

Meet the

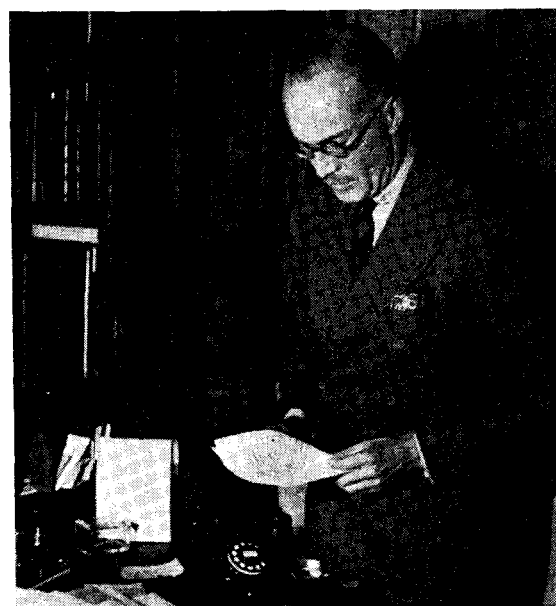
Saturday Review News Pictures



LIN YUTANG, author of "My Country and My People," interviewed in Asia magazine's offices. He will spend the next year near Princeton, N. J., writing a book on the art of living.



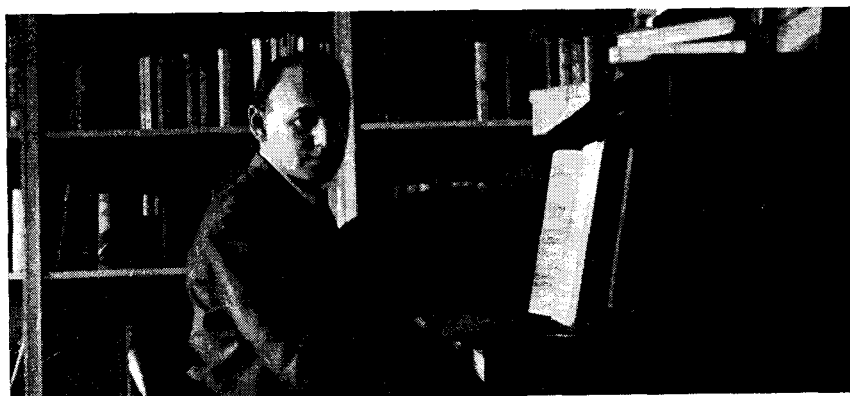
Dr. Lin explains to the Herald Tribune reporter that the art of living doesn't mean philosophy or "high-flown thoughts" but "the superficialities of which life is made up."



COL. RALPH W. ISHAM, owner of the Boswell MSS from which the first complete edition of the "Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides" will be issued next month, holds an unpublished letter from Voltaire to Boswell. Writing in English from Ferney, Voltaire disclaims knowledge of the soul, and refers Boswell to young scholars and priests.



CORNELIA OTIS SKINNER, widely known monologist of "The Wives of Henry the Eighth," takes a bow for her book of humorous sketches, "Excuse It, Please." Here she is with clippings of early reviews.



GILBERT SELDES (above), author of "Mainland," at home with the lively art of George Gershwin; I. J. SINGER (below), who wrote "The Brothers Ashkenazi," occupies an editorial desk in the office of The Jewish Daily Forward.



Authors...

of the Month by Robert Disraeli



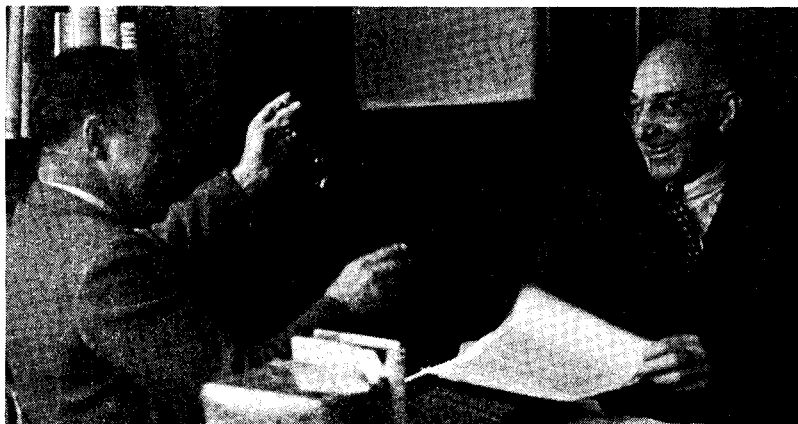
P. G. WODEHOUSE (above), with Mrs. Wodehouse and their Pekes, en route to Hollywood, where he will write for MGM . . . MARJORIE HILLIS (below), author of "Live Alone and Like It," in her Tudor City apartment.



DR. VICTOR G. HEISER (right) tells Storer Lunt of W. W. Norton & Co. (his publishers) how he was saved from after-dinner speaking in Samoa...



. . . because the Samoans, who take oratory seriously, got a professional speaker for him. The story is told in "An American Doctor's Odyssey."



JOHN MASEFIELD (above) who came to America to read his poem written for the Harvard Tercentenary . . . (Right) Photographers represented in "U. S. Camera, 1936" (Disraeli among them) exhibit at Radio City.




