

War of the Vultures

THE EAGLES GATHER. By Taylor Caldwell. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1940. 498 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

A LITTLE over a year ago appeared Taylor Caldwell's first novel, "Dynasty of Death", a powerful account of the rise of a great munitions family to a position of ominous international influence. "Dynasty of Death" carries the Barbours and Bouchards through the last sixty years of the nineteenth century; the story of "The Eagles Gather" is concerned with bitter family struggles in the Bouchard clan during the 1920s, but many pages of retrospective action establish Ernest Barbour and other founders of the dynasty as substantial characters. Both novels have the same theme—the titanic struggle between ruthlessness, greed, opportunism, selfishness, and dishonesty on the one side (the munitions barons blandly lump together all such practices as "realism"), and altruism, justice, love, and self-sacrifice on the other side. The victor in this internecine war is not announced, for the war is still raging—perhaps more fiercely today than ever before.

"The Eagles Gather" is a depressing, almost terrifying book. It hurls formidable charges against the powers of evil that shape our personal and national destinies, and although the book is fiction, its insinuations and

implications are disturbing and sometimes alarming. Is it ironically true that the powerful munitions manufacturers are the only honest internationalists in the world today? Are they determined to wreck democracy wherever it survives, because democratic nations tend to be peace-loving nations? Was the post-war German democracy subverted and Hitler put into power by the arms trust—with the connivance of the British and French Tories? Was Mussolini supported by the same interests? Is anti-Jewish agitation fomented by those who may profit when people smoulder with fear and hate? Have the munitions lobbyists wrecked peace conferences and through a controlled press kept active vestigial national and racial animosities? Have a number of English bishops, Mussolini, and three members of the British Royal family investments in the arms industry? Do the great financiers really make our history? Are they attempting to promote fascism in America?

Under the impact of these allegations we find difficulty in responding always to the deep human demands of the story, but human interest is here. For these men of greed, these "realists," do not hesitate to sacrifice friends, brothers, children, and parents in their ruthless battle for power. The various narratives of the novel deal with death-struggles between Machiavellism and human decency. Although the author is not an absolute cynic, she is no facile optimist, and to resolve these conflicts she does not conjure up the comfortable old saw that right makes might.

One fault of the novel, less annoying than in "Dynasty of Death," is the confusing legion of characters (one sympathizes with Peter Bouchard—"Bouchards upon Bouchards. Peter could not keep his relationships with them straight. Cousins and second-cousins and third-cousins, and in-laws and brothers and nieces and nephews and aunts and uncles and grandparents . . ."). The author does not exercise her artist's privilege to select, but presents to us in detail, often amusing, the whole clan. Possibly, too, the novel is weakened by a glut of guile and hate. Nearly everyone loathes and despises nearly all the other members of the family—brothers hate brothers, parents and children abominate one another—there is hardly a page which does not contain "hate" or "detest" or "nauseate" or "despise" or some such ill-tempered verb. Everything considered, "The Eagles Gather" is a full-blooded book, provocative and haunting.



From the jacket of "Portrait of Jennie."

Wishing Game

PORTRAIT OF JENNIE. By Robert Nathan. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1940. 212 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by WILLIAM MAXWELL

MR. NATHAN'S new novel is not a fantasy. Neither is it "realistic." The action doesn't remain within the bounds of strict possibility, and the two most important characters operate on slightly different time gears so that one ages more quickly than the other. More than anything else it resembles an ordinary day-dream, for, once the story is set in motion, the artist-hero acquires one after another of those things which in his own life are lacking—friends, a solid success, a faithful love; and he acquires them almost effortlessly.

The artist, a young man in his late twenties, is also the narrator of the story. Walking home one evening through Central Park he met a little girl playing hopscotch in the Mall. Surprised to find a child playing in what was at that time of night a lonely place, he stopped to watch her, and eventually they fell into conversation. The little girl's name turned out to be Jennie, and after a moment or two she offered to walk a ways with him. She looked more like a little girl in a painting by Henri or Brush than a present-day youngster.

When they came to the circle at the end of the Mall he said goodbye and held out his hand to her. She took it gravely and then asked him if he knew the game she liked to play best. It was a wishing game, she explained, and what she wished for most was that he'd wait for her to grow up. "But you won't, I guess," she said.

The artist was cold, hungry, and tired. If he had had even a little money or any friends waiting for him anywhere he would have walked on,



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probably, and forgotten about her, but he had no assets of any kind, and so he did wait until she grew up.

How she grew up and how, from time to time, she came to him, are Mr. Nathan's story, and I doubt if anyone writing today could have told it with greater tenderness or with quite the blend of humor and imagination which the book has on every page and which might serve almost as Mr. Nathan's signature.

