

# Books of the Fall

*Advance reports on the season's important books, submitted by*

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY, CHRISTOPHER MORLEY, WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

*Of the Book-of-the-Month Club Selection Committee*

Rather than publish a complete list of Fall books, which after all is only a book list and can seldom help any one to make his choice, The Saturday Review offers informal opinions by three of the judges of the Book-of-the-Month Club. In their official capacity they have read most of the principal books already published this season or to appear within the next two months. Their opinions as expressed herein make a useful and highly selective guide to Fall reading. In their reports, the titles not yet published have been marked with an asterisk.—The Editors.

## Mr. White:

MY impression of the books that have come across my desk for the year 1936, as reader for the Book-of-the-Month, is that on the whole those books were not so interesting as the books of the year before. Possibly the let-down was in my attention. But these books of '36, with one or two exceptions, seem to me to lack a certain distinction. In the lot was one super-best seller, "Gone with the Wind." I picked it as my first choice for the Book-of-the-Month because obviously it would be a best seller. It seemed obviously "a wrap-up," a thing sold in advance and a customer made happy. My own choice that month, the month that "Gone with the Wind" came along, would have been a book like Joseph Jastrow's "Story of Human Error."\* If I were picking my favorite book, that type of book, which is not generally a best seller, would be chosen as the Book-of-the-Month club prize too often. It's just as well that we have on our reading committee several minds with varied tastes. I suppose the book that I liked better than any of the half a hundred I have read this year was Stuart Chase's "Rich Land, Poor Land," a vital book, a terrible book which should be made compulsory reading in every high school and college in this land, yet one which alas will have a limited sale and fall into the hands of men and women who agree with it in advance. "Who Owns America," edited by Herbert Agar and Allen Tate, was another book of much the same kind that pleased me. It was written by apostles of discontent. These Jeremiads—and, in the list of books I read this year, "American Democracy and the World War" was another, and "Pacific Adventure" by Willard Price was not such a hopeful story—seem to me to be the best medicine for our current ills of the flesh. Complacency in this hour for the American is a sopo-

rific, the opium administered to democracy in danger.

In my list, however, were a number of corking good stories, "Drums Along the Mohawk," for instance, by Walter Edmonds. It reminded me of a book of adventure published in the 1870's called "Our Western Border One Hundred Years Ago," one which my father bought of a subscription book agent and which filled my young days with delight and my dreams with pleasant horrors. This "Drums Along the Mohawk" story, a story of cruel fighting Indians, was the sort of thing that my generation was reared on, strong pap, probably about as bad as the gangster movies today, yet we survived. But perhaps we might have been much better if we'd been properly led away to the Elsie books; I don't know.

I enjoyed "The Brothers Ashkenazi," but it was not a book for the center table. It was an honest, serious discussion of one of the major problems of modern Europe in fiction form, as Maurice Hindus's "Moscow Skies" was a fictional travelogue in the Russia of 1933 and '34,—a true picture apparently and one that a reader who desires to know about Russia should read. He should also realize that events are moving so fast in the Soviet world that "Moscow Skies" is practically a historical novel. Probably it is out of step with the world this minute. Herbert Gorman, who always writes a good story whether biography or fiction, did a splendid job with "The Mountain and the Plain." His research is always careful, his picture authentic even if his story sometimes gets a little melodramatic. But the French Revolution was melodramatic and probably Mr. Gorman's fiction was on the safe side of truth. Anyway, it was a pleasant book.

Two other pleasant and enjoyable books were Donald Culross Peattie's "Green Laurels" and Malvina Hoffman's "Heads and Tales." I liked Joseph Dinneen's forthcoming "Ward Eight"\* but it was too good a movie scenario to be the novel it might have been. If they do that faithfully on the screen, I shall go to see it and take my friends. It will make a beautiful, significant, disturbing picture of American urban political life. "African Witch," by Joyce Cary, is a grand tale. It will have to go to the screen to get its best interpretation. There indeed would be a super travelogue which has not been equaled in the movies since "Trader Horn" went down the road.

