

## Remarks, Humanitas Luncheon

*I'd like to dedicate my remarks today to two friends—writers, unique human beings, Michael Blankfort and Carl Foreman. I can't think of a more compatible atmosphere in which to remember them than at an occasion like this which celebrates the achievements of writers who are contributing something of value to the world they live in.*

*In the 50s when I first met Carl and Michael we were all part of a close community of screenwriters who were children of the depression, and we quite frankly enjoyed Hollywood—the orange groves, the palm trees and the unaccustomed climatic and financial warmth. But along with those siren delights, there was a strong feeling among many of us that movies should not only entertain but have something to say about the human complexities of our time.*

*It wasn't easy to fight the battle for content in what was largely considered an escapist medium, but some did—certainly, Michael and Carl. With movies like Home of the Brave, Broken Arrow, Champion, The Juggler, High Noon, Bridge on the River Kwai, they demonstrated that films with thoughtful and challenging themes could also win large and appreciative audiences. And because motion pictures are a business as well as an art, the success of those movies was a spur to us all.*

*But times change, audiences change. And here we are in 1984 still fighting the good fight—and if anything, against even greater odds. Movies are a bigger business than ever, if we are to believe the box office reports we, oddly enough, see quoted regularly on the entertainment pages of our newspapers. And escapism has been elevated to a high art in the sea of “blockbuster” movies that flood our screens. And in spite of the fact that two of last year's resounding box office successes, Terms of Endearment and The Big Chill, were movies about recognizable human beings relating to each other in recognizable life situations, they fall into that ghetto of films described as “soft” or as “flukes” in the executive suites of the studios and avoided like the plague. When they are done at all in today's market-research-oriented industry, it's only because somebody loves them enough to fight uphill all the way to get them made. And that “somebody” is most often a writer.*

*The upside of what would otherwise be a bleak picture is that the film writer with something to say now has another place to go, and access to a medium that has an outreach undreamed of by any of us thirty years ago.*

*I have only to cite my own experience. A few years ago, as a refugee from movies about car races and chases, teenage libido and space hardware, I did my first television feature—about some wives of blue collar workers who begin talking with each other and in the course of it change their lives and the lives of everyone around them. On the night it aired, I sat at home with my husband and watched it on the little box. There was no audience around me, no reactions, and I must admit I felt vaguely disappointed. As a matter of fact, I wasn't sure I was going to like this at all. But in the next few days, wherever I went—in the market, the drugstore, the bank, elevators, coffee shops—I could hear people talking about it. And I began to comprehend the enormous impact of television. Even a movie that has what is considered a modest rating in prime time is seen by how many million people—ten, twenty, give or take a million? And if it really goes, thirty million!*

*And when the letters start coming in to the network, to the sponsor, to you, you realize something else—that this audience wants to share its feelings with you, to tell you how the movie affected them, their husbands or wives, their children. There is nothing like that in any other dramatic medium. It is unique.*

*In a theater, a good movie can transport you out of yourself into another world, sometimes of illusion, sometimes of harsh reality, and send you away with a sense of shared experience.*

*TV comes into the living room and takes off its shoes and loosens its belt and opens a can of beer. Sometimes it yawns and falls asleep. But when it doesn't, it has the ability to reach into people's minds and hearts and change their lives, as nothing else can.*

*What a heady opportunity that is, what a challenge! But what an awesome responsibility.*

*Just pick up the morning paper—rapes, murders, muggings; the drug traffic and the national debt growing, the banks failing; energy resources being used up at an epidemic rate; the cost of a single orange in Los Angeles 30 cents, and the price of a heart attack in Boston \$30,000. In the face of all that, you say, "How can I possibly write anything that will encourage people to feel hopeful, to care for and about each other, to believe that an individual can take charge of his or her life, and that that life can have meaning; to think that anything they do can make a difference? Isn't it a little crazy to dream of taking on such a challenge?"*

*Well, let me borrow again from personal experience. Recently, my husband, Michael, and I have been visiting my mother who is ill in the hospital. Sharing a room with her is an elderly lady. Mrs. Leiberman—in her 90s, I believe. I'm not sure what the nature of her illness is, but when we arrived the other afternoon, she was facing a rather serious crisis that stemmed, it seemed, from her stubborn refusal for the past three days to, in hospital parlance, "evacuate." As we entered, she was fighting off the entreaties and persuasions of the last of a parade of nurses and interns who had been appearing all day, armed with bedpans, portable water closets, enema bags and assorted paraphernalia. Since the whole issue was obviously aggravated by the fact that Mrs. Leiberman spoke and understood very little English and the staff spoke no Yiddish, Michael, who has quite usable Yiddish, said, "Let me help," and went to her bedside. He leaned over the bed, took her hand and said (and I'm translating), "Little mother, I am speaking to you like a son. Anybody can see that you are in pain. And anyone can see that you are a sensible woman and a smart woman. Now, you are in this hospital and you don't like it. You want to get out as quickly as possible. If you will take the bedpan and relieve yourself, then your pain will soon pass and you will recover." Mrs. Leiberman looked up at him. "What do you do?" she asked. "I'm a writer," my husband said. Mrs. Leiberman shrugged, then shook her head firmly. "Everyone knows that writers are meshugenahs."*

*For those of you who don't know the joys of Yiddish, "meshugenah" means crazy.*

*Well, Michael hasn't been a screenwriter all these years for nothing. He quickly seasoned his first draft with a few jokes, some stories about his own mother, and in the glow of her laughter and empathy, you will be pleased to know, Mrs. Leiberman capitulated.*

*For ten years now The Human Family Institute has been giving awards to a growing and honorable company of "meshugenahs," writers who care enough to try to address the difficult human concerns of these troubled times and know enough to use all their craft and their skill at entertaining, in the process.*

*For myself, I want to congratulate and thank all of this year's nominees. They make me proud of my profession.*

*And on this tenth anniversary, a final and affectionate bouquet to the Humanitas founders—first, for their use of that beautiful word, “human”—and then, for the vision that created these Awards, the idealism of its goals and the pragmatism of its financial incentives. By bringing writers out of the lonely anonymity in which they labor into the unaccustomed spotlight, and inviting them to take center-stage for richly-deserved bows, the Humanitas Awards honor not only today's gifted nominees, but all their many colleagues standing offstage in the wings.*

*A Happy Tenth Birthday from all of us!*