One could point out that he is no more successful than most novelists at suggesting the nature of a painter's mind, but it is an unimportant failure in this case. Mr. Nathan was not seriously attempting, I'm sure, to show how an artist thinks in relation to his work. What concerned him was the artist's hunger for kindness and gentleness and devotion, for all the things which somehow or other make it possible for a man to get through to what is inside him. The accomplishment in "Portrait of Jennie" is minor—at his best, Mr. Nathan has something important to say about the immediate times. But the book is also charming and well done.

Farce with a Purpose

LET THE PEOPLE SING. By J. B. Priestley. New York: Harper & Bros. 1940. 351 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BASIL DAVENPORT

FOR a guess, this is a novel which Mr. Priestley began once before, from a different starting-point. He has contributed to an English miscellany a chapter called "Prologue to an Abandoned Novel," which opens tantalizingly with the escape of an amiable lunatic who has plans for building in every town in England halls where people can get together and sing. That fragment unfortunately broke off, after the lunatic had joined forces with some one who was apparently a more sinister madman; but in "Let the People Sing" Mr. Priestley has returned to the same theme of community singing as a sort of symbol for all the true English values which he wants to see preserved, and again he approaches it in the company of two oddly assorted traveling companions. This time it is Timmy Tiverton,

a music-hall artist down on his luck, who has a bomb planted on him by an Irish revolutionist, and who (like a born fool) runs from the police instead of going to them; and his companion, a refugee Czech professor who is obliged to hide because of difficulties about his passport. They have adventures in Mr. Priestley's most Falstaffian manner, collect other acquaintances, and presently come to the town of Dunbury, where there is an ancient market hall, which was given to the town for community music; but both the local Best People, and the American-owned factory, are trying to grab it.

Here the notion of police pursuit is abandoned almost as definitely as the prologue to the unwritten novel, for Timmy and the Professor are allowed to become as conspicuous as they like in defending the market hall, while Mr. Priestley says his say about what is wrong with old families and new business methods. He says it warmly and eloquently; one feels that he has put much of himself into the book; but he has perhaps put in too many of his selves. The jolly Priestley of "The Good Companions" has been providing excellent entertainment; now the serious and generous Priestley of "English Journey" champions the common man; even the Priestley fascinated by the new ideas of time and race-memory who wrote "Time and the Conways," makes a brief appearance; and they do not get on together perfectly. Mr. Priestley seems to have planned a book of farcical picaresque adventure, with an undercurrent of social purpose rising slowly into view, such as Chesterton used to write. But Chesterton always saw that it was necessary for such a book to become more sober as it became more social, and that the solution must be achieved by means which could be taken seriously; whereas "Let the People Sing" lapses again into farce for its solution, with its appeal from Philip sober to Philip drunk.

The conclusion, like everything else in the book, is excellent on its own level; everything is cheerfully and neatly tied up: boy gets girl; Timmy gets an old girl of his, and a contract; professor gets passport; town gets hall. Indeed, the only character one is left wondering about is a local half-wit who has nothing to do with the story. Everything else ends in the most delightful fashion; the arrangement of farcical beginning, serious middle, and farcical conclusion, leaves one with somewhat the same sticky feeling as a sandwich made of bread spread on both sides with jam.

People of the Short Grass

OUR COMMON HERD. By Sue Sanders. New York: Garden City Publishing Company. 1939. 261 pp. \$1.

Reviewed by STANLEY VESTAL

HERE is a book which, as a picture of the people who live in the Short Grass—that region comprising parts of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico centering around what is now known as the Dust Bowl—has it all over "The Grapes of Wrath" in more ways than a farmer could whip a mule.

The publishers guarantee your money back, if—after reading it—you express dissatisfaction within two weeks; but nobody with any principles of honesty or any shreds of intelligence will demand a refund. This is the most honest, convincing, and authentic book as yet printed about the people of the last frontier.

It is the unadorned story of a woman who began as a poor farmer's cotton-picking daughter, and later made fortunes and lost them in the oil game. It is told in the genuine vernacular of the region, an unadorned, racy, pungent story of a person who learned about life the hard way, who asked no favors, no quarter, and pays no undeserved compliments. For hard

sense, understanding of human nature, valid sentiment, and the old, basic American philosophy the book will be hard to beat.

The author is no hero-worshipper, and her success has not gone to her head. She gained a point of view which made her incapable of self-pity. Here is a rugged individual with the bark on, a girl who took life by both horns and cracked its neck. As an interpretation of capitalism, it leaves Karl Marx in the dust; as an expression of the faith that made America, it should prove a rebuke to defeatists, and a fountain of strength for those who believe in the American way. The book is a manual of the oil game, and a handbook for success in business. But it is also a book with a great heart, and an honesty and courage that never waver.

The author is no literary person and her style is sometimes monotonous.

The book is not goofy enough to please a jaded critical taste, and it offers no easy exits from the responsibility of living. Probably it will not have much of a sale. The real Americans will take it all for granted; others will not understand it. But it is the genuine article, as indigenous and earthy as buffalo grass. People who ask for that refund should be deported.



Sue Sanders