

Lundberg...

RIVER RAT. By Daniel Lundberg. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. 1941. 281 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

BOTH the title and subtitle of this novel (which is possibly somewhat autobiographical) are misleading. "River Rat" is a harsh sobriquet for these boys and girls of suburban Boston who tend and sail their boats on the well-behaved Charles River; certainly the term would have a tougher connotation in Toledo, Terre Haute, or Memphis. The subtitle, "An Extravaganza," is equally deceiving, for much of the charm of the story and of its strenuous young hero lies in the absence of extravagant and fanciful qualities. "River Rat" entertains not by astonishing the reader but by affording him the pleasure of recognition—Ralph is Everyboy in the limbo of uncertainty between boyhood and early-manhood, now tortured by misgiving and doubt, now ecstatic in self-confidence and day-dreams. In this amusing chronicle of Ralph Blood's eighteenth year Father discovers that Life with Son has its problems, too.

Ralph makes his last gesture of revolt before Tufts College, New England notions of respectability, and the social and economic pressures of adulthood claim him forever. It is not a big revolt, but it demands some daring and cunning, and is perhaps the best Thoreau's state can afford after a century of softening. Ralph and his contemporaries find their parents tiresome and boring but never suspect their own puerility and dullness.

Ralph is by no means incredibly dull, but he is naive; even his armchair acquaintance with Freud and Joyce has given no brittleness to his sophistication, which is delightfully ingenuous.

Although not brilliantly written, "River Rat" has charm and freshness, and there are a few scenes of excellent humor—when Ralph is loose among the Stuffed-shirts-and-view-with-alarms of Suburbia. Even the boy-and-girl adventures are not too tiresome, and the dialogue is consistently good. For all their petty fibbing and fickleness these boys and girls are no worse than Willie Baxter and his friends of nearly a generation ago. The youngsters of 1940 are franker in their speech (their solemn sex-talk with slight regard for euphemism will make the Tarkingtonians wince), but no reader will lay the novel aside worrying about things to come when such as Ralph, Danny, and Dutchy take over.

Street...

IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE. By James Street. New York: Dial Press. 1941. 348 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JOHN TEMPLE GRAVES

IN spite of the oily title and a suspicious odor of sweetness and light and character play in introductory remarks by author and publisher, this story is a joy forever. To say that it has to do with a farm family in present-day Mississippi, living in comparative poverty and a certain ignorance, is to over-identify it. It belongs in the category of products too close to the whole of human nature for a regional or class stamp. The better identification of Mr. Street's Abernathy family is with those men and women everywhere and always who take a character and a wisdom from their closeness to the earth and their remoteness from gadgets and sophistications of mass life. These are strong people, and very sweet ones, and even though their love for one another and their stern loyalties betray them in the end you have a sense in that end of something like Finland going down or the Greeks finding a worth-while in their never-flinching against odds. You have a sense, too, of eternal agriculture, of service to land of infinite variety in what the land gives in spiritual and physical return.

The Abernathys didn't want particularly to get ahead in this world. But with all their wills and wits they wanted to keep up. They were happy, and loved each other and their out-of-doors. They wanted to preserve against all decay the things they knew were dear to them and of use. The cyprus planking in their well "was cut and put there by my Grandpa Abernathy and it's just as good as new because Papa took care of it." And "Papa" was a man who just had to be free. "I ain't scared of death, but I sure hate to think of being locked up in a box 'til Judgment Day." It was because he couldn't stand being locked away from his folks that the penitentiary guards had to kill him. He was as fine a man as his young son, who tells the story, thought him. Not as a poor farmer, or as a Southerner, but as an American. If enough of his ilk had survived to these times the democracies wouldn't have to be uncertain about their fate against the man with the little black moustache.

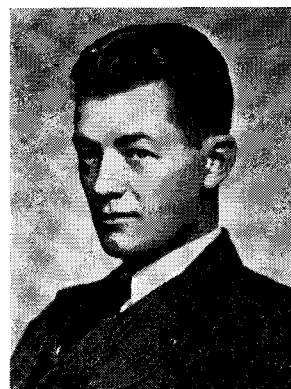
Stegner...

FIRE AND ICE. By Wallace Stegner. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 1941. 214 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by RAY B. WEST, JR.

WALLACE STEGNER, in this book as well as in his three earlier published works, has chosen what is probably the most difficult of all novel forms: the short novel. That is to say, he has written in the tightly compact manner of the modern short story, and in so doing has shown himself to be one of the most expert craftsmen in contemporary American writing.

"Fire and Ice" is the story of Paul Condon, a poor student, struggling at an assortment of odd jobs to put himself through the university, attempting to provide an outlet for his pent-up envy of more fortunate students by aligning himself with the communist youth organization on the campus. Confronted by Miriam Halley, a symbol of pampered beauty, a wealthy coed with an interest in social welfare, his anger turns to desire. He attacks her, is jailed, but released when no one appears to testify against



Bachrach

Wallace Stegner

him. His sudden hatred has exposed itself, as he comes to realize, in a desire to possess capitalism, not to destroy it.

There is also a thread of love story running through the book. Paul shares his discovery with Zoe, a lukewarm comrade, for whom the party line has come to mean less than has her love for him.

The movement of the story is swift, the reader's interest never flags, and the attack scene is as gripping as anything since Richard Wright's powerful scenes in "Native Son." The character of Paul Condon emerges clearly in the rapid sequence of events, particularly in his relations with very minor characters.

The chief defect of the book seems to me to lie in the swiftness and ease with which the whole problem is resolved. A more complete background and more fully rounded secondary characters would have made it easier to accept. In short, I couldn't help feeling that, despite its excellence, the whole picture deserved a larger canvas.

NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS: THE SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE HAS MOVED ITS EDITORIAL AND BUSINESS OFFICES FROM 420 MADISON AVENUE TO 25 WEST 45th STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y.

Rodman . . .

THE AIRMEN. By Selden Rodman.
New York: Random House. 1941. 148
pp. \$2.

Reviewed by SARA HENDERSON HAY

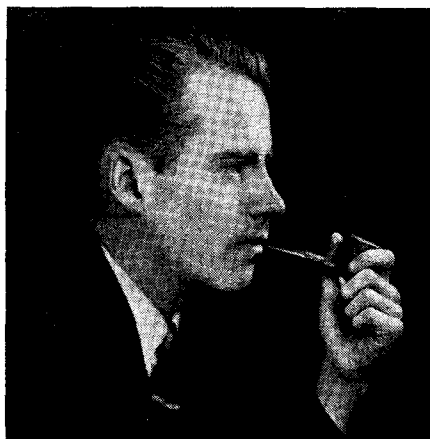
THIS is an ambitious and conscientious piece of work. In a long narrative poem, Mr. Rodman has attempted to translate into verse the essential spirit of aviation, the ideal behind the aspirations and achievements of airmen from Icarus to our own day. His book is divided, excluding a prologue and epilogue, into four sections. The first deals with Icarus lost, the belligerent youth who misunderstood and misused, to his own disaster, the wings that his father Daedalus dedicated to a selfless love of mankind and swore never to use but in the service of Good. The second section leaps twenty centuries to Leonardo, the embittered scientist, who destroys the machine he has built lest men say "He had less love than Pride." The third is the story of the Wright brothers, their long struggle against private difficulties and public ridicule, to the final triumph at Kitty Hawk—the Wright brothers who said of their invention "Its greatest use will be in helping to put an end to war . . ." And the fourth, "Icarus Regained" is concerned with the young Italian patriot Lauro de Bosis, who in a final gesture to express the individual's rebellion against a regimented State, scatters revolutionary pamphlets over Rome, and then heads his plane out to sea, to crash somewhere in the dark water.

It is an heroic theme, man's age-old desire for flight, and a sad one, in that Daedalus's dream for his creation should have been in our time so defeated. This is the underlying motif of the poem, the nobility of the dreams, this concept of the true spirit of the true airman. It is an emotional and romantic rather than an intellectual idea. It is a subject for poetry, and yet I doubt that Mr. Rodman has approached it from the poetic angle. His book excites the mind but not the heart. There is little of that personal warmth and simple human application which many people, even today, look for in poetry. There is much of fact, which in the mere statement is tremendous and moving. But the poem is so condensed, so packed with documentation, historical reference, and allusion that even with an explanatory argument heading each section, and a glossary at the end, it is pretty hard going at times.

And it seems to me that a poem whose comprehensibility depends to any great extent on the aid of explan-

atory notes approaches dangerously the boundaries of a scientific treatise. The stiff garments of Logic do not become the Muse.

Mr. Rodman employs a variety of metres, mostly a long line, with irregular rhymes. Except for the interspersed lyrics, and the six-line stanza form of the poems at the beginning of each section, there is no distinct rhyme pattern. As a purely technical criticism, I might remark that it takes an exceedingly acute ear to catch



Selden Rodman

Bachrach



John Peale Bishop

and connect rhymes which come unexpectedly and more than five lines apart, and for this reason some of the musical effect of the work is lost. Mr. Rodman is an able craftsman, however, and when he does choose to write in a conventional verse-pattern, the result is very good indeed. See the lovely lyric put into the mouth of Bill Tate, the "plain man" who met the Wright brothers on the sands at Kitty Hawk.

The book as a whole has a sweeping power and intensity. The concept is moving in the extreme, and there are passages and lines which have great poetic dignity and beauty. It is epic in theme, and if, for some readers its treatment makes it fall short of a certain warmth of emotional appeal, that is not to say that it is not a fine and praiseworthy accomplishment.

Bishop . . .

SELECTED POEMS. By John Peale Bishop. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1941. 99 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by DUDLEY FITTS

ONE cannot, within the compass of a brief notice, do justice to these poems. They demand the careful, line-by-line analysis that is Richard Blackmur's method. To generalize about them, as one profitably may about much competent verse, would be almost meaningless; its only possible use might be to call them to the attention of readers of poetry who do not know John Bishop's work.

Nearly all the poems in this book seem to me to be successful, and many of them are as brilliant as anything in contemporary writing. The conspicuous set pieces, like the Desdemona-Othello poem about poetry, wear well; they are as powerful today as they were when one first read one; but it is in the less portentous lyrics that the force is most pure, the meanings most complex. I am thinking of certain landscape poems, unpretentious on the surface, and immediately evocative of Frost; but better than all but the best of Frost because they are straight-to-the-center, untheatrical—almost, one might say, unarranged. (Frost arranges too much, calculates effects, is too consciously Yankee to be philosophical.) Or of such a poem as "This Dim and Ptolemaic Man," whose farmer in his rattly Ford

*Wheels with the road, does not
discern
He eastward goes at every turn,*

*Nor how his aged limbs are hurled
Through all the motions of the
world,
How wild past farms, past ricks,
past trees,
He perishes toward Hercules.*

This poem, indeed, is a kind of test. It is the sort of thing that Tristram Coffin wants to do, but it has depths that he has never touched.

The only downright failure in the book, I think, is the long narrative "October Tragedy." The failure is twofold. The material does not lend itself to the medium: there is enough here for a novel (indeed, the tone recalls the author's "Act of Darkness"), and it is crammed into a curiously indecisive free-verse form that simply can't carry it. Moreover, its violence and (to me, at least) repugnant wit produce a kind of strain that is not far from that of a high grade thriller. But "October Tragedy" is one poem out of many; and of the many, a large number are the equals of the finest we have today.