

No Classes With the Girls:

Writer Evan Hunter, '50,
Reminisces About Hunter's Past

By Millicent Brower

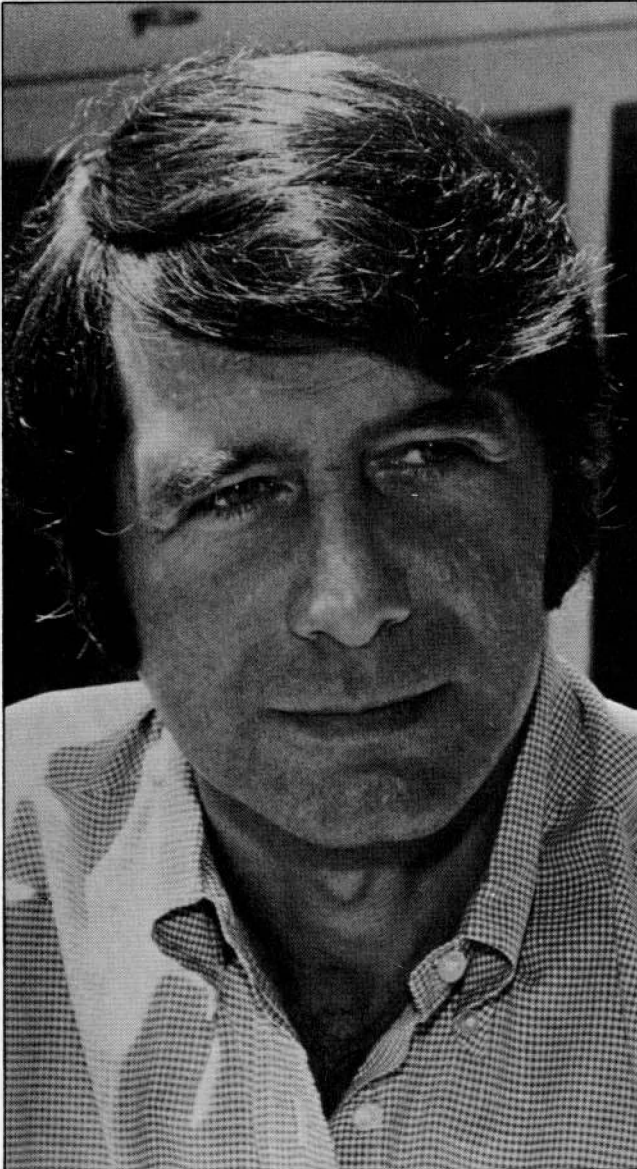


Photo by Jack Farren

At 46, he remembers: "It was a good life at Hunter . . ."

An eager ex-Seaman First Class, ambitious to be a writer, enrolled at Hunter College after World War II and determined to learn as much as he could about writing. Evan Hunter, class of '50, is now the established author of nine novels, 25 mysteries in the *87th Precinct* series under the pen name Ed McBain, eight plays and two screenplays, *Strangers When We Meet* and *The Birds*. As a Hunter undergraduate, he took most of the writing courses available and recalls that several teachers nurtured his writing hopes and helped him a great deal.

Hunter recounted his college days in a direct, rich voice. "Clinton Mindil, who taught English, was a good man. Mindil would invite several of us from the drama group to lunch and to the Saturday matinee of a Broadway play, at his expense. Then he'd hold a round table session afterwards. He was operating like an instructor at an Ivy League campus, and it was really nice."

When he talks, Evan Hunter's natural abundant vitality reveals itself. He speaks gratefully of Mindil's influence. "I was very poor when I was a kid and rarely went to the theatre. Mindil cultivated a taste for the theatre in me."

Clinton Mindil also spoke to Francis T. Kolars, a writing instructor in the evening school, about the enthusiastic young writer. Mr. Kolars also helped him. "I'd meet Kolars before his evening class, which I wasn't in, and give him my stories. The following week he'd sit down with me for fifteen or twenty minutes and discuss my work." Prof. Marion T. Witt's classes in poetry and Shakespeare were illuminating, and he also remembers Prof. Martin J. Freeman, "who'd stop me in the hall and tell me how much he loved my column in the college paper, *The Hunter Arrow*. He'd say, 'I hope you're going to do something with your writing.'"

The satirical column that Hunter wrote for the paper criticized the college establishment in a witty way. "I learned a lot about writing comedy from doing it."

At 46, Hunter is an attractive, vibrant man. Of his years in college, he says openly: "I thought 'if they just leave me alone, I'd learn something.' I used Hunter as a place that would give me assignments. I wanted discipline. To be told, 'Bring in a one-act play by Friday. Bring in a sestina by Monday.'"

He remembers that, "it was a good life. We were all celebrities, we were constantly visible. We put ourselves on the stage every minute we could and, having friends on the Student Council, we ran the politics of the school as well."

He adds, "I often feel that what a university is about anyway is not the classes you attend, but the people you meet and the sparks you strike with them. I was in with a great group of people on the newspaper and in the drama groups." But, he says, he doesn't see any of them now.

Women's Lib was unheard of when Hunter and his fellow veterans became the first male students on the uptown campus. The Hunter girl had an image, he remembers: "A studious type, with her nose in a book." And the atmosphere: "Restrictive." He notes wryly: "There were no classes with the girls. I guess as returning veterans we were considered mad rapists who would spoil all the seventeen year olds. It might not have been so far from

the truth; I don't mean myself, but these were guys who had killed people; they had been through a war." After two years of male togetherness on the uptown campus, the men took the subway downtown to study with the girls.

