

*Preface to the
50th Anniversary Edition:
“The Personality of Philadelphia”*

by Richard Powell

AN AUTHOR IS on relatively safe ground when he uses a setting which is either vague, or invented, or foreign. In such cases, although a few experts may charge him with errors or poor craftsmanship in developing the setting, his neighbors will not know the difference. But when the author picks his hometown as the setting for his book each and every one of his neighbors automatically and rightly becomes an expert critic. So if the author does a bad job in describing his hometown, he had better be prepared to leave quickly in the dark of night, unless of course he has done such a dull job that nobody is interested in reading it. However, fools and authors rush in where angels fear to tread, and so from time to time some of us write about our hometowns.

My knowledge of Philadelphia comes from being born here, getting most of my education here, and doing most of my work here. On one side I'm a seventh generation Philadelphian or maybe even worse ... I haven't tried to check back any further.

This Philadelphia background, however, only gave me part of the knowledge which I needed in order to write *The Philadelphian*. Left to myself, I would have accepted the city's traditions and beliefs and customs without question. They would have seemed so normal and natural to me that I would not have thought of them as material for a novel. But I was not left to myself. In 1932 I married a girl from Cleveland who proceeded to question each and every one of my accepted ideas about Philadelphia.

The book is dedicated to her with these words: "For Marian, who didn't understand Philadelphia." I might just as honestly have dedicated it to the author, who originally didn't understand Philadelphia either. In order to defend my beloved city against my wife's unprincipled attack, I had to learn how to look at the city objectively. This book is the result of many years of hot and heavy family argument. And, for once at least, a husband manages to get in the last word in an argument with his wife. In this book, in fact, I get in 150,000 last words.

As an author, I feel fortunate in having been born and raised in Philadelphia. My city has a personality. It is a strong one, and it is out of strong personalities that authors dig up the material for novels.

Most American cities are merely oversized housing developments with no personalities of their own. The result is that these cities produce almost nothing in the way of literature. Every important book grows out of the author's reaction to his environment. If it has no personality, the writer has nothing to react with or against.

Of the major cities of the United States, only nine have distinct and individual personalities. These are New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New Orleans, Charleston, and Savannah. The rest may be nice housing developments, but as far as the stimulation of writers is concerned, all you can say is thank heaven for the American small town. Our small towns and small cities often have very strong personalities. For example, we are in debt to Sauk Center, Minnesota, for Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, and to Asheville, North Carolina, for Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*.

In order to stimulate writers, the personality of a city or town need not be lovable. In fact, of the nine major cities which have personalities, only San Francisco has a really nice one. The other eight cities often annoy people who have not had the good fortune of being born there. I hope I am not revealing anything top secret when I say that, to many outsiders, Philadelphia and Boston have highly irritating personalities. To many outsiders, these two cities are rather like a pair of sheltered maiden ladies who have become crotchety and eccentric but who happen to be awfully well-heeled.

New York, of course, has a very strong personality. Naturally, as a good Philadelphian, I dislike the place. But one must admit that, like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety."

Here is a quick review of the personality or lack of personality of other major American cities:

Chicago—Yes, it has personality. It's the neighborhood big shot of the Midwest.

Detroit—No personality. It's just the hot-rod kid of American cities.

Los Angeles—Lots of personality, but of kinds that delight a psychiatrist.

Baltimore—No more personality than one of its own Chincoteague oysters, and just about as retiring.

Cleveland, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Kansas City, Columbus, and Indianapolis—These are the great faceless cities of the Midwest, representing nothing more than the lowest common denominator of many rather interesting small towns.

Pittsburgh—It has no personality. It's merely a pro football player who struck it rich.

Washington—It's not really a city at all. It's just a big international motel whose guests only sign in for overnight.

Milwaukee—A freckle-faced kid peering wistfully through a knothole at the Milwaukee Braves.

Seattle, Rochester (New York), Portland (Oregon), Buffalo, and Minneapolis—All you can say about these is that the name is familiar but you can't place the face.

San Francisco—The most delightful personality of any American city: cultured without being snobbish, cosmopolitan without seeming foreign.

New Orleans—Like Paris, it is one of the few cities with sex appeal. It's a sort of Creole Marilyn Monroe.

Newark and Jersey City—These are nothing but a couple of dead-end kids.

Houston, Dallas, and Fort Worth—They merely pretend to have strong personalities, in the manner of cowboys whooping it up on Saturday night.

Charleston and Savannah—These are lovely old ladies, who sometimes get a bit tiresome in talking about the men who courted them when they were young.

Miami—Just a chromium-plated diner at a crossroads.

Atlanta—It has a split personality, because it can't decide whether to play the role of Scarlett O'Hara or that of Perle Mesta.

The fact that a city has a strong personality does not necessarily mean that it will produce many authors and many books. As we have noted, Philadelphia has a strong personality. Nonetheless it is a fact that Philadelphia, while producing many writers over the years since Ben Franklin wrote his *Poor Richard's Almanac* and his autobiography, has been the subject of very few books. A good illustration of this is the classic novel *The Virginian*, by Owen Wister, which laid the groundwork for the western novel. Owen Wister was a Philadelphian. So what did he write about? He wrote about a Virginian in Wyoming. In modern days such Philadelphia authors as Christopher Morley and Alexander Woollcott moved to New York to carry on their writing careers. The late Joseph Hergesheimer, who was born and educated in Philadelphia, wrote about Java and Palm Beach, while Philadelphia-educated James Michener writes about the South Pacific, the Orient, and Hungary.

Why is it that, in the past, Philadelphia authors seldom found anything worth writing about in their native city? For one thing, they failed to see anything remarkable in the traditions and beliefs and the social structure here. If I may paraphrase the old saying about not being able to see the forest for the trees, I think that, in the past, authors have not been able to see Philadelphia for the Philadelphians.

An even more important reason is that, in the past, Philadelphians were quite contented with their city. Complacency of this type had a bad effect on Philadelphia writers. Either they moved elsewhere and picked more interesting subjects than Philadelphia to write about, or else they stayed here and in their turn became contented and complacent. Where you have upheaval and discontent, you have authors writing books. Often, in the past, the Philadelphia author became so contented that he stopped being an author.

In recent years, however, there has been a great change in Philadelphia. Many people became discontented with what we used to regard as our

Promised Land. They realized that a lot of the promises had never been kept, and they set out to make some of those promises come true. Anybody who looks around Philadelphia and sees Penn Center, the Mall projects, the new airport, the Schuylkill Expressway, the new City Charter, the start of work on the \$100,000,000 Food Distribution Center, the plans to save and develop the old Society Hill section, and the memorial to the Unknown Soldiers of the Revolution in Washington Square, can hardly fail to realize that there have been great changes. I have been fortunate, as an author, in being able to see some of these changes first-hand in working with Harry Batten and the Greater Philadelphia Movement, the moving force behind many of these projects.

This is no longer the city of the tattered old joke about rolling up the sidewalks at nine o'clock every night. And these physical changes have been matched by changes in thought and feeling. A very exciting Renaissance is taking place here. And, as a natural result, Philadelphia has become an exciting subject to write about.

It has made me very happy to have been able, in my book, to contribute in some small way to this revived interest in our city. Everybody knows that Philadelphia has a great past. There is now no doubt at all that Philadelphia will also have a great future.

*From a talk given by Richard Powell on May 15, 1957 at the
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