



### The Next Best Seller

THE annual convention of the American Booksellers' Association this week takes place during one of the leanest book seasons in five years. In that space of time the booksellers have waged an uphill campaign for price maintenance, which was won in 1934 with NRA, lost in 1935 when NRA was declared unconstitutional, and won again in 1937 with the Feld-Crawford Act in New York, similar laws in many other states, and the Miller-Tydings Act of the Federal Government.

What the book trade needs now is a good book. A best seller. Something people want to read; something that sweeps the country on its own momentum, regardless of what the reviewers have to say, because readers like it and pass the word along. In 1933, in the trough of the depression, "Anthony Adverse" was the Moses that led the book trade out of the wilderness. "Anthony" not only made its own history, but unquestionably paved the public way for "Gone with the Wind." Do the literati sneer? Do we hear anybody saying that "Anthony" and "Gone with the Wind" are merely our old friends Winston Churchill and Mary Johnston in modern dress? Well, yes, we have heard remarks to that effect, but not many until the popularity of the two books was well established. There are always second-guessers to say that whatever is popular must be mediocre. However, even if we granted for the sake of argument that the second-guessers are right, we still maintain that it is better to read "Anthony" and "Gone with the Wind" than not to read any books at all.

Recently Pearl Buck made a speech, widely quoted in the press, in which she objected to best sellers on various counts, among others that the best seller list is "an iron mold on the public mind." This seems to beg the question, since the public mind is what creates the mold. Objecting to best sellers is like objecting to radio programs; after all, you don't have to read the best sellers if you don't want to. On the other hand, the commercially

sponsored radio programs make it possible for NBC to put Toscanini on a sustaining program; and best sellers make it possible for publishers to issue distinguished books at a risk or at a loss, and for booksellers to carry them in stock.

This year, then, is one when a best seller on the level of Mr. Allen's or Miss Mitchell's would be doubly welcome. It is a lean season for business, and it is a lean season for books. Here is a partial but significant measure of the quality of this year's production: three of the most notable American novelists, including a Nobel Prize winner and a Pulitzer Prize winner, are represented on the spring lists with the weakest novels of their careers. Too many authors are joining crusades; too many book readers are finding the newspapers and magazines a sufficient substitute for the journalism they have been getting in the form of fiction. One of the psychological by-products of a best seller is that it creates conversation, and talk is a good lubricant for reading. What have literary people been talking about so far this year? We can't tell how it has been out your way, but around here the book readers and the book reviewers have been talking about "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," the birth-of-a-baby pictures in *Life*, and Franklin D. Roosevelt (the last, however, not in his capacity as an author). So we look for-

ward to the next big, rousing best seller. We look forward to the reviewers' cry of "masterpiece!"; we look forward to the animated dinner-table conversations about the book, to the parodies and the wisecracks; we even look forward to the second-guessers, who will tell us that the book never was any good, anyway.

None of this, of course, is to say that there are not good and even distinguished books among the new publications, in sufficient quantity and variety to keep any reader busy. It is unnecessary to make a list of them; Thomas Mann's "Joseph in Egypt" is one that would distinguish any season, and it has been very successful. (How we should like to see it sell half a million copies, if only to hear what the highbrows would say.) But the fact remains that after five months of 1938, the best seller lists both in fiction and in non-fiction are headed by books published in 1937. If this meant only that last year's books were enjoying long lives, it would be a good thing. Unfortunately it means also that too many of this year's books are stillborn.

*The Saturday Review* welcomes the booksellers in convention, and wishes them a successful solution of the problems they have to discuss. But their main problem is outside their field; it's up to the authors.

## Radio at Night

BY MILDRED COUSENS

NOW is the time that the dark flows in from the wide Atlantic,  
The edge of the shadow glides over the miles of land,  
Covering the restless continent far to its western beaches  
With the peace of the homecoming hour and the stillness of night.

Then over the hemisphere listening there in the darkness,  
The voices, the many voices, hover like birds in the air  
That dip to earthward and rising, flutter and disappear.

The threads are tangled, the threads of sound, the golden music,  
But over the lighted cities and towns where men are waiting  
The words come clear as the clangor of bells.

The magic sound drifts over the Appalachian ridges—  
Over the broad lakes held in the cupped hands of the hills,  
Over the mighty rivers rushing along their valleys—  
Out in the far Dakotas the tired man hitches his rocker  
Across the faded carpet close to the dial—

Then lost, lost in the snows of the Rockies the voices,  
Like ice-clad planes they are lost—only the strains of music.  
Schubert and Strauss and the wraiths of the women dancing  
Swirl in the storm on the mountain-peaks of the Rockies—

There on the coasts where all day long the sunlight glistened  
The dark lies now, and the voices drift out over  
The pale white crescents that gleam like thin young moons—  
The songs and the dances, the news of the day and the speeches,  
The voice of the suave announcer, the sound of the gong—  
Twelve o'clock by Pacific time—back in New York  
The music is thinning a little, but way out in Frisco  
The fun is beginning, the wine just starting to flow.

