



### Best Sellers under Fire

WE have never understood why a book must be bad because a lot of people enjoy it. Therefore we cannot go along with Pearl Buck in her interesting strictures against best sellers, delivered recently at a symposium of the League of American Writers. "We Americans who are so sensitive about freedom and independence in matters of government . . . submit our minds like ignorant lambs to a dictatorship as senseless as any in the world," said the author of "The Good Earth"—"the dictatorship of the best seller lists. I cannot see it as anything but vicious from any point of view."

Of course it is obvious that best sellers are not prescribed reading. It is equally obvious that a best seller reaches only a small fraction of the population. "The Grapes of Wrath" has sold about 300,000 copies since April—ten per cent of the circulation of *The Saturday Evening Post* for one week's issue. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Buck went on to say how much she admires "The Grapes of Wrath;" called it "the perfect example of an ideal best seller." So we gather that even from her point of view best sellers are all right if they are good books.

It is universally recognized that the literary quality of best sellers has enormously improved since the days of Harold Bell Wright and Gene Stratton-Porter (see, for instance, Frederick Lewis Allen's article in the *SRL* of December 7, 1935). That, however, is incidental. What Pearl Buck is arguing against is the influence of the best seller lists. "Reading ought to spring out of individual interest. . . . This running to consult best seller lists is a specious thing." But this argument seems to beg the question. Actually it is the reading tastes of the public that make the best seller lists in the first place, not the other way

around. Of course the appearance of a title on the best seller lists is a further stimulant—completing a circle which Mrs. Buck considers vicious, but which seems to us at worst neutral, and often benevolent, as in the case of "The Grapes of Wrath." Mrs. Buck likes individualism, and so do we. But it seems to us not to undermine individualism to admit that people do have some interests, tastes, and characteristics in common. These common properties explain why thousands of people often like the same book—so often, in fact, that when a book has once become a best seller, there will be many readers, hearing of it for the first time, who will reasonably consider that if this book has pleased fifty or a hundred thousand others, it will please them as well. In view of the present sales figures of best sellers—even of a "Gone with the Wind"—this constitutes something less than universal regimentation.

We can see no threat to democracy in best seller lists. On the contrary—as Malcolm Cowley pointed out at the same symposium—profits on best sellers help to make possible the publication of unsuccessful books: first novels, experimental writing, advanced thinking, and art for art's sake. It is the availability of unpopular books that is essential for a democracy, and if best sellers contribute to this availability, so much the better for best sellers. This may not be ideal, but it is practical. The only other way to make unpopular books available is through some form of subsidy. Private subsidy is uncertain; public subsidy is a step in the direction of censorship: for what government will pay for the dissemination of ideas in opposition to its own policies? We prefer the present imperfect system by which unpopular books are frequently taken on by the publishers of best sellers, on the theory that the unpopular writer may eventually produce a best seller. As indeed they sometimes do. Steinbeck, for instance.

### Two Free Speakers

TWO valued contributors to *The Saturday Review* have died within the past two weeks. Ernest Sutherland Bates, after leaving the University of Oregon as a result of a quarrel over free speech, began his New York career as a reviewer for this paper, and has been a member of our critical circle ever since. He was courageous, indomitable, and extraordinarily versatile. But while we knew him as an authority on philosophy and the history of religions, and as a doughty controversialist, the public will remember him best for his excellent modern reordering

and selection from the Bible, which had a wide success. Llewelyn Powys, by many considered the most gifted of that famous family, has for many years contributed occasional literary essays, studies of men and books, to this *Review*. They were distinguished by a weight of intellectual appreciation behind the fine rich style of the author, and by a passionate defense of literature with emotional depth and originality. The seventeenth century was his favorite, and in the sensuous beauty of his prose, and his contempt for priggishness, genteelness, and mere cleverness, he wrote in the atmosphere of that century. He was at his best in descriptions of English nature, although these were always incidental to some biographical or philosophic purpose in his essays. Sex, for him, ennobled life; he was a pagan, with a religion of beauty; and a critic at his best with the great originals in English literature.

H. S. C.

## Security

BY

ANNE MORROW LINDBERGH

THERE is refuge in a sea-shell—  
Or a star;  
But in between,  
Nowhere.

There is peace in the immense—  
Or the small;  
Between the two,  
Not at all.

The planet in the sky,  
The sea-shell on the ground:  
And though all heaven and earth be-  
tween them lie,  
No peace is to be found  
Elsewhere.

Oh you who turn  
For refuge, learn  
From women, who have always known  
The only roads that life has shown  
To be secure.

How sure  
The path a needle follows—or a star;  
The near—the far.  
With what compare  
The light reflected from a thimble's  
stare  
Unless, on high,  
Arcturus' eye?

The near—the far:  
But in between,  
Oh where  
Is comfort to be seen?

There is refuge in a sea-shell—  
Or a star  
But in between,  
Nowhere.

## Letters to the Editor: Benjamin Stolberg Replies to Henry Seidel Canby

Et Tu, Dr. Canby!

