

Principally on Snakes

THRILLS OF A NATURALIST'S QUEST.

By RAYMOND L. DITMARS. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1932. \$3.50.

Reviewed by WALTER A. DYER

IF one may hazard a guess, serious naturalists will read this latest book by Curator Ditmars for the fund of valuable information, based on long experience and observation, which is to be found in its latter half; lay readers—and there will be many of them—will read it for the amazing and amusing adventures and the delightful horrors of its first half.

Raymond Ditmars is a naturalist of established authority, but he is not a dry recorder of learned facts. He possesses the gift of expression and of appealing to the emotions of his readers; he possesses marked sympathy for his animal charges, and above all he is gifted with genuine humor. There are times when he is irresistibly funny.

You may picture a youth of eighteen, working as an assistant in the entomological section of the American Museum of Natural History, spending his days affixing little numbered triangles of paper to pinned beetles, or fumigating trays of moths and butterflies, while his heart was out in the woods and his mind was running on snakes. Occasionally he was allowed to accompany collecting expeditions, and one delightful chapter describes the emergence of the seventeen-year cicadas from their long interment, but his greatest interest on these occasions was in watching the naturalists turn up flat stones in search of bugs; they might also disclose the long, slimy, slithery forms that he loved. And you may picture him devoting his brief noon hour to a run across the park to the reptile house at the zoo, where on one occasion he helped the keeper to remove the obstinate integument from a boa constrictor that was having trouble with the process.

Receiving little encouragement in his serpentine researches from his entomological superior, young Ditmars at length prevailed upon his dubious but evidently indulgent family to permit him to convert the top story of the house into a reptilian seraglio and to install there, in cases, a choice collection of vicious and venomous vipers. Hither came from Trinidad a box containing such charming specimens as fer de lance, bushmaster, and boa constrictor, and the account of their transfer to the cases forms one of the high spots of the book. The deadly bushmaster chased its keeper across the room and the boa wound its tail around the banister in the hall and refused to budge until Raymond's father, coming upstairs to see what was the matter, produced it.

There was the time when the young naturalist exchanged a spare boa with a snake charmer named Olga for one of her pythons named Sultan, transporting the serpents on the elevated train in a wash-basket. There was the time when he journeyed to Brazil in search of South American snakes and kept them in his hotel room in Rio de Janeiro. One of them was starving for lack of the small fish which constituted its sole diet. Small fish Ditmars could not buy anywhere, so he was forced to steal them at night from a park basin and to keep them in his bathtub at the hotel.

Ditmars in due time realized his early ambition and became curator of reptiles at the New York Zoological Park. Later he was made curator of mammals as well, and his interest in part shifted to quadrupeds. But still there were adventures in strange parts of the country, a season with a circus menagerie, the capturing of rattlesnakes and copperheads, intimate relations with cobras, and scientific experiments with venom, as well as varied experiences with elephants, bears, monkeys, apes, and other creatures.

The last few chapters deal with animal habits, care in captivity, market prices, rare specimens, and the like. They have their unquestionable value, but the lay reader will possibly suspect that they were added at the request of a publisher who desired a few more thousand words to bulk up the volume to standard size.

The BOWLING GREEN

Translations from the Chinese

CATHARSIS

THE smart freighter *City of Elwood*
Was unloading at Pier 58.
What's your cargo, I asked the mate.
"Myrobolloms, gunnies, and tea," he replied,
"And 3000 tons of castor oil beans,
Physic enough for the whole of America."
And I thought to myself,
Perhaps that's exactly what this civilization needs:
A good purge.

Certainly our economics is costive
And our bowels of mercy
Suffer from constipation.

EIGHT HOURS

The young poet complained
Of low dearthy spirits
And inadequate transmission into print.
Both in literature and in metaphysics
(Suggested the Old Mandarin)
The best remedy for biliousness
Is, get a little sleep.

ARTS OF GOVERNMENT

Why, oh Fountain of Wisdom,
Is this humble existence
Plagued with ironics?
The old Mandarin was flattered to receive
An invitation to dine with the Emperor
And then, in the same mail, found a bill
For the Imperial Income Tax.

THE LAUGH

Once, in the season of fiscal nadir,
Two necessitous mandarins
After gazing in the window of the famous jeweler
To see how many jade necklaces
Were, that week, reduced
From twelve thousand to six,
Passed on, one of them remarking,
"Now our duty is accomplished."
The other, cleft by some twinge of comedy,
Laughed loud and shrill.

Fifth Avenue, long unaccustomed to laughter,
Turned apprehensively to stare
Wondering whether Congress had again denied Beer
Or grass had been found growing
In the streets of Detroit.

