

Fiction Drowned in Talk

THE JOURNEY DOWN. By Aline Bernstein. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1938. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BERNARD DeVOTO

MRS. BERNSTEIN'S novel deals, in nine episodes, with the love affair between a great literary genius and this year's most sensitive spirit, a woman who paints, designs costumes for the theater, and talks in phrases by Black, Starr, Frost & Gorham. Neither he nor she is ever given a name, but the third story in Mrs. Bernstein's earlier "Three Blue Suits," which deals with the same people and fits in here just after the fifth episode, shows that his name is Eugene. Little characterization is expended on him and, in fact, little attention is paid to him. He is gigantic physically and suffers from a kind of giantism in his speech and in his ideas about himself, which the lady shares. He makes love to her by telling her that she comes from a dung hill, that she belongs to the stable, that she is a flower growing from filth, that her breasts are like melons, that she smells like a Jew. He models his behavior on the romantic tradition of geniuses. He forgets to turn off the faucets in the bathroom, he stands shaving and seeing visions for hours on end, he works all night writing indescribably magnificent prose, he weeps and also has ecstasies—that sort of thing. All his adjectives have a high amperage, he bellows and throws people about, his phantasies are populated by malevolent enemies who are trying to inflict immeasurable cruelties on him. He

seems to be, that is, a megalomaniac. He would have been an interesting character if some use had been made of him in the novel, but his only function is to start the lady talking.

This is the usual mechanism of the episodes: after some prefatory matter, the genius says, "Tell me what you saw this morning," "Tell me what it was like when you were a little girl," or "Tell me about the vegetables in your garden," and the lady tells him for thirty pages of genuine, hand-painted prose. She is hell on overtones and nuances, and determined to let none of them escape her. Her ailment would appear to be systemic hyperaesthesia complicated by logorrhoea. It is fine talk and even finer writing, the kind of tense and mannered sensibility that furnished forth the little magazine of twenty years ago, an attempt to sublimate pure mood. Ineffable but unbearably portentous moods turn on the curve of a parsley leaf, a glimpse of a face in the city street, the colors of sky and foliage in that one moment when the luminous twilight pauses and seems trembling toward revelation. The lady is as sensitive as possible to all forms of beauty; she has a low flash-point and a hair-trigger. But fiction gets drowned in talk. The reader perks up in one episode when a fortune teller succeeds in getting the ball away from her, but the seeress also is sensitive and talks in just the same way. The point of the novel is that the genius discarded the lady, who alone of all women understood and loved him, but the reader can take that with composure. She merely talked herself out of a job.

The Criminal Record

The Saturday Review's Guide to Detective Fiction

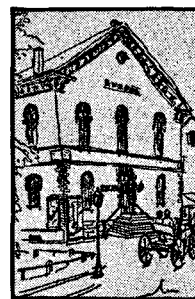
| Title and Author | Crime, Place, Sleuth | Summing Up | Verdict |
|---|---|---|------------------------|
| THE MYSTERY OF THE PAINTED NUDE William Gore (Crime Club: \$2.) | River Thames disgorges painting and naked corpse. Insp. Penk invades surrealistic circles to find solution. | Penk's adventures among advanced artists add hilarious spice to yarn that violates sundry rules but has zest. | Unusual |
| THE CLOUDED MOON Max Saltmarsh (Knopf: \$2.50.) | Sudden death of girl and detective on Riviera plunge novelist Stern and friend Lumsden into maelstrom. | Modicum of mystery but plenitude of thrills in tale of clever criminals, devil worship, and blazing forests. | Thriller |
| BRIGADE OF SPIES Wm. J. Makin (Dutton: \$3.) (Non-fiction) | Huge amount of inside—and some old—stuff about post-war spies and their machinations in Europe and Asia. | Writing verges on Sunday-supplementish, but facts are fascinating—especially "Spies of Science" section. | Sinisterly informative |
| MIDNIGHT AND PERCY JONES Vincent Starrett (Covici-Friede: \$2.) | Concert singer shot; radio announcer vanishes; another killing—and drama critic Blackwood spots third death before case closes. | Chicago night life, cynically amusing cops, bullet spattered climax, plentiful red herrings, and gruesome solution, expertly blended. | Worth while |
| MURDER ON THE NOISE George Bagby (Crime Club: \$2.) | Crooner slain as broadcast ends. Insp. Schmidt learns much about radio, uncovers slick racket, nets slayers. | Inside dope on addled antics of air-wavers and bountiful action quell doubts about method of major murder. | Higher brackets |

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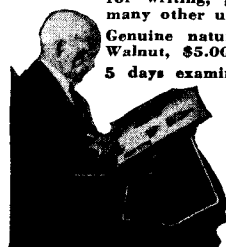
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The New Books

Belles Lettres

FREE SPEECH AND PLAIN LANGUAGE. By Albert Jay Nock. Morrow. 1937. \$3.

