

Formula for a Best Seller

A HOUSE DIVIDED, by Pearl S. Buck.
A John Day Book. Reynal & Hitchcock,
New York. 353 pages. \$2.50.

I AM indebted to a fellow novelist for a sure-fire formula on how to write a best seller, and this review affords an appropriate occasion for passing it on. The first step in the process is to select a hill. If it is a hill in Alaska, there is gold in it. If by some miracle it is located in Kansas, it yields wheat. If it exists in the deep South, it is puffy with cotton. And if it is in China, it produces soybeans. A man and his wife live in a shack on the hill. The man's father, great-grandfather and on, back and back to that fabulous day when God tripped up on mankind and flooded the world, have all lived on this hill in a little shack. The man is poor. He is very poor. But he is hardy, and sturdy, and he is rugged. He and his wife are very poor, and they have little to eat. They struggle. He wakes up the rooster in the morning, and is out with his hoe. He plants, and sometimes there is a little crop, and sometimes there is none. Because there is nature. Sometimes it snows. When it does not snow it rains. When it is not raining, it hurricanes. When it does not hurricane, it earthquakes.

There are diverse and sundry manifestations of nature. And the man and the woman in the little shack on the hill live and work, and they love each other. So that at the appropriate dates in the calendar, babies are born without benefit of a doctor. And then the man and his wife, they work even harder. And there is snow. And there is rain. And there is sleet. There is winter, spring, summer, autumn. The sun comes up. The sun goes down. Time passes, and the man and his wife in the shack on the hill become gray-haired. But off on yonder horizon, there is another hill, and in it another man and his wife live, and they are also very poor. And the son born to the first hill marries the daughter born to the second hill, and the newlyweds now own two hills. And the son of the first hill awakens the rooster each morning and goes out with his hoe. And the sun comes up. And the sun goes down. And winter comes, and then spring, and then summer, and then autumn. And it rains, snows, sleets, earthquakes, hurricanes. And times passes. And more time passes until the son of the first and second hill marries the daughter of the third hill. From then on, the formula demands a knowledge of multiplication, and the multiplication is gauged in terms of the number of volumes one is writing—one, two, or a trilogy. For at the end, out of the good earth, there has grown a rich family and a great house on a hill.

In her much publicized *The Good Earth*, Pearl S. Buck did not stick precisely to formula, but the narrative followed it sufficiently to pass muster. And in addition, her characters were unwritten-about Chinese instead

of Scandinavians, hardy Englishers, Irishmen in peat bogs, or immigrants on the western plains of America.

Net result—one best seller.

And out of the loins of the sturdy man from the shack on the hill there grew a son who was destined to be other than a poor man in a shack on a hill who awakened the rooster each morning and went out to hoe and plant soybeans. And his story was chronicled in a tale of *Sons*. For he was the one known as the Tiger, and he became a general and a Chinese war lord with all the accoutrements of a great warrior in the pages of fiction. He owned a sword. He had muscles in his arm, and when he swung that sword, the very wind did stir and groan and wail and keen, so mighty were those muscles in those arms. And God have mercy on the soul of any one who stuck his neck in the path of that sword. And he had a moustache. He twirled and pulled his moustache in a manner that would have dragged envy from the very bowels of a Hollywood director. And he had a face, because even generals have faces these days. And when he saw an enemy he frowned, and that terrible frown of his worked like a left jab from Jack Dempsey. And he had a voice, because even generals have voices. And he did not speak mildly, even as you and I. He did not precisely talk. He roared. He bellowed. In simple language, he shouted. And there was dynamite in them there nostrils of the Tiger. So he became a general and a war lord in the interior of China.

Net result—a best seller.

And the general with the sword, the voice, the moustaches, and the frown like a right cross from Jack Dempsey had a son. And the son was a very sensitive moon-calf who liked

poetry better than he liked war, and he actually did not know what he liked. So he ran away to the far city on the coast. There he went to school. There a maiden held his hand, and other maids did dance with him in the new foreign ways of dancing, and there did come into his blood a hotness. And he sometimes could not sleep at night with that hotness in the blood. And when the maids saw him, their hearts did get hot too, and there was the hotness in the hearts of maids, and the hotness in the blood of the sensitive young moon-calf who did not know what he did desire, but the hotness was just not hot enough. So he remained a pure young man. And he could not dedicate himself to pleasure or to revolution. But in due time he did rise up and rebel against the marriage his father did plan for him, and he joined the secret revolutionists. And they were arrested, but just as his comrades were sent off to death, his freedom was purchased. And he was sent to the foreign country to learn the new foreign knowledge.

And in the foreign country learning the new foreign knowledge, he did study hard, and he was lonely, and he was sensitive, and he was not always happy. And he did meet a girl who knew the new foreign ways of the foreign country. And her parents knew the old ways of the foreign country, because they had been educated by Protestant wowsers and they wanted to save him in the blood of the lamb. And he and the girl, they did look at the flowers early in the morning. And the girl, she kissed him. And there was that hotness in his blood, and that hotness in her heart, and it was still a hotness not quite hot enough.

And he did graduate *cum laude*, and return to his land with the new foreign clothes and the new foreign ways, and he wished to serve his country. And during the six years that he was away, the revolution had come, and

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gone, and those who had been rich were richer, and those who were poor were poorer, and there was a great buzz and stir. And he did teach the new foreign knowledge in a university, and he did fall in love. But the maid she was cold. And one night when he did go to a pleasure house and come home with wine on his breath, she did say to him that she hated him. And the sensitive, pure young man who had always been a house divided in himself, was more divided, and he was more unhappy, and he did not know what to do, and what to be or what not to be. And some of the old ways went. And more of the new foreign ways came. And

then at the death bed of the Tiger, who had been the general with a sword, a moustache, a roaring voice and a frown, the right maid she did come. And they did hold hands with that hotness in their hearts. And the sensitive, pure man, he was no longer a house divided, and the top and the bottom story they were not locked against each other. And he could look to the future, and he could say to the maid, we, we two, we two need not be afraid of anything.

