

## A Champion of the Old Southern Order

FELICIANA. By Stark Young. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ELMER DAVIS

TO the multitudinous devotees of "So Red the Rose" Mr. Young's book will need no recommendation; those who, like this reviewer, were unable to stagger more than half way through that work of piety will find him much more palatable in small doses. These nineteen sketches, collected from magazines over some years past, deal sometimes with the Louisiana-Mississippi region, sometimes with Texas, sometimes with Italy; and New York comes in continually by derogatory implication, which from a champion of the old Southern order is reasonable and fair enough.

In the very first of the sketches the startled reader finds himself once more on the brink of that bottomless morass, the McGehee Family Connection; but Mr. Young lets him escape without getting in more than hip deep, and there is no more about the McGehees till the very end. "I sometimes think," says the author, "that nothing is worth while that is not about something else." This doctrine requires some qualification if it is not to impose a considerable burden on the reader, and most of Mr. Young's sketches are about something else than their ostensible topic; but their brevity, and the leisured suavity of his manner, make the overtones and allusions an enrichment rather than an obstacle.

In a collection of random writings no particular unity need be looked for, but one doctrine recurs again and again—that a man needs a frame, of doctrine and social order; needs "to act within something wider and greater than himself." Or, as an old Monsignor puts it: "These days

everybody is himself without reference to any idea, anything larger than himself; and so nobody is anybody." This no doubt was the informing principle of "So Red the Rose," though it was hard to follow among the McGehee cousins and in-laws. Certainly the pendulum is swinging away from individualism these days; and while the order that Mr. Young admires is gone beyond recall, he puts up a good argument for it. Nor is he mere sweetness and light; he acknowledges the existence of Evil and then turns from it to something that interests him more; which after all is more recognition than the artists of the Southern horror school accord to anything good.

Among writings so diverse readers will have various preferences; Southerners will like some of the sketches, Catholics others; while Yankee heathen may be chiefly delighted by "Jalous Business," a tribute to Creole cooking which is enough to make the crassest bourgeois individualist jump on a train to New Orleans, and eat nothing till he gets there.



HORACE MCCOY

## Life Is a Marathon

THEY SHOOT HORSES, DON'T THEY?

By Horace McCoy. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1935. \$2.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

THE coastal Attic plain originally gave its name to a foot-race featuring endurance. In our own day we are familiar with the dreary public dances that seem to go on and on forever—as long as the contestants can move at all. They are called Marathon dances. They are a witless form of spectacle patronized by the great American public. But the participants are in deadly earnest. For they dance for a money prize. And meanwhile they get free meals and a free bed.

Take a girl to whom life itself has become an unbearable Marathon. She has sized herself up, decided she is no good, and had better be out of it. She has worked it all out in her own mind, through thorough acquaintance with misfortune and the sordid side of life. She is determined.

In Hollywood she meets a boy, also down on his luck but still full of hope and vague idealism, though he is just beginning to be disillusioned. To try to recoup their fortunes they enter a Marathon dance together, to which there is a tragic ending.

The author started in to work when he was twelve, and has known life at first-hand, as newsboy, salesman, taxi-driver, soldier, and journalist. That was till five years ago, and after that he followed various callings in California, among which was that of bouncer in a Marathon dance contest. So he knows all about the grueling endurance exhibition of which he writes. A technical device of interpolation is employed in his short novel which

heightens the dramatic and ironic nature of it. But quite aside from that, it is a story of great power, a story as stripped-for-action as a racing car.

I understand that the story as you now read it was cut considerably from an original total of 90,000 words. If so, it is a masterly job of condensation. It is intensely pitiful while being just the opposite of sentimental. The atmosphere of the dance is compellingly conveyed. The characters of the boy and the girl, and of the subordinate people in the story, are clearly defined. The story has inevitable fatality.

Language is not minced in this short novel, which presents life in its most brutal aspect. So if you don't like that kind of book, don't read it. But there is nothing fake-tough about it. You are convinced that this is the way these people are. And, in the end, a young man with nothing but hope and kindness and friendliness in him is called upon to pay the extreme penalty, because of the inadequacy of the laws of society to cover the exceptional case.

But are such cases exceptional? Certainly the wastage of human life in society as at present constituted is a grim problem. And there are cruel maladjustments that seem to be inherent in life itself. Gloria at least saw honestly the futile, worthless nature of her own existence. She found nothing in herself with which to combat it. And had she been otherwise she would not have involved in her death the boy who was her only friend. She was that kind, and the novel simply accepts her and presents her. No moral is pointed and the tale is not adorned. No propaganda flourishes. But we are left with the impression that in some respects we are little better today than was Rome in its decadence; and there is a good deal of truth to that. May the truth be salutary.



STARK YOUNG

Ossip Garber

# Poetic Strategy

**GOLDEN FLEECE.** By William Rose Benét. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JOHN CROWE RANSOM

ON the jacket of Mr. Benét's collected volume the publishers have printed a statement of Mr. Mark Van Doren's: "The poetry of William Rose Benét will outlive that of many modern American poets." It is easy to concur in the estimate. Recently Mr. Benét edited an anthology for fifty living poets, and the publishers obliged him to include himself among the fifty. I should say that the number might be reduced to twenty, and Mr. Benét would still be among them, even if half a dozen poets who were not of the original fifty should find their way into the twenty, where they belong. He writes poems which I do not like—among others which I do like—but he writes them well. Of his equipment this may be said: it is adequate for accomplishing his poetic intentions.

