one book after another...

BY MARY DARLINGTON TAYLOR

BROTHER TO DRAGONS. By Robert Penn Warren. 232 pages. New York: Random House.

August has been that—with a small "a"—for a distinguished new Fairfield resident, Robert Penn Warren, poet, novelist, and professor of playwriting at Yale's Department of the Drama. On August 2, his first child, a daughter, Rosanna, made an electric advent into the world, selecting, of all places, the living room of his Hoyden's Hill home for the event: and last Friday, his newest literary child appeared, in considerably more conventional fashion.

"Brother to Dragons" is, by subtitle description, "a tale in verse and voices." The poem is spoken by people who, except for the considerably more than interlocutor poet himself and one other, were directly concerned in the historical episode it concerns. Storywise it is a murder committed nearly a century and a half ago in a little town in Kentucky. The perpetrator is a frontier landowner; the method is butchery and burning; the victim, a slave; his offense—a vase is broken—so piffling as to rob the horrendous happenings, told factwise, of probability.

SET DOWN IN POWERFUL, THOUGHTFUL, even in its occasional dreadfulness, beautiful verse, by a many times poet's award winner and Pulitzer Prize novelist, it is monstrously real in narrative, commanding in philosophic core.

The events proper happened. People recall them from hearsay in Smithtown:

> ". . . the sort of town Sam Clemens might
> Grow up in now and not be much worse off.
> River and catfish, nigger in the shade,
>
> Little brick jail your fist could punch a hole in."

The records are in the court house. Late in the 19th century, a man who had been a child in 1811 made them the plot for a novel. Occasionally newspapers revive the story: and back when it would have made sure-fire atrocity-story stuff for th Abolitionists, one writer used it. But only one, he veiledly, for the murderer, Lilburn Lewis, was nephew to Thomas Jefferson, apostle of freedom. Believer also in the perfectibility of man. Believer all his life? Or only until the "year of portents," by the almanac 1811, had turned in its suit, and spring, perhaps summer dressed Virginia? That would have given time for the word to be carried back over the mountains.

It must have been carried. Contemporary newspapers told the story. Jefferson must have known. Yet never in the 15 years that remained him did he mention it, in his writings or to anyone who left record. On this silence, and on what happened in the mind that dictated it, is based the philosophic center of the poem.

There is no time nor place for the convocation of voices, and "Brother to Dragons" is not a play, although spoken in parts. Rather the people speak as the thread, not necessarily the chronology, draws them from limbo. Jefferson and the poet, who has twice visited the ruins of the house Dr. Charles Lewis went west to build, carry the narrative.

Lewis, his wife born Lucy Jefferson, Lilburn's foolish, frightened wife, Laetitia, their second son, poor groping Isham, and Meriwether Lewis, as near a son as Jefferson ever had, speak as they are called up. Lilburn's mammy, Aunt Cat, whom he repudiates, and Laetitia's bumbling brother, the only invented characters, aid the interpretation.

Lucy, and Meriwether whom Jefferson had sent west fired with his own idealism and who had come to disappointment and suicide, in charging Jefferson with myopia as to his own motives, sway him toward a widened, deepened vision.

Damned by his own dark nature, Lilburn speaks only once. So too George, the slave, whose cry of lostness and ignorance spurs Jefferson to realization that

> ". . . if there's to be reason, we must
> Create the possibility
> Of reason and we can create it only
> From the circumstances of our most evil dispair."

The poem, thus spoken by real if long-dead people, is also a symbolic narrative of America—of where she has seen clearly and where she has gone down into darkness.

"BROTHER TO DRAGONS" has been long in the writing. Professor Warren found the facts of it while engaged in research for "All The King's Men", a stirring and romantic novel of old Kentucky, a Pulitzer prize winner and, in a subsequent movie version, a National Award cinema.

He considered first a novel framework, but it wouldn't have done. There was no right ending without vitiating known fact. He turned then to verse, writing George's haunting lament for understanding first.

PROFESSOR WARREN was, at the time of publication of "All The King's Men" (1946), already a distinguished man of letters. Professor of English at the University of Minnesota since 1942, he had also for two years occupied the Chair of Poetry at the Library of Congress. Before then and since being graduated summa cum laude from Vanderbilt University in 1925, he had taken a master's degree at the University of California, studied two years at Yale and a year at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, and returned to teach at Vanderbilt, then at Louisiana State University.

