

# for the Month of August

so prevalent as it is now. Heaven knows there is need of it. Frankly, "American Girl" is muck-raking. We sometimes wonder whether the people who do the muck-raking are not in danger of covering themselves with the slime they are stirring up. Whatever may be true of others it is certainly not true of Mr. Tunis.

—*The Book League of America.*

## Pirates of the Natchez Trace

THE OUTLAW YEARS. The History of the Land Pirates of the Natchez Trace. By ROBERT COATES. New York: The Macaulay Company. 1930. \$3.

Reviewed by FERDINAND REYHER

THE Natchez Trace has become a main traveled literary highway, which is being worked harder today than it was by the banditti of a century ago. The present volume stars Big and Little Harpe, Samuel Mason, Joseph Thompson Hare, and John A. Murrell, the leading cutthroats of the old Indian trail which ran for half a thousand miles of canebrake from Natchez to Nashville. It adds nothing to Sabin and Robert or to the earlier works describing these gentry. When the author says "this book is designed for the general reader," one feels that he has sought rather to disarm criticism than to define a purpose. After a century of broadsides fired in periodicals, penny dreadfuls, and criminal anthologies at the general reader, and presumably hitting him, whoever he may be, one is inclined to query the author's sacred right to select his own premises, when they serve only to perpetuate the sentimentalities of crime without the expertness of the modern True Detective Story.

None of the figures in this book was as important in American life as any book which deals with them exclusively must imply. It is virtually impossible to star a villain and keep him from turning into a hero on one's hands. Yet they were important enough to warrant their place in frontier history being accurately established and their types specifically analyzed. Dunbar's matter-of-fact summary, incurious of detail as it is, gives a truer impression of the personal importance of the outlaws of the river and the Trace than this full-throated narrative. In the history of American travel the river pirates and the land robbers as such are worth exactly four pages out of fifteen hundred. And yet, paradoxically, Mr. Coates does them even less than justice in his three hundred pages. They were much more significant than his attempts to heighten them in a false bracketing of an era between given years. The outlaw years, whatever that may mean, did not begin in 1797 nor end in 1835. They ran from Jamestown to Chicago. And these men are important as manifestations of the trend of lawlessness, fear, hex, persecution complexes, and frontier sadism, which runs through American life as consistently as an historical principle.

It is as impossible to establish the number and the exact nature of the crimes they committed as it is to determine how many men Bat Masterson shot from Dodge City to Tombstone to Times Square. Cannier rogues there were who took the cash and let the credit go to these headliners. Their reputations batted on themselves. The Harpes were wilderness perverts, Jack the Rippers of the forest, and their orgiastic seizures make case histories for the study of frontier pathology. Skull bashers, disembowellers, decapitators, mutilators, they are a genial theme for the general reader. Mason was a wilderness Capone, an organizer of gangs who entered the field of murder through the booze racket. Hare fitted more in the tradition of English highwaymen, and his own literary gifts put all his subsequent biographers to shame. Murrell was a negro stealer. He was accused of organizing a Clan to free the slaves, which was the forerunner of the Klan to perpetuate their slavery, and from this aspect makes a pretty study in historical ironies.

The author follows Virgil A. Stewart, who claimed to have won Murrell's confidence on a three days' horseback ride to the point where that master mind divulged to him, a stranger, all the secrets of the Great Conspiracy, resulting in the execution of his whole Grand Council. Having swallowed Stewart, it is sad that Mr. Coates did not nibble at Jonathan Green, who expanded the

Stewart method into a full-sized book, "Secret Band of Brothers," with an exposure of its constitution, flash language, and all the fee fi fum of ritual so dear to the heart of the American "jiner."

The credence in Murrell's so-called rebellion remains, however, one of the most striking manifestations of the great American fear. Murrell himself accomplished nothing as tragic as the Virginia Southampton riots of about the same time, but much more fully did the legend of his mystical empire let loose the rooted terror which haunted the whites of the black belt. It was a part of that great American fear which crept out of the wilderness of an unknown continent and touched the first settlers, which was kept alive by natives and wild animals, strange sicknesses and roving renegades, and all the haphazard perils of frontier existence, and which was immeasurably increased by the introduction of slavery, until it flamed into frenzy and sadistic reprisals whenever the night was disturbed by an unusual sound from the slave cabins.

