

O'Brien's Choice

FIFTY BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES, 1914 TO 1939. Edited by Edward J. O'Brien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1939. 868 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

Twenty-five years have made a difference in the American short story comparable to the difference between the tone and feeling of Pope and the tone and feeling of Shelley. During this one short generation American writing has evolved from the point at which it could only be described as extremely provincial English writing to the point where it has achieved dignity and substance as a literature in its own right.

SO Mr. O'Brien, in his introduction. And the slightly bedazzled reviewer, reading the words, can only mutter "Aren't you taking in a good deal of territory?" For, after all, there are "The Gold Bug" and "The Great Stone Face," "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" and "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven." If those four stories are merely "extremely provincial English writing" — and there are many others one could mention — your present correspondent would be delighted to eat a complete set of the works of Henry James. And, incidentally, what about "The Real Thing?" What about "The Little Regiment?" What about such extremely American—and yet hardly extremely provincial English stories—as "The Brigade Commander," "Under the Lion's Paw," and "The Outcasts of Poker Flat?"

One hates to disagree with so authoritative and well-grounded a critic as Mr. O'Brien. But it seems to me that the American short story, from the first, has owed less to foreign influence than a great many other forms of American writing. Moreover, it is a form in which most of our well known writers have been at home and which most of them have used characteristically. Poe, Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Henry James—each contributed something genuine to the short story. But you will have to load the dice, if you want to select a contribution by Thackeray or Trollope—and Dickens's short stories are by-products. Indeed, it is interesting to note that in Maugham's new anthology, "Tellers of Tales," there is no representative British short story between Sir Walter Scott's "The Two Drovers" and Stevenson's "Markheim," while Irving, Poe, Bret Harte, and Hawthorne are all represented.

It is true that, for a while, under the spell of O. Henry and the imitators of O. Henry, the successful American short story went in for the sur-

prise ending and the well-tailored plot. This is doubtless what Mr. O'Brien means, and he has done as much as any one man to change it, by his constant and unflagging encouragement of experimentation and his critical generosity to young writers of promise. I don't agree with a lot of his selections. I think he is just as prejudiced in favor of the formula formless story as the big-magazine-editor of 1925 was prejudiced against it. But, since the very first of his annual collections, he has been willing to stand up and yell for work he considered important whether any one else liked it or not. And, a lot of the time, he has been right. Perhaps that is as much as could be asked of any one man.

Now, in this book, he brings together what he considers the fifty best American short stories of the last twenty-five years. It is an interesting, varied, and characteristic collection, beginning with Wilbur Daniel Steele and ending with Richard Wright. It includes Dreiser, Hemingway, Anderson, Lardner, Marquand, Dorothy Parker, William March, Kay Boyle, Fitzgerald, Saroyan, Wolfe, and Steinbeck. It includes as well, at least a baker's dozen of younger writers—some of them not nearly as well-known as they should be. It is not the fifty best American short stories—for you cannot pick one story by each of fifty different authors and make them all equal. But it does present a cross section of the rich and varied field of the American short story during the past quarter century. And, looking it over, we have every reason to be proud of the achievement.

There are some important omissions—Katharine Anne Porter and Edna Ferber. I think Mr. Hergesheimer has written better stories than "The Meeker Ritual" and I wish Thomas Beer could have been represented by one of the Mrs. Egg stories instead of "Onnie." The least understandable of Mr. O'Brien's inclusions, to me, is Alan Marshall's "Death and Transfiguration," with its overloaded local color. But I will give him three stars—man bites dog—for reprinting Oliver LaFarge's extraordinary "North Is Black," for including Robert Whitehand's "American Nocturne," which succeeds in a difficult field, for including George Albee's "Fame Takes the J Car," in spite of its debt to Lardner, and for ending the collection with "Bright and Morning Star," where Richard Wright displays gifts that ought to take him a long, long way.

Well, there it is, and a good job, too, granted Mr. O'Brien's predilec-

tions and prejudices. Every editor has them or he wouldn't be worth his salt. And, if you are interested in the American short story—or in short stories at all—"Fifty Best American Short Stories" will give you in spite of its curious introduction, a very fair sample of the living work in the field.

Edward J. O'Brien

Because Mr. O'Brien has lived in England for seventeen years, many readers are under the impression that he is English; but he was born in Boston in 1890, and was educated at Boston College and Harvard. His annual volumes, "The Best Short Stories," have appeared since 1915; he got the idea from William S. Braithwaite's annual poetry anthology. A companion series, "The Best British Short Stories," was inaugurated in 1922. "I have probably read with some care," says Mr. O'Brien, "fifty thousand American short stories in the past twenty-five years [i.e., over five a day]. I have probably examined another hundred thousand with sufficient care to see that they were rubbish."



Katherine Albert

Glamor Factory

REMEMBER VALERIE MARCH. By Katherine Albert. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1939. 313 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by BEN RAY REDMAN

KATHERINE ALBERT knows her Hollywood, and she has used this knowledge to spin an entertaining tale that truly illuminates various aspects of the world's great glamor factory. The life story of Valerie March, born Peggy Higgins, who rose from obscurity and squalid poverty to become the first lady of the screen, is a synthetic biography in that it borrows from many Hollywood case histories. Valerie cannot be identified with any actual star, but each of her characteristics and adventures reminds the knowing reader of some living model. Yet she has an integrated personality of her own; her creator has breathed life into the synthesis, and by so doing she has

made it probable that her readers will remember Valerie March.

