

Twelve Good Men and True

THE JURY. By Gerald Bullett. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by AMY LOVEMAN

HERE is a book clever, but more than clever, ingenious, the tale of a murder trial which though it holds its tension taut to the end, revolves less about the mystery attaching to its crime than around the psychological reactions of its characters. Writing of it, the critic must proceed warily less indiscretion betray the surprise Mr. Bullett springs in the last chapter and so destroy the effectiveness of a conclusion as neat as it is unexpected. It is so rarely that an author conceives a situation at once so fresh and plausible as that which brings "The Jury" to a close, or clothes in so much body and substance a theme which the detective story writer has long since rendered trite, that it would be a pity indeed to detract from its force by giving in more than scantiest outline the incidents of the tale.

In brief it is the story of Roderick Strood, his marital relations, and the murder charge on which he is brought to trial because of them. Mr. Bullett opens his book with a portrayal of Roderick's wife philandering before she has realized her husband's defection from her, and advances from that to a succession of brief, unrelated episodes, vignettes of personality and bits of life history which suddenly swing into focus as characterizations of the men and women who compose the jury sitting in trial on Roderick Strood and of the friends who support him in that ordeal. Each of these short narratives, complete in itself, has a life independent of the life of the novel, yet each is a logical part of the pattern of the story.



GERALD BULLETT

All of us who have followed murder trials in the newspapers must have wondered at times what passes in the minds of the juries that try them, what personal experiences color their reactions and condition their judgments. It is here presented with complete plausibility in the conversation and comments of the mixed group which debates the problem of guilt as it is to be drawn from the arguments of lawyers and the charge of the jurist. Mr. Bullett sets forth with humor and subtlety the attitude of his "twelve good men and true" (two of his men are women). He is adroit, convincing, and impressive, holding his material admirably in hand, turning the spotlight now on one person, now on another, never allowing the prisoner to lose the center of the stage and yet reflecting him through the eyes of the jury.

There is sound psychology in this story, and there are sympathy and understanding. A book that holds the attention steadily fascinated by interest of plot and uncertainty of outcome, "The Jury" remains in the memory by virtue of excellent craftsmanship, and by something beyond craftsmanship—originality.

Revising Scripture

SOLOMON, MY SON! By John Erskine. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JONATHAN DANIELS

SOLOMON may have been a great and wise king but he was a puzzled young man, and Abishag was the young virgin the doctors had brought to warm old King David who was beyond warming. Pharaoh's daughter was one of Solomon's wives, and Solomon's mother was Bathsheba, who bathed upon a housetop and who, Mr. Erskine would have us believe, was not merely careless about the high place in which she chose to bathe. And there was, of course, the Queen of Sheba and a less familiar figure, young red-headed Hiram, son by the left hand of old Hiram, King of Tyre. With such a company Mr. Erskine presents his newest version of the past behind us which, as usual, is so full of the present about us. But clever as are the uses of Mr. Erskine's scholarship, amusing as the book sometimes is, a reader who has followed Mr. Erskine from Troy to Eden to Camelot cannot escape the feeling that beyond authorship he has become something like the manager of a repertoire company whose actors have a variety of costumes but know the lines of only a single play.

Of course, it would be unfair to expect that the familiar Erskine method with men and women and history, in which Solomon's story is written, should be as fresh as it was when he first made whimsy in legend of the grand tale of Troy. And apparently Mr. Erskine realizes that it would be unfair of him to give us nothing



JOHN ERSKINE

more. But he seems uncertain whether to give us the frankly romantic and melodramatic, as in Abishag's solemn and sentimental giving of all for love, or to go in the direction of mockery of our own New Deal in the public works project of building a temple with which Solomon marked his reign. Certainly no other American could have written in more delicate jibe at our current political preoccupations than Mr. Erskine if he had stuck to the line of Benaiah's protest to Solomon that

if ever the temple is finished, it will doubtless be for the glory of God, but first it will disrupt society. The lower class are seduced by this opportunity to work for the state. Shimei never gave his servants what they'll get if Hiram lets them chip away at his cedar logs. Of course Shimei has thought it out—though he loses their aid, yet through extra taxes he will be providing them with double pay.

But such satire is merely a flash in a book which seems written in uncertainty and with less jest than Mr. Erskine has taught us to expect from him.

Perhaps in Solomon and the Shulamite Mr. Erskine has not chosen his subjects as wisely as he might have done. Of course, there was Adam, as precedent, but Menelaus and Launcelot were cloaked with a dignity that it was funny to tear off. But Solomon, about whose wisdom legend has grown, has also been made the figure for ludicrous legend before. There are no thousand wives in Mr. Erskine's tale. Perhaps being cruder in spirit than Mr. Erskine I missed them.

Nevertheless I still cling in preference to that pre-Erskine version about King David and King Solomon and their youth and "their many, many wives." But when—you remember—their age came on with its "many, many qualms"—

King Solomon wrote the proverbs,
And King David wrote the psalms.

Jonathan Daniels is the author of "Clash of Angels," a satirical novel drawn from Biblical sources.

Mr. Hatcher on American Fiction

CREATING THE MODERN AMERICAN NOVEL. By Harlan Hatcher. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1935. \$3.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

MR. HATCHER tells us that "very little American fiction of the last century has any life left in it," that "by the end of the third decade of this century, the American novel had emerged as a body of serious literature," and that his book intends to "show how the American novel was lifted from its lowly place in the nation of a generation ago into a respected position in the literature of the modern world." The contemporary novel certainly deserves a discriminating study, but Mr. Hatcher has not written it. His book has the air of having been delivered as a series of lectures before the Thanatopsis Club of Main Street.

