



An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell

Robert Landers

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James T. Farrell vaulted into the American literary firmament during the 1930s, becoming one of its brightest lights. "Studs Lonigan," his trilogy about a young Irish "tough" from Chicago's South Side, became a literary sensation and was acclaimed as a modern classic. Farrell went on to write some other excellent novels, and kept on writing for four more decades. But his courageous stance against Stalinism took a toll on his literary reputation, and later, as the naturalism he employed in his best fiction slipped out of vogue, his work fell into neglect and his star dimmed. Even "Studs Lonigan" came in recent decades to be little read. "An Honest Writer" recreates Farrell's life and times and restores this important writer to his rightful place in the forefront of American literature. Robert Landers begins this landmark biography with Farrell's great subject: the vibrant Chicago of his birth and boyhood, the struggling Irish-Americans and others on the city's South Side, and his own family, whose eccentric members inspired some of the most memorable figures in his fiction. If the theme of Farrell's contemporary, Thomas Wolfe, was that "you can't go home again," the theme of his own work was that you never really leave. In Farrell's half-century as a writer, Chicago would remain as much a mythic landscape for him, a place standing for the whole of the American experience, as Yoknapatawpha County was for William Faulkner. In his chronicle of Farrell's effort to escape the heavy gravity of his youth and begin his audacious assault on the wider world, Landers gives us the archetypal journey of a young man discovering America at a time when the country was in the process of finding itself amid the crisis of the Great Depression. In his description of Farrell's search for love and sexual fulfillment, his relationships with friends and enemies such as Theodore Dreiser, Edmund Wilson and Nelson Algren, and his long quarrel with would-be censors who wanted to deny the harsh social realities portrayed in his works, Landers has given us a portrait not only of a man and a writer but of literary America in the middle decades of the 20th century. Drawing on the voluminous private papers that Farrell left behind upon his death in 1979, as well as on his own independent research and interviews, Landers opens a time capsule that reveals the connection between literature and politics from the 1930s onward. Initially drawn to the Communist Party when he left Chicago, Farrell was propelled by a radical vision in his early years as a writer and became deeply involved in the doctrinal disputes of the day. Yet he was ultimately a maverick who would not bow to any party discipline, and he awakened long before Hemingway, Malcolm Cowley and others to the horrors of Soviet totalitarianism. He freed himself from Marxist illusions for good at the onset of the Cold War, joining Sidney Hook, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and other leading anti-Communist liberals in the Congress for Cultural Freedom. With a deep sympathy for Farrell and an informed reading of the larger context in which he lived and worked, Robert Landers has produced a sparkling history of an era and a compelling portrait of one of its major figures. This authoritative biography arrives right on time for the James T. Farrell centenary in 2004.

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