Peggy was an ignorant little tramp from the wrong side of the tracks, and she remained ignorant until the end of her career, but she had a fire within her, a compulsion that drove her upward, and an instinct that enabled her to use anyone who could be of service to her ambition. She was determined to be a great actress, and for years she managed to maintain the illusion that she was one. Her essential tragedy is familiar to all who know her kind.

What had happened to Valerie was what can, I suddenly saw, easily happen to any movie star. She was a dumb child when she started. At an age when most girls are entering college, she was already a star, a studio property, fawned on by those who wanted favors, kept healthy by those who wanted to make money out of her, kept as emotionally stable as possible by me, who could only express myself through her. How could she see in proportion, when she lived the unhealthy egotistical life required of her?

It is Conrad Powers speaking, Valerie's discoverer and director, in whose words the author tells her story, and what he is made to say of Valerie is true of some stars and most so-called "starlets." One has seen those dumb children appear on the lots, year after year; seen them ballooned into popularity, real or false, by the world's most ruthless publicity machines; seen them, under the hot lights, making their pathetic attempts to be glamorous actresses and women of the world when they should still be in high school. Most of them fall by the wayside in a few months; a very few succeed for a brief while. Still fewer of them triumph and manage to hang on to success as long as did little Peggy Higgins.

Miss Albert, writing in the person of Conrad Powers, is almost perfect in her simulation of the masculine point of view and the masculine idiom. One may not be able to believe that a hard-boiled director like Powers would feel constrained to put an end to Valerie's career just because he had discovered she could never be the great actress he had once thought she would become. The real Conrads of Hollywood and Burbank and Culver City would say to themselves: "Let the kid milk the racket dry, and good luck to her." But Conrad's lapse into quixoticism does not invalidate Valerie's character. She is drawn from life, and she lives. Her existence and her story may not be important, but Miss Albert, without sensationalism or exaggeration, has written a lively, absorbing tale that shows of what stuff a great screen star may be, and often has been, made.

Return to Life

THE OPEN SKY. By L. A. G. Strong.
New York: The Macmillan Co. 1939.
445 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

WHEN L. A. G. Strong's first novel, "Dewey Rides," appeared ten years ago, discriminating readers detected at once a fresh, new talent—not altogether new, for Strong had already published numerous short stories and some lively narrative and ironic verse. In subsequent novels, especially "The Garden," "The Sea Wall," and "The Last Enemy," he has steadily progressed toward a firm mastery of his craft.

In "The Open Sky," the best novel Strong has written, he again uses the wild Atlantic coast of Ireland as a setting. In many ways the novel is old-fashioned: it has form—it obeys Aristotle's injunction that a work of art have a beginning, a middle, and an end; there are great blocks of pure description; and although the "hero," an exhausted dilettante who has given up both authorship and the practice of medicine, is suffering from a mental breakdown, the author spares us the tortuous and tedious windings of the stream of consciousness, but succeeds, nevertheless, in making us see and feel the strange Western World as the invalid sees and feels it. Since Strong is poet and philosopher as well as realist, he is little concerned with

the merely pathological and morbid, and the recovery of the physician is made into an exciting, unsentimental adventure.

The novel is stuffed with good things—stirring drama, well-realized characters, humor, philosophy, poetry. Strong, who is three-fourths Irish, writes with affectionate understanding and candor of the rugged Irish coast and its eccentric inhabitants. Caliban, it seems, left issue not only along Tobacco Road but also along the shores and isles of Eire. When the ailing physician is left in a supposedly simple and lonely place to heal himself, he soon discovers that his peasant neighbors are just as complex and harassed by life as he had been in the maelstrom of London. His healing is the old paradox: he is gradually rescued from the bog of egotism and self-pity, at the same time acquiring a new wisdom: "You taught me that my job was to be myself, the self I was born with. You taught me to keep still and take things as they came . . . You and Father Morrissey have had more influence over me than any one, because you neither of you tried to do anything to me."

"The Open Sky" is refreshingly free from the nebulous mysticism that darkened Strong's earlier Irish stories like an encircling gloom. It is a beautifully written novel which undoubtedly will advance the author's reputation.

Crisis in a Marriage

SKYLARK. By Samson Raphaelson.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1939.
225 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

MR. RAPHAELSON is a clever playwright who was once, among other things, vice-president of an advertising agency. He writes his first novel very much in the crisp and condensed fashion demanded by a good light play. The Kenvons have come to their tin wedding. He is a dab at advertising, his wife is a good helpmeet with nothing in particular to do. From a husband absorbed in business she is getting very little out of life except ease and idleness. She revolts. He wins her back by lying. She forgives him for this at the

end, because she loves him, and because he finally takes her part against an intolerable woman who has the power to make or break him in business.

Mr. Raphaelson writes with great economy and pace, and his dialogue is natural and often amusing. The Kenvons are real people. They jest and fight like real people. They are bound to the wheel of an essentially vicious and parasitic business system—but such work is the breath of the man's nostrils. The end of the novel leaves them on a more honest and outspoken basis than they have had heretofore. If their lives are essentially unproduc-

tive and uninteresting, the author has made a most readable story of a phase in such lives.



From the jacket of "Skylark"