

The Saturday Review of LITERATURE

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Published weekly by The Saturday Review Co., Inc., 25 W. 45th St., New York, N. Y.
Noble A. Cathcart, President and Treasurer;
Henry Seidel Canby, Vice-President and Chairman; Amy Loveman, Secretary.

Subscription rates per year, postpaid in the U. S. and Pan-American Postal Union, \$3.50; in Canada, \$5; in Great Britain, 18 shillings; elsewhere \$4.50. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 1, 1879. Vol. 11. No. 13.

THE SATURDAY REVIEW is indexed in the "Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature."

THE SATURDAY REVIEW cannot assume responsibility for the return of unsolicited manuscripts submitted without an addressed envelope and the necessary postage.

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The Novel of Curiosity

How long is the nose of fiction, how much further can it poke? Are there any provinces, states of mind, backwaters, freshwaters, refuse piles, types, classes, mores and immoralities, sentiments and sentimentalities, into which the curiosity of the novelist has not pushed like an irrepressible reporter? The poor white, the Negro, both plantation and Harlem, the gangster, the small-town rake, the police, the college faculty, the down-Easterner, the factory hand, the emigrant and immigrant, the baker and the automobile salesman, the Pennsylvania Dutch and the Boston intellectual, coal miners, gold-seekers, herders, bankers, Indians—this is only a tenth of the possible list from recent fiction. Also the sexually maladjusted, the paranoiac, the inhibited by inferiority, the class conscious and the class unconscious, the frightened and the impudent, the victims of social injustice and the neurotics ruined by wealth.

Can there be many classes or types or states of consciousness left in the United States which have not been put through a typewriter? Yes, undoubtedly a few. We can remember no novel about the life of railroad conductors, surely a fruitful subject since they see America on the move, no stories of gas station attendants, undertakers, American Chinese, apartment doormen (who certainly see life), street cleaners, candy factories, blueberry pickers, internes, insurance adjusters, old clothes men, college crammers, proof readers, exterminators, mineralogists, New York Turks, Presidents' secretaries. And no novel about the neurotic who ruins himself by a vicious passion for normality, which is about the only form of neuroticism that has not found its way into fiction. Yet doubtless this rash statement of exceptions will bring letters stating title and publisher of a book on each topic.

It is a literature of curiosity, legitimate, quite interesting, and an evidence of the restless activity of the modern mind. Furthermore it seems to indicate an intensity of individualism in strange contrast to the new collective ideas on the wind. It is hard to believe that a country so eager to read about the behavior of its citizens can ever work up a passionate interest in a totalitarian state. Or is this the decadence of that obsession with personality which began with the Renaissance?

Our guess is in the negative. There is nothing mysterious in this curiosity. It is the natural result of easy transportation,

nation-wide publications, and national advertising. The burning curiosity of the frontier, to which every memoir writer testifies, and the malign and ingrowing curiosity of the village, have broadened with opportunity. We peep in the windows of all the world.

It has been a picnic for the fiction writers, but picnics cannot last indefinitely. With all this vast encyclopedia of information about the habits of our neighbors, we seem to understand human nature about as much as before, perhaps a very little better. The student of Shakespeare is not at a loss in an argument with the student of Dreiser or Proust. Perhaps only in the fiction of neuroticism have we put our hands on something new, and the ultimate value of this is still indefinite.

Can curiosity go much further unless supported by a desire to interpret, to get values, and to create, as so many great novelists and dramatists have done, character types that are extensions from reality into the future? We doubt it, and hence read with only a faint stir of still unappeased curiosity advertisements of books written by roving reporters who say they have found new kinds of Americans. Library shelves are crowded with specimens that have been labeled but not really studied. Has not the time come in fiction for less behaviorism and more art?

Last year 10,993,203 copies of the Bible in 678 languages were distributed throughout the world. The eleven new languages included Afrikaans, the Lettish Romany tongue, and Kunini.



"GIVE ME THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC AND A COPY OF 'INDIAN LOVE LYRICS' AND I'LL WRITE YOU ANY ROMANTIC NOVEL."

Letters to the Editor: Montana Votes for Literature; Notes on a Missouri Novelist

Tired of Russia

SIR:—I am sick to death of books about the World economic and social problems. The Pro- and Anti-New Deal with its arguments about inflation and deflation leave me quite untouched. Perhaps it is just my aversion but it seems to me that ever since "New Russia's Primer" was published in this country there has been a preponderance of reviews of books of the above mentioned subjects and of Russia. Every time anybody goes to the border of Russia to make a call, he or she or he and she together just must write a book about it and your staff just must write a lengthy review of it. This may all be literature and perhaps you are quite right in what you are doing, but you are simply driving me to other reviews which are not as well done as yours but I do not have to travel across Russia or through a morass of economic problems to get to them.

