

The Negro Intellectual

THE BIG SEA. An Autobiography by Langston Hughes. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1940. 355 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD

WHEN I was more than halfway through this book I felt a strong sense of disappointment. It seemed to me that it had not justified itself. It was vulgar in spots, trivial elsewhere; neither the contents nor the style were original, noteworthy, or compelling. But when I laid it down it was with regret. It had taken hold of me, this picture of the itinerant life of a Negro intellectual, mostly at loose ends, with nothing to tie to, and no strong parental hand to direct his life during the formative years.

Primarily it is Mr. Hughes's absolute intellectual honesty and frankness which moved me. He looks at his White and Negro world with rare objectivity and paints it exactly as he sees it. He is not a propagandist, nor a too bitter critic. When he records some of the discriminations from which he has suffered and insults to which he has been subjected he does so almost like an outsider looking in. You feel also that he is not holding something back as so many colored people do when setting forth their views where they may be seen or heard by white folks. More than that, he is as severe in his criticisms of the snobbish colored intellectuals, notably in Washington, as he is of the condescending, race-proud whites.

It will be a shock to many readers to learn that a people so discriminated against as the Negroes has an intellectual uppercrust with all the arrogance, bad manners, and snobbishness of the *nouveau riches* of Park Avenue, but here the facts are. For example, Mr. Hughes was invited to attend a formal dinner in Washington in honor of the "New Negro" writers, to represent the younger poets. He was told that he might attend although he had no dinner clothes and that his mother was included in the invitation. The afternoon of the dinner his mother was called up by one of the "ladies" of the committee and told that it would not be wise for her to come since she did not possess an evening gown! Needless to say the younger poets were not represented at that dinner by Langston Hughes. That many of these colored intellectuals boast of their illegitimate descent from Southern white families, Mr. Hughes also stresses.

As for himself he makes no claims. He does not write as if he were a genius born and admits frankly how



Langston Hughes

slow he was in coming to his versifying under conditions which would have proved fatal to many a man. He has kept alive by struggling for existence as a sailor, scullion, bus-boy, cook, clerk, waiter, and laundryman here and in France and Italy, often hungry, sometimes sleeping for weeks in a public lodging-house or leading the life of a beach-comber in a foreign city. All this was on his road to getting a college education and becoming an outstanding poet, dramatist, and writer, and winner of many prizes. There is not a trace of self-pity, nor a whine in the whole book. There is also no yielding of his manhood or his rights as an American citizen. He is one of those uncomfortable people who wish to have ethics and Christian rules of conduct applied at all times. So when at an interracial conference at Franklin and Marshall College, which bars Negro students from attending, Mr. Hughes was wicked enough to think that this, his first interracial student-conference, ought to "get at the root of the matter *right there* on the campus where we were in session—as to why Negro citizens could not attend *that* college." He proposed a resolution on the subject. As he puts it:

But I could get no action on such a resolution at all. Everybody shied away. And the white director of our conference—an adult professional Young Men's Christian Association leader—said regarding this problem in his final talk to the assembled delegates: There are some things in this world we must leave to

Jesus, friends. Let us pray. So they prayed. And the conference ended.

It is not surprising that he has now discovered that "an awful lot of hooey resolves around interracial conferences in this country."

One of the most tragic episodes is Mr. Hughes's description of his being taken up by a rich resident of Park Avenue in New York, who became his patroness and most generously freed him from having to toil for his living so that he might be unhampered for creative work. She wished him to be primitive and "know and feel the intuitions of the primitive." But he was

only an American Negro. . . . I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem. And I was not what she wanted me to be. So, in the end, it all came back very near to the old impasse of white and Negro again, white and Negro—as do most relationships in America.

The break—it was complete—made him physically ill.

That beautiful room, that had been so full of light and help and understanding for me, suddenly became like a trap closing in, faster and faster, the room darker and darker, until the light went out with a sudden crash in the dark. . . .

Yes, this is a moving, a well worthwhile book which should have been written; a most valuable contribution to the struggle of the Negro for life and justice and freedom and intellectual liberty in America. But I warn Mr. Hughes that when our military dictator takes the saddle "The Big Sea" will burn among the first.

Oswald Garrison Villard, one-time editor and owner of the New York Evening Post and The Nation, has been one of the leaders of this country in the fight to advance the position of the Negro race. As a grandson of William Lloyd Garrison, he comes by his crusading spirit honestly.

ANSWERS TO LITERARY QUIZ

1. Richard Brindsley Sheridan: "The Duenna."
2. Edward Fitzgerald: "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam."
3. Henry Aldrich: "Five Reasons."
4. Oliver Goldsmith: "She Stoops to Conquer."
5. John Dyer: "Down Among the Dead Men."
6. Thomas Peacock: "Misfortunes of Elphin."
7. John Keats: "Ode to a Nightingale."
8. Lord Byron: "Don Juan."
9. Richard Hovey: "A Stein Song."
10. George Ade: "R-E-M-O-R-S-E."