This infusion of raw male blood recharged campus life, Hunter reminisces. "Sometimes one of us would be the only man in a class, or maybe there'd be two or three of us. It was a funny feeling. The girls used to accept everything unquestioningly, but we were veterans, we'd fought a war, and we questioned everything." The inquiring veterans were greeted with "giggles from the girls" and a "behave, boys" attitude from the teachers, says Hunter. "But soon, the professors realized that it made for a livelier classroom situation; the girls began to catch on too and they began to question things."

Evan Hunter and the returning veterans also revamped *Hunter Sing*. "Every spring all the girls would sit on stage in bleachers and they held a competition. They would take popular songs and make puns of them, with social significance. It was a dreary affair," he notes. "We vets came in and had a ball. We wrote original material and, to illustrate our disrespect for *Sing*, we came out in long underwear, purple diapers and mortar board hats. It was a departure," he comments.

A dedicated, no-nonsense writer, he begins his work day at 10 a.m. when he answers his mail and makes phone calls, and then writes from noon until five or six. In his early days as a writer, he wrote for the pulps and was paid one quarter of a cent per word for 5,000 word stories, earning \$12.50 per story. "I had to write a lot to support my three children and keep up the mortgage."

Success arrived soon; in 1954 he made a hit with *The Blackboard Jungle*. His latest novel, *Come Winter*, will be issued by Doubleday in February. "I'm always either writing one or having one published."

He begins his novel with a title and a theme, followed by an outline of the whole book and a detailed outline of four or five chapters.

"Once I'm into the writing, at some point, the characters come alive and move out of the outline. If you know how to write, you let the characters go; you don't say, 'hey, get back in line.' It's a matter of how close you come to tapping the unconscious. You write with your head and your heart and some days, when you're doing good writing, it just seems to open up, and you go, and you have twenty pages and you look up and it's six o'clock. You read them over and you don't know where they came from. Other times you sweat over three pages.

"The characters do become a part of your everyday life and you have to draw the line. If you step over that line and become involved with the characters, you're a schizophrenic. At the end of the day, I'm still involved with the characters, the places and the situation. It takes me an hour or so to unwind, like a decompression chamber. I usually have a drink and relax."

It takes him eight months to two years to finish a novel, after which he takes a one or two week vacation.

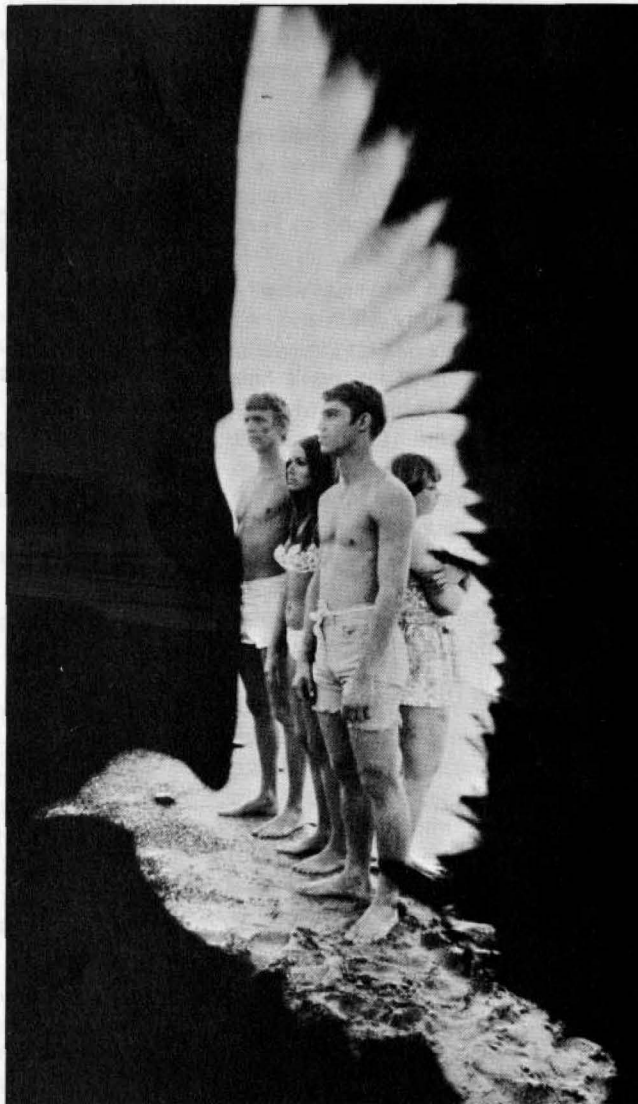
As a writer, he feels that "I don't fall into the Jacqueline Suzanne or Harold Robbins ilk, and I'm not in that rarified atmosphere occupied by Nabakov and John Updike and

that crowd; those writers," he comments dryly, "who are being groomed for immortality by the *New York Times*."

"I understand the difficulties of working in two psychological climates because my mystery books have received nothing but extravagant praise, and I feel that in writing mysteries I can do no wrong. I take liberties, extensions. That is different than working in the uncertain critical climate of my novels."

While his novel *Second Ending* earned a good review from the *New York Times*, he was not very happy about the short notices given some of his other books in Martin Levin's column of brief reviews in the back of the *Sunday New York Times Book Review*.

Whatever type of criticism he gets, Evan Hunter has never had a writing block. "If you're a writer, what do you do? Go out and play golf? Writing is my work. I go to my office every day and sit down and write. It's my job." ■



Culver Pictures

Four teenagers stand transfixed in the huge shadow of a seagull, symbolizing the story of how a wounded seagull affects the lives of Bruce Davison, Barbara Hershey, Richard Thomas and Kathy Burns, in the film version of Evan Hunter's novel *Last Summer*.