LITERARY NOTE

Mu Kow, the poet, printed some verses
About the telephone booth at Putnam's
Suggesting mildly that visitors who come in
Merely to use the phone
May also some day purchase a book.
The bookstore was pleased
And posted the verses in the booth.
The first time they put it up, it was stolen.
The second time, someone wrote on it
Your American monosyllable of sans-gêne:
Nerts.

"WOMEN ON PERCENTAGE"

Variety, that frolicsome paper,
Once figured out a decimal system
For reckoning the Coefficient of Appeal
Of the ladies of the stage.
"Women on Percentage," they called it,
And graded vaudeville prima donnas
In 10 qualities of showmanship.
These were the divisions:—
Modishness, Neatness, Make-Up,
Coiffure, Lighting, Personality,
Delivery, Routine, Originality,
And *Applause*.

The naive Old Mandarin introduced this calculus
As a game of Truth at a women's club party
And became very unpopular.

WISDOM OF THE LENS

But the profoundest classification of humanity
Was that of the eminent Portrait Photographer
Whose filing cases unconsciously revealed
The order of importances
From the camera's point of view:—
Brides
Children
Young Women
Women
Men.

CONGRATULATION

Delightful phrase
Was that of the colored janitor
Who received a tip for some service.
"Did you get that Dollar I left for you?" said the tenant.
"Yassuh," smiled Fuscus,
"That's just what I wanted
To congratulate you about."

CONSIDERATE

Good old Chaucer,
Always genial and accommodating,
Even planned his birth and death
To make things easy for his students.
No wonder we love him,
His dates are so easy to remember—
1340-1400.

THOUGHTS IN THE PARK

The Aberdeen terrier sneered at the mongrel
For his haphazard lineage
But a few days later, Scottie was seen
Being taken to the vet.
Thoroughbreds ride in more elevators,
Mused the mutt,
But also they have more worms.

ON THE DEFENSIVE

In a recent auction sale
I was pleased by the catalogue note
On a book well known to bibliophiles,
The Bondage of Ballinger, by Roswell Field:—
"An ideal Christmas gift
For the wife of the collector
Who must apologize for his collecting."

THE UMLAUT

Gazing sadly at the Swedish delicatessen
The adipose and esurient Old Mandarin
Saw lingon jam (a kind of cranberry),
Teewurst of pure pork,
Swedish brown beans,
Anchovies, matjes herring,
Praliner, Spisbröd, Fiskeboller,
And Knackebröd
(From the Knackebrödsbageri in Göteborg.)

O Greta Garbo,
Was it on such pinguid victual
You preserved that heavenly figure?
Is it the umlaut that keeps one slender?

PERCENTAGE OF SLIP

The Chief Engineer of the steamship
Showed me his daily report:—
Revolutions of engines, 126,000
Engine run today, 418 miles
Actual run, 394 miles
Percentage of slip, 6.4

Oh if I could propel my own affairs
With so small a Percentage of Slip.

STERN CHASE

Sometimes, watching the electric news bulletin
In Times Square
I forget to read the fiery message
Fascinated to watch the little flickering period
Swimming along at the tail of the sentence
Like a baby goldfish
Trying to catch up.
I have a horrid thought, that's Me.

CHEVY CHASE

Terrified, but exultant,
I hardened myself to drive the little Chevrolet
Through the New York Traffic.
But still I wondered
Why are the trucks that rumble just ahead of me
Always the hugest in town?

UNTO THIS LAST

John Ruskin, sensitive student of aesthetics,
Would be startled by the portrait of himself
Bearded, very red in the lips,
Blazoned on the cover of a spare-tire:
SMOKE JOHN RUSKIN, 5c CIGAR.

THE POWER-HOUSE

Out for my evening stroll
I discovered on 84th Street
A power-house, quietly humming to itself,
And though I lived near-by
I had never known it was there.

Some people are like that.

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383 MADISON
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The New Books

The books listed by title only in the classified list below are noted here as received.

Biography

COLONEL ROOSEVELT, Private Citizen. By EARLE LOOKER. Revell. 1932. \$2.50.

Mr. Looker is the author of "The White House Gang," which a year or two ago proved a very popular addition to the still rising stacks of Rooseveltiana. Here he turns to the final period of the great career—now, perhaps, the most interesting period because it is the one upon which the least has been published and about which some mystery still remains. The book opens with a scene at Sagamore Hill in February, 1915, when Roosevelt was already actively planning the volunteer division which he hoped to lead into the World War; it ends by reprinting that pathetic correspondence with Baker and Wilson in the spring of 1917, when the martial vision which Roosevelt had cherished for thirty years was finally shattered. Except for some scanty details on the organization of that dream division, however, the book contains little else. It is chiefly another expression of the uncritical adoration which Roosevelt stirred in so many minds, and which still lives after him.