B. H. KEPNER.

Great Falls, Montana.

Far from a Hermit

SIR:—Many of your readers interested in Josephine Johnson should be told that the Simon and Schuster column in your issue of September 22 gives an erroneous impression of her residence and way of life.

"Hundreds and hundreds of miles from the nearest literary tea or broadcasting station" indeed! Miss Johnson lives within a dozen miles of the broadcasting rooms of KMOX, KSD, KWK, WIL, and a couple of minor stations, and for several years has found it no insurmountable difficulty to attend the meetings of the St. Louis Writers' Guild, which are as near to literary teas as we poor, benighted Midwesterners can hope to come.

"Diffident to the point of inaccessibility?" Well, Ellwood Douglas of the *Post-Dispatch* managed to get a half-page interview as soon as the publication of her novel was announced; and those of us who

have seen her in the halls and on the campus of Washington University in the past five or six years know that though undeniably diffident, she is far from a hermit.

But perhaps anyone living west of the Mississippi is still supposed, by New Yorkers, to reside in a mud hut and shoot rusty flintlocks at occasional Indians. It will be a surprise for Fame, when the time comes to "seek her out," in the words of Essandess, to find Josephine Johnson living in a pleasant home, much like some in New York, on the edge of a metropolitan area which, believe it or not, has all the modern conveniences, including literary groups that sometimes recognize merit in advance of New York.

RAYMOND F. HOWES, Editor.

The Alumni Bulletin,
Washington University,
Saint Louis, Mo.

And Finally

SIR:—Mark Twain told of a young man describing his experiences in a free-for-all fight:

"And placing my nose securely between his teeth, I threw him heavily to the floor, he falling on top of me."

This is quoted from memory, but it seems rather apropos of the free-for-all concerning my biography, "Meriwether Lewis, of Lewis and Clark."

The book is written, published, and to some degree, sold. Its preparation has given me much pleasure along with much labor. I have worked conscientiously in presenting what I believed to be a helpful volume on a too-little-known era of Americana. Mr. Allan Nevins, of "Grover Cleveland" fame, branded the work as wildly conjectural in his review,—in my opinion supporting his condemnations with assertions that were in themselves wildly conjectural, and essentially fragmentary exhibits, rather than the products of discerning research.

As a student of historical research, I am sure that Mr. Nevins is aware of the great number of contradictions to be found in basic materials which cover a period so dynamic and little-known as does the life of Meriwether Lewis. I believe that he will agree that historical writing is essentially a matter of sorting, rejecting, and coördinating materials, of weighing probabilities and improbables in good faith and producing a bona fide balance. It is my belief that the book in question observes these principles; that it is a sincere effort, offered in good faith.

Moreover, in his criticisms, Mr. Nevins has failed to offer adequate or discerning documentations for his own assertions. He has sought to shift the burden of defense to the book itself, overlooking the very elemental fact that good criticism must be more than vitriolic abuse.

Furthermore, it seems only fair to point out that I have been given no opportunity to offer a complete statement or listing of my source material. It is available for anyone who wishes to consult it.

I should be very happy indeed to discuss sources and references for Meriwether Lewis material with anyone who, in good faith, cares to enter into such discussion.

Finally to Mr. Nevins's assertion that "one or two unwary critics" accepted "Meriwether Lewis" as an authentic biography, I should like to point out that reviewers who have given the book favorable or constructive criticism include those of at least 105 important magazines and newspapers, throughout the nation. To refute, rather than to blurb, the following is quoted from the *Washington Historical Quarterly*, Seattle:

"Meriwether Lewis of Lewis and Clark" will be accepted enthusiastically by the general reader seeking the record of a hero and adventurer. The historian will also appreciate the volume for its real worth and for the numerous letters and documents to augment the evident authenticity of the entire work.

CHARLES MORROW WILSON.

Newfane, Vt.

The New Philosophical Poet

SIR:—Permit me to submit the following quotations as possible answers to Mr. Irwin Edman's basic questions, for characteristics of the new philosophical poet.

From time to time [says Mr. Henri Bergson in "Laughter"] in a fit of absent-mindedness nature raises up Souls that are more detached from life. Not with that intentional, logical, systematic detachment—the result of reflection and philosophy—but rather with a natural detachment, one innate in the structure of sense or consciousness which at once reveals itself by a virginal manner, so to speak, of seeing, hearing, or thinking. Were this detachment complete, did the soul no longer cleave to action by any of its perceptions, it would be the soul of an artist such as the world has never yet seen.