In the first place, his style has all the distressing inaccuracy of the popular literary lecturer. For example, a generation ago the American novel was being illuminated by the fine theorizing of Howells and James, not to mention many lesser men; it was everywhere being discussed as a serious contribution to American letters; and its position was probably more "respected," whatever that may mean, than it is today. It is not, however, in misapprehension of historic truth alone that Mr. Hatcher errs. His sentences have all the fuzzy indefiniteness of bad writing. "She came," he writes, "from an easier background than many of our realists." "Ben Hecht was a very self-conscious young cynic, bred by the dehumanized life that passed through Chicago's streets across the desks of a metropolitan news-



HARLAN HATCHER

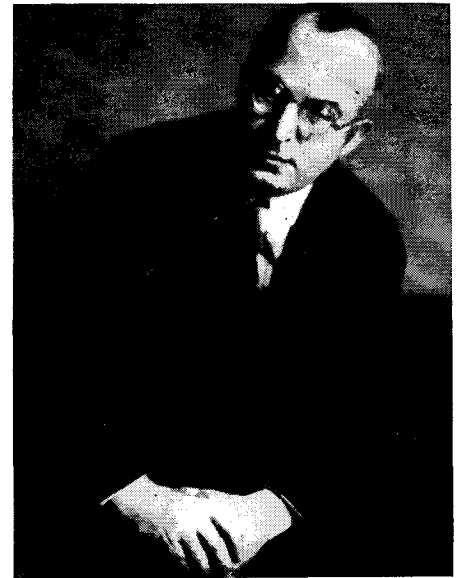
paper." "She has comforted the hearts of millions who revered her because she had written a realism which could be read in schools and women's clubs where Theodore Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson would have caused a panic." These are representative sentences selected almost at random. When freshmen write this way, their instructors require them to reconstruct their sentences.

In the next place, Mr. Hatcher tells us that "the invigorating tonic of the realistic movement" (which with characteristic inaccuracy is "applied to the American scene") is the central force in the creation of the modern fictional movement. But he nowhere tells us what he means by realism; and when we find that Theodore Dreiser (who "never wrote a caricature"), Sherwood Anderson, Ellen Glasgow, Josephine Johnson, John Dos Passos, and Willa Cather are all "realists," that James Branch Cabell "is by all odds the most important and most distinguished of American novelists in a realistic age deliberately to cultivate romance," that "poetic realism continues to attract young American writers," that William Faulkner's work is characterized by "the realism of exposure," the suspicion will not dawn that Mr. Hatcher does not know what he means by realism, or if he does, that he has failed to inform the reader.

And in the third place, Mr. Hatcher's book is absolutely lacking in critical standards. He tells us that "the greatest accomplishments yet made by an American in the psychological novel are those of Conrad Aiken," Henry James being dismissed in a paragraph; that "Upton Sinclair . . . is in a class by himself, only a little below Sinclair Lewis in literary art," that Waldo Frank and Sherwood Anderson had "the honor of pioneering [sic] a new type of American fiction," that the technique of "This Side of Paradise" is "ultra-modern . . . utilizing the impressionistic style then in its first flower through the success" of James Joyce, that Willa Cather is "the most talented of our escapists" (this is on p. 71; on pp. 191-201 this doubtful honor seems to be claimed for the "keen and graceful mind" of James Branch Cabell), that "An American Tragedy" is "by any standard . . . the greatest and most powerful novel yet written by any American," etc., etc. Perhaps as characteristic a judgment as any other is this: ". . . Howells has a high place of honor in the creation of the American novel, for better or for worse [pray, what does this mean?], and it is a part of his memorial [sic] that he properly praised Stephen Crane when all others cried the boy down and said nasty things about his forthright books."

Mr. Hatcher has tried to say something about almost every novelist of any importance who has written in the last forty years. It is, I suppose, inevitable that his book should be shallow.

Howard Mumford Jones is professor of English in the University of Michigan.



ARNOLD ZWEIG

People Are People

PLAYTHINGS OF TIME. By Arnold Zweig. New York: The Viking Press. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by SAMUEL NOCK

SOME of the short stories in this collection were written a number of years ago; some are of quite recent date. All, however, deal with the affairs of those whom the Germans call "little people" — ordinary small shopkeepers, workmen, poor people endeavoring somehow or other to get along, in war time or in the years after the war.

Although several of the stories lack what we are accustomed to seek in short stories, plot, all of them show the reaction of character to circumstance; and the circumstance is almost invariably in one way or another a result of the upheaval of values and opportunities brought about by war. Some of the stories are amusing, others are tragic; but throughout runs a vein of implied comment on the utter folly of war and what war does to those who might well go on about their little businesses, leading their little lives in contentment and happiness.

Nor is veiled comment on present-day conditions in Germany lacking. The situation of the Jews is touched upon, but only to the extent of suggesting that Jews are very much like people who are not Jews. In fact, Zweig lets a number of his characters perceive that people are very much people after all, whether in Germany or elsewhere.

The stories, however, do not preach: they are simply stories of the little adventures of unexciting people which are, thanks to the narrative talent of the author, interesting despite their cosmic unimportance.

Samuel Nock returned to America last Fall from a residence of several years in Germany.