

The New Books

Drama

STEVEDORE. By Paul Peters and George Sklar. Covici-Friede. 1934. \$1.50.
JIG SAW. By Dawn Powell. Farrar & Rinehart. 1934. \$2.
YELLOW JACK. By Sidney Howard and Paul de Kruif. Harcourt, Brace. 1934. \$2.

It has often been remarked that Negroes make the best actors we have. Many a weak or absurd play has been made into a passable evening's entertainment by the acting of Negroes. But "Stevedore," by Messrs. Peters and Sklar, is the first play we have seen in which the beneficent influence of the Negroes has reached the writing itself. The authors seem to have been thinking, while writing their dialogue, how Negroes would act it—for some of their directness, credulity, and simplicity has warmed the lines written for them. As for the play, which tells the story of a dispute between Negro stevedores and their bosses in New Orleans, and the race riot which develops out of it by way of the usual perjured white girl—it is only another one of those "proletarian" or "socially conscious" or "propaganda" plays. The first scene sets the tone: a loud and meaningless and violent squabble between the white girl and her lover. Then we go on to union men with hearts of gold, and scabs who are nothing but bullies and cowards, and bosses that give punches in the jaw: a Boy Scout parable, in a word, which would make the most sanctimonious Victorian moralist look like a Maupassant by comparison. But the Negroes remain fairly human throughout. They do not fit into these simple legends. Is it because they lack our pale-face hypocrisy? Or are they simply too relaxed to catch our abstract rages?

Miss Dawn Powell's "Jig Saw" is a play about the penthouse-dwelling whites, who are neither hypocrites, nor sectarian crusaders, nor even bosses: all that's the matter with them, as they frequently tell us and each other, is that they are utterly futile and unreal. The unimportant plot is based on the return of a schoolgirl to her divorced mother's household, where she finds a complicated but unstable system of love affairs flourishing. She picks out the man she likes best (who happens to be the one her mother intended for her next lover) and marries him. We have no quarrel with Miss Powell for writing about these mayflies, but she might at least make her play more interesting than the mayflies themselves. "Serena Blandish," which had a brief run on Broadway a few years ago, exhibited a similar set of people, but subtly distorted, as though they had been viewed from an odd angle or under a peculiar light. The pleasure and amusement lay in the clever distortion, which gave one a perspective on the people and so freed one from their actual vulgarities. But Miss Powell serves hers up to us just as they are. Even their wisecracks are no better than what you hear. Reading her play is like sitting through a long cocktail party cold sober.

What would you write about, if you were a dramatist? Something to hold a Broadway audience for a couple of hours, it must be; something a little new for a change, people are tired of sex; yet something obvious enough to penetrate brains fed on publishers' money-makers. Mr. Sidney Howard had the bright idea of staging a chapter from "Microbe-Hunt-

ers," the one about Yellow Fever, or "Yellow Jack." It seemed to have a theme of the proper gravity, man's battle with disease; the word science, especially when applied science is understood, is still capable of preparing us to receive solemnities. Men in white coats are only a bit less thrilling than men in khaki coats; and the war atmosphere is there too; brief and pregnant sentences, stiff, stiff upper lips, and good shrewd masculine comedy without malice, based on the fact that the Irish and the Jews are soldiers together in Uncle Sam's army. Mr. Howard thought it would be a good idea to make such a play, and he did, and "Yellow Jack" is it.

F. F.

Fiction

A LAW UNTO THEMSELVES. By Love-day Prior. Little, Brown. 1934. \$2.50.

It is a safe bet that any novel that does not stem directly from its author's own times, his race, and the genius of his language, will be no more than a show of strength, a literary exercise whose intrinsic merits will rise less from its creator's profundity as an artist than from his dexterity as a craftsman. Even the great have failed to breathe life into the past (Flaubert's "Salammbô" and "The Temptation of Saint Anthony" come to mind), and their efforts in that direction have remained pleasant diversions; their scholarship and sensitivity have succeeded, at the most, in evoking an authentic atmosphere entertaining for its remoteness from our own times, for its air of verisimilitude.

Miss Prior has done a fine job of reconstruction; her period, the thirteenth century; her people, the feudal barons of Austria. The least that can be asked of an author embarked on such a task is that his researches fuse with his method and his exposition, that they do not obtrude upon the reader. These difficult adjustments Miss Prior has made. Out of her pages rises a picture of the Middle Ages such as it might well have been; the stern brutality of its men, the routine of their plundering lives, the bitter physical subjection of their women. We learn what these people ate, how their castles were appointed, how their minds worked, what were the codes by which they lived their lives. Entertainment is provided in full measure through the abundance of factual detail, fascinating in itself. Into the bargain, the author has a pleasant tale to tell, and if she tells it in the terms of her elected period, in the rhythms and with the phraseology of those times, she is quite within her rights, and the narrative gains heightened "truth to life" through such a method. The tale she tells is too involved for condensation in a review; it winds its way through a long book, at times moving in its intensity, at times dull through a sort of dilution—the necessity to skip years or pass lightly over bare details. But it is generally interesting, always readable, occasionally exciting. Though gownned as carefully as she has been able to dress them, the Count Ludwig of Feilmar, his two wives, his son Adalbert, the degenerate; his daughter Luise, the clever; her husband, the beast Wolfgang von Maieburg—none rises from the status of fictional characters, nor do their schemes and machinations, their aspirations and ambitions for power, for wealth, for ascendancy over each other, carry more conviction than the events of

(Continued on next page)

The Criminal Record

The Saturday Review's Guide to Detective Fiction

Title and Author	Crime, Place, Sleuth	Summing Up	Verdict
CANDIDATE FOR LILIES Roger East (Knopf: \$2.)	When rich English eccentric summons heirs to announce whimsical change of will, a bullet has the last word.	Competent writing; not much suspense; ineffectual professional, and not too brilliant amateur, sleuthing.	Fair
THE RUSE OF THE VANISHED WOMEN Val Gielgud (Crime Club: \$2.)	London bachelor and girl-friend stumble into mysterious midnight adventures in Suffolk that give Scotland Yard anxious hours.	Co-author of "London Calling" gets off to fast start but finishes lamely in white-slave (?) story with surprise twist.	Disappointing
THE HOBGOBLIN MURDER Kay Cleaver Strahan (Bobbs-Merrill: \$2.)	Wealthy, tyrannical old maid recluse murdered during Coast visit of poor relations. Lynn MacDonald, female sleuth, stumbles on solution.	Incredible situation, pretty sticky in certain aspects, produces faint nausea, but one does read on to end which flouts intelligence.	Thin

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