MY DEAR DR. CANBY:—You call me irresponsible in dealing with members of my own trade who have played the Stalinist game. And in the next breath you admit that you yourself know nothing of that game. How, then, can you judge of my responsibility?

You say that I read like an editorial from *Pravda*. I wonder if you have ever read an editorial in *Pravda*. Indeed, I wonder if you even know the polemical manners of the *Daily Worker*, or of the *New Masses* of which Mr. Granville Hicks was until recently an editor. I doubt it. For nowhere have I seen you objecting when Dr. John Dewey was described as wallowing in "a swamp of filth . . . the puppet of disruption in America's liberal and progressive movements," a "Charlie McCarthy for the Trotskyites." I have not seen you objecting when Max Eastman was called "a notorious swindler," "gangster of the pen," and a British agent. Or when Norman Thomas, time and again, was called a Fascist agent, or when Sinclair Lewis was classed with "the drones and parasites of society," or when Carlo Tresca was accused of vying with myself "for stoolpigeon honors."

And now, Dr. Canby, having agreed with you that you are ignorant of Stalinist "ideology" and supplied you with a few samples of Stalinist character assassination, I ask you by what right you speak as one having authority.

You seem to have fallen, no doubt unwittingly, for the old Stalinist trick of trying to keep critics constantly "proving" what the world already knows. If you had done me the honor to read what I have written about Stalinism in the labor movement and elsewhere, instead of merely calling me a "wise guy," you would know by this time that I know whereof I speak. Do you think that Norman Thomas, Eugene Lyons, James T. Farrell, Sidney Hook, Louis Stark, and other writers of equal integrity, who have also exposed the Stalinist racket, simply rush into print without having the facts to back up their statements? We know our stuff, Dr. Canby. And if you would like to learn something about this issue before you yourself rush into print again, I shall be very glad to send you a long string of witnesses—radicals, liberals, progressives—who will give you the facts. For that matter, you can get them for yourself by simply going through the back files of both the left wing and the general press. But of course you will have to read with your eyes open.

The fact is, you are missing the whole point of the current struggle for intellectual freedom by assuming that the Stalinists are "radicals." What is "radical" about the League of American Writers, an organization



"Have you a copy of this book without the asterisks?"

which bitterly (before the Stalinazi Pact) condemned the persecution of German intellectuals under Hitler, and enthusiastically whitewashed the intellectual Terror in the Soviet Union?

As for the Writers Project, Dr. Canby, real radicals and liberals didn't stand a ghost of a show there at the height of the Stalinist Terror. The details of this terror are a matter of public record. But even if one granted that the Stalinists and their stooges on the Project were "radicals," the fact still remains that most of them were not writers. I said this in my article, I repeat it, and I stand ready to prove it.

And now for the three individual writers whom you defend. I mentioned Mr. Van Wyck Brooks as a distinguished intellectual who had lent himself to the Stalinist racket because he was politically unsophisticated. And this sounds to you like an editorial from *Pravda*? The fact is, I was kind to Mr. Brooks. I did not mention his notorious letter to *Time*, demanding the burning of German books; I did not mention that he has never opened his head against the Stalinist Inquisition. Do you believe, my dear Dr. Canby, that to fight Hitler by burning Goethe would be either politically or "philosophically" sound, or morally defensible?

As for Mr. Hicks, I could respect him more had he "changed his mind" about Stalinism on more principled grounds than his objection to its clumsy publicity. You, Dr. Canby, may find his contribution to criticism "exceedingly valuable." That is a matter of opinion. I know other scholars who consider it silly. I note that in the same issue of the *Saturday Review* in which you defend Mr. Hicks, Mr. R. Ellis Roberts, reviewing his latest

"contribution" to "the Marxist interpretation of literature," finds him ignorant of both the literature he writes about and its social and political background. But the really important thing, of course, is that as a member of the Communist Party Mr. Hicks was not, and could not be, a free critic, and that he used his position as an editor of the *New Masses* to measure literature by the standards of the Kremlin Inquisition.

I cannot leave Mr. Hicks without expressing my admiration of your own magnanimity. As late as August, Mr. Hicks—and Mr. Vincent Sheean too, for that matter—signed the famous Letter of the 400 which attacked as "agents of fascism" the Committee for Cultural Freedom, to which both you and I belong.

On Mr. Sheean I am forced to disagree with every word you say. To be sure, Mr. Sheean's books are full of "ready indignation against cruelty and injustice and tyranny." But his indignation is very diplomatically guided. He showed none against the betrayal of Loyalist Spain by the Stalinists. He is a journalist. I hold that it was impossible for him to visit Loyalist Spain and remain unaware of the G.P.U. terror to which John Dos Passos, Jose Escuder, Sam Baron, Liston Oak, to mention only a few who were there, have testified. And I insist that nobody could have learned the horrible truth about the Soviet Union as fast as Mr. Sheean appears to have learned it—*vide* the chronology of his "conversion" as given in my article.

I know that old phrase about fouling your own nest, Dr. Canby. Are you sure it is I who am guilty of it?

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