

# Selby . . .

*ISLAND IN THE CORN.* By John Selby. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1941. 404 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by PHIL STONG

THE financial decline and human stabilization of a comparatively great American family of the Midwest during the years between 1880 and 1892 is the general theme of this fat, rich book. It should be said at once for the benefit of those whom either the dates or "Midwest" might prejudice, that both the locale and the period are highly subordinate to some stories of American people which might have been set anywhere in any time of the country's history.

Father Trace is much the biggest man in a good-sized Wisconsin manufacturing town in 1880. Aside from authority, he has surroundings of heavy silver, Oriental rugs, fine horses, and some beautifully costumed women—his wife and three daughters. Father has the not unusual disabilities of a man born but not trained to great wealth and influence; a belief in his own infallibility and an unconscious impulse to force everyone he loves or needs into orbits about his star. Otherwise, he is a highly sympathetic character.

Curiously enough, it is too much foresight that takes Father down the first long flight from his inherited position. He believes in Tom Edison's electric lights and while he makes a small success with his light plant, he puts himself in a position where he cannot find funds to back up some iron mining experiments, which would, within a generation, have made a hundred fortunes the size of his. He believes in electricity for locomotion and sinks the principal remaining portion of his fortune in a premature trolley line.

His son-in-law and family know enough to move him from a town where he will no longer be prince or even one of the nobility, to a younger Minnesota city where he can again be lordly as proprietor of a travertine quarry. It is touch and go for operating expenses and Father makes this touch and no go by lordly investments in impracticable speculations. Father replies to the timid remonstrances of his family with the maddening reply, "I'll manage"—doubly maddening because they know that he is precisely the last man who ever has or ever can. The quarry goes down partly through misfortune but largely through lack of resources and Father goes down, too, probably much to his surprise, while posing magnificently but insanelly on a barge load of his own rock.



John Selby

Though this major character is eliminated, the principal character, the family, goes on into a third movement. In this the dramatic touch is supplied by the son-in-law manager and his wife. Neel had made a complex of mistakes early in the book which resulted in his wife's having a stillbirth. The wife was shocked into frigidity which exhibited itself as an hysterical paralysis of the legs.

Neel moves the family and its remaining elegances down to a small town in Missouri, no doubt near what is now Trenton, and starts in to run a hardware and implement store—without previous experience. Younger Midwesterners will probably protest that no such Baptist-ridden, anti-whist playing, narrow, snooping bunch of busybodies exists as a small town in that locale and that is probably true. It is a proof of Mr. Selby's careful treatment of his story as a document of character, which is more or less timeless, rather than as fictionized research—though the research is unimpeachable—that one's indignation is suddenly stilled by the reflection that the time is 1892, long before the automobile, the motion picture, and the radio had perhaps vulgarized but certainly liberalized the behaviors of even the western Baptists.

The family has a difficult time in this "island in the corn" but the Presbyterian minister and a few kindly old ladies pull them through and they find themselves at the end of a year at least that year's living ahead. This matter and the story of the paralyzed wife and the subordinate stories are wound up neatly and with proper rapidity in the last pages of the book.

It is a very good, full book which tells its story of an American time and some American places without any historical ostentation or anguish.



Judith Kelly

# Kelly . . .

*MARRIAGE IS A PRIVATE AFFAIR.* By Judith Kelly. New York: Harper & Bros. 1941. 359 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

THE Harper Prize novel for 1941-42 can take its place confidently alongside such notable predecessors as "The Grandmothers," "The Dark Journey," "Honey in the Horn," and "Children of God," for this sharp study of a modern marriage is written with skill and acumen. Although the accent of the novel is witty and non-romantic and its portraiture slightly satirical, the story itself threatens to become the conventional tale of a once happy marriage shattered by disillusion and infidelity; but the author successfully detours around the hackneyed. There is one great weakness in the plot: when the young wife begins to interpret her restlessness and fear of middle age as the fading of her love for Tom, she yields too easily to a somewhat colorless Lothario conveniently waiting for her. The novelist, unfortunately for her "plot," has already stressed Theo's basic taste and decency as well as

## SOLUTION OF LAST WEEK'S DOUBLE-CROSTIC (No. 386)

SWIFT:

### THE BATTLE OF THE BOOKS

Momus found criticism a malignant deity extended . . . upon the spoils of numberless volumes half-devoured. . . . She had claws like a cat; her head and ears and voice resembled those of an ass; her diet was the overflowing of her own gall.

Tom's engaging charm, affectionate nature, intelligence, good looks, and virility. The adultery is not quite credible.

