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AMERICAN AUTHORS IN THE FBI'S LIBRARY

By David J. Garrow

DANGEROUS DOSSIERS
Exposing the Secret War Against America's Greatest Authors
By Herbert Mitgang. Donald I. Fine. 331 pp. $18.95. Illustrated.

Several years ago, Herbert Mitgang, a cultural correspondent for The New York Times and a former president of the Authors Guild, began filing Freedom of Information Act requests with the Federal Bureau of Investigation to discover what information the FBI had gathered over the years on some three dozen prominent 20th-century writers and authors. Last fall Mitgang offered a partial report in The New Yorker on the documents he had received; this book provides a more inclusive, author-by-author summary of the generally bland although sometimes bemusing information that the FBI garnered and has now released.

Mitgang's seriatim approach, along with a tendency to describe no small number of unremarkable documents in excessive detail, combine to result in a book that is sometimes tiresome and more often boring. As Mitgang surely realizes, much of what the FBI collected and retained is trivial minutiae that says nothing about the authors' writings and little about their political views aside from what rallies they attended or which organizational advertisements they endorsed. A writer-by-writer rendition of such facts, generally from the period of the mid-1930s through the early 1950s, rarely makes for scintillating reading.

More serious, Mitgang consistently fails to acknowledge how relatively modest the amount of information that the FBI collected on American writers actually was. Almost any serious political activist of the post-World War II era (whether involved in civil rights initiatives, opposition to the Vietnam War, student protests or other more diverse peace and social justice causes) accumulated an FBI file that numbered in the thousands and oftentimes tens of thousands of pages -- evidence of just how seriously J. Edgar Hoover's FBI viewed the challenges to America's political and cultural status quo represented by the black, student and antiwar movements of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Mitgang's writers, on the other hand, rarely received enough attention from the FBI to accumulate files of even several hundred pages. Even writers who were actively involved in political groups closely allied to the American Communist Party -- Theodore Dreiser (240 pages) and Dashiell Hammett (356 pages) are two of Mitgang's subjects -- developed files that any experienced student of the FBI would regard as extremely modest. Any individual who was the subject of more than casual FBI attention could develop a file of that size within several months.

In a clear majority of Mitgang's cases, the accumulated evidence of FBI interest is remarkably underwhelming. William Faulkner (18 pages), Carl Sandburg (23 pages), A. J. Liebling (18 pages), William Saroyan (45 pages), Tennessee Williams (7 pages) and Robert Lowell (32 pages) all reflect little more than incidental FBI indexing of virtually every name appearing in

any document, no matter how offhand the reference. In cases such as those, and even more strikingly in the cases of Robert Frost and artist Henry Moore, each of whom apparently received only two pages worth of attention, it is fundamentally misleading to speak of them as the subjects of FBI "dossiers." When Mitgang refers to "the Frost file" and "the file on Henry Moore," when, in reality, such "files" are only a tiny number of unrelated documents that mention an individual's name, he does a serious disservice to any reader who does not otherwise know that personal files on individuals whom the FBI actively investigated usually fill several cartons.

Despite that weakness, Mitgang's descriptions of the FBI's incidental information-gathering on major writers do help to highlight several crucially important points about the FBI's role in 20th-century American life. First, a very substantial percentage of the information memorialized in FBI files came

from human informants -- sources who oftentimes had personal or ideological axes to grind, thus distorting the accuracy of their data. In other instances, as the full sweep of the FBI's history repeatedly reflects, some informants become so influential in particular Bureau probes that they are able to manipulate investigations in directions that otherwise would not have been taken -- as the case of Frank Varelli, the major figure in the FBI's recently- exposed investigation of opponents of recent US policies in Central America, vividly exemplifies. Not only do human informants sometimes inventively report what they believe their handlers most want to hear, but sometimes -- as apparently happened in Varelli's case -- informants "run" their supervising agents rather than the agent controlling the paid informant.

Second, some of Mitgang's documents, as with any sample of FBI memoranda, effectively highlight just how politically distorted and culturally insulated the internal world of the FBI often was. Literary ignorance in a police agency may not come as a surprise, but the FBI's distrust -- not just Hoover's distrust, but the average or random agent's distrust -- of mainstream, New Deal liberalism, even years after Franklin Roosevelt's presidency, will enlighten many a reader as to the jaundiced if not at times slightly paranoid political view of the world that J. Edgar Hoover's FBI sometimes manifested. Even now, in 1988, with recent news stories highlighting the all-but-incredible racial harassment visited upon a black FBI agent, Donald Rochon, by his supposed colleagues in the Bureau, students of the FBI need to remember that the truly distinctive internal culture of the Bureau did not wholly die with the passing or departure of J. Edgar Hoover and his immediate subordinates. That such repeatedly offensive treatment could have been directed at Agent Rochon, in two different FBI field offices, without generating immediate and vociferous protest by numerous agents, seems to be the saddest possible lesson to be gleaned from a thoroughly depressing affair.

Third, and lastly, Mitgang rightfully highlights how dramatic and extensive a gutting of the Freedom of Information Act has taken place over the last 18 months. This generally unpublicized gutting has occurred not simply because of Reagan administration hostility to the purpose and effects of FOIA, but much more directly because Congress, in fall 1986, quickly and without sufficient study approved amendments to the FOIA that allowed federal agencies such as the FBI to expand tremendously the amount of information that could be withheld from FOIA requesters or deleted from released documents. With the FBI now able to delete all information provided by

human sources or informants, the practical utility of the FOIA for both journalists and especially historians has declined dramatically. One prominent academic user of the FOIA has, in frustration, withdrawn previous requests -- a signal of defeat that opponents of FOIA will heartily and privately celebrate.

FOIA has made a tremendous contribution to the quality of American journalism and the quality of much 20th-century American historiography since it took full effect in 1974. If any books similar to or better than Herbert Mitgang's are to be written in the future about the FBI and its important role in American life, then American academics and journalists need to raise far more complaint than so far has been the case about the unpublicized gutting that the Freedom of Information Act has suffered.

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