

*John Sheirer*

**The Cover-Story-Warm-Up Reader Guy**

**N**O MATTER HOW MUCH HE WANTED TO, Scott couldn't write stories of his own. So he decided to become a cover-story-warm-up reader guy. Singers who didn't write their own songs performed hits by famous bands, so why couldn't he "cover" famous writers?

Scott showed up at local libraries, bookstores, colleges, coffeeshops-anywhere writers were reading stories. Before the "real" author took the stage, Scott would read a few stories from anthologies of classic authors: John Updike, Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, Shirley Jackson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Kate Chopin, Edgar Allen Poe, Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Carver, William Faulkner, Herman Melville.

For a while, Scott was content with his role. Much as concert goers could tolerate and even sometimes appreciate a warm-up cover band, fans of live literature managed to sit through his cover-story-warm-up readings. The polite applause and cheese-and-cracker tables sustained him, much as the mild approval and mediocre meals provided by his parents got him through those long years of childhood.

But then an audience member asked Scott how he felt about reading such depressing stories by long-dead authors. He couldn't answer. And some of the actual authors featured at the local readings asked him if he wrote his own stories. They were just making polite conversation during the awkward moments following these readings when audience members milled about, not wanting to stay but having no other plans for the night, literature being their only hobby.

Scott knew he couldn't write his own stories, but, as a human being, he needed a creative outlet, so he started changing the gloomy endings to the classics he read. Sammy toughed it out and kept his job at the A&P, eventually getting promoted to store manager. The young bride learned to communicate how she wanted her husband to touch her with his monstrous hand. The lottery-winner got an extra helping of pie at the town picnic, where not a single stone flew. Wakefield stayed home where he belonged. Mrs. Mallard embraced her rescued husband, joy healing her damaged heart. Montresor and Fortunato enjoyed a few too many glasses of wine and then drifted off to pleasant slumber. Francis Macomber shot straight and lived long. The splitting couple sought mediation, and their issue was decided amicably with no harm to the innocent baby. Emily married happily, snuggled with a warm body, and paid her local taxes.

Audiences barely noticed Scott's revisions. Even among the type of people who frequented literary readings, surprisingly few had read the classics. But, eventually, a few English majors objected, claiming that great literature couldn't be molded by the whims of just anyone. The tipping point came when Scott tried to marry Bartleby to the boss's daughter and award him an employee-of-the-month certificate. After that, he was insistently requested to forego his role as the cover-story-warm-up reader guy.

As for the ending of his own story, these days, Scott drives a bland delivery truck and wears a brown uniform. He prefers the boxes large and heavy. The slim ones might contain a book, and Scott has given up on those.