

Carlos Baker
34 Allison Road
Princeton, New Jersey 08540

December 15, 1977

Professor Richard Baker
702 Journalism
Columbia University

Dear Professor Baker: As you suggested, I am sending along these informal remarks by way of commentary and explanation following the recommendation just made by the Fiction Jury for the Pulitzer Prize for 1977. We arrived at our unanimous decision only after the most careful consideration of all books submitted to us. We also admired, though not necessarily in this order, Peter Taylor's In the Miro District, Anne Tyler's Earthly Possessions, Paul Horgan's The Rhin Mountain Air, William Maxwell's Over by the River, and for various reasons one or two others. In the long run, none of us felt that any of them was as good as McPherson's Elbow Room, for the reasons set forth in our formal letter of nomination. At my own instigation, we accordingly settled on his book as our sole choice.

We all read with considerable care the body of published fiction submitted to us. Again and again we found that books which had been highly praised by various reviewers did not in fact stand up under our seriously objective scrutiny. McPherson's did, and we chose it.

Many well-known writers were represented by books that we found to be seriously below the standard we felt should be adhered to. Among these were Robert Penn Warren, John Cheever, John Hersey, Walker Percy, and Hortense Calisher. Others considered and rejected for the same reason were books by Joan Didion, Philip Roth, Shirley Ann Grau, and Toni Morrison. We gave each of these, like the rest, a thorough and careful reading, and found them all wanting when measured against the calibre which we thought should be represented by a Pulitzer Prize-winning book.

As usual in my previous experience as a jury-member, there were a number of competent first novels. Among these I personally especially liked Jon Hassler's Staggerford, Don Robertson's Miss Margaret Ridpath (with severe reservations starting about 3/4 of the way through), and Mark Helprin's Refiner's Fire, which bulges with talent. I also liked, though less well, Mosher's Disappearances and Raines's Whiskey Man, which both deal, by one of those curious coincidences, with whiskey-running during Prohibition, under Roosevelt, in 1932, one with a New England setting and the other in Alabama. My notion is that Hassler, Robertson (who has done a number of other good novels, so that I'm wrong in grouping him with the firsters), Helprin, Mosher, and Raines are good men to keep an eye on, but that a first (or even a second or third) novel ought to be an absolute knockout to merit a Pulitzer. I didn't think any of them measured up to that standard.

The fiction jury worked hard all summer and fall before reaching its unanimous decision. I cannot praise my fellow-jurists enough: Mrs. Manning and Professor McConnell were a joy to work with; we exchanged many group letters, and got on very well together. We were often dismayed and astonished by the quality of the books submitted to us, but we considered with care every considerable candidate, and we are convinced that our final decision was the right one, both absolutely and on a comparative basis. Others may disagree. We were appointed to make a choice, we did so to the best of our combined abilities, and we hope the full committee will respect it.

Yours very sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Carlos Baker". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name and title.

Carlos Baker
Chairman