

John Chamberlain: Hostage to Fortune

BY CLIFTON FADIMAN

THE office allotted by the *New York Times* to its daily book reviewer is about half the size of Groucho's stateroom in "A Night at the Opera" and is apparently constructed to prevent its inmate's thoughts from straying. I sat beside Bob Van Gelder (who is built, poor fellow, along crew-man lines) waiting for John Chamberlain, and terrified at the notion of another adult wedging himself into this sanctum-let. One inch before my nose was a wall; tacked on to this wall was a length of string, bravely trying to look like a clothes-line; and on this string a sweat-shirt and a pair of gym trunks, partly draped over a shelf of new books, were hung up to dry. They were Mr. Chamberlain's shirt and trunks and I remember thinking of them as heavily symbolic of his temperament. In the first place, they underlined the attractive, almost boyish informality which can juxtapose a sweatshirt and a severe row of books for review. In the second place, they represent the other half of Mr. Chamberlain's double life, its non-literary side. Without his daily tennis (he says he takes it as others do aspirin) he wouldn't be able to review books at all.

Well, here is Mr. Chamberlain, thirty-two years old, and one of the literary white hopes of a generation which has still to develop its Mencken and its Van Wyck Brooks. Perhaps he is the man. At any rate, he is one of the few worth keeping an eye on. In the course of a little less than three years on the *Times*, he has proved that it is possible to review a book a day and be consistently intelligent. He has attracted an audience that never before gave a rap about books, not to say book reviews. Though a daily journalist, he has influenced serious opinion. And he has developed a style, easy but not trivial, allusive but not pedantic, which people have come to look for, somewhat as they used to look for the reviews of Mr. Mencken in the old days long before Mr. Mencken went *juramentado* and started after the New Deal with a butcher knife.

Mr. Chamberlain, as has frequently been remarked, is young, and looks younger. I suppose, like so many gently nurtured, college-bred Americans, he will never really look very old. He owns a shy, deprecating smile (complete with dimple) and a tentative manner of speaking, both tending to obscure the fact that his mind has a sharpness and an unbluffability quite remote from that of the conventional college graduate. He is the kind that will never try to out-argue anyone, but on the other hand will rarely permit himself to be fooled. Hence, though in one way he is their delight, he is also the despair of book publishers.

When he started the *Times* job, he had only one idea—"to stir up the animals." He has stirred 'em.

In case you follow, as I do, Mr. Chamberlain and his opinions, here are a few facts to paste in your scrapbook, for future reverence, so to speak. He was born in New Haven, has lived all his life (with the exception of one year) in the East, attended the Loomis Institute at Windsor, Connecticut, and, following the example of his father, or maybe just for geographical convenience, went to Yale. He was no child prodigy. Before eighteen he did very little serious reading and at Yale was a good but far from brilliant student. His class ('25) was very footbally and, possibly in reaction, he turned gradually to the world of ideas, in defiance of all decent college traditions. We pass rapidly over the fact that he wrote poetry and note that he was on the board of the *Yale Literary Magazine*, ran an F.P.A.-ish column in the *Daily News*, and was chairman of the *Yale Record*. He specialized in a mild way in history and was fortunate in having his eyes opened to contemporary literature by his roommate, William Troy, who is now a most notable critic himself.

Once free of Yale, he fiddled around aimlessly in the big city for a while, and then got a job with Thomas F. Logan, Inc., writing ad copy. It lasted four months. He followed this with three years with the *Times*, as a reporter, covering one thing and another (including Washington) and finding his interests tending more and more toward problems of national politics and economics. (It was this period that gave him his practical grounding in the American scene and enables him to consider a book on politics as

soundly as he does Willa Cather's latest novel. He is no "literary" book reviewer.) Toward the end of 1928, he took John Carter's place as assistant to J. Donald Adams on the *Sunday Times Book Review*, quickly made a reputation for himself as a first-rate man, and capped the first part of his career by publishing in 1932 his brilliant "Farewell to Reform." For five months he was one of the editors of the *Saturday Review of Literature* (adv.) and from September 1933 to date he has been running his remarkable daily column in the *Times*. He is now about to make another jump. This week he goes with *Fortune* and his friends will echo the wish that fortune may go with him. (His first assignment, by the way, is a study of the Supreme Court, the only nine in existence made up of six right-fielders and three left-fielders.)

To my mind any daily book reviewer is a marvel but Mr. Chamberlain is something extra-special. For he has rarely been satisfied merely to recapitulate the content of a book, add a little harmless gossip, and close with a helpful paragraph of casual judgment. His stuff has been analytic, more like monthly periodical journalism than like the hurried product of the daily grind. How did he do it? For one thing, he has that peculiar journalistic gift of being able to write—and write well—under pressure. And he writes quickly, straight on to the typewriter, without much revision, 1200 words in an hour and a half (which makes him a good typist too). If you think it's easy to write 1200 sensible words about a single book in an hour and a half and keep this up five times a week for three years, just take three years off



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and try it. Let me know how you make out.

One thing that helped Mr. Chamberlain to do his job as well as he did, is a phenomenal Macaulayan memory. He never looks up the facts which back his opinions. They come to him, unbidden, out of the pages of ponderous volumes read long ago. Huneker had this kind of associative memory, but Mr. Chamberlain has judgment in addition. Furthermore, Mr. Chamberlain has something not all book reviewers are able to retain. He has for books, for the printed page, the line of type, not merely that facile enthusiasm which becomes a primary reflex with any competent literary hack, but a genuine passion.

