

Why Is a Best-Seller?

By HARRY SALPETER

AS these lines are being written some one somewhere is buying the 100,000th copy of Thornton Wilder's "The Bridge of San Luis Rey." Not because he, or she, is interested in good prose—the 100,000th purchaser of a new book rarely is—but because he, or she, must say something sensible in response to the next person who asks, "And what do *you* think of 'The Bridge of San Luis Rey'?" If Mr. Wilder could encompass the feat of raising from the dead the Franciscan Brother Juniper who strove to discover whether it was through accident, or design, that the osier bridge over the Peruvian gorge collapsed at the moment that a certain quintet of travelers would be precipitated to death thereby—if this Brother Juniper were then put to the task of discovering who, and why, the book in which he is a minor character became a best-seller in the United States of 1927-8, I think he would be sensible enough to demand immediate restoration to his grave.

Being a prophet after the event is one of the things in the practice of which most of us excel. To say that "The Bridge of San Luis Rey" is a best-seller because it is a beautiful story told in beautiful prose, is to hazard being ruled out of court to the echo of rude laughter. Whatever evidence may be marshaled to the contrary, it is firmly fixed in the minds of those who are vocal in these matters that really fine books do not become best-sellers. And it is true that "The Bridge of San Luis Rey" is one of those rare best-sellers against which the voice of depreciation has not once been raised. Its very excellences made those who are supposed to be able to anticipate success distrustful of its sales possibilities. From the publishers, A. & C. Boni, I learn that Carl Van Doren, of the Literary Guild, to whom the book was offered for League subscribers, refused to consider it for fear that it was too beautiful to sell. Henry Seidel Canby is head of the Book-of-the-Month Club, which has more than 60,000 subscribers. He also taught Thornton Wilder English at Yale. Wilder has been out of Yale for less than eight years, being only thirty. Dr. Canby read "The Bridge of San Luis Rey," but discounted his enthusiasm for the book as pleasure in the promising work of one of his students. He feared to consider it for Book-of-the-Month Club subscribers.

Therefore "The Bridge" made its way without the helping hand either of the Literary Guild or of the Book-of-the-Month Club. It was not forced down the throats of a subservient host of subscribers who read what they're told to read. One hundred thousand individuals have been paying \$2.50 apiece for an unusually brief novel, to which weight and bulk were lent by such devices as generous margins and chapter divisions, large, well-spaced type, heavy paper and binding. (The assumption among publishers is that readers of fiction want a lot for their money.) What, then, is the explanation? The following have been given, and I dare say the truth lies in a combination from among them and by no means in the simple explanation that "The Bridge" is a good book. Nor is any one so naïve as to believe that the unanimous praise of the reviewers sold "The Bridge." These are some of the explanations which I have heard:

Because William Lyon Phelps in addressing a crowded Town Hall of feminine culture-seekers bespoke the rare qualities of "The Bridge of San Luis Rey."

Because no good novel being then on the market, "The Bridge" served to fill the gap.

Because the title is euphonious and the jacket arresting and provocative.

Because the book is all things to all men—prose for the dilettante, romantic character portraits for the majority. Because the optimist may draw an optimistic conclusion from it and the pessimist a pessimistic conclusion.

Because readers of fiction were becoming tired of realistic novels and were rotten ripe for a book like "The Bridge," whether they knew it or not.

The person who seems least concerned about the discussion is the man who wrote the book. When Alexander Woollcott described "The Bridge" as a novel of "aloof and untruckling beauty," he chose just those adjectives which most neatly describe Thornton Wilder in relation to his writing. When Wilder wrote "The Bridge," he no more truckled for popular favor than he did when he wrote "The Cabala," its predecessor, which, until recently, has not been much more than a success of esteem. When he submitted the manu-

script of "The Cabala," he told his publishers that it did not matter if they did not advertise it at all—so long as those who would relish a book like it would find their way to it. He wanted his readers to be a confraternity with him. Now that the readers of "The Bridge" are rather too many to be accommodated within the limits of an intellectual confraternity, Wilder is hard put to it to explain. He has expressed the belief that "The Bridge" is a popular success because, unknown to himself, some bit of sentimental quality crept into the novel.