In 1824, a planter who lived outside of Natchez in the heart of the hair-trigger South, spoke to Stephen Grellet of the prevalent fear of negro uprising:

"I . . . never went out without being well armed; I . . . kept during the night my sword, pistols and gun close beside my bed side; the barking of a dog, or the rustling of the wind among the trees alarmed me . . ."

As for the actual writing of this book, it progresses from cliché to cliché.

The man had the flat pale glance of a killer. His face loosened in that fatuous deprecatory (?) grin that oils a man's mouth when he tells of his own triumphs. The valley was free to grow, to spread out, to expand in every direction, and people went about clapping each other on the shoulder, as if intoxicated with the limitless possibilities of the nation.

Mr. Coates is always formally picturing, only somehow there rarely is a picture. He attempts to create movement by the shifting of tenses and the animation of nature, but it is always on the outside and there is no more inner reality than in a dime novel. He uses Beer's trick of getting at a principal through a contemporary witness. It is a good trick if you can do it. The Natchez Trace, however, remains indistinct, away, untraceable.

The author's publishers have said that the author followed the Natchez Trace. It is the principal defect of this book that the Natchez Trace did not follow the author.

—*The Literary Guild.*

## Colonel Gethryn's Deductions

THE LINK. By PHILIP MACDONALD. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1930. \$1.

Reviewed by WILLIAM C. WEBER

MR. MACDONALD is the author of "The Rasp," one of the best detective stories in the English language. "The Link," unfortunately, does not measure up to its famous predecessor. The body of Lord Grenville, shot through the head, is unceremoniously dumped into the hallway of a village inn. Grenville was outwardly respectable but had shady pages in his history, and several persons might have been gunning for him. Colonel Anthony Gethryn, who was, like so many of these English sleuths, taking a vacation in the next country house but one, gets into the case and in a very engaging manner proceeds to solve it. There are two gentlemen from North America in the story, one from the United States, the other from Canada, and a high light of the yarn is the amazing Americanese that Mr. MacDonald puts into the mouths of these characters. The fact that they are leading players in the drama makes their terrific linguistic lapses more regrettable. Perhaps that's the way the average English writer thinks American gangsters talk. Certainly Mr. MacDonald has illustrious precedents. But when an ex-racketeer talks about "aërating a Stetson," it is almost too much. Outside of the terrible Americans the characterizations are interesting, the deductions of Colonel Gethryn cleverly worked out, and the story moves at top speed—though this reader detests concluding appendices in which the detective sums up and explains.

—*The Crime Club.*

## Making Her Way

A BARREL OF CLAMS. By SHIRLEY BERTON LESHER. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 1930. \$2.

Reviewed by AMY LOVEMAN

LIKE "the Colonel's lady an' Judy O'Grady," the present-day tales intended for young girls standing on the brink of romance and those written for their mothers are "sisters under their skins." We remember imbibing with great ardor in our own youth the books of Mrs. A. D. T. Whitney, passed on to us from an elder generation, and as we recall such stories as "We Girls" and "Other Girls" their heroines seem to us to have been quite as eager to meet life and carve out their own destinies as is the Judy of this volume. To be sure, in at least one case, dire retribution in the form of a telegram running, "Come home; mother dying; no money" was visited on the daughter who had ventured from the home to make a career. But then, Miss Leshler's heroine, who, her publishers inform us, is herself in thin disguise, has the security of her island retreat violated by an insane man, a triumphant vindication of her family's unease in submitting to her desire to go into the solitude of Maine to write a story. And Mrs. Whitney's muslin and befrilled heroines and Miss Leshler's short-haired, overalled Judy alike go the way of all girl flesh in succumbing to the first handsome young man they see. "A Barrel of Clams," though it chronicles the doings of a girl who enjoys "the new freedom," runs true to the form of the tales of Victorian days.

