

from one-party Mississippi and the ambassadors from two-party New York, may be better than any conceivable alternative. But its value as a principle would not be destroyed by making an occasional exception. Not all the "traditions of place and

power" would crumble into dust if the Senators should pass over Eastland for chairman for good and specific reasons. Surely, the guardian of a "qualified and qualitative" democracy can qualify and be qualitative in regard to itself. «»

Life and Love In the Split-Level Slums

BRUCE BLIVEN, Jr.

THE CRACK IN THE PICTURE WINDOW, by John Keats. Houghton Mifflin. \$3.

John Keats has written this book because he hates suburban housing developments—specifically, the all-alike, box-on-slab, nothing-down, one-family-house tracts that are filling in so many of the open spaces on the edges of most American cities: the new "rural slums," to use his language, "conceived in error, nurtured by greed, corroding everything they touch," which unscrupulous speculators have "vomited up" on the landscape.

Mr. Keats, who is descended from the poet's family, was working on a newspaper, the Washington *Daily News*, when the G.I. Bill of Rights inadvertently began to make shabby suburban building profitable. The law guaranteed that bankers who assumed low-interest mortgages on houses purchased by veterans would recover substantial sums if the payments were not kept up. As Keats points out, the idea that veterans who hadn't yet settled down in any sense of the phrase should own houses was often absurd; the actual need, in general, was for rental housing at reasonable prices. But since the G.I. Bill made homeownership an official part of the ex-serviceman's dreams; and since, especially after the end of effective rent control, lots of veterans found that they *had* to want to own (if a lifetime mortgage constitutes ownership) because there was nothing acceptable for rent in their monthly budget range, there was no restraining the jerry-builders. "The typical postwar development operator," Keats says, "was a man

who figured how many houses he could possibly cram onto a piece of land and have the local zoning board hold still for it."

THE NEWEST suburban developments, Mr. Keats argues, are only slightly less obnoxious than the worst 1948 had to offer, and he regards the real estate industry's optimistic prediction that the suburban building boom will continue for at least the next twenty years as a threat.

In his indictment, Mr. Keats is only partly concerned with money. Tens of thousands of house buyers have been gypped, certainly. But the author is worried about a more serious matter. He believes that developments are destroying their inhabitants: "More insidious and far more dangerous than any other influence, is the housing development's destruction of individuality . . . we're constantly being badgered to look around us and make sure we're doing and saying and thinking what the mass of our neighbors will accept . . . The physically monotonous development of mass houses is a leveling influence in itself, breeding swarms of neuter drones. I submit . . . that these drones cannot be said to have lives of their own. I submit housing developments combine the worst disadvantages of suburbs and city slums without reflecting the advantages of either . . . are a disruptive influence in our national life . . . pose many clear and present dangers to us all."

Meet the Drones

He shows what he means, in considerable detail, by following an imag-

inary family, John and Mary Drone and their two children, as they move from an apartment in barracks rented by the government to veterans only to Rolling Knolls, a mythical development set in a bleak stretch of pine barrens outside Washington, and from there, in another desperate move, to a slightly larger split-level in a more expensive tract, also apocryphal, called Merryland Dell. The entire book, except for its introduction and concluding chapter, is devoted to the sorry saga of the Drones.

The full inventory of disappointments John and Mary meet is nearly incredible. Among other things, their street is not paved, their plaster is cracked, and their floors are warped; their neighbors are repulsive; for lack of a basement they have to hang the wash on rainy days in the living room, and for lack of space on the same rainy days the children have no place to play except under the indoor clothesline. And when the Drones move on to a bigger car and a better house, both well beyond their means, there is no real improvement—the new development is no more a community than the old one was, but only another aggregation of inadequate houses filled with people who, from the Drones' point of view, are as unsatisfactory as the shortage of closet space. In the end, when their credit bubble has burst and the Drones are on the point of losing everything, it almost seems as if at last they've had a lucky break.

IT'S TOO BAD that Mr. Keats—who probably meant to turn in a serious report on an important subject—should have chosen the awkward device of the invented couple. He has combined fiction with fact in such a way that the reader does not quite know what to believe (or even what the author wants him to believe). One of the most unhappy by-products of the semi-fiction method is a jazzed-up writing style in a vaguely comic vein. The light touch is augmented by a sprinkling of Don Kindler's cartoons. Unfortunately, Mr. Keats is far too angry to be amusing. It seems fairly clear, at least from the tone of his final chapter, that Mr. Keats really hopes to goad his readers into action, if not arson. Humor can be a powerful editorial weapon, but first it must be funny.

Slightly Adrift In Venice

JAMES E. BAXTER

VENICE OBSERVED, by Mary McCarthy. Edited by Georges and Rosamond Bernier. Reynal. \$15.

Convalescing after surgery in 1934, Rebecca West heard over her radio in a London nursing home that King Alexander of Yugoslavia had been assassinated in Marseilles. She had a sudden, sharp presentiment that this was an event of great import. From her struggle of seven years to assess its meaning, to find the political and cultural significance of Yugoslavia, emerged her extraordinary book, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*.

What constituted Mary McCarthy's incitement to undertake a far briefer but no more modest inventory of Venice is not revealed in *Venice Observed*, but it possibly may have been Miss McCarthy's reading of Miss West's *magnum opus*.

For more than a generation, Rebecca West has been suspected of being the cleverest woman writer in the English-speaking world. In criticism, novels, short stories, reportage, and biography she has dealt confidently in dazzling insight and plunging speculation. No one has rivaled Miss West until in recent years the expanding horizons and growing self-assurance of Mary McCarthy put her into Miss West's class. Reading Miss McCarthy has provoked a continuous sense of facility straining against limitations of subject matter, of satisfactions with technique more than balanced by frustrations with scope. Now she has staked out a claim that was finally to have been big enough: Venice; and by a paradox worthy of her own connoisseurship she has found herself within the ungenerous confines of scholarship.

'Tintoretto Painted Too Much'

The synthesis of Venice, historical, cultural, and aesthetic, essayed by Miss McCarthy demanded not merely a gifted tourist's willingness for basic research. Above all it demand-

ed the scholar's humility before the sweep of events. Months of careful picking in Venetian politics do not substitute for a larger hold on Venice—a Venice juxtaposed against the Byzantine Empire, for example, or the Balkans, or central Europe. Even the more delicate swordplay of Venice with the other Renaissance Italian city-states is furtive and cramped in her hands. Nor need her organization have been chronological to avoid an arrangement of material that is throughout blatantly capricious. Our experience is of anecdotes and morals, not of the surge and thrust of history itself.

But it is when she guides us through the churches and museums of Venice that Miss McCarthy's central absence of humility reveals itself most damningly. Here is the searching brilliance of her fiction, but in the vast chamber of Italian art it glows but feebly, illumining not the paintings and their creators but only their observer. Private vision is usefully made public if either the scenery or the viewer is unobtrusively small; but Miss McCarthy's own image looms at once large and petty. Clever is what Thomas Wolfe was not. We measure his ebullience in terms the reverse of sophistication, feeling he best belongs in adolescence. Miss McCarthy's perpetual disenchantment, her petulance, is

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