

# The Field for Progressive Writers

By GEORGE MORRIS

**J**UST finished Ben Field's fine novel *Piper Tompkins*, (Doubleday & Co., \$2.50). Field takes a Connecticut farm boy with the common prejudices against unions and city folk and brings him into a Hartford war plant where he breaks through the barriers of narrow craftism and urban cynicism.

At the end of the book Tompkins comes out a solid unionist of the local of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers in the shop—



a blend of tough Yankee farm stock and progressive CIO unionism.

The story is a familiar one to Americans who worked in war plants. Aside from its beautifully done local color, it might have been placed in any state. The base of Field's book is that great wartime shift of millions from farms to war plants. This has had a profound influence upon our entire social pattern.

Millions of farm boys like Tompkins learned trades, mixed with city workers and became active and even leaders in unions. This shakeup of our working humanity is responsible for much of the two-way change in attitude these days, bringing labor and its rural allies closer together.

## *The Anvil For Literature*

Field's novel is equally powerful for its description of the daily life in a wartime factory and the process through which its many different human beings were welded together into a labor union.

Unfortunately, too few of our writers have taken the wartime factory and its union for their theme. And yet it was at the point of production and labor organization that the pulse of our home front was really felt. Field does an excellent job because he lived the lives of the people he describes in his book. When he writes of the farm it is straight from the cowshed. His language on the shop rolls like steel shavings from a lathe. And he knows his union. He is himself a mem-

ber of it. None of that phony stuff that is dashed off a typewriter after a flying visit to a few spots.

As I read Piper Tompkins I thought of the American scene today—the lightning postwar changes, the farmer, veteran or sharecropper who returns home and their new struggles, the wave of strikes, the new stage in Negro-white unity. I wondered how many Ben Fields and Howard Fast we have—writers who know, live and breathe these struggles—who could take advantage of this richest inspiration for literature today.

I also thought of the discussion now going on in progressive ranks which developed after Albert Maltz's recent article in the *New Masses*. Maltz whom I first met during the General Motors strike in 1937 when he received inspiration for his best work, now complains that the work of an artist who is consistently guided by progressive views is restricted and he has no opportunity to give his best. He challenges the basic theory that art is a weapon which inevitably serves either the working class and progress or the capitalist class and reaction.

## *The Window From Which to See*

What strikes me is the glaring fact that it is precisely only those who follow consistent progressive policy, which, essentially is Marxism, who could really appreciate the richest and most dynamic field for writers today—the struggles of labor. Some of our best literature of recent years was

born out of the struggles of the unemployed, dispossessed, labor and the Negro people. Much of this literature came because it was suggested and spurred on by association with Communists.

Straitjacket? Nonsense! The real problem today is the other way—to drag many of our writers from strange corners where they really are restrained and to awaken them to the vast scene before them. They must be impressed with their responsibility as progressive writers to dive into this great pastureland. The "unrestrained" writers aren't writing much to picture the great working class advance in recent years. The labor movement is crying for the services of writers. They need only let themselves go and draw the truth as it stares at them.

We are combatting the paralyzing disease of Browderism which for a time has been drawing Communists away from the realities of the class struggle. Now that Communists are getting into the thick of the fight, the view that adherence to them narrows the scope of an artist's work is simply a formula to justify escape from struggle.

The labor movement in general has an equally serious responsibility to the artist. He must be shown that the greatly strengthened trade union movement demands and appreciate his work. We have had some progress along that line in a number of unions. But those labor's book-of-the-month clubs and similar methods to stimulate sale of pro-labor books, are still the exception.

## Worth Repeating

Writing of the part played by great men in history Plekhanov said: "It has long been observed that great talents appear everywhere, whenever the social conditions favorable to their development exist. This means that every man of talent who actually appears, every man of talent who becomes a social force, is the product of social relations. Since this is the case, it is clear why talented people can, as we have said, change only individual features of events, but not their general trend; they are themselves the products of this trend; were it not for that trend they would never have crossed the threshold that divides the potential from the real." *The Role of the Individual in History*, International Publishers.