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Reader extraordinaire: Scrupulous subscriber now LOA proofreader

By Aileen Jacobson

In 1982, when Warren Keith Wright received an invitation to become a charter subscriber to the new Library of America, he thought it a splendid idea. A resident of Arbyrd, Missouri—a town of 573 set amid flat farmland 40 miles west of the Mississippi River—he was busy caring for elderly relatives, a full-time vocation that ended this March with the death of his mother.



Warren Keith Wright

“It sounds Victorian, I know, but I’ve filled the role that the unmarried Victorian daughter used to fill, the family caretaker,” Wright, 54, said in a recent interview.

His degrees in English literature from Oakland University in Rochester, MI, and the University of Michigan help explain that reference—and his decision to sign up with The Library of America. “I told myself, ‘You are making a commitment.’” He vowed to read every volume. And then he started writing letters—more than 200 so far—that have endeared him to the LOA staff.

His missives did not, however, contain flowery adulation. In the first, sent in May 1982, he addressed the inaugural Herman Melville collection. He noted that he had found only one error—a “had” instead of a “has” in a note on the

texts—but questioned several typographical oddities, such as spaces that seemed too great or too small, and suggested an additional annotation. Despite his critiques, he deemed the volume “pretty remarkable” and enclosed his check for the next.

Cheryl Hurley, The Library of America’s president, answered that “Dear Sirs” letter warmly, calling Wright “amazing” and “correct in every case.

Oh, for more readers like you.”

And thus began the fruitful relationship between Wright and the LOA, in which he continued to comment and to question possible errors, which were often corrected in future printings. His letters were “delightful,” said Hurley, and many in the New York office have come to consider Wright a friend, though he has visited only once.

Over the years Wright’s letters have become chattier. In 1995, as he dissected a volume of Faulkner, he pointed out the word “cooter,” explaining that as “that classic reference ‘White Trash Cooking’ confirms, a cooter is a turtle.”

Two years ago, Wright’s status changed: He was hired by LOA as a proofreader and is now working on his 17th volume before publication. He jumped at the proofreading offer: “It

made me think of Mrs. Frances Trollope, mother of British novelist Anthony Trollope, who tended the sick while writing her own novels.” He hasn’t stopped sending letters.

Wright doesn’t just read scrupulously. He knows a lot, from academic arcana to Motown lyrics. While proofing a Philip K. Dick volume recently, he recognized a character’s words as quotes from Carole King’s *Tapestry* album and suggested a note. “If I’d realized what a proofreader does, I would have considered it as a career possibility before,” said Wright. “I finally find that everything I know is useful.”

These days, he works in the dining room with “a fine northern exposure” in the 100-year-old house he inherited. A small bookshelf with reference works and “the most important Library of America books that I might want to consult” is nearby, as is his computer, which keeps him in touch with friends around the world. He reads each proof three times. (In addition to freelance work, he also reviews CDs, DVDs, and books for the British magazine *Opera*.)

His favorite Library of America author, he said, is Dawn Powell. “She has an attitude toward life that I find very congenial, that life is a hard job but there’s some fun to be had out of it.” Wright finds fun in his proofreading: “It’s a dream job for me.” ★