The voices float out over the western ocean  
And are lost like birds in the deep fog of the dark.

## Letters to the Editor: "Architects of Ideas;" The Pulitzer Prize Novel

### A Reply to Mr. Bierstedt

SIR:—I take great exception to Mr. Robert Bierstedt's review of "Architects of Ideas" by Ernest R. Trattner, and would enlighten potential readers who may derive both pleasure and profit from the book, but who might be deterred by such a notice, appearing in so respected a magazine as *The Saturday Review of Literature*. I also have read the book; priding myself on an intelligence far above that of the ten-year-old—even of the fourteen-year-old—I found it instructive, interesting, and often inspiring. In short, I feel it was a happy thought which prompted Mr. Trattner to write such a book, and that his successful achievement merits him a vote of gratitude from the thinking world.

Obviously, Mr. Bierstedt is merely grinding the axe of an aversion to the "popularizing" type of literature. I have no desire to convert him, but take him to task for inflicting his personal dislike on those who regard the printed book review, no matter how opinionated it may be, as the ultimate judgment of a book's worth.

Unfortunately, there is no criterion for literary criticism; nor is there any fixed standard to measure the ability to criticize, with the result that commentary on style is an unrestricted vocation, open to everyone. Mr. Bierstedt, with an unborn insight into the art of literary criticism, has totally overlooked Mr. Trattner's pleasurable style, which is both appropriate to the subject and inherently beautiful. The philosophy lecturer has misconstrued the fascinating freshness, which comes from the author's enthusiasm for his subject, and his talent for presenting it in an absorbing fashion; he has selected naïveté, in a pejorative sense, as another target for his "criticism."

Lastly, Mr. Bierstedt has smugly ignored the essential purpose of "Architects of Ideas." Its main value is the integrated account of man's scientific progress, made lively by the introduction of the scientists themselves, and meaningful by showing the interrelation of apparently disparate fields in their proper historical perspective. Above all, the fact that this wealth of information is brought within the scope of all thinking persons, makes the book an event of scientific importance. Since Mr. Bierstedt's intellectual snobbery would deprive the layman of such knowledge, and relegate him once and for all to the baseball field, he cannot be expected to appreciate the intrinsic value of such a book.

ADELE GOLDFINE.

New York City.

### "The Late George Apley"

SIR:—I have just finished reading the comments on the Pulitzer Prizes and also the poem by F. P. A. with the line, "Why did it win the Pulitzer Prize?" I want to ask the same question concerning John P. Marquand's "The Late George Apley."

As the SRL says, "Mr. Marquand was



"T! T! T as in Tea!"

a much poorer philosopher than Santayana [in "The Last Puritan"] but a much better novelist." I am afraid I cannot agree with Mr. DeVoto on the latter part of that statement. One reviewer (whose name I have forgotten) said, "If you chuckled at 'The Last Puritan,' you would laugh out loud at 'The Late George Apley.'" I do hope there is nothing wrong with my sense of humor—I laughed out loud at the first book and was much disappointed with the second.

Last year "The Last Puritan" was mentioned as a runner-up to "Gone with the Wind." I think it is hardly fair that a book of such high quality should be passed up and then a year later a book that resembles it so much should receive the award.

I wonder if others agree with me and if there is any real justification for my belief. Perhaps I had better reread "The Late George Apley." It is now two years since I have read "The Last Puritan" and maybe now I will not be prejudiced in its favor.

BETTY LEE HILLGREN.

Chicago, Ill.

### Polish Folklore

SIR:—Miss Sarah Benet, first assistant in anthropology at the University of Warsaw, who is at present in the United States, and I are preparing a book on the folklore of Poland. We plan to devote a portion of it to the question of how far their ancestral customs and beliefs have survived among the Poles in the United States. In order that we might report on this subject as fully as possible, we should appreciate hearing from your readers who are in contact with Polish groups in the United States and who have

knowledge of native Polish family and holiday customs, beliefs, proverbs, and superstitions that have been preserved here.

We should be most grateful to you if you would be so kind as to publish this appeal with the request that the correspondence be directed to me and that it contain, wherever possible, in addition to a description of the practices or beliefs, the information whether they were observed among original immigrants or among their descendants born or reared in this country.

HELEN ZAND (Mrs. Stephen J. Zand).  
82 Tennis Place,  
Forest Hills, N. Y.

### Sainte-Beuve Letters

SIR:—I should be very much obliged to you if you would find space for this letter in your columns. I am looking for the letters of Sainte-Beuve for a French editor who is publishing a complete correspondence in Paris. If any of your readers can give me any information which will help me to trace letters in public or private collections it will be of great help.

C. H. DICKSON.

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Ilford,  
Essex, England.

### Uniatz

SIR:—Referring to Dorothea Moore's letter in your issue of May 14, you may read ten billion Carter Dickson mysteries and never find Uniatz. He is "The Saint's" factotum—by Leslie Charteris.

JUDGE LYNCH  
(for The Criminal Record).  
New York City.