The books I liked least in the year's list

were probably the best books submitted, "Green Margins," by E. P. O'Donnell, and William Faulkner's shortly to be published "Absalom, Absalom."\* "Green Margins" is a succession of dirty stories about dirty people, beautifully told. In my youth, having lived in a country town familiar with the vengence of the hayloft, the hay stack, the livery stable, and the old-fashioned saloon, with the Rabelaisian rhymes of the boys at the swimming hole still jingling in my memory, I don't seem to need a revival of that sort of plaisance in my declining years. It doesn't revolt me. Heaven knows, nothing ever can shock me, with the fond recollections of my innocent childhood hovering like lascivious ghosts through the secret places of my heart. But Lord, I'm like old Solomon who cried out, "Comfort me with apples and stay me with flagons, for I am sick of love," certainly sick of having that kind of love smeared under my nose as literature. It is *Ersatz*. And I don't seem to need compensations.

As to William Faulkner's book, I've tried and tried to surrender myself to the obvious gentleness of his personality, to his tender heart, to the warmth that glows through whatever he writes, the warmth of a genuinely human person. But one must burrow through pages of detached uprooted ideas, like a pig hunting truffles, to get what he is driving at. And why do it? And here is a pointer—in the 80's and 90's, Henry James and Meredith wrote that kind of involved, obscure, literary crossword puzzle stuff—shelves full of it.

I spent some days of my youth and not a few nights digging into it and thinking I was dumb because I rejected it. Men said, "Here's the style of the future; here's beautiful English; here's a literary consummation of the hopes of the doctrinaires of a new art." Well, where is the new art now? Is anyone excited about "Richard Feverel," a fine novel, by the way, or "The Golden Bowl?" They also and all their kind are "gone with the wind."

Someone would be doing William Faulkner a kindness to make an inter-linear translation of "Absalom, Absalom" in plain, straightforward, Sunday supplement newspaper English. He has doubtless told a good story, but after reading it "through long nights of labor and days devoid of ease" I don't seem to get the hang of it. However I am charmed and warmed by something back of those baffling lines that must come out of the

(Continued on page 26)

# The BOWLING GREEN by Christopher Morley

## Reperusal

I WAS a little grieved—with the petulance of the egotist, I suppose—when I read as follows in Herbert West's pleasant *Modern Book Collecting for the Impecunious Amateur*:—

"I suspect a good many readers first discovered Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith in 1933 when he published his *On Reading Shakespeare*."

This seemed less than fair to the *Trivia* zealots who have been by no means lacking ever since that little vinaigrette classic was first published for general circulation in 1917. It cast a shadow on the Green which has for so many years belabored its customers with petition and advice in re Mr. Pearsall Smith. And in looking up the bibliography of L. P. S., Mr. West will even find that some of the sketches included in the volume *More Trivia* (1922) were first printed in a newspaper column in Philadelphia.

I enjoyed Mr. West's book, which is written in a lively and positive spirit and with the good purpose of inoculating the small-pursed collector. He is brisk and sensible on the matter of signed and limited editions and all sorts of phony de luxes. He starts various hares of anecdote or controversy which I should enjoy to help him pursue. In some cases the hare might escape while we were bickering for I don't always agree with him. For instance I don't think *Goodbye Mr. Chips* "extraordinary." The ship *Erin's Isle*, in which William McFee was almost born, was not a "schooner" but a square-rigger. My impression is that Swinburne and Watts-Dunton used to walk together not in the "north" of London but in the southwest (Putney Heath). Some of Mr. West's biographical allusions are rather sketchy—for instance in the case of the distinguished Bone family. These matters are important enough to require a background of sure fact.

