it is to enter the schizoid temperament for a year or two and, closing all the doors, as it were, look at the world and its people from the timid and childlike psyche of this type."\(^{14}\) But a novelist of Fisher's scope could not confine himself to one character type. "It is when he departs farthest from what he basically is that the greatest demands are made on his intuitive insights, and that he risks the greatest danger to his sanity."\(^{15}\)

Fisher felt that, just as writing, the reading of most of the greater books (and novels) is for the one who gets inside them, an erosion of superstitions, presuppositions, self-protective illusions, wishful thinking and self-flattery. If any of Fisher's works are capable of allowing the reader to experience the same "erosions" which Fisher experienced in their writing, then they are, by the author's standards, great books.

Although he is still accused of being too autobiographical and of writing sprawling work, it is significant that Fisher's reputation is undergoing a very modest revival. This new interest

\(^{13}\)Fisher, "The Novelist and His Characters," American Book Collector, p. 29.
\(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 29.
\(^{15}\)Ibid., p. 30.
probably derives from the fact that Fisher's intention in his writing is more compatible to those of this decade than it was to the readers of the 1930's and 1940's. This generation of readers can overlook the lack of technical excellence and appreciate Fisher for his struggle to find and lay bare the truth.
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