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A Historical Scenario

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF CATHERINE DE MEDICI. By Francis Watson. New York: D. Appleton-Century Co. 1935. \$3.

Reviewed by GARRETT MATTINGLY

OUR view of France under Catherine de Medici," writes Mr. Watson, "is a confusion of lurid detail, a succession of close-ups, a film with vivid shots but a thin plot." Such a confession should disarm criticism, although it does leave one wondering why anyone who could make no more sense of the period should have offered as a "Life and Times" a work so cinematographically conceived. It is true that some of the memoirists and pamphleteers of the sixteenth century lend themselves readily to what might be called the De Mille conception of history: ballets, boudoirs, baths, and blood. The Renaissance liked its sensationalism hot and strong, so that an indiscriminate sampling of the pages that catered in that day to the taste now satisfied by our relatively decorous "tabs" does result in a confusion of details sufficiently lurid. It would be wronging Mr. Watson to suggest that he makes the most of this material; he only hints at some of the nastiest stories and he is full of apologies for the impropriety of the people about whom he feels impelled to write.

Since the description "a succession of close-ups, and vivid shots" does not exclude serious distortion it may perhaps be granted. No one acquainted with history is likely to read as far as page 194, so no one is likely to be surprised to learn that the assassination of Gaspard Coligny was determined on in 1560, or to be disturbed by the treatment of the massacre of St. Bartholomew's as entirely Catherine's idea. Some of the errors in this book are

due to pure ignorance, as when the author confuses cordwainers with rope makers or Anne with Mary Boleyn, but most of them may be attributed to a Mulvaney-like unwillingness "to spoil a good story by not telling it." It would be supererogatory to list them in detail. The real complaint is the thinness of the plot. The only significant or well documented part of Catherine's life was that thirty years of unremitting effort during which she sought by a patient, tortuous diplomacy which, in spite of the painful weakness of her position and the limitations of her own character, not infrequently succeeded to preserve, in the midst of an appalling social convulsion, the power of the French crown for her worthless sons.

But that story is tremendously complicated; it would take considerable intellectual power to understand and arrange. This book prefers to devote more than half its modest length to the years before 1559 when Catherine's power began, and pads the inadequate skeleton of biography with irrelevant episodes from the standard histories, chatty discursions on art, architecture, and *ceintures de chasteté*, and bits of dubious gossip from Brantôme. Since this sort of commentary also bulks large in the last hundred pages there is naturally no time for any explanation of the Holy League or analysis of the contending parties; and the religious wars are telescoped by a head-on collision with the author's indifference.

After all, this book with its standard mixture of court pageantry, court scandal, and art criticism at the tourist level is not different from many others which have helped get sixteenth century studies into bad odor with critical moderns.

The Criminal Record

The Saturday Review's Guide to Detective Fiction

Title and Author	Crime, Place, Sleuth	Summing Up	Verdict
THE THREE COFFINS John Dickson Carr (Harpers: \$2.)	Murders of London "illusionist" and dabbler in magic reveal Dr. Fell's knowledge of vampires and the black arts.	Imposingly transparent solution of "impossible" crime involves almost too many "traps"—but takes the cake for creeps.	Class A
MERELY MURDER Georgette Heyer (Crime Club: \$2.)	Arnold Vereker (no-body loved him) found quaintly slain. Debonaire detectives and callous kin wisecrack way to killer.	Much uncommonly good dialogue, an almost too gentlemanly sleuth, and a guessable but unconvincing end.	Diverting
MURDER ON THE WAY Theodore Roscoe (Dodge: \$2.)	Fortune in Haiti lures heiress and lover to eerie chateau where everybody starts killing everybody else.	After ten brutal murders and a burial-alive there's a caco insurrection for good measure.	Super-something
THE STUFFED MEN Anthony Rud (Macaulay: \$2.)	They choked to death, they did, on a Hideous Fungus, but Jigger Masters he foiled the Villains!	Holocaust of Horror in Hempstead, Long Island, with Noseless Monsters spouting Gray Death.	Tripe

The New Books

Belles Lettres

DON QUIXOTE: An Introductory Essay on Psychology. By Salvador de Madariaga. Oxford University Press. 1935. \$2.50.