Of Lucretius, George Santayana writes in "Three Philosophical Poets," "The greatest thing about this genius is its power of losing itself in its object, its impersonality. We seem to be reading not the poetry about things, but the poetry of things themselves. That things have their poetry, not because of what we make their symbols of, but because of their own movement and life, is what Lucretius proves once for all to mankind."

In conclusion I should like to ask Mr. Edman, would it not be more fitting to be a good detective and find the new poet in the flesh rather than the word?

MILTON GRAY.

New York City.

The Saturday Review recommends

This Group of Current Books:

NEW FRONTIERS. By HENRY A. WALLACE. *Reynal & Hitchcock*. A prospectus for America by the Secretary of Agriculture.

THE FOLKS. By RUTH SUCKOW. *Farrar & Rinehart*. The chronicle of an American family.

RETREAT FROM GLORY. By R. H. BRUCE LOCKHART. *Putnam*. More adventures of a diplomatic agent.

This Less Recent Book:

ENCHANTED WOODS. By HENRY BAERLEIN. *Simon & Schuster*. A book of travel adventures.

Tolstoy's Daughter and the Revolution

I WORKED FOR THE SOVIET. By Countess Alexandra Tolstoy. New Haven; Yale University Press. 1934. \$3.

Reviewed by ARTHUR RUHL

ALEXANDRA TOLSTOY is now living in this country, but both in personality and experience she differs from the usual type of upper-class Russian emigré and her story is no mere raking over the already familiar pile of emigré dead leaves.

The daughter of the great Leo, much more a chip of the old block than many who bear the famous family name, not only followed her father's teachings but was a vigorous and capable woman quite able to look out for herself. Long before the Revolution she had considered the overthrow of the monarchy essential, and had looked forward "to a more liberal government, one without militarism, with religious and political freedom, with land for the peasants." It was quite natural, for example, that when she first arrived in this country, she should be the guest of Miss Lillian Wald at the Henry Street Settlement. She was the sort of pre-war Russian liberal with whom Americans felt quite at home, what we call "a good scout."

She was commanding a hospital unit just back of the front at the time of the March revolution and she hailed it with the rest. The soldiers wanted to toss her in the air in the general enthusiasm. When it became impossible to go on with the hospital work, she returned to Moscow and later to her own farm near her father's estate at Yasnia Poliana, and there is an amusingly typical picture of her good-bye to her former belongings. The farm had been taken over by the village soviet, but Alexandra Lvovna nevertheless ordered the farm manager to harness all the horses to the carts. Machinery, tools, beehives, and furniture were loaded on the carts and driven over to Yasnia Poliana. The peasants shook their heads and laughed, but helped her just the same. She slept in an empty house on a pile of hay on her own place that night and at three o'clock the next morning, in the darkness, took the horses to the nearest market and sold them for half what they were worth. Then she whistled to her dogs, and with the one horse that was left drove off to Yasnia Poliana.

For the next ten years, with intervals as a political prisoner, she fought to keep Yasnia Poliana as a memorial to her father. She got the Central Executive Committee to put the estate under the control of the Department of Museum Activities in the Commissariat of Education and to make her Curator. There were to be schools, intelligent farming, and freedom from the atheistic propaganda elsewhere in vogue. As things turned out, the attempt was doomed. Little by little, the Bolshevik tide crept into and finally overflowed the place. One spring day in 1929, Alexandra Lvovna got up early and walked through the forest to her father's grave. A thin crust of ice cracked, water gurgled underfoot. The gold in the east brightened, the birds started singing, and all at once she felt

convinced that she "could not go on living a lie." After that, it was only a question of ways and means of getting out of the country.

The things that happened during that troubled decade, and they included personal interviews with Kalenin, Lunarcharsky, and Stalin himself, various perquisitions and arrests, and a trial in which Trotsky took part—on the side of one of her fellow prisoners—are told with admirable brevity, commonsense, and simple eloquence. There is a passage describing one of the farm days at Yasnia Poliana which recalls similar bits in "War and Peace." Alexandra Lvovna was working in the rye field with the rest:

Loading the sheaves on the carts was as easy as playing tennis. You speared a sheaf with a fork and tossed it up to someone on the load who caught it in his hands. Then you tied up the load and sat down on the sheaves to wait for the next cart. The field was clear and shone like gold; only here and there cornflowers and wormwood could be seen. The straw heated by the sun smelled like fresh-baked black bread. From far off came the sound of empty carts hurrying back to the fields. I felt very warm, strong, happy.