Of its sort, it is a good story, with pleasing incident, attractive background, and enough interest in its narrative of hardship overcome and determination rewarded to carry the reader along agreeably. But we think the Guild does an injustice to the maturity of the upper reaches of the class of girls for whom it is intended by deeming this the kind of book they should be reading. And by that remark we mean no disparagement to "A Barrel of Clams" for we should say the same of Louisa Alcott's stories, of Susan Coolidge's, or of any books of the type. They are fit reading for girls between twelve and fourteen, but girls who have passed that age should be serving their novitiate in the field of adult literature instead of substituting what after all is pap for the good red meat of the classics. However, if you have a daughter, anywhere, we should say, between the ages of ten and thirteen (we lower the Guild's age limits at both ends), here is a pleasing tale for her about a girl who lived by her own ingenuity, discovering as she went along how to run her island shelter with the least expenditure of labor and money, making her money painfully but delightedly by dredging for clams and by lobster fishing, and capping her year's experience on the island by selling the story born of its incidents and promising to marry the man who had shared many of them.

—*The Junior Literary Guild.*

## The Primitive North

OOD-LE-UK THE WANDERER. By ALICE ALISON LINDE and MARGARET ALISON JOHANSEN. Illustrated by RAYMOND LUFFKIN. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. 1930. \$2.

Reviewed by FELIX RIESENBERG

THIS is the story of the Eskimo boy, Ood-le-uk, and his wanderings across Behring Strait, far into Siberia, and the return to his people after three years of adventure.

"An Eskimo," says the author, "especially an Eskimo like Ood-le-uk of that Arctic land where Alaska juts out into the sea, called Behring Strait, above Onzebue Sound, must have no room in his heart for fear. In those barren man must literally snatch his daily meat from the jaws of death." The story woven about him is concerned with the enormous major movements of the polar world, the long night, the terrific crash of a meteor, the great sea bergs, towering jewels of purest crystal set into the cobalt sea. It is a picture of mysticism, as felt by a boy, and makes the story an unusual and thrilling record.

Every once in a while I reread portions of Robinson Crusoe. Don't wonder why—it is just because I like to live again with Crusoe and Friday. In reading this book a similar feeling of interest came over me. It has an air of truth.

—*The Junior Literary Guild.*

## The Defeated Dream On

BY THE WATERS OF MANHATTAN. By CHARLES REZNIKOFF. New York: Charles Boni Paper Books. 1930. 50 cents.

Reviewed by LEONARD EHRLICH

THIS is a variation on a *motif* of familiar and honorable usage: the dream a defeated generation cherishes for its children. Herein a family of Russian Jews toil, are trodden, know hunger for bread and learning; the more restless are gnawed unendurably, they cross an ocean on small ships and end in the New World sweat shops.

Sarah Yetta, archetypal helpmate, with a passion for knowledge, a mind sharp as a blade, and a sense of proportion, carries the slender thread of story through the book's first part, which is chiefly a relation of tribal activity. Genuineness is a strong quality here, but like much that is authentic in the craft of fiction, it is no certain stay against dullness. The Volsky tribe's endless changes in locale and the smallest details of their struggle for livelihood are set down with wearisome care. They loom great, of course, in the estate of Mr. Reznikoff's people, and their underemphasis would have distorted the flow and stature of their lives. But the objection is against literalness, the need is for a heightening touch. Here, chosen not at random but as typical, is a bit of the book's wearying way:

It wasn't long before Sarah Yetta sent for Glazhdinsky's System of Cutting for Dress-makers and Tailors. The books and an instructor's lessons cost fifty roubles. But she was soon able to make dresses that fit. She also copied the patterns in any size for tailors and was paid fifty copeks each. This was easy money and cost her nothing but time, for the tailors furnished the paper. Here, it seemed to her, was a good business for her father, and she was eager to have him come home. He was quick and would have no trouble making the patterns. She now made house-dresses, too. This was much better than sewing linen. She was paid a rouble and a half for the cheapest dress and all it cost her was two copeks for thread. (She was paid twenty copeks for a skirt and the thread cost her six.) Things were beginning to look brighter.

Many passages of this kind constitute in the first part a factual edifice which for some readers may have an impressive cumulative effect; for others it doubtless will be merely soporific.