As an undergraduate, he had been a member of the Fugitive Group of Poets; while teaching at Louisiana State, had founded and been editor of the Southern Review. In 1936, he received a Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship, the Levinson prize from 'Poetry', and in that and the following two years, the Caroline Sinkler prize from the Poetry Society of South Carolina. In '39-'40 came a Guggenheim Fellowship, to be repeated in 1947-48. And in 1942, he had received the Shelley prize for poetry.

Two novels, "Night Rider" (1936) and "At Heaven's Gate" (1943), had preceded "All The King's Men." Professor Warren had also written extensively on apreciation of literature. In this field, with Cleanth Brooks, a fellow editor back in his Southern Review days, he is co-author of four works. And through two decade, he has been frequently represented in anthologies of prose and poetry.

The novels have all been set in Kentucky where, April 24, 1905, in the town of Guthrie, Robert Penn Warren, son of Robert F. and Amanda Ruth Penn Warren, was born. His summers he spent largely in the country absorbing, with the country sights and sounds, the legend and history that enshrouded the area.

"YOU WRITE ABOUT WHAT you know best, feel or have felt most keenly," he says, and regrets that the vivid perceptiveness of childhood becomes somewhat dimmed with growing older.

A meticulous probing historian when research for his writing sets him delving into records, manuscripts, dusty tomes, Professor Warren never has nor ever wanted to teach history. He has taught all forms of creative writing, however, and English in all fields of interpretation.

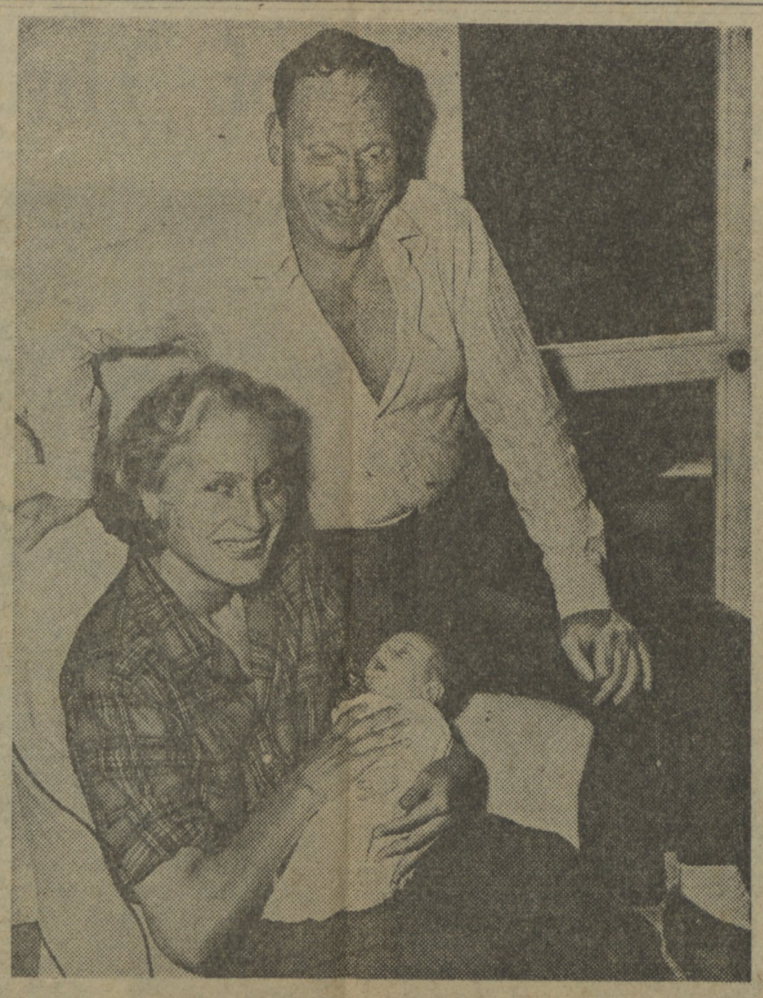
Ranking very high in today's roster by critical consensus, Robert Penn Warren's poetry is not esoteric, although it is far from easy-does-it. The degree to which a poet is readily grasped is not, in his opinion, of any great importance. "'The Waste Land'" wouldn't be better if it were more obvious; nor Whitman improved by complexity."