Criticism of Mr. Benét's effects therefore is, or should be, from a special point of view, and it consists with one's respect for the poems as being just about what, one imagines, they set out to be. And some of them escape this special criticism, so far as I am the critic. I mean to give the impression of this poet as one of opulence, variety, and spirit; pretty formidable and bound to hit everybody's taste once in a while. I will document this a little. He writes romantic poems in the field which Pliny called natural history—of birds, giraffes, horses, dolphins, and dirigibles—and one of these is "Whale," which I think is humorous, tender, and majestic all at the same time, a distinguished little addition to our poetry. He also writes ballads (he is a very brave poet), and "Dark Legend," perhaps among others, seems successful, provided that an old ballad by a modern poet can be authorized. "The Fawn in the Snow" is brilliant, and nearly right in its accuracy of touch, a fine image of desolation. "The Ponies" and "Deer in Mooreland" are also symbols, under the general head of pathetic fallacy, gentler, subtler, and—I think it must be—later. "Eye and Mind" is another kind of poem altogether, one of the introspective or philosophical poems in which the conception is better than the execution; this particular one has a subject which might have made the reputation of a "metaphysical" poet, treated with the psychological delicacy of his school; and Mr. Benét does not spoil it, though he does not treat it too happily.

And so on. Mr. Benét has his successes, and in the midst of them he commits ineptitudes—as other poets do.

But more than other poets he provokes an uneasy reflection about the difficulties

which confront a living poetry today—difficulties which few poets manage to surmount, and of which he for his part seems unaware. There is a primary question of strategy. Unfortunately it is not merely bravery which wins the campaign, nor cavalry, nor artillery, nor even aeroplanes; it is strategy. Who will define the objectives that have to be attained? Mr. Benét is every inch a soldier, but I do not think he is a strategist, and his triumphs look too pyrrhic.

It is not a poetic age. Poets today are like the French royalists; very properly they—I mean the poets—identify their cause with the restoration of certain rare and innocent attitudes, bound up with certain leisures, ceremonies, and the formalism which is inseparable from art. There must be a great number of persons who would like to see the crown restored, yet cannot discover from many evidences that poetry is prepared to make the effort of adaptation necessary if it is to come back to power over a generation which has been going forward fast while it has been, so to speak, in exile.

The conditions are anti-poetic. And where, more precisely, are the enemies of poetry to be identified? They are not only those Philistines who are always a little bit sullenly ranged against it—the indifferent bourgeoisie, the stolid proletariat—though these elements may be specially chartered, confirmed, fortified, in their interests and their failures of interest, under the present economic and social preoccupations. The enemies are co-extensive with the moderns generally, and include those who wish well to poetry, and even desire it, but have trained themselves conscientiously away from the capacity to accept it under its traditional forms. Modernism is the cast of the modern mind, and with respect to the claims of poetry it is a fastidious scepticism, because it involves several things; for instance, an attitude to nature which is instrumental, and abstract almost to the point of insensibility; a suspicion of any formalities which are really innocent, esthetic merely, impractical, like meters; and an intellectualism (Mr. Benét calls it ratiocination) which is subtle and strong and does not like to abdicate. Perhaps I am describing the modern mind at its liveliest. Upon it is fastened unshakably the impression that it is a new mind and cannot be fed by antiquarians on an old po-

etry. Nobody, I think, can recover to poetry its lost ground until he can speak the contemporary language like the natives, and surprise the contemporary mind where it is actually entrenched and while it is about its actual business. The poetry must reach and overpower this mind.

I do not know how it is to be done. But I am afraid Mr. Benét's characteristic victories consist in taking abandoned positions; the enemy is not there.

The middle half of the volume records feats of this kind—poems a century or more behind the times. His recourse to the supernatural is too facile. A horse thief, in the poem by that name, is telling his story while waiting to be hanged; he has discovered himself to be Bellerophon, and is just back from an exciting ride on the stolen property out in the eighth of the Ptolemaic spheres; but as a horse thief he is an importation from the sophomore

honor roll, and his use of some cowboy language is nothing but a red handkerchief. "Merchants from Cathay" compounds two kinds of romanticism, the supernatural and the historical. The merchants come riding in appropriate trap-pings from the great Chan's court,



From the jacket of "Golden Fleece"

and the pictures of them and their big talk is jolly enough, but when they begin to tell the ruler's secrets the ground opens in flames, and the mules descend with them into what is conveniently styled "Pits Abysmal." Now romanticism always fancies superlative effects, and preferably blurry mysterious ones, or effects without proper causes; and the romantic style comes and goes eternally with the vicissitudes of literally tastes; but each time it finds it impossible to flourish upon that minimum of perceptual and intellectual distinctness which was enough for the rude fathers on its last visitation. Mr. Benét, who seems to have a different impression about this, wastes many labors of love most heroically.

Little poets write little romantic poems which are too pitiful to delude us for a moment. Mr. Benét is, shall we say, the last of the big poets who write them in a large way. He is impressive, yet it is impossible that a poet should succeed on this line of strategy. Why should he have tried it? I shall be pleased if the question is not found impertinent, for the answer might be instructive.

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