Horse Country

SUCH WAS SARATOGA. By Hugh Bradley. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1940. 386 pp., with bibliography and index. \$3.

Reviewed by FAIRFAX DOWNEY

EVERYTHING from scalps to shirts, from virtue to avoirdupois has been lost at Saratoga. Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne dropped a decisive battle of the world there. Hundreds of thousands of dollars vanished in the elegant gambling hells of "Big Smoke" Morrissey and Dick Canfield and at the race track. The hotel business took chances with fire or failure. But you always got a run for your money at Saratoga, as you still do. For every loser there was a winner.

Among the winners will be readers of this book about Saratoga. If, as a philosopher avowed, reading maketh a full man, Mr. Bradley brings home the Bacon. His research was extensive, and he is able not only at digging it up but at writing it down—a happy combination not too often found. He has rolled the dry bones of history and made his point in a lively chronicle.

It all began with water, the curative waters of the Saratoga springs. The Indians kept them secret until the middle of the eighteenth century when they carried there to be healed of an old wound Sir William Johnson, their British superintendent. Sir William, having sired scores of children by Indian mistresses, the Iroquois may have thought they were keeping the secret of the springs in the family. But the baronet proved to be Saratoga's first press agent. Visitors began to arrive. Non-paying guests such as Indians, bears, panthers, and rattlesnakes were routed. By 1789 the three log cabins which were the accommodations of the time were packed and jammed with tourists from Albany and as far away as Hartford. Saratoga was launched as a spa. Its story unrolls a panorama of the American social scene in its summer resort phase which none of its rivals, though some of them became more fashionable, can pretend to equal.

Saratoga became known as a spot where one could sin safely and stylishly. And always the niceties were observed. Although the big hotels insisted on decorum within their portals, cottages "solved the problems of numerous lonesome Wall Street tycoons and Western copper kings," moved to visit the resort accompanied by "obscure but beautiful nieces" or by as many as five fair secretaries. What if the rent of cottages in boom times



Drawing by Guy Pene du Bois, for a mural in the lobby of the Saratoga Springs, N. Y., Post Office.

"Saratoga"

rose to \$125 a day? "It usually," opines the author, "was worth it."

Here, well worth the reading, is a parade of modes and manners and people and things, including the invention of Saratoga chips for a diner who liked his fried potatoes sliced

thin. This reviewer can complain only of the lack of illustrations. With many fine woodcuts and photographs available, the publishers have skimmed by with a jacket design, an end-paper street plan, and one title page vignette.

Jersey's Golden Strand

ENTERTAINING A NATION: THE CAREER OF LONG BRANCH. By Reynolds A. Sweetland and Joseph Sugarman, Jr. (New Jersey Writers' Project). *The City of Long Branch, N. J.* 211 pp. Chronology, bibliography, index, and map. \$1.

Reviewed by JAMES A. NELSON

AMERICA'S "gilded age" might dispute a later period's right to the title, "the era of wonderful nonsense"—and lay claim to both designations. A strong supporting document would be this grand anecdotal history of a seashore watering place that saw great railroad, patent-medicine, and gambling fortunes at play when the fortunes were making their mightiest experiments in ostentation.

Long Branch's spectacular rise and decline and its chance for a more golden future parallel to a remarkable degree those of Saratoga. Health, horses, and "hells" of gambling were the chief attractions at both resorts. Each still has its hygienic appeal, and the pari-mutuels are operating in Saratoga and soon will be in Long Branch.

Mrs. Abraham Lincoln started the parade of celebrities to Long Branch, which later became a summer capital for Presidents Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, and Wilson. "Shadow Lawn," the mansion in which Wilson lived, still stands with its gold-plated plumbing intact. And many of the older and even more fantastic mansions with their minarets, turrets, cupolas, and fret-work—notably "Alladin's Palace," owned by Solomon R. Guggenheim—stand today by the sea.

The Gaudy Great of the late eighteen hundreds took "The Branch" and the Monmouth Park track to their hearts: Phil Daly, the Wideners, Lily Langtry, August Belmont, Diamond Jim Brady, Lillian Russell, George F. Baker, Maggie Mitchell, and hundreds of others all were there in antic style, including John Hoey, who grew vast gardens in the patterns of Teheran rugs with "borrowed" Adams Express Company money.

This book is the gorgeous record of it all, from the days when the Iroquois Indians visited Long Branch for—surprisingly enough—vacations—to today, when visitors still resemble Indians.