The Saturday Review
of LITERATURE

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The Code Napoleon

BY an inscrutable paradox of criticism, unpretentious fiction is judged under the Code Napoleon whereas fiction which sets out to be literature is granted the more comfortable jurisdiction of the Common Law. Let a novelist intend only to entertain the leisure moments of his audience with a good story about recognizable people, and no matter how effectively he does what he intended to do, reviewers will denounce him in the court house square for not writing "Ulysses." He may have mastered his technique, he may give his audience the momentary pleasure he aimed to, he may thoroughly succeed within the terms he set himself, he may display superior intelligence and expert craftsmanship—but if it is possible to call the material trivial, frivolous, or even unimportant, then he is sternly told to remember Thomas Mann and sentenced to the literary doghouse. The clumsiest workman or the most mediocre intelligence, however, need only to tackle the cosmic in order to begin, so far as the reviewers are concerned, with high, low, jack, and the game already in his hand. An implicit assumption of importance is all that a novelist needs to be treated with respect, though a confident assertion on his own behalf will serve him even better. There exists a relative scale of importance which changes somewhat with the fashion, conferring significance *per se* on novels about the ileac aspects of farm life at one time, on novels of beautiful despair at another time, and on novels about the tonic spirituality of farm life sometime later. But also there appears to be a fixed scale which makes it impossible at any time to write an unimportant novel about homosexuality, for example, or about the defeat of a generation or the philoprogenitiveness of an eccentric family or the soul of America. And anyone at all who writes with sixteen-cylinder pretentiousness customarily finds that he has to prove not that he is important but only that he doesn't want to be unimportant. His book is cus-

tomarily reviewed on the soundest of Victorian principles: not failure but low aim is crime.

A more sensible basis would be the exact contrary. Writers who intend to offer no competition to Jules Romains ought not to be assailed for not intending to. Confronting a novel which sets out merely to tell a good story, report topically some of the moods of the moment, or be gay or melancholy about something less fundamental than the law of falling bodies, a reviewer ought to be required to deal with it in its own terms. The reviewer may be saddened by the depravity of a novelist who chooses to write a good yarn when mankind is clearly not yet saved, civilization is at the crossroads, and all the artistic possibilities of incest have not yet been explored. But that choice is not the reviewer's affair, and if he uses his space bidding the author repent for the hour is at hand, slanging him with Joyce, or pointing out how dreadfully the yarn falls short of the everlasting verities, he not only makes something of an ass of himself but betrays the reader as well. The reader may not be interested in salvation or even in Joyce, though actively interested in good yarns and in learning whether this is one of them. The reviewer's job is to tell him—to appraise the book according to the standards of its kind and intent. To be interested in good reading, as distinguished from literature, is not actionable under statute or in equity, and to write a book for the purpose of entertaining someone or describing experience less than eternal is surely not crime.

But just as surely, when it comes to literature failure is the worst crime and no loftiness of aim can atone for it. The writer who sets himself the highest goal must reach it—or criticism should lay him by the ears. The art of fiction is austere; it is so important that it cannot permit fumbling, indirection, awkwardness, or fake. Unhappily, many people try to practise it with no more equipment than a pure soul, a fervent heart, and the most commendable intent; and unhappily critics are prone to accept such equipment as enough. A number of sizable reputations today rest on the single fact that their possessors have sweated mightily at a job so noble in conception or so vague in meaning that it must be great. Certain leading novelists have never expressed an idea complex or mature or subtle enough to trouble the intelligence of a high school boy, and one has no difficulty in remembering others who write English as if doing calisthenics with a bad cold. But they are or seem to be men of great seriousness, and the jobs to which they apply themselves heave with solemnity, and that has been enough. They seem to be grappling with the cosmos and so criticism is content to call them great.

All of which is clearly wrong. Rather, let the novelist beware, the ambitious novelist, the novelist as artist. He under-

takes to tell us something true about the world and mankind, to illuminate some part of the darkness, to dissipate some of the mystery of experience, to reconcile or propitiate us with genuine emotions wrought out of genuine knowledge in the profundities of the soul. It is an exalted undertaking and it does the novelist great credit, but let him enter upon it at his peril. It calls for the highest possible attributes, and he had better have them. If he does not tell us truth, then he is a failure and must be denounced as one in the interest of the art he serves. If he does not dissipate mystery and illuminate darkness, he will be just tawdry. If he does not have the knowledge he pretends to have, he will be mere fake and the intensity of his dedication will be no defence. The obligation of criticism is to insist that he be good or to denounce him as intolerably bad. For criticism, his purpose and his purity, however high, however honorable, however solemn, can never substitute for achievement. They must be disregarded altogether and the thing itself must succeed or the art of fiction is mocked.

Let the two codes be reversed. Ask of a book only that it shall do what it starts out to do—but insist on its doing that. In unpretentious fiction there is room for charity, and the Common Law should apply: let a book be considered good until it is shown to be bad. But the art of fiction, to protect itself from the mediocre, the bungling, the pretentious, and the phony, must insist on more rigorous judgment. If a book presents itself as important, if it aspires to high achievement, then criticism must put the onus of proof on the defence, on the book itself, and must hold that it is bad unless that it can unanswerably demonstrate that it is first-rate.

Ten Years Ago

The Fall Announcement Number of *The Saturday Review* in 1926 included reviews of a number of widely read books. Among them was Montgomery Belgium's review of Arnold Bennett's "Lord Raingo," reputedly a *roman à clef* based on the character of Lord Beaverbrook. Mr. Belgium admitted the grounds for this contention, but presented even stronger evidence to the contrary, pointing out that if Lord Raingo "has any prototype at all, it is Mr. Bennett himself as Mr. Bennett reveals himself in his various writings." Of the conclusion of this novel, the reviewer wrote: "I believe it is one of the most remarkable passages in modern fiction, standing beside Mr. Bennett's own famous account of an execution in 'The Old Wives' Tale.'"

Reviewed in the same issue were "Harmer John," by Hugh Walpole, "The Ninth Wave," Carl Van Doren's only novel, and "The Chariot of Fire," Bernard DeVoto's second novel.