Albert Jay Nock is an old-fashioned liberal individualist. He fancies himself as a citizen of that purely imaginary republic of which Thomas Jefferson was prophet and high priest. Mr. Nock spends much time in Belgium and in a realm of ideas which brook no concessions to expediency or even to practicality. He writes lean, athletic English tinged with an ironic humor akin to that of the eighteenth century British essayist. He writes well.

"Free Speech and Plain Language" is an assortment of essays most of which were first published as magazine articles. Mr. Nock's articles are his conversations with himself which he paused to write upon paper. Very good conversation, too. He believes in free speech without reservation. His kind of free speech is possible only to those rare persons who know precisely what they mean when they use words. He presupposes a degree and a spread of intelligence and wisdom difficult to locate in any land.

His arguments are so fundamental that in places he seems to be irresponsible. This is because he is following to the end the logic of his belief. Surrenders to expediency are, in his scheme, the sin against the Holy Ghost. The philosophers who measure the worth of principles by the consequences which flow from them are not the saints of this system.

But whether we accept or reject the teachings of so detached and remote an observer, his book provides pleasant reading for more than one evening's leisure.

W. L. C.

Fiction

ROOT IN THE ROCK. By D. H. Southgate. Knopf. 1938. \$2.50.

The native brown races have preoccupied a good many novelists this year. The task of interpreting customs, minds, religions, and speech idioms into an English which will make them seem veritable and moving is a formidable one. Unfortunately the reader is callously untouched either by the amount of research a writer may have put into assembling his material or the amount of genuine fervor which has pushed him into writing the book. The actual words on the actual pages are all he sees or can feel. And the actual words on the actual pages of "Root in the Rock" did not, for us, do the trick of taking India and the Brahmin woman Latchmi out of the factual descriptions of any of several non-fiction books on the same subject and giving them independent fictional life.

Because it is apparent that the author has taken pains, has gathered information, and is genuinely disturbed by the plight of the Brahmin woman, it seems unkind to say that the book does not come off. Nevertheless, as fiction, it does

not. Latchmi is a child bride. Her sufferings, the shame of her sterility, the son who is finally "given" her by a temple "god," the horror of life in her mother-in-law's house, and the cruelty of her position as a widow are sociologically moving; but they are not fiction. When her son becomes a medical student, outraging and breaking with his caste, when the son's daughter in her turn tries to throw off India and embrace the West, the book is a treatise, and a serious one. But it bears the same relation to a novel that the Red Cross float in the Armistice Day parade bears to a dressing station behind the front lines.

I have no doubt that the author has lived in India. It is entirely possible that he (or she, the initials reveal nothing, but the writing seems to be that of a woman) is an Indian. But, unlike Pearl Buck, unlike Vicki Baum who has lately and rather surprisingly made the Balinese protagonists of a good novel, D. H. Southgate is not a story teller. Louis Bromfield's "The Rains Came," set in India and beyond question written with less high purpose than "Root in the Rock," nevertheless makes its Indian characters more believable people, more vividly seen, than any in this book, for all its creator's earnestness.

F. W.

ENCHANTED OASIS. By Faith Baldwin. Farrar & Rinehart. 1938. \$2.

Take a lovely young girl; give her peach-blossom skin inherited from the English lady of title who died in giving her birth, and hair the color of a new penny inherited (together with a fabulous number of new dollars) from an American father; transport her from the beech woods of Sussex to Palm Springs; compromise her in a canyon with a rich, handsome, and idealistic pseudo-cowboy; stir and spice with a wicked stepmother; garnish with a hard-boiled movie star faithful beyond death though in heart alone, of course, to the no-count gambler she married when a child; and you almost have Faith Baldwin's latest. Almost, but not quite; because Miss Baldwin is a little better than her formulas, and at her most saccharine can surprise you with her deftness and her capacity to make an unreal type character suddenly break into an unmistakably human utterance.

K. T.

YOU'RE IN THE RACKET, TOO. By James Curtis. Knopf. 1938. \$2.50.

This second novel by James Curtis is particularly disappointing because it lacks most of those qualities which made his first so interesting. "There Ain't No Justice" treated intensively of the life and environment of a young British fighter; it had a strong and well-knit plot that carried local color and characterization along with it. But here that polarizing force is sadly lacking. "You're in the Racket, Too" is composed of a series of sketchy incidents calculated to acquaint us with London's second-story men,