

Speaking of Books

Edited by FRANCES LAMONT ROBBINS

The Pulitzer Awards

THE Pulitzer prizes in journalism and letters for 1927 were announced last week. The names of the judges for the awards may be found in the newspapers for May 8. Their decisions are open to question. That always happens with prizes. The prize for "the best volume of verse published during the year by an American author" was given to "Tristram," by E. A. Robinson (the Macmillan Company). We should say that its only competitor must have been "Woman at Point Sur," by Robinson Jeffers (Boni & Liveright), and that the decision must be accepted as excellent. For "the best book of the year upon the history of the United States" the award was made to "Main Currents in American Thought" (two volumes, "The Colonial Mind, 1620-1800" and "The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800-1860"), by Vernon L. Parrington (Harcourt, Brace & Co.). There cannot be any loud quarrel with this choice. It focuses the attention of the reader away from history as a record of events to history as an investigation of the thought which shaped those events. The Parrington books were reviewed in *The Outlook* (July 27) as "a fresh and original interpretation of the more influential tendencies in American thought and sentiment from colonial days to the outbreak of the Civil War." They provide a valuable background to all reading in the literature and history of that period, and also to contemporary critical comment on America. We find the award for "the best American biography teaching patriotic and unselfish services to the people, illustrated by an eminent example, excluding as too obvious the names of Washington and Lincoln," to "The American Orchestra and Theodore Thomas," by Charles E. Russell (Doubleday, Page & Co.), the most successful of the awards. Even without the stipulated exclusions, it is a fine choice. About Washington and Lincoln much was said last year, and nothing much. But the history of music in America has not received commensurate attention. In orchestral music America stands well, both in quality and quantity. Music is a conspicuous civic element in every

large city. Theodore Thomas, the spiritual parent of the American orchestra, for forty years fostered and led the musical taste of the country. His efforts to establish and maintain a high stand-

THIS list is compiled from the lists of the ten best-selling volumes sent us by wire by the following book-shops each week:

New York—Brentano's;
Rochester—Scrantom's Inc.;
Cleveland—Korner & Wood;
St. Louis—Scruggs, Vandevort, & Barney;
Denver—Kendrick Bellamy Company;
Houston—Teolin Pillot Company;
San Francisco—Paul Elder & Co.;
Baltimore—Norman, Remington Company;
Kansas City—Emery Bird Thayer;
Atlanta—Miller's Book Store;
Los Angeles—Bullock's.

Fiction

- "The Bridge of San Luis Rey," by Thornton Wilder. Albert & Charles Boni. This beautifully written and moving study in the working of God's providence, and of love, the bridge which joins the living and the dead, deserves its popularity. 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 Closed Garden," by Julian Green, translated by Henry Logan Stuart. Harper & Brothers. A strong and somber study in hysteria in the French provinces. To be reviewed next week.
- "The Key of Life," by Francis Brett Young. A. A. Knopf. The author's two most sympathetic settings, the Cotswolds and Africa, are the background for a dramatic story, written with poetic feeling. Reviewed in this issue.
- "The Greene Murder Case," by S. S. Van Dine. Charles Scribner's Sons. The famous society detective, Vance, is at work again, this time on a complicated and slightly incredible case, which nevertheless is not keeping Van Dine enthusiasts from devouring it.

Non-Fiction

- "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.
- "Skyward," by Commander Richard E. Byrd. G. P. Putnam's Sons. This stirring story of achievement deserves a place beside "We" on the American book-shelf. Reviewed May 2.
- "Safari," by Martin Johnson. G. P. Putnam's Sons. The interesting and often exciting diary of four years spent in a wild-animal paradise; with wonderful pictures.
- "Stonewall Jackson," by Allen Tate. Minton, Balch & Co. An excellent account of Jackson's campaigns, and a poet's interpretation of the "good soldier." Reviewed last week.
- "Strange Interlude," by Eugene O'Neill. Boni & Liveright. This play, in which the dramatist steals some of the novelist's best psychological thunder, is as good to read as to see; perhaps better. Reviewed in "Lights Down," February 22.