However it is necessary for the progress and direction of the novel. After Tom has discovered his wife's defection and his violent anger and hate have boiled away, there remains a residue of cynicism which enables him to take Theo back, not as his wife but as his mistress. Obviously such a solution belongs to artificial high comedy and not to the realistic novel, and the author is too wise to make the arrangement permanent. To expect her to rescue her characters from such an emotional impasse with-

out resorting to a certain amount of melodrama and sentimentality would, perhaps, be unreasonable.

The overtones of "Marriage Is a Private Affair" are those of intelligent and adult fiction. The background of Boston with its Marquands and Rover Boys, its Italians and Poles, its labor racketeers and idealists, its Back Bay and slums is correctly drawn. The first half of the novel is crackly with wit and cynical observation. The ludicrous ritual and pageantry of fashionable weddings are described with playful irreverence; cocktail hours and talky dinners among the intellectuals result in delightful stretches of Behrman-like patter.

## The Lyricism of Vincent Sheean

*BIRD OF THE WILDERNESS.* By Vincent Sheean. New York: Random House. 1941. 322 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PAUL STARRETT

ALMOST anyone who has read anything knows that "Jimmy" (I think he does not object to the title) Sheean writes at times with a spontaneous and seemingly involuntary lyricism which suggests the old Cymric and Irish legends of harps that sang by themselves when the proper hand touched them.

This must be kept in mind before one examines this bird for feathers. A young German-Welsh-American with some sensitivity for music and literature lives in a German-American small town in Illinois over the time that Wilson was keeping the country out of war. He gets the girls who teaches Senior English in his High School into some social difficulties—not what is known as "trouble" for Goodness Sake—and joins the United States Army.

The story is so extremely slight that that is absolutely all one can make of it. The mechanics involve nothing more than the item of the boy's newspaper route and the climax is built on a shortage of about thirty-eight dollars in his books. Perceptive persons may find some significance in this thirty-eight dollars beyond the simple circumstances, but it is difficult for this observer to believe that a plutocrat with an assured income of nine or ten dollars a week could do anything serious about his career, his love-life, and world letters with no more trouble than a debt he could pay up in four or five weeks.

There is some amusing, perhaps prolonged, soap-boxing about Wilson, Germans, etc.—definitely too much scenery, inaccurately described, amusing people, no story to speak of, a great

deal of self-consciousness in writing, and a few poetic bits that are worth their weight in radium.

It is probably unfair to quote from the "Author's Note" as a suggestion of what to skip in the book, but almost everything is unfair in some sense:

"When, last year, the rhythm of external events—in spite of obvious differences and deceptive resemblances—turned my mind back to these themes, although I approached them in a way so very different, it seemed to me best to retain the frankly romantic title that had once graced them."

What one will find in the book are such pleasant conceits as that of the hero's musical education. When he discovers that what he had taken to be the pleasure of piano playing is supposed to be work he determinedly forgets everything he has learned except a few chords—and those are in D-minor, not the conventional C-major.



Vincent Sheean

## Life in the Mill

*IN THE MILL.* By John Masefield. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1941. 158 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by R. ELLIS ROBERTS

WHEN John Masefield, now Poet Laureate of England, worked in a carpet-mill at Yonkers (in the years 1895 to 1897) the Palisades across the river were open, undeveloped country, and "Upper New York was still uncleared and unbuilt. From 155th Street one passed into the woodland which was much as it had been when the Red Indian had it." The hours at the mill were from seven to noon, from one to six; there were no unions, no social service, but the owners treated the men well, and any enterprising and inventive workman was not cheated but rewarded. Masefield was nineteen years old in 1895—he had been trained for the Merchant Marine, had seen many seas in different ships, and just before he went to the mill, he had worked on an American farm.

His account of life in the mill, and of the details of carpet-making are told with the direct precision which his writing has always shown; and the chronicle ends with an imaginative suggestion for the improvement of such industries. The real interest of the book lies, however, in his reconstruction of his own growth into the world of romance and poetry. For the first time in his life, since his childhood, he had leisure to read. And he read voraciously. Novels, medical books, the English essayists, Walton and De Quincey, Malory and Melville, Darwin and Chaucer—the lonely English boy, burning to be a writer one day, devoured them in his lodgings in the evenings, at the week-ends. He writes of those adventures among books with a simplicity that makes these pages of high value as the record of the making of a poet. Two authors moved him most—George du Maurier with "Trilby" and "Peter Ibbetson"; and John Keats. Of "Trilby" he writes, as many other young men and women of that day, had they the honesty, would write!

On the whole, I enjoyed it more than any book I had read until that time; . . . Youth longs for close companionships. The book describes an enchanted companionship of men linked together in the practice of art; it gave me, therefore, the image of a double happiness. It gave me moreover an impression of France which I have never lost, and quoted to me, for the first time, scraps of French verse which seemed very beautiful.

Under the charm of "Trilby" and of "Peter Ibbetson" Masefield learnt