As Tolstoy's energetic daughter, Alexandra Lvovna's position was, of course, more favorable than that of most of her class. The Bolsheviks must have been at their wits' ends to know just what to do with her and with Yasnia Poliana—how to be consistent and yet not to offend public opinion abroad. On the other end, she very decidedly, instead of merely running away, stood her ground and made a fight for it. It is a stirring and entertaining record, told with fairness and vigor and a minimum of recriminations and complaints.

The Trail of Rabelais

A JOURNEY INTO RABELAIS'S FRANCE. By Albert Jay Nock. New York: William Morrow & Co. 1934. \$3.50.

SUPERFICIALLY, Mr. Nock's travels are reminiscent of those recorded by Henry James in "A Little Tour in France." They both start at Tours, make a semi-circle through the southwest, pass through Montpellier, Arles, Nîmes, and Avignon, and proceed up the Rhone; they both complain a good deal about traveling conditions; and they both consider the tourist centers generally overestimated. Here the resemblance ends. Mr. Nock's route was chosen to include all the places associated with Rabelais; this gives his book a center of gravity—frequently it is a center of levity—which distinguishes it from other travel books. He is always informed and interesting in regard to the background, whether specifically Rabelaisian or not, of the places he visits.

Mr. Nock tells a lot of good stories—there's one about a young American who had the French equivalent of a shot-gun wedding; there's one about Ste. Radegonde of Poitiers, a sixteenth century feminist who founded a coeducational convent—and there are excellent brief characterizations, of numerous contemporaries of Rabelais, of the du Bellay family, of Louise Labé who varied an existence spent in the Lyon society of 1550 by bearing arms on the battlefield and by writing excellent



LOUISE LABÉ

poetry. If there are also frequent occasions when the author descends from urbanity to issue pronunciamientos (these are mostly about America, and they mostly miss the mark), there is no issue to be taken; the spirit is informal, even conversational; one cannot object to anything Mr. Nock says about us while he is giving us such a good time. The numerous pen-and-ink drawings by Ruth Robinson are perfect illustrations for this personal record.

Mistaken Identity

HENRY FOR HUGH. By Ford Madox Ford. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1934. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THIS novel is a sequel to "The Rash Act" which told of the suicide of Hugh Monckton Allard Smith and the circumstances which forced Henry Martin Aluin Smith to take his place, though those circumstances are mainly recapitulated in the new book. It is a rather implausible and boring story, and Henry Martin is such a lazy valetudinarian with a regular wish-fulfilment of mistresses, so cosseted and coddled and almost dandled, that one ends by not giving much of a hoot whether the imposture he is always trying to explain away is found out or not. A great deal of the book is taken up in trying to make reasonable what is essentially unreasonable. A frankly implausible story like "The Masquerader" is more to my taste.

Naturally, Mr. Ford can write; though he has an irritating trick of translating all his scraps of French as though otherwise the benighted reader couldn't possibly understand what he was talking about. But here is a seasoned novelist concerning himself with material that seems to me a bit heavy, quite a bit repetitive, and rather dull. There are, of course, some nice and subtle touches in the narrative; but not nearly so many as one had anticipated. The women seem viewed so entirely through the eyes of a self-absorbed man that they hardly come alive; though the aunt is quite a character. Henry Martin is an American, presumably; Mr. Ford does rather better with the task of making him an American than most English writers do; and still manages some howlers.

Some of Mr. Ford's writing I have enjoyed greatly. He has written several poems that should not perish, and has the faculty of reminiscing in a most delightful fashion. I am not so familiar with his novels, but I am quite sure that this novel cannot be up to his best. Henry emerges with honor, owing to the author's management of circumstance. But the story doesn't end anywhere in particular. It suggests that it might be followed by other instalments, which would have as accurate an English background as this is accurately European, and would move on in much the same pleasantly desultory fashion. The touch is languid. Mr. Ford can create situations of high dramatic potential, but he does nothing in particular with them. Neither is his variety of stream-of-consciousness writing of any great subtlety or depth. Conrad Aiken, for instance, can give him cards and spades as to that. And a very small fly in this ointment is still bothering me. I wonder whether there is a New Canaan, Massachusetts? I know there is one in Connecticut, because I have lived there. Not that it matters.

Savages Are People

WITH NAKED FOOT. By Emily Hahn.
Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co.
1934. \$2.

MISS HAHN tells the story of her black heroine, Mawa, with the same freshness, humor, and freedom from ready-made notions with which she wrote of her own adventures in "Congo Solo." This, we are quite ready to agree, is just the way it happened. Darkest Africa becomes an understandable neighborhood, with local peculiarities, to be sure; and savages are also people. It is an entertaining and nourishing book.