Thornton Wilder makes his living at the Lawrenceville Academy, where he helps to prepare young men for such universities as Princeton. He teaches French and is master of one of the houses. Dr. Mather Abbott is the head master, and, although Dr. Abbott is not master of Wilder's week-ends, it is not every week-end that the author of "The Bridge of San Luis Rey" can tear himself away from the village peace of Lawrenceville and the routine of the Academy to come to New York to be tea-ed, interviewed, fussed over, and to depreciate the value of his autograph by writing his name into more and more copies of "The Cabala" and "The Bridge." On the occasion of his latest visit, he conveyed the impression that it was almost by special dispensation that he had been permitted to leave Lawrenceville, for the mid-term exams were impending. Whatever his mental reservations may have been, Thornton Wilder in no way betrayed the conviction that, as the author of "The Bridge," he was sitting on top of the heap. Having observed smaller successes turn larger heads, the modesty and reticence which Wilder expressed in his bearing seemed worthy of note.

The fact is that Wilder does not fully sense the significance of being the author of a best-seller because he lives for most of the time in the—for New Yorkers—sleepy village of Lawrenceville. Living in the—for New Yorkers—sleepy village of Lawrenceville, he does not hear the noise that New York makes about anything, himself included, except in the muted form in which it is transmitted. When I asked Wilder what he felt about his success, the mild man answered: "I live in such a happy, limited community I am not yet aware of it. Such things as the success of 'The Bridge' simply

(Please turn to continuation, page 640)

Speaking of Books

A New Literary Department

Edited by FRANCES LAMONT ROBBINS

THE books in greatest demand are usually those most discussed. The following list is compiled from the lists of the ten best-selling volumes sent us by wire by eight book-shops each week. These particular book-shops were chosen because we think that they reflect the tastes of the more representative readers. These shops are as follows:

New York—Brentano's.
Rochester—Scrantom's Inc.
Cleveland—Korner & Wood.
St. Louis—Scruggs, Vandevoort,
& Barney.
Denver—Kendrick Bellamy Co.
Houston—Teolin Pilot Company.
San Francisco—Paul Elder & Co.
Baltimore—Norman, Remington
Company.

Fiction

"The Bridge of San Luis Rey," by Thornton Wilder. Albert & Charles Boni. Those who have not yet read this beautiful and moving study of the working of God's providence, of love, the bridge which joins the living and the dead, have a delight in store. We find it even better on second reading. Reviewed January 4.

"Wintersmoon," by Hugh Walpole. Doubleday, Doran & Co. You will enjoy this social comedy in Walpole's best vein. Some old names appear, and there is at least one very engaging character. Reviewed March 7.

"The Greene Murder Case," by S. S. Van Dine. Charles Scribner's Sons. That odious society detective, Vance, is at work again, this time on a case too complicated, and incredible for our taste. But Van Dine enthusiasts are devouring it and smacking their lips.

"Debonair," by G. B. Stern. A. A. Knopf. To be reviewed later.

"Crusade," by Donn Byrne. Little, Brown & Co. Irish fighting and love-making in a picturesque setting of the Holy Land where Templars, warring Christian sects, and noble Saracens converge make this poetic romance fine light reading. Reviewed March 28.

Non-Fiction

"Skyward," by Commander Richard E. Byrd. G. P. Putnam's Sons. This stirring narrative of courage, perseverance, and skill intelligently directed to the attainment of great ends is a fine companion book to Lindbergh's "We." Almost every one will enjoy it. To those who are depressed about the fate of the Nordic these books should be heartening. Their authors represent what we like to think of as ideal American youth.

"Disraeli," by André Maurois, translated by Hamish Miles. D. Appleton & Co. This strangely romantic figure is touched vividly into life by Maurois's hand. You will find this excellent reading. Reviewed February 22.

