

## IN DEFENSE OF ANTHOLOGIES

FOR some reason, the anthology is the outcast, the *mauvais sujet* of literature. No matter how intrinsically valuable or important, its reception is almost certain to be chilled by Brahmins who regard it as a member of the lower literary castes. Chiefly responsible perhaps for this disdain is the general impression that the anthology represents a short cut to a byline on a book by someone who is too lazy to write one or who, plainly, couldn't write one even if he wanted to. Moreover, the anthology is supposed to represent brain-picking on a deplorable scale, with the editor or anthologist trying to pass off the combined wit and wisdom of some several dozen contributors as his own. As part of this general picture, it is supposed to be a slap-bang affair easily come by—something anyone could do who knew how to use a pair of scissors and place consecutive numerals atop each chapter.

But the curse is much too general. Some anthologies may justify the generalizations, but the anthology can be one of the most exacting and demanding jobs in all literature. Ask any conscientious anthologist, who is also an author in his own right, which is the easier job—an original book or a good anthology—and don't be surprised if he votes against the anthology. An anthology worth its salt can shorten the life of its editor as will no other job in publishing. Blocking out a general pattern that will have impact, meaning, and cohesion; reading and re-reading countless thousands of words; editing and annotating—all these are only phases of the job. Correspondence with authors and publishers, with an average of three or four exchanges per author or publisher; copyrights, fees, special notations—these are the headaches and hair-whiteners of anthologists, who have generally expended enough time

and effort to cover two or more books of their own.

As a case in point, look at Clifton Fadiman's "Reading I've Liked."\* Not content with presenting a carefully assorted and well-bundled literary harvest, Mr. Fadiman (where does he find the time and energy?) has written enough introductory and interpolative material to make a separate book. And make a separate book it can, for his own material is by no means handcuffed to the selections. His opening essay, "My Life Is an Open Book: Confessions and Digressions of an Incurable," is a semi-autobiographical excursion (Mr. Fadiman provides a solemn promise that he will never venture into autobiography again), and runs to some twenty or thirty thousand words, many of which have little or nothing to do with the anthology itself—as Mr. Fadiman himself recognizes—but which come almost as close to stealing the show as his own stint on "Information, Please." This essay provides several dozen juicy bones for Mr. Fadiman's fellow reviewers to chew on, for Mr. Fadiman has never been one for stepping lightly around a generalization, or filing the sharp edges off a flat statement.

So that his fellow reviewers cannot be blamed if, after acknowledging the discerning taste reflected in his selections, as well as the excellent quality of the anthology as a whole—certainly one of the best balanced and stimulating literary treasure chests to come along in many publishing seasons—they come back, as they should, to Mr. Fadiman himself. They may balk somewhat at his purest definition of a literary critic, especially in the light of his emphasis upon the big job before

\* *READING I'VE LIKED: A Personal Selection Drawn from Two Decades of Reading and Reviewing, Presented with an Informal Prologue, by Clifton Fadiman. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1941. 906 pp. \$3.*

writers in the shape of things to come; they may be surprised to meet such open-and-shut preachments and maxims as, "Never to be bored is merely an active form of imbecility," or, "Ennui, felt on the proper occasions, is a sign of intelligence," or, "he [the reviewer] should have the ability to be bored, even if this ability is much feeblar than his ability not to be bored." They may be surprised, not only because of the statements themselves, but because of their redundancy in a single paragraph. And when they come across Mr. Fadiman's dictum against newspapers, and read of his high regard for and reliance on newspaper headlines and spot-paragraph glances as a good way of keeping abreast of the times, they are going to raise something of a collective eyebrow. For if anything is needed these days, whether in regard to books, magazines, or newspapers, it is not only the discrimination called for by Mr. Fadiman but a willingness and ability to hear a writer out. Especially with newspapers is there a need to go beyond the headlines, to read with the greatest possible care, for the substance of the news is in its net impact, and the only impact provided by the headlines and by the spot-paragraph technique, time-saving as it may be, is that of a switchboard unattended and with many of the wires buzzing at the same time.

All this, however, like a good part of Mr. Fadiman's own notes, is digressive and not too strongly related to the anthology at hand. But we started out to applaud him for exploding a fallacy about anthologies, and, even if we did pick some lint along the way for some of his own opinions, we reiterate our hunch that "Reading I've Liked" is going to be about the best dollar-for-dollar book buying you can do this Christmas. N. C.

## Sewer Project: Employee

By Joseph Langland

BRONZE in the twilight now he journeys home  
hanging his arms on the racks of the city truck.  
Pick and shovel are cleaned of sewer loam  
and laid away; the courthouse bell has struck  
the only hour that matters anymore  
to men who fill the emptiness of time  
with thought of the slow silver of the poor . . .  
bread twelve a loaf, milk a dime,  
butter at thirty-six, and