However, in the midst of much that is merely circumstantial, a rare quality shows through—a sense of wonder, a kind of faint, fragile brightness. You will feel it in the portrait of grandfather Fivel, who was "only God's cashier" (who was he to hide His money when people were going about barefoot and hungry?); in the few chapters on the father's death, a recital of beautiful and moving simplicity; in the brief words upon a walk through city streets with dawn coming; in a fleeting scene where a weary boy goes to sleep in a dark hallway. See the magic in this kind of thing, the slow rich dignity: "How good the bread tasted! He studied the smooth brown upper crust and the thick under crust, white with flour. How good it was. He ate thankfully and understood how men have come to say grace."

The second part narrows to focus upon Sarah Yetta's boy, Ezekiel. "We are a lost generation," she has said, sadly watching young ones running home from school; "it is for our children to do what they can." Now it is Ezekiel's story, but her own tragedy remains implicit in his failure.

It seemed to her that if only she had had time to read when she was young, she would have patterned her life on the wisdom of books and lived wisely and happily. So, time and again, she had spread a pattern carefully on cloth and cut others a garment that fit and was becoming. And yet her son with all the education so cheap in America, this blessed land—Sarah Yetta took up her long fork to turn the meat in the pot. As she lifted the cover the steam rose and gathered in a mist on her eyeglasses.

For Ezekiel, drawn inescapably toward a mate chasms removed from him in mind and ideal, the urgency of the flesh spells defeat. The immemorial propulsion brings him to compromise with his high, bright dream; there will be an end to it.

You will find flaws in "By the Waters of Manhattan." But as a whole work it is genuine and sensitive, with roots in actual living, and power to move.

—*July Paper Book.*

## Round about Parnassus

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

ONE of the most important works of this week is English, "Macrocosmos," by James Laver, of which we heard something in London this Spring. "Macrocosmos" is beautifully brought out by Alfred A. Knopf in a limited and signed edition of five hundred copies. Its text is "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" The individual searches through the great modern city, in this case London, for the true wisdom and a working philosophy. The poem moves swiftly. It is, of course, not to be spoken of in the same breath with a creation like James Thomson's "The City of Dreadful Night," but it holds the attention, and its phantasmagoria does well convey the sense of the individual crushed under the macrocosm of a huge, bewildering metropolis. "You are too mighty for us, Behemoth!" cries the poet.

*How can I ever hope to gain  
Sight of your vastness? Down a drain  
I slip, and take a train.  
"Right down the car, please! Mind the  
gates!"  
The human eddies meet and swirl. . . .*

It terrifies the poet to know he never shall "See My Self steadily and see it whole." He emerges from the Underground, he wanders into Whitechapel, he finds "Devout men out of every nation under heaven." His Sense of Humor laughs at him, yet he cries out upon it "For it is only the devils that can laugh in Hell."

*I will escape from this City  
Before it is destroyed by fire from Heaven."*

He passes an ex-Indian Colonel who tells him that he is now in South Kensington, and the poet asks himself whether he shall "take up the White Man's Burden and comfort myself with a Code."

*I will be strong, without passion,  
I will be just, without love,  
And the mailed fist of dominion  
I will wear in a boxing glove.*

*I will make my body a bathroom  
To keep my senses cool,  
And my heart a well-swept highway,  
And my soul a Public School!*

he cries satirically.

But there seems to be no desert into which he can escape to leave behind "The packed and jangling traffic of my mind." Hyde Park and the Serpentine will not serve him. "A hundred clamorous tongues crowd in my ear." He is bewildered by them. A Moving-Picture Palace suggests to him a deeper irony. Then he becomes, as it seems to him, Adam. "But my soul moaned and said: 'I am lonely.'"

*My ribs were melted with longing  
For the birth of Desire,  
For the new creation of Woman. . . .*

Woman is there, hands him an apple divided in twain, and half is harlot. When he turns to her embrace she vanishes and the Solomon Eagle of old plague days, who is also John the Baptist, crowned with a pot of blazing coal, chants to him the burden of Babylon. The poet flees him, and suddenly is dream-tranced into Egypt, by the very Nile. He consults the sphinxes.

