



Perspective

By

JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Many newspapers have a policy of running pictures of their writers and columnists next to their copy. My picture, sad to say, has not had the effect on my readers I would have hoped. Thus I am changing.

I have it from the grapevine that one woman said I looked like her first husband, who smiled politely every time he hit her with his fist. One fellow was reported to have said, "If that man's a preacher our nation's in a lot of trouble." Another replied, "I'd be satisfied just to know that preacher's a man."

I never have been too crazy about that other picture, although it's better than the high school photo some of the local columnists use. But I've learned to adjust. Frankly, it's a lot better than I really am.

Pictures fool you. Take the one of Jack Fay. It gives the impression he's nine feet tall and you have to look up to see him. This is simply because the photographer determined he looked better from his chin up than from his forehead down. Or the one of Ed Dangler with his flashy vest and sinister snarl as he sits at his typewriter. Who'd ever suspect he's a mild man who loves bird-watching.

The biggest disillusion comes when someone who's only known you through your picture sees you face to face. Last week I walked into a Vero department store to buy a bathing suit. "Gee," the young clerk said when I told her I needed a 'large,' "I thought you were young and skinny." Such is the fate of meeting a writer face to face. It's like discovering John Wayne has training wheels on his horse or Mannix wears built up shoes.

I know the feeling. It's the same one I had when I first saw (and heard) Truman Capote on television after imagining he was a baritone he-man. It makes me want to subscribe to the theory that writers should be like the old radio heroes — heard but not seen. Then they could be anything you wanted them to be, limited only by your own imagination (You can't imagine the disappointment I felt when I discovered that Andy, of the original Amos 'n Andy, was white.)

Last week I was speaking in Norfolk and a lady came up to the speaker's platform. She had one of my books in her hand and said, "I want Mr. Buckingham's autograph. Which one is he?"

"Right here," the MC said, nodding at me.

"You're kidding!" the woman blurted out. "I thought he would look like a writer."

Unfortunately I had just shaved off my Hemmingway beard because I never could convince people it wasn't a briar patch that I had stuck to my face with peanut butter. I'm sure this would have helped her impression. But it did leave me wondering if writers shouldn't be people of mystery who regard reality as a nice place to visit but wouldn't want to live there. They should be a little weird and a lot unconventional. They should be wild, unpredictable, wear trench coats and sneer when they talk to women.

I guess I could fill the bill, but I just don't own a trench coat. Anyway, here's looking at you.