Mr. Looker represents the Colonel as having been convinced at the time of his visit with the Kaiser in 1910 that a world war was a certainty and that the United States would be drawn into it. This is used to explain Roosevelt's later passion for preparedness; it is a view not always easy to reconcile with the published facts, but Roosevelt's reaction to the Berlin visit is apparently given on the authority of Mrs. Roosevelt, who has endorsed the book. Another detail may be from the same source. Early in 1915 Roosevelt and Mr. Frank Knox were eagerly planning the projected division when Mrs. Roosevelt broke in: "Both you men," she said, "are exactly like two small boys playing at soldiers."

Fiction

A TIME TO SOW. By EVANS WALL. Macaulay. 1932. \$2.

Evans Wall has a way with backgrounds. In each of his novels the social, the economic environment of his people is given in understanding and significant detail. His men and women are born of their time and place and move through them rightly as fish through their familiar water. His novels being placed in the South, he has shown successively the differing struggles of the white, the half-white, and the colored dwellers there. In "A Time to Sow," the story is of the effort to keep an impoverished farm above the surface of submerging debt and mortgage. The background lives. The work of the men, the work of the horses, pull at the reader with a tiring and physical reality. Day opens on hopelessness and closes on hopelessness until eventually after such long and bitter battle the tide begins to turn a little for the better. There is with work and work and work a way out.

But with the story of the characters a creaking difference is felt. They do not live, they are merely used by Mr. Wall to point, if not a moral, at least a theory. The unfolding of the physical awakening of woman to love is a dangerous phenomenon to handle. The ridiculous and the sentimental press so closely upon the inexperienced. Mr. Wall's bride reminds one all too often of those books—where are they now?—on "What a Young Wife Ought to Know." What must have been to the author very real reachings out toward encompassing experience are, unfortunately, for the reader merely embarrassing contortions of a not unusual young woman.

AMOS THE WANDERER. By W. B. MAXWELL. Dodd, Mead. 1932. \$2.

Mr. Maxwell has written another of his gentle, rambling, old-fashioned novels. Another quiet soul, under his facile guidance, finds that adventure may snuggle at the ingle-nook as well as roam the world, and that happiness may be inside the garden gate. In this case, Amos is a young man tied reluctantly to his father's dull business in a dull English village and longing for what may lie beyond the rim of his cupped life. And so he says goodbye to the girl for whom he feels enough to fear the binding quality of her.

After only a very short journey, Amos comes upon new ties not to be denied. He settles down to take care of a tubercular

man and to assume the burden of the latter's work. When death comes to the invalid to release Amos, he has already taken on new obligations by promising to marry a sister infected with the brother's disease. Not a very gay life this, but death once more lies at the end of a vista and Amos returns to the dull English village and the dull business in both of which he now finds an illumination.

The girl of the first part also returns to the village and tells Amos in page after page of her adventures during her absence. She has been around the world before she was twenty-two, she has consorted with pigmies and cannibals, she has shot big game, and she has married a missionary. Nevertheless, she is content, the missionary dead, to end the book in Amos's arms.

International

THE BIRTH OF THE NATIONS. By VALERIU MARCU. Translated by EDEN and CEDAR PAUL. Viking. 1932. \$3.75.

We are informed that the author of this volume—"born a Rumanian, thinking like a French philosopher, and using German as a literary medium—is well equipped for these literary explorations into the past out of which the Europe of today has emerged." Lest we be accused of lack of appreciation of this tri-partite heritage, we may admit this at once.

We are constrained to add, however, that the book has no more significance than a "literary exploration." It is excellently written, a quality which the translators have as usual skilfully carried over into English. And it will have for some readers a veritable charm. They must, however, bring to the reading of it a vast equipment of historical knowledge. Marcu is not writing history, he is writing an essay about historical forces. After the manner of some of our own mono-national essayists, he assumes an encyclopedic knowledge and becomes lyrical over the consequences.

It is always a temptation to treat history in terms of its more or less striking figures. Marcu fits from Tommaso Campanella to Richelieu, from Descartes to Urban VIII, from Blaise Pascal to Grotius, from Father Joseph to Cromwell and Maximilian with the same irritating familiarity with which some of our contemporary "current-events" lecturers like to convey the impression that they are "in the know."

It is an excellent book for those who like this kind of a book.

Miscellaneous

TOURING UTOPIA: The Realm of Constructive Humanism. By FRANCES THERESA RUSSELL. Dial. 1932. \$2.50.

Professor Russell had no dearth of material. Wistful members of the human race, exercising wisdom, whimsy, or jest, perhaps all three, have concocted so many Utopias for a heedless world that the author has devoted all of ten pages to classified lists. Even so, she excludes socialistic and communistic expositions, as well as accounts of cooperative communities in practice. Here are Utopias central and peripheral, satiric Utopias and utopian satires, treatises, predictions, fantasies, arcadias, and a map of the whole empyreal realm. Many of them could be modeled in cardboard and put out for the Christmas trade. This practical world could provide no more ironic fate.