Toward the end he was beginning to get a bit dizzy, not because the strain was so great, but because of the effect of continuous book reviewing on his naturally orderly mind. There was no chance to follow up anything. The universe of ideas became fragmented, split up into five books a week, all different, all disconnected. There was no chance to relate the thousands of things that the publishers incessantly poured into his brain. Any book reviewer (this is an old hack speaking) will confess that ten conscientious years at the game completely unfits the mind for doing any precise thinking. In one sense, after ten years you know too much—and you have had no time to do anything with the much you know. Hence, it's a good thing that Mr. Chamberlain is bidding his farewell to reviewing. He may now have a chance to look inside his mind and figure out what has been accumulating all this time.

My hunch is that good things will come out of him, and I base my hunch, not only on his past record, but on one of his fundamental characteristics. The great advantage he has over many of his writing contemporaries is that he is profoundly educable, even at thirty-two. He is no mere gentlemanly skeptic in the Anatole France tradition (whatever happened to that tradition, by the way?) but a man who, though he has plenty of firmly held opinions, still preserves, in these non-open-minded days, an open mind. Politically, he tends to the observer-type, but characterizes himself as a "free-lance radical who refuses to be bound." (It should be mentioned here that during his entire incumbency, though he was obviously considerably to the left of its editorial page, the *Times* never hampered his freedom of expression in any way.)

Except for that business of mental fragmentation referred to above, Mr. Chamberlain believes his last three years well-spent. He has managed not to get caught in the literary cocktail whirl (though he likes cocktails, and his family all Congregationalists, too!). He doesn't believe he has written any real criticism, because he doesn't think a daily reviewer can. "Well, occasional sentences, maybe," he adds thoughtfully. Looking over his immediate

past, he considered his most flagrant error of judgment the high praise he accorded Du Bose Heyward's "Mamba's Daughters." Asked what book he had reviewed in the last three years had impressed him most, his mind went completely blank. Which is the correct and inevitable reviewer's reaction. But going further back in time (before he had to read books as a business) he was able to name a few that had radically rearranged his mental furniture: "This Side of Paradise," Randolph Bourne's "Untimely Papers," the works of Thorstein Veblen and William Graham Sumner, among others. (It is notable that his reading background, in distinction to that of many of his contemporaries, is largely American. He missed the wave of interest in Continental and particularly French literature.)

He thinks Edmund Wilson and Van Wyck Brooks the best living American critics and would rather read Archibald MacLeish than any other contemporary American poet. If permitted by the gods to do any reading for pleasure, he would go back and read dusty, formidable old boys like Gibbon. He thinks his own generation, as compared with its predecessor, knows more but has less personality, which seems a fair judgment. Among reviewers he most admires Malcolm Cowley and Robert Cantwell. He believes Heywood Broun the best all-round journalist in America, and judges New York journalism too gentle to develop the hard-boiled Hecht-MacArthur type. He prefers to write about things he knows little of in order to learn something about them in the process; and some day hopes to write books—not literary criticism, but nice, solid ones, biographies, studies of American history and social psychology, that sort of thing.

Like most of his generation, he tends to think more about the world than himself. (This, roughly, marks the difference between the Hemingway-men and those who were too young for the war.) But this objectivity, in his case, is not merely a matter of seriousness of temperament, but of genuine modesty. He is the only literary man I know who blushes when you praise him.

The last book he read for pleasure was "Tristram Shandy." That was back in 1933. He admits that, had it been a new book, he would have given it a good review.

Clifton Fadiman is the book-reviewer for The New Yorker.

Feeble Human Nature

THE THINKING REED. By Rebecca West. New York: The Viking Press. 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by AMY LOVEMAN

MISS REBECCA WEST'S customary sparkle and cleverness are qualities which should make a light novel from her pen more than commonly entertaining. She has subtlety, wit, and penetration, and a deft and darting malice that demolishes pretensions and bluster. All of these qualities show fitfully through this tale of love, and lov-

ers, and marriage, to tantalize attention and rouse regret that her brilliant abilities have produced so indifferent a story.

She gets off, to be sure, to an excellent start in her portrayal of the efforts of a beautiful American widow to extricate herself from an outworn infatuation for a French man of the world. There is an oblique satire in the depiction of Isabelle's attempt to rid herself of



REBECCA WEST

André de Verviers, an ironical humor in her discovery that in divesting herself of one lover she has alienated the other who had superseded him in her affections, that deserve better than the absurd incredibility of the marriage which, to save her face, she makes with the enormously wealthy and equally naïve Marc Sallafrange.

Miss West has the faculty of standing apart from her characters and viewing them with detachment. She is sensible of the vagaries that govern conduct, sensitive to the moods that modify it. She shows at times insight and understanding, and she writes with ease and fluency, even though she is frequently mannered and affected. But it is only intermittently that her story rises above the level of mediocrity, and incredible as it may seem of the brilliant Miss West, her novel for long stretches is dull and banal. Its incidents in those scenes in which Isabelle and her husband are shown amongst their associates on the Riviera and in Le Touquet are far-fetched where they are not commonplace; the society depicted is shoddy, the conversations trivial. Nowhere does Miss West probe profoundly; everywhere the emotion is thin, and the wit plays only over the surface of society. Miss West's story is light, moderately entertaining, and entirely unimportant.