

The Great God "Noodeal"

STAR-SPANGLED VIRGIN. By Du Bose Heyward. Farrar & Rinehart. 1939. 230 pp. \$2.00.

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

THE title of this novel, which is more striking than appropriate, is explained by the fact that it is laid in the Virgin Islands, and begins shortly after Mr. Hoover had transferred them from Danish poverty to American bankruptcy. In it, Mr. Heyward appears to be attempting two things, to apply his sympathetic observation of Charleston Negroes to the far more primitive Negroes of the West Indies, and to show these primitive blacks suddenly brought into contact with civilized, and over-civilized, nations. In the first of these attempts he succeeds—or does so until the second interferes with it: his picture of Rhoda Berg, the big, earthy, genuine negress, of her shiftless, happy man Adam, and her brood of children (by no means all of them Adam's) is a warm and satisfying one. Rhoda one feels as the eternal mother, mothering (somewhat sharply) even Adam, finding him work and seeing that he does it, and bringing forth children with the joyful fertility of the tropical earth.

But halfway through the tone of the novel changes abruptly to farce. The New Deal reaches the islands, and the book becomes a laborious satire on the natives' understanding of the deity "Noodeal," who gives them food which they sell to buy finery, provides them with band concerts and Gilbert and Sullivan, and maintains them in idleness which they enliven by making illicit cocoanut wine. The mockery here is heavy-handed, and its aim is uncertain; Mr. Heyward appears to have intended to ridicule the Government and its lack of understanding of the true problems of its dependencies; but by the time the ridicule reaches the page, it strikes principally at the Negroes and their worship of Noodeal. And all this half of the story comes perilously near a Bourbon attitude astonishing in Mr. Heyward: it does not say, but it could be very easily taken to say, that the Negro was meant to cut cane, and is

happy at that until you-all damyan-kees come and spoil him by giving him ideas of improved conditions.

The end of the book is achieved by another volte-face of the author's: from being the ostensible object of the satire, the New Deal appears as the god from the machine which al-



Du Bose Heyward

lows Adam and Rhoda to take up a homestead. The book might seem better as a whole if it were less good in parts; the scene in which the government provides a parade to propagandize for legal marriage, and Rhoda counters with a parade of her own to popularize natural unions, is extravagantly funny, in a mode like Mr. Evelyn Waugh's of designedly heartless frivolity; but it does not fit with the splendid, savage

Rhoda of the first half, the Rhoda who, until she was spoiled, belonged with Porgy and Bess.

Annals of Science

THE MARCH OF MIND: A Short History of Science. By F. Sherwood Taylor. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1939. 311 pp., with index. \$3.

Reviewed by GEORGE RUSSELL HARRISON

IN this scientific era, when the invention of a new kind of glass is allotted a three-page spread in the news-picture magazines, and the future of civilization is considered by some persons to rest on whether scientists of democratic or dictator nations will be first to find the new alloy steel which may give temporary supremacy in the air, books on the history of science are of particular interest. Here is such a book; it was picked up for reviewing, only to be held for absorbed reading by one already familiar with the material under discussion.

Most of the available histories of science have had an academic tinge, which discouraged the layman who might wish for a clear, simple picture of the way men have learned to control Nature to their own ends. Now Mr. Taylor has written a concise, straightforward account of the development of science from the early practical astronomy and surveying of the Egypt-

tians and the abstract and theoretical science of the Greeks, up to the present. The writing is distinguished for smoothness and clarity, and, without the usual devices for attracting the reader, holds interest by its swift pace. While details are not neglected, they are never allowed to obscure the general view of the broad development of science, and the result is a quick-moving, unified, and unpedantic picturization of the development of one aspect of the human mind.

The main emphasis of the book is on the general development of the scientific method, as exemplified in astronomy, chemistry, physics, biology, and medicine. There is a clear, though elementary, discussion of the conflict between scientific and Biblical teachings regarding the structure of nature. The author points out the effect of a stable political organization on the development of science, and shows how culture has depended on the freedom from want and worry which is one of the results of scientific development in a stable political system.