*Then I said:  
"I will dig in the Tombs of the Kings  
That lie in the sands of my soul—  
Deep, deep in the sands of the soul—  
And spell out a script forgotten,  
By the light of a single lamp,  
In a chamber full of books  
In the Bloomsbury of my mind."*

It is the old escapist way. But a sword of lightning sweeps his heaven, the door-posts of his temple rock, he follows a Pillar of Fire, which grows into a comet and then into a star. He consults three old men concerning it, learns that they are the three Bearers of Great Gifts, myrrh and frankincense and gold, and finds himself in a vast cathedral where he suddenly falls down before an immaculate Madonna and prays her to succor him. His infant faith goes forward to her breast

*But much remained behind.  
And I stayed with it,  
The poorer for a faith.*

That gate is too narrow for him. He hears a step behind him and "saw a figure, tall and saturnine." The figure calls himself the Sacristan, and takes the poet up on the tower. Asked his identity he replies that he is incarnate intelligence. He is Lucifer. He tells how for æons he slept:

*At last I stretched and awoke,  
And, as I gazed about me,  
Unity parted,  
The single light grew double,  
For I saw—and my seeing was deadly—  
That Contrast is Life's existence,  
Good is a term of comparison,  
God casts the Devil's Shadow.  
Then from my mouth a flaming sword shot  
out,  
Lightnings leaped from my scabbard;  
The sky cracked, for it could not contain  
me—  
The Birth of Intelligence is called the Fall  
of the Angels.*

Thereafter the poet is overcome by the weight of this conclusion. A great wheel turns before his eyes, its rim engraved with the word "Eternity." The wheel becomes a whirlpool and he is nearly sucked into it. He is plunged in the Dark Night of the Soul. Lucifer calls upon him to cast himself down, assuring him in a Biblical paraphrase that there is None to give His angels charge over him. The poet draws back and the spirit questions him concerning his love of life. If he loves his life so why does he not conform to the general fashion: eat, exercise, and live in bodily health and wisdom of the world? The dawn grows upon them as they talk and Lucifer, who prefers that name for himself, explains that he is also often spoken of as Partial Solution or Working Compromise. He offers the poet all the London now glittering beneath them in the dawn, if he will fall down and worship him.

*But I looked away and remained silent,  
Having nothing to answer,  
And when I looked again  
The Sacristan was beside me, in his old  
habit,  
For a cloud had overshadowed the sun.*

The poet escapes from him at last, is nearly killed in the traffic below, and, missing by an inch "the Heel of Death," suddenly sees himself in a flash as one, and indivisible:

*And London was no more  
Macrocosmos,  
But a microscopic cell in my own brain,  
Two nerves intersecting.*

He prays aloud to "catch at a Solution," and hears "an Angel from the top of St. Paul's crying a counsel, which partly is

*Thou, O Man!  
Look up and down, inward and round about,  
And if, from thy experience of thyself,  
Thou canst embrace in one huge clasp of  
Love,  
The world of which thou art a puny speck,  
The world as vast that is a part of thee,  
And cry: "I love Myself, nor more, nor  
less  
Than this huge dome, than this bestridden  
curb,  
This three-haired wart upon my neighbor's  
neck,"  
Thou hast attained, for one brief space at  
least,  
The wisdom of the only God there is,  
And for that moment thou art one with  
Him.*

It is High Noon; and High Noon in the poet's heart. The poem ends with an ecstatic cry. . . .

It will be seen that this effort is chiefly interesting by reason of its transitions. It will also be seen that a good deal of it is poetic stereotype. The Blakeian apocalypse without the possession of Blake. As for the actual writing, episodes are remembered where language is forgot. The philosophic content, if so it can be called, is more than the words in which it is clothed. Moreover, the significance is blurred. We cannot but call the poem an interesting failure even though it seems to have been some six years in the writing.

Marshal Feng Yu-hsiang, who is one of the leaders of a revolt against the Nationalist Government at Nanking, is the author of both a book of "Poems" and an "Autobiography." The latter is to be published in an English translation.

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