There are some books that should be reviewed either in a lengthy essay or by a brief note intended to stir the right readers to find out the contents for themselves. Such a book is Madariaga's essay on Don Quixote. There is no question that he actually has something to say. The theme of his study is based upon Cervantes's remark that he had become the stepfather of Don Quixote, in other words, that Don Quixote had taken on a life of his own which sometimes was out of the control and even out of the sympathy of his author. Madariaga feels that the struggle in the book is not so much between an outworn chivalry and a sane realism, as between the idealism of Don Quixote and the materialism of Sancho Panza. Thus he explains the impatient and brutal mishandling of Don Quixote, which must puzzle many readers who see without understanding a certain resentment in the author against his own creation. Thus he explains the tragic decline of Don Quixote who surrenders his idealism with his fantasies. Madariaga has made no attempt to discuss every aspect of this great book. He has rather desired to show why it continues to have psychological vitality when so many other character studies of the Renaissance are long since dead. What he has to say is by no means the whole explanation of "Don Quixote," but it is certainly an explanation, and one reader, at least, who has just completed a second perusal, feels that there is justice in Madariaga's definition of the book as a work of art which sometimes goes beyond the conscious knowledge of its author.

H. S. C.

Fiction

JAKE. By Naomi Royde Smith. Macmillan. 1935. \$2.50.

Miss Royde Smith's talent for communicating the subtle beauty and excitement of little things appears to advantage in her new novel. Her humor relieves the tension of this excitement and blows cool in unexpected and gratifying gusts. Both qualities added to a very intelligent interest in the varieties and inconsistencies of human nature cause the reader to follow with pleasure the story of young Jake Moore, greatest violinist of his age, his guardian, his mother, his first teacher, and certain predatory women. And he will not easily forget the author's skill in suggesting emotional undercurrents in many scenes. Most romantic, but restrained and moving, are the hours spent by the two prodigies, Jake and little Allie, mathematical genius and his worshipper, in a Swiss shepherd's hut, in the dark of the moon, drawing a map of the heavens. Throughout, the décor of the tale is romantic, the music colony Mildensee, musical Paris, alpine meadows. But these qualities do not follow the author either

in her conception of the novel as a whole or in the several scenes of great emotional disturbance. The musical triumphs of Jake, for instance, are breathlessly, gaspingly, described; the physiological effect upon the intent reader irritates him because the excellence of the book lies in its delicate and humorous perceptions.

E. C. W.

A PREFACE TO MATURITY. By Jule Brousseau. Crowell. 1935. \$2.50.

Surely no young woman ever went through the torment of self-orientation and self-integration with more dismal seriousness than Theodora Menninger, Mrs. Brousseau's protagonist in her first novel. Much of this seriousness carries over into the conception and the execution of her novel, with the result that its purposiveness is vitiated, with, at times, a humor that is as pathetic as it is unintended. This grimness, this essential humorlessness coupled with a des-

perate determination on the part of the author to see things straight and set them down honestly, makes it possible for her to write such sentences as: "But in the days and nights that followed it seemed to her that a mouth had opened, deep down beneath her spine"; or, in Theodora's first passionate encounter, permit so completely false a speech as this: "She was shaken. 'You—! Oh, I am virgin,' she stammered. 'You invade me, Alec!'"

The child of a woman who had married a man she always felt was superior to herself, and hence despised, Theodora suffered through her childhood and adolescence with a sense of separation, "apartness." She witnessed her father's disintegration by way of alcohol, and his suicide; she witnessed her mother's belated self-assertion, how she lifted herself by sheer determination into a wide success in the world of business; she broke with her mother when she learned finally what the effort had done to her—made her hard, ruthless, an exploiter of her fellow-man. But her own integration was even more difficult to come by, and she had two romantic episodes

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