In a book where detail is subordinated to a general view of trends it is ungracious to point out inaccuracies; those few which forced themselves on my attention were uniformly unimportant, and surprisingly few in number for a work covering such a broad range of information. To avoid interrupting the smooth flow of the narrative, or



F. Sherwood Taylor

cluttering up the pages with footnotes, almost no reading references are given, but a few books dealing with the histories of the various sciences are listed together at the end. The volume is well illustrated with fourteen plates and thirty-six text figures, but has an adequate index.

George Russell Harrison, on the staff of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is shortly to publish a volume on "Atoms in Action."

Writing for Publication

WRITING AND SELLING SPECIAL FEATURE ARTICLES. By Helen M. Patterson. New York: Prentice-Hall. 1939. 578 pp. \$3.65.

Reviewed by FLETCHER PRATT

THAT the present is the heyday of the feature article is a proposition already frequently advanced. It now receives confirmation, and a certain amount of annotation, through the appearance of a textbook telling student writers how to build reservoirs to catch the golden rain from the publishers. The profession is not one, it appears, that requires any particular amount or kind of talent.

Many persons hesitate to market their manuscripts because they believe that successful writers possess occult powers they themselves do not have. But writing for publication is not mysterious; it must be reduced almost to a formula if one would write successfully . . . Anyone who can write English can write features if he will cultivate (1) the ability to be curious. . . .

"The ability to be curious." It is not, of course, the business of a textbook to investigate causes, and it is hardly the business of this textbook to offer remark on the rather terrifying spectacle of three or four thousand amateur reporters turned loose on the public yearly, each supplied with a good notebook, a candid camera, and a curiosity more insatiable than that of the elephant's child. "Everywhere one turns, everything one reads, everything one sees, contains possibilities for subjects about which to write." Then comes an ominous "Exercise"—"From a conversation find one idea that you could expand into a feature to sell."

The fact that a university professor familiar with the subject believes the literary market can stand all this production from newcomers without talent but with the ability to be curious implies rather more than the discovery of a useful working formula, however. It also implies an evolution in reading habits toward the acquisition of miscellaneous information; and from the details furnished, it would appear that most of the information wanted by readers is of a personal, and what used to be considered a private, nature.

But this is not all. Miss Patterson identifies seven main types of feature articles. Three of the seven—the Personal Experience Story, the Confession Article, and the Narrative Article—on the descriptions she gives of them clearly belong less to the conventional form of non-fiction than to an unconventional form of fiction. "A

narrative article," quotha, "is one using devices of the short story—conversation, rapid action, thrilling adventure, and sustaining suspense." Where is the writer to obtain the record of actual conversations to support a Confession Article or a Personal Experience Story? Obviously, he must imagine them, along with some of the minor action (being careful to secure a signed release from the subject of the article).

The total result is really a new literary form, already recognized by at least one magazine, which boldly calls it "semi-fiction," defining it as a form in which the plot, dates, places, sometimes the names, are supplied by life and the details by the author. Meanwhile the form without the name is all around us. It is the entire stock in trade of the confession magazines, of the true detective and true adventure magazines, and of many of the movie magazines. If one may judge from the present volume it constitutes a very high percentage of newspaper feature articles.

Miss Patterson quotes statistics to show a great advance in the number of publications offering a market for such articles. She does not quote (it is not her business to) statistics showing a parallel decline in the number and importance of the magazines making fiction their staple. For that matter statistics are unnecessary; one has only to consider the list of new magazines that have been sensationally successful in recent years. *Time*, *Life*, *Look*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Fortune* carry no fiction at all in the accepted sense of the term; *Coronet* and the *New Yorker* a very limited amount, and only *Esquire* as much as twenty-five per cent. On the other hand every one of these magazines makes great use of the narrative article in one form or another.

With the usual reservations for generalities this would seem to point to considerable public dissatisfaction with the art of fiction writing as now practised. Perhaps this is because we are becoming a nation of keyhole peepers whose ideal of belles lettres is Walter Winchell's column. Perhaps it is because the suspension of disbelief has disappeared in a public that has discovered most stories are written by formula. Perhaps they will change back when they find out that narrative articles are written by formula, too. The only thing altogether clear at present is that by vote of the man who is paying the bills, the writer of "fact" is achieving a closer approach to life than the writer of fiction.

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