

## The Literary Life of Spiro Agnew

Washington

Until Thursday, January 24, no one in the capital knew that the former vice president was a literary man.

Yet, on Thursday morning, the Washington Post broke the news:

Spiro Agnew: Another Rejection Slip, said the headline. Beneath, Maxine Cheshire, who has been known to unearth some unearthly gems about her fellow men and women, announced that the former vice president's efforts had been dismissed by a major publisher "on its merits," if that's the right term.

"I'm not sure," the unnamed publisher told Mrs. Cheshire, "I'd want to publish Agnew unless he wrote 'Ulysses.'" Well even though that doesn't sound as if his efforts were rejected on their merits, it did sound as if the unnamed publisher had a definite idea of his likes and dislikes in books and former vice presidents.

It also sounded as if that was the end of Agnew's budding literary career, but the demise turned out to last only as long as it took for the Washington Star-News to hit the streets.

There was Mrs. Cheshire's opposite number, Betty Beale, reporting that:

"Former vice president Spiro T. Agnew has written a novel which will be published soon by Random House." She added that Agnew broke this news "last night to his former aide, Peter Malatesta, when he and Mrs. Agnew came out of their seclusion to give a party in their Kenwood house." The former vice president, furthermore, was reported to be "very tickled" at writing a novel, even though he hadn't known before that he had it in him "until I sat down and wrote one."

Well, it looked as if one of two things had happened between the last edition of the Post and the first of the Star-News. Either more than one publisher had seen the manuscript — one obviously taking a dislike to it and the former vice president — or Ms. Cheshire and Ms. Beale had vastly different sources.

The plot thickened at noon. The next edition of the Star-News hit the street and all references to Random House had been expunged, but the story was otherwise intact.

Naturally, all eyes turned to Random House. The excision of its name was the first firm clue that only one publisher was involved in the plot about a "spy novel."

Robert L. Bernstein broke cover. He admitted that he, the head of Random House, was the publisher quoted in the Post story, that he had rejected the Agnew book and that the Star-News story was wrong in saying he would publish it.

So much for what was then known. The question was raised as to whether the Star-News reporter had checked with Random House before naming it as the publisher of the Agnew novel. The answer was that the Star-News had checked, at 9:15 that Thursday morning. By then, 85,000 newspapers, the Star-News capital special edition, were spinning off the press announcing a non-event.

"We should have checked first," a Star-News editor admitted. "It was inexcusable."

But another Star-News editor wasn't so sure about that:

"We had what we thought was a good source," he said. "Agnew told it to a whole group of people at a party. He was on cloud 9. He couldn't have known it was rejected. They (Random House) didn't tell him before they leaked it to the press."

Not so, countered Random House. "He was told the book was rejected at 3:15 p.m. on the previous Monday by a Random House representative," said a Random House spokesman.

So, there is the mystery that only one person can explain.

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