"Strange Interlude," by Eugene O'Neill. Boni & Liveright. This, "the first successful attempt of drama to use the double voice," to carry on at once objective action and comment and subjective thought made audible, is a theft by the dramatist of some of the novelist's best thunder. The play is as good to read as to see; perhaps better for students of modern drama. Reviewed by Francis R. Bellamy in "Lights Down," February 22.

"Trader Horn," by Alfred Aloysius Horn and Ethelreda Lewis. Simon & Schuster. The romantic story of an ancient adventurer, full of poetry, guileless wisdom, action, and more or less reliable information. Reviewed November 16.

"Mother India," by Katherine Mayo. Harcourt, Brace & Co. The reading of this report of some aspects of Indian society should be followed by fair-minded readers with that of some of the Indian replies to it. Reviewed June 22.

Poets' Novels

"Mr. Hodge and Mr. Hazard," by Elinor Wylie. A. A. Knopf.

"Home to Harlem," by Claude McKay. Harper & Brothers.

"That Bright Heat," by George O'Neill. Boni & Liveright.

In "Mr. Hodge and Mr. Hazard" Elinor Wylie has chosen a subject particularly sympathetic to her turn of mind and to her talents as a prose writer. It is a sad and very moving book. Its leading character is treated with feeling and insight, and all its characters with understanding. Elinor Wylie says that she wept in writing it. Much of it will move the reader, too, to tears. And the prose will delight those who become as exalted by the precise and delicate order of words in sentences and paragraphs as others are by a perfect performance of a Mozart opera.

The story is of the simplest. Mr. Hazard, a minor poet, who has been self-exiled for years, fighting with Byron at Missolonghi, wandering, perhaps with the Shelleys, on Italian coasts, returns to England in the middle years of the nineteenth century, to recapture some flavor of his lost youth. There, in a few summer months, he suffers the pains of a sentimental love for the urbane and elegant Clara and her enchanting daughters. He is kind, melancholy, full of generous gesture and romantic dream, not at all the ruthless Don Juan cast off by a scandalized society whom Clara has been led to expect. He is iridescent mist; and Mr. Hodge, worthy, right-thinking tutor of Clara's sons, comes home and dispels the mist. What a pity! it was so charming, it softened the lines so! But more than a sweet pity for the mist. It was, and now is not. Elinor Wylie has the gift for touching into life such delicate ephemera as Mr. Hazard. She endows them with a terrible capacity for suffering. They lend themselves, how easily, to mockery. Their quivering sensibilities are the scorn and butt of harder souls. When the Hodges of the world are touched by them at all, it is by their physical weakness. "For God's sake, let me pack those heavy books for you," says Hodge—not in those words—when the mist must vanish before his sun of every-day.

Now Comes the New Shorthand!



Miss Emma B. Dearborn who, through years of teaching shorthand, learned its shortcomings and then originated Speedwriting.

FOR years there has been a need for a new system of shorthand—modern, scientific, more rapid than conventional sign systems and more accurate—a system that could be learned easily and quickly.

Now it is here—Speedwriting—the new shorthand. The business world has hailed it with enthusiasm. It is increasing efficiency in offices everywhere. Busy executives use it. So do professional men and women. Experienced secretaries as well as beginners are adopting it.

You use only the ordinary letters of the alphabet. Speedwriting is simply a condensation of the English language—but—a thousand times faster.

Quickly Learned at Home

No need to memorize confusing hooks and curves. You start using Speedwriting almost at once. Amazing speed is quickly developed.

Mail Coupon for FREE Booklet

An interesting, illustrated booklet tells all about Speedwriting and demonstrates its practical usefulness. Mail the coupon NOW.

Speedwriting
The DEARBORN
SHORTHAND SYSTEM

BRIEF ENGLISH SYSTEMS, Inc.

Dept. D-73, 200 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.

In Canada: 1415 Royal Bank Bldg., Toronto, Ont.

In England: Cecil Chambers, 76 Strand, London, WC2

Without cost or obligation on my part, please send me your new illustrated booklet on Speedwriting, the Natural Shorthand. My present work is ☐ Stenographic ☐ Secretarial ☐ Executive ☐ Student ☐ Professional

Name

Address

City..... State.....