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Involved in the dispute at World magazine, are, clockwise around the U.N. symbol: Norman Cousins, editor; Midge Decter, literary editor; Anne Fremantle, who wrote the rejected review, and Shirley Hazzard, the author of "Defeat of an Ideal."

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Attack on U.N. Stirs Literary Row

By MICHAEL KNIGHT

A literary feud, peppered with charges of censorship, cowardice, hypocrisy, male chauvinism and sloppy writing, has boiled over in New York's literary community.

At issue in the dispute is a favorable review written for World magazine by Anne Fremantel the British-born biographer and literary critic, of "Defeat of an Ideal," a recent book by the novelist and short-story writer Shirley Hazzard that attacks the United Nations for ineffectiveness and subservience to the United States.

The dispute began early this month when Midge Decter, literary editor of the eight-month-old magazine, which supports the United Nations and has enlisted U Thant, its former Secretary-General, as its editor at large, rejected the review.

'Sticky for Cousins'

In a letter to Miss Fremantle that she now concedes was an ill-advised attempt at writing a kind rejection note, Miss Decter wrote:

"Frankly, there is a problem with the piece, and I think I owe you the candor of telling you that the problem is political. That is, it would be extremely sticky for Norman Cousins to publish this kind of unsparing, unequivocal attack on the U.N."

Mr. Cousins was editor of the Saturday Review for 30 years before becoming editor of World last year. He is the author of several books, a ghost writer of speeches for Presidents, an honorary president of United World Federalists and a Co-chairman of the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy.

"I am sorrier than you can possibly know," the letter continued, "and hope that my blundering will not foreclose the possibility of your writing for us in the future."

That letter angered Miss Fremantle, who in an interview said it represented censorship. She turned it over to Miss Hazzard, the Australian-born author of "People in Glass Houses," "Cliffs of Fall and Other Stories" and "The Evening of the Holiday." Miss Hazzard, who worked at the United Nations from 1952 to 1962, was angrier still.

In an interview, she charged that Miss Decter was one of a number of literary lights who were leading a kind of Walter Mitty life.

"They lead fantasy lives and think they are leaders of thought," she said, "but, of course, they have to stay in their little boxes and not offend their employer. I

wonder if the review was unfavorable, if it would have been published?"

Miss Hazzard hinted that Miss Decter, for five years an editor of Harper's and the author of a recent book, "The New Chastity and Other Arguments against Women's Liberation," might be the victims of male chauvinism on the part of Mr. Cousins.

Now it was Miss Decter's turn to be annoyed. "As every editor knows," she said, "Hell hath no fury like a writer scorned."

Miss Decter said she had sent Miss Fremantle the note, rather than the usual curt rejection form "for the sake of the respect in which I've always held Anne Fremantle—I thought she was entitled to something more than a formula note, but I was mistaken."

Politics Denied

There were no political reasons for rejecting the review, she said; it was just poorly written. She said she had made two mistakes in her handling of the affair.

"The first was to allow the book to be reviewed by someone who turned out to be a friend of the book's author," Miss Decter said. "The second was to pay Miss Fremantle the respect of trying to indicate the difficulty with her review without having to spell it out in full.

"For the first error, I can be forgiven on grounds of ignorance. For the second, I will be laughed at with justice by all my colleagues in the magazine business for my innocence.

"The political difficulty I referred to was not the substance of the review, but the shrillness of its tone. For some crazy reason, I thought Miss Fremantle might have wished me to spare her so tough a criticism."

Miss Decter's response brought another blast from Miss Hazzard, charging that her statement "is cowardly, unworthy and quite shocking."

"All this fits in with the typical sacred-cow treatment of the U.N. that I protest in my book," she said. "It's just not plausible. I don't think she would have written such a letter unless it was from the heart. One has to ask, 'When do they speak the truth?' When they say they are being candid, then they tell you that they didn't mean that, either."

'Sugar and Water'

Miss Hazzard denied knowning that her friend, Miss Fremantle, would ask to review the book. She said she had asked her publisher not to send review copies to World on the assumption that the magazine would be biased against it.

For his part Mr. Cousins said that he "backs Miss Decter 100 per cent."

He said that "World magazine is not in the business of publishing scathing attacks on the U.N., and it would not want to give strength to those in full cry against the U.N. But that does not mean that we will never publish attacks on the U.N." He added that his magazine recently had published "a stern criticism" by Max Jakobson, a former Finnish delegate to the U.N.

"But I don't think our readers would be impressed with articles that are not reasonable nor accurate," he added. I assume from what Midge has told me that Miss Fremantle's review was neither."