Net result—a best seller.

P.S.—Pearl Buck is a very dull writer with a redundant, soporific style.

JAMES T. FARRELL.

The Sidestep Philosophical

PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAS IN THE UNITED STATES. Harvey Gates Townsend. American Book Company, 1934. \$2.

THE appearance of a history of American philosophy is a rare event. One seizes upon it eagerly, hoping to find some clues for the interpretation of the shifting emphases in the history of American thought. One wants an integration of philosophic movements in the colonies and later in the states with the conditions of life and the needs and aspirations of various sections and classes of the people. In this book, however, one looks in vain for such things. It is not a *history* of thought, but merely what its title says, a survey of "philosophical ideas," giving little suggestion of either the social conditions behind any philosophical movement or of the causes for the various shifts that have taken place.

To begin with, the author uses the fiction of a "national consciousness." Have we really ever had such a thing? We have had it only at rare times and in limited degree, and then usually in war. There have been city and frontier consciousness, northern and southern consciousness, merchant and worker consciousness. But "national consciousness" is a questionable term and suggests both a patriotic and idealistic approach. In similar vein he speaks of the "agony of spirit" designated as the breaking up of the feudal order. The author has heard of the economic interpretation of history and he says "it would have us believe that no forces except economic ones determine our theories." That is a crude conception of it, to say the least. Calling it a time of action, Townsend dismisses almost without notice that remarkably fertile period in American thought, between 1760 and 1820, when the materialism of Rush, Buchanan and Cooper developed, when militant deism flourished, when Madison, Hamilton and Adams set forth with bold strokes the capitalist theory of the State. He calls the thinking in times of action "more or less identical with the thinking of a fox who devises ways and means of getting into the chicken house."

Townsend is an idealist who despises all naturalism. His own opinions blatantly in-

trude themselves. According to him, it is always the idealists who show a "critical spirit." He associates philosophy solely with ferment and enthusiasm. In fact, he is really looking for poetry, not science or philosophy as a Marxist would understand it. "A program is a poor substitute for poetry," he says. Underneath this lies a whole system of judgments that express an aristocratic point of view. Reason lies in the few; masses of men are incapable of it. To quote directly: "Anti-intellectualism is always latent in the mass of men. Sometimes it shows itself in a popular enthusiasm, such as war, when the restraints of reason give way and people are swept along on the crest of an emotional exaltation. (The usual capitalist theory of war as caused by the stupidity of the masses. P. S.) Such an emotional outbreak, when combined with unity of purpose, spends itself in national loyalty and may be far less destructive than when it takes the form of sectarianism, religious or political, in time of peace." (p. 75ff.) In other words, the masses are given to irrational outbreaks anyway, so it is better to direct them outward into war than to let them take the form of class struggle. But this is, of course, a perfectly "objective" history of philosophy.

The book abounds with trite "metaphysical" profundities, such as: "The problems of philosophy are ever solving, but never solved"; "Common sense always evades an intellectual struggle"; or, in speaking of Emerson: "He was not after all so much like other men; he was more like—Emerson." Townsend calls Brattle our first philosopher. Why dignify Brattle, the poorest pedant, with such a title and deny it to thinkers like Roger Williams, John Wise, even the Mathers? Here were inspired views of the nature and purpose of human life. His exposition of Samuel Johnson's philosophy is meaningless, since it is no more than a cataloguing of doctrines. He dismisses Edwards' truly magnificent treatise on the "Freedom of the Will," for what seriously appear as theological reasons. He assumes (pp. 63-66) that genuine philosophical speculation must be of the traditional Platonic type. He sighs with sorrow that Thomas Paine never had the opportunity to

read Kant, and childishly attacks Paine for holding the theory that evil arises out of concrete social conditions and can be cured by social action. He likewise attacks Emerson because he "did not come to close grips with the theoretical problem of evil and its metaphysical status in the universe." He praises Jefferson's idle theories of government, because they suggest Christianity and Kant to him, and never mentions Hamilton or Madison. His bias forces him to obscure significant issues rather than to bring them to light.

The book contains some fair analyses of individual thinkers, notably of Jonathan Edwards, Royce, James and Peirce. But when it comes to evaluating the thought of these men and to seeing them in historical perspective and social context, the author has nothing but balderdash to offer. Dewey, for example, is finally dismissed for not transporting the soul "on wings of aesthetic and poetic imagination," and for developing a philosophy which in lesser minds "degenerates to the service of bellies." The point is that this is no history of philosophy in America in any meaningful sense of the term history. Neither were the earlier writings by Professor Riley. The work is yet to be done. And it can be done only by a Marxist, guided by dialectical and historical materialism. Why did the merchants of Boston fight with the leading clergy over witchcraft and smallpox inoculation? What forces were behind the debates between Roger Williams and John Cotton over the relation of church and State? Who and what were the Quakers? Why did Scotch realism have such a hold in the eastern colleges? What was behind the conflict between Emersonian transcendentalism and W. T. Harris's right-wing Hegelianism? Why were Peirce, James and Dewey unable to accept materialism? These are a few of the innumerable

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