PROFESSOR WARREN meets one disarmingly, speaking thoughtfully, and not looking down his nose. His rather infrequent laugh has catching conviction. He is sandy—better, gingery—of coloring, and when he stands up you see he is rangy and moves without seeming to make much motion.

He is quite capable of dividing his attention—did, last week, when The Sunday Post went calling, as he kept an ear alert for sounds beyond the house door. Rosanna was in there, napping, and Mrs. Warren (Eleanor Clark, whose "Rome and A Villa" won widespread as well as critical acclaim in 1952), sunning below the terrace, had left the new father in charge. It was a welcomed responsibility. Professor Warren is enchanted by his small, pink and white bit of a daughter and everything about her, even her peremptory arrival which placed unprepared-for obstetrical demands on himself. She is a love of a baby, wide-eyed when she chooses to be, and already mistress of a gallery of fleeting, changing expressions.

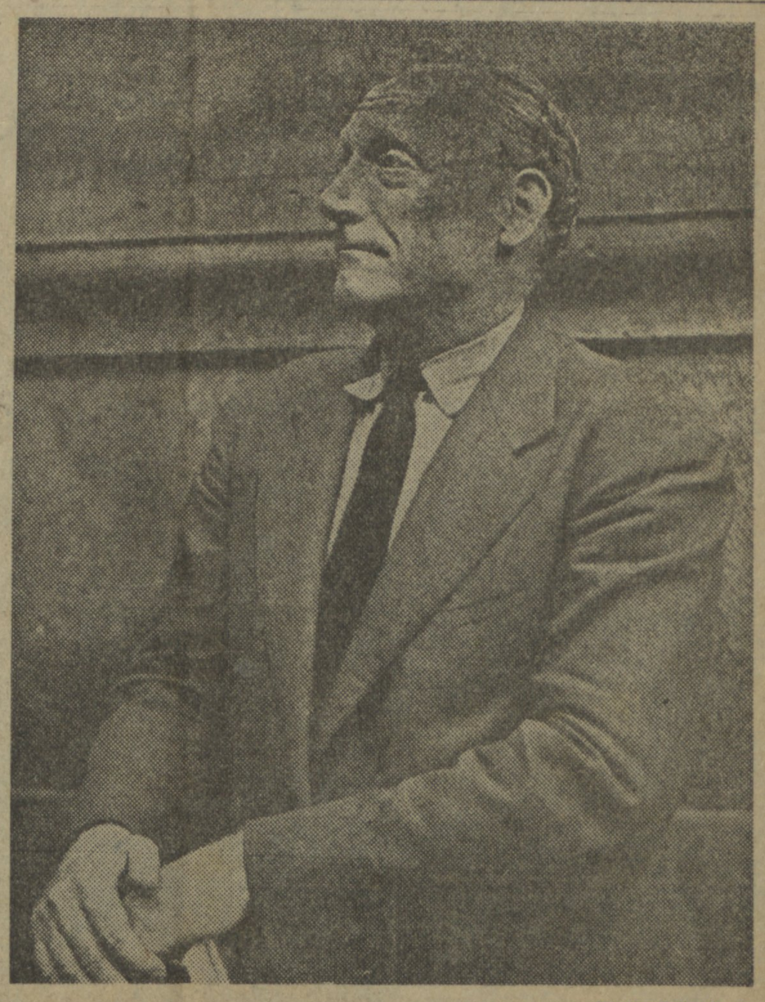
THE WARRENS ARE ON HOYDEN'S HILL, in the Joseph Carlson guest-house, only as temporary tenants. By late fall, the barn they have bought from the Foster estate on Redding road should be a suitable dwelling place for a writer-poet-professor-father, a writer-mother, and a very young lady.

The Warrens saw the Foster barn in course of a drive around the country. They had been living between New York and New Haven since Professor Warren's appointment at Yale, which commenced in 1951. Fairfield is conveniently located between the two places where business calls him. They have friends nearby and in neighboring towns, and look forward to a happy settled residence in the area.



Sunday Post photo—Taylor

AT HOME ON HOYDEN'S HILL, Fairfield, Professor Warren, Mrs. Warren (writer Eleanor Clark), and new daughter Rosanna, rather bored with all the book-talk.



Photo—Sally Ross

ROBERT PENN WARREN, poet, novelist, and professor of playwriting at Yale, whose "Brother to Dragons" was published Friday by Randon House.