The utopian scheme, taken collectively, is found to emphasize environment and external betterment, considering "favorable circumstance a powerful first aid to personal integrity." Government is a benevolent and efficient autocracy. Education is free and universal; labor and leisure are shared alike by all. Miss Russell also has burrowed into utopian beauty and art, religion and morality, domesticity, marriage and the other mores, with the worlds of H. G. Wells grabbing a whole chapter. A pretty tale, but in the end, she fails to give most Utopias a passing grade. Of the ten dozen (!) on the list, not a third pass the main tests she applies. The majority are "either fragmentary or lop-sided or fanatic or vague or conceived in skepticism rather than faith." And so here we are again, back to our miserable earth, and almost on the verge of summoning Professor Pangloss.

Books for Christmas

By AMY LOVEMAN

THE inexorable demands of space forced us to break off abruptly last week in the very midst of our summary of books which might prove fitting gifts for those whose tastes run to the arts. With no further preamble we resume where we left off then, in the middle of a sentence recommending Szegedi Szut's "My War" (Morrow), a history in pictures of a Hungarian soldier's experiences in the World War; "A Wanderer in Woodcuts" (Farrar & Rinehart), by H. Glintenkamp; Lynd Ward's novel in woodcuts, "Wild Pilgrimage" (Smith & Haas), and Norman Bel Geddes's extremely interesting "Horizons" (Little, Brown), an application of his theories to cars, motor cars, steamships, etc. This is the place, we think, to include Ernest Hemingway's "Death in the Afternoon" (Scribners), for it's as a fine art that he looks upon bullfighting, and here, too, we insert John Erskine's new novel "Tristan and Isolde" (Bobbs-Merrill), since the musician or the musical ought to find in it added interest.

There is small doubt, we suppose, that many readers find little outside of fiction of interest. For such of these as you may number among the prospective recipients of your gifts we have selected novels in accordance with what may be varied tastes. For those who find fascination in study of human relations and who are especially concerned with the family as an institution there is a group of books which includes some of the outstanding fiction of the season: "Family History," by V. Sackville West (Doubleday, Doran), "Greenbanks" (Farrar & Rinehart), by Dorothy Whipple, which we have already mentioned in another place; "A Good Man's Love" (Harpers), by E. M. Delafield, a portrayal of Victorian girlhood and of the suffering which the conventions of that period forced upon the young woman in the matrimonial market, which might well cause those elders who still raise horrified hands at the "new freedom" of woman to think their day blest instead of cursed; Ellen Glasgow's "The Sheltered Life" (Doubleday, Doran), which, like her earlier "The Romantic Comedians" and "They Stooped to Folly," is a brilliant and witty depiction of a passing social code; "Thicker Than Water" (Liveright), the story of a Jewish family done with spirit and veracity; and "The Family Circle" (Appleton), by André Maurois, a work of much subtlety and interest. These are all stories in which attention centers almost exclusively on personality. There are others in which background plays an important part, such as "The Years of Peace" (Century), by Leroy McCleod, in which the struggle of man with his environment as represented in the life on the farm comes to the fore, and "The Broken House" (Smith & Haas), by Ambrose South, a novel in somewhat similar vein.

If you are looking for books to send to a friend who would keep abreast of foreign literature there are "The Burning Bush" (Knopf), by Sigrid Undset; "The Sleepwalkers" (Little, Brown), by Hermann Broch; "The Pascarella Family" (Simon & Schuster), by Franz Werfel, and "Fired" (Century), by Karl Schenzinger. Two Irish novels deserve mention, "The Coloured Dome" (Macmillan), by Francis Stuart, and "The Saint and Mary Kate" (Macmillan), by Frank O'Connor, a writer whose work is arresting and who gives promise of being an important author. There is a new volume of Lady Murasaki's charming "Lady of the Boat" (Houghton Mifflin).

Your young friend, who enjoys reading of her own generation, and indeed older readers, too, to whom youth is always a lovely and enchanting subject, will rejoice in Rosamond Lehmann's charming and understanding "Invitation to the Waltz" (Holt) and will read with interest G. B. Stern's "The Rueful Mating" (Knopf), with its story of young love. The thoughtful will find much food for their interest in Leonie Zugsmith's "Never Enough," while those whose inclination is for action and vigor will welcome "Mutiny on the Bounty" (Little, Brown), by James Norman Hall and Charles Nordhoff, a transcription in terms of fiction of a famous incident of British naval annals, and a book that seems to us to have the qualities which make for a classic of the seas; Somerset Maugham's "The Narrow Corner" (Doubleday, Doran), and Max Miller's "I Cover the Waterfront" (Dutton).

Give the Southerner, if you would present him with something concerned with