Mawa was *ménagère* or housekeeper, in turn, for four white "husbands"—the little Portuguese, Fernandes, who was father of her son, Joachim; the big brute known as The Fat Man; his successor, "Mr. Angry," and finally the young American schoolteacher, "Mr. Good." It is through the eyes and feelings of the white men that we get her story.

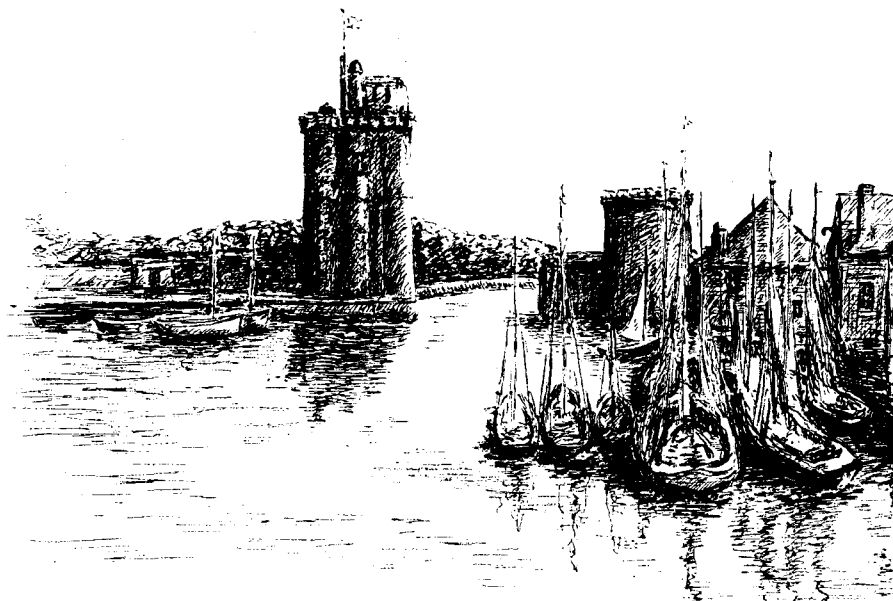
As a woman, she would have been more or less bought and sold, in any case, would have had to belong to someone to whom she would be expected always to answer "Yes, Master!" And the mass-injustice—however taken for granted—of the lot of myriads of her sex is one of the ideological bases (always implicit, never stressed) of Miss Hahn's novel. Another, similarly implicit, is that a civilized white man can fall in love with a primitive black woman. All four white men loved Mawa in their different ways. She had humor, sweetness, tact, understanding, and a certain unconquerable inner essence which made her decidedly a person. None yielded so completely—just because he was of finer stuff, less cynical, than the others—as the young American, who came out to Africa with eyes open, knowing just what he would and wouldn't do, with a young wife at home to whom he wrote long letters telling everything he saw, did and felt. The Fat Man might save his face by pretending to treat Mawa as a mere concubine, but

right, this is all right . . . sigh of relief stopped thinking."

The young American, without meaning to be so, was, of course, the most cruel of all her masters. He never beat her—if only he would, and forgive her and be kind again, and stop that endless talking! But having given himself, he must needs, for his pride's sake, receive from her a civilized white woman's peculiar sort of devotion. And it is characteristic of Miss Hahn's at once sympathetic and understanding but quite unsentimental and realistic attitude, that the final crash should come when "Mr. Good" discovered Mawa giving what seemed to her merely a passing favor to one of the black men.

It was such a little thing—why couldn't he understand? He had known about Mr. Angry and the Fat Man. Why couldn't he understand this, and beat her and forget about it? But he only spoke softly and made her pack her clothes and himself packed up and started back for the white man's country—and took Joachim with him! The really big thing in Mawa's life was her "white" son, although none of the white men understood that—she would have left any of the four for one of the others if it had meant losing or keeping near her son. And in the end he was taken away, and Mawa, "old" now, was left for such an old man of her own people as might be willing to have her.

The author's own attitude toward the primitive blacks, in so far as it is expressed, is most nearly put in one of the American's soliloquies: . . . "they were such children. They were such wise old people. They were so simple, and yet such terrible animals." The uniqueness of her story lies partly in her perception of the fact that "savage" and "civilized" human beings, of whatever color or race, can't be accepted or rejected, so to speak, *en bloc*; that on certain levels—that of Mawa's mother-love, for instance—they are identical, while the next instant they may be centuries and continents apart. From the inability of these different levels to coalesce, flows, of course, the pitiful tragedy as well as the ironic humor of her story.



THE HARBOR OF LA ROCHELLE

Drawings on this page by Ruth Robinson, from "A Journey into Rabelais's France."