ard were a constant struggle against apathy, commercialism, fads, and bigotry, all those factors which combine, in America, to frustrate great artistic expression. It is only right that a book, excellent in literary quality, devoted to his life should be chosen for the prestige of an award and for the wide reading sure to follow its publication. The

wording of the awards for the novel and the drama was subjected by the judges, on their own admission, to pretty liberal interpretation. In fact, it was disregarded. We believe that this is a mistake. If these awards are to be made, they should be made on an unvarying basis, which can be understood by the public. The prize for the "original American play performed in New York which shall best represent the educational value and power of the stage in raising the standard of good morals, good taste, and good manners" was given to "Strange Interlude," by Eugene O'Neill (Boni & Liveright). We may find the conditions imposed by the donor ridiculous where a work of art is in question, but they were imposed. If the award had been for "the finest play" or for the play which shall best "present for the observation and study of the future the contemporary spiritual state of America," we should have acclaimed the decision. As the award does read we cannot. Certainly the standard of manners or taste as expressed in "Strange Interlude" is not a generally acceptable one. Standards of morals are tricky things for judges to decide. But no play could illustrate better than does "Strange Interlude" the incapacity of the American mind of today for the poise and detachment necessary to spiritual ripeness. What did Henry James say of our land—either green or rotten? The prize for the American novel "which shall best present the whole atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood" was given to "The Bridge of San Luis Rey," by Thornton Wilder (A. & C. Boni). The setting of this novel is eighteenth-century Peru. This decision is pretty clumsy to handle. If the award had read, "for the finest contribution in novel form to American literature," then the choice would have lain, surely, between "The Bridge," "The Grandmothers" (Glenway Wescott, Harper & Brothers), "Death Comes for the Archbishop" (Willa Cather, A. A. Knopf), and "My Heart and My Flesh" (Elizabeth M. Roberts, the Viking Press), and the judges would have had ample support for whatever decision they might have made. But in that case, what

about last year's prize, awarded to "Early Autumn," by Louis Bromfield, in a year which produced "The American Tragedy"?

We do not believe in the giving of prizes in letters or in art. Perhaps in countries where the general cultural standard is high, or where the group pretending to cultural interests is small, such prizes can be successfully and profitably given. There will, in the one case, be some common understanding and appreciation of those values in letters and art which are unchanging; in the other, no interest outside a small circle. Here, where the average mental age is said to be twelve years, and where every man sets up as a judge of painting and a patron of literature, prizes are likely to be misunderstood. The public accepts too readily as the decision of an all-wise providence what is really only the choice of a few fallible men. Our advice to readers interested in the Pulitzer awards is to take them with a grain of salt.

Parents, Take Your Choice

By L. J. P.

"Growing Into Life," by David Seabury. Boni & Liveright.

"Psychological Care of Infant and Child," by John B. Watson. W. W. Norton & Co., Inc.

"For biological facts, like mathematical processes," says Mr. Seabury "are not a matter of debate." True enough. But what are the facts? Mr. Seabury says:

We are what we are as characters because of the mental values of the chromomeres. And when the chromomeres in our blood stream have in their majority been of fine quality and power, capacity and refinement is (*sic*) born in the individual. Inversely, the psychic potentials in the chromosomes of a born criminal are

of primitive form and manifest only crude development. He is incapable of the high reaches of thought and feeling which belong to a fine heritage.

Yet here comes Dr. Watson with this statement:

If you start with a healthy body, the right number of fingers and toes, eyes, and the few elementary movements that are present at birth, you do not need anything else in the way of raw material to make a man, be that man a genius, a cultured gentleman, a rowdy or a thug.