These cavils are mentionable, in a mood of fraternal backchat, because Mr. West's book is of a good sort and on the right track. Naturally it pleases me that we have many favorites in common. When he talks of Neil Munro (though he several times calls him "Hugh" Munro), Mary Webb, James Elroy Flecker, Wilfrid Blunt, Sir Hugh Clifford, Roy Campbell and various others, I swing my hat. I wish he had spoken more at large about the divine Stella Benson. He says he has had Tomlinson's *The Sea and the Jungle*, first edition, offered him for as low as five guineas. Dare I prick him by confiding that I bought my copy (in 1920) from the State Library of Harrisburg, Pa., for One Dollar? They were glad to dispose of it then as unread and unwanted.

Had we but world enough, and time, Mr. West and I could find plenty to metabolize together. The grand old *Caronia*, for instance: he says he crossed in her in '24. Does he remember the expansion joint, a sort of flexible fissure (or suture) that ran right across her middle? But he was reading Conrad's *Rover* that voyage and I have a feeling that he didn't admire *Caronia* as she deserved. Does he remember the big fireplace in the smokeroom; the whiteheaded old Night Steward who brought around sandwiches and coffee in the middle watch; and the cranks in the engine-room—I mean mechanical cranks, those noble big connecting rods, the largest ever cast they used to tell us. O lyric love, half piston and half crank, I used to cry. . . . What a ship! She even



L. P. S., AGED FOUR

had a book dedicated to her, if only a little one.

I could even argue with Mr. West about the frontispiece of his book, "A Corner of the Author's Library." I'm a bit worried about it, I don't think a library should look quite so prim. . . . That sounds unmannerly, but Mr. West will understand. Collectors are jot-hounds and tittle-baiters. What would look among others like picking a quarrel is really the flush of kinspiracy. Bibliophiles of the right kidney are sea-lawyers and quidnuncs; in the delirium of their mystery their eyes roll together in a comical insane gleam—like a dog's when he shakes his head. Not without reason is Crotchet Castle their home and Crabbe one of their poets.

The very day after reading Mr. West's book, and thinking to myself that I had

been a Pearsall Smith devotee for exactly a quarter of a century—it was in 1911 that I found a pleasantly faded copy of *The Youth of Parnassus* in an Oxford bookshop; in the words of Lord Houghton's pretty poem

This was not the work of days  
But had gone on for years and years—

I happened into one of those intelligent bookshops where like narrow estuaries the tide rises faster and sooner than on the broad sandy shores of trade. There I saw Pearsall Smith's new book, *Reperusals and Re-Collections*, already published in London but not yet (to my knowledge, at least) announced over here. Mr. Smith speaks therein of Edward FitzGerald as the master of the art of reperusal, the exquisite and refreshing renewal of old enthusiasms. In this elderly and savoring spirit, both ripe and acrid, Pearsall Smith at seventy has put together some of his enduring amours of print. And for the whole of one felicitously rainy day I rolled his fine flavors on my tongue. I sat or sprawled by an open fire (my curst Italian stonemason made the fireplace opening so low that to enjoy the blaze one has to squat on the floor; and perhaps that affords a literary parable) or occasionally rambled into the wet garden to rummage my own memories with those of this beloved old bachelor whom I always think of as the ideal intellectual uncle. Alert ironist, patient precisian of words, still endearingly young in so many moods, what finer uncle or godfather could there be for any sensitive prose mind. (O. W. Firkins was another, in his own way. Perhaps only England or the Middle West, both somewhat exempt from the muddy sophistries and yowling self-conscious bravado of the Atlantic coast, could stimulate so clear a mood.) In the very first paragraph of this new book I found a happy and humorous apologia for my own feelings about Pearsall Smith:—

There are readers—and I am one of them—whose reading is rather like a series of intoxications. We fall in love with a book; it is our book, we feel, for life; we shall not need another. We cram-throat our friends with it in the cruellest fashion; make it a Gospel, which we preach in a spirit of propaganda and indignation, putting a woe on the world for a neglect of which last week we were equally guilty.

And so, in his own spirit of possessed excitement, I lived through Pearsall Smith's professions of faith. Montaigne, Madame de Sévigné, John Donne, Jeremy Taylor, Jane Austen, Carlyle—had I not also—no matter how transiently—sat under all those pulpits too (very likely

(Continued on page 20)