So, it seems, we pay our money and we take our choice. If we are middle-aged and disappointed, we can lean on Mr. Seabury and blame the chromomeres. If we are young and hopeful but the son of a gambler, we can chuck Mr. Seabury and side with Dr. Watson. And if there chance to be a baby's crib in the next room? Well, both Mr. Seabury and Dr. Watson put it up to us pretty

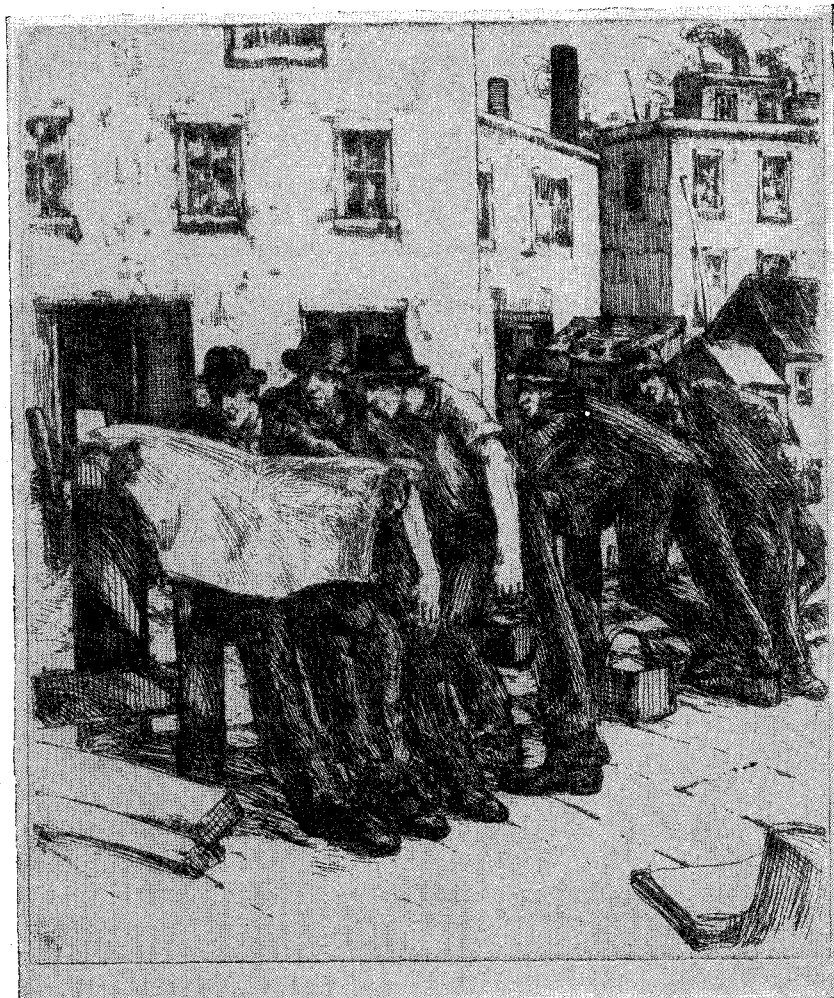
strongly there. According to Mr. Seabury, it lies within our power to see that the good chromomeres get a free hand and that things are made dark and dreary for the bad ones. According to Dr. Watson, we can make what we will of the child, and for whatever he becomes the whole blame or glory is upon us.

Mr. Seabury makes the opening observation that in order to raise hogs successfully men are sent to agricultural colleges, but did you ever hear of a woman getting a college degree in the art of motherhood or of a man studying human husbandry for four years? Then he rushes on for 700 pages without pausing for a reply. We propose to turn him back at this late date and forcibly interject a reply, because his question irritates us. The same question in one guise or another levels itself at us

from the preface or opening chapter of numberless books by scientific popularizers in the fields of heredity and child culture. And, once stated, it is assumed to be indictment, proof, verdict, and judgment all rolled up into one.

The obvious answer is that raising hogs successfully may be a very profitable source of income, whereas the practice of human husbandry, successful or otherwise, is one of the most unbeatable sources of outgo that have yet been devised. A man must first have income even to raise children afflicted with "ambivalence," "catatonia," "echolalia," and "hebephrenia." And a woman must first have a man. The pursuit and acquisition of either takes a lot of time and study.

We wish that in Mr. Seabury's book there were less heat in proportion to the light. The author frankly admits a "burning, partisan emotion for the rights of youth." But, assuming that youth is in need of self-appointed adult defend-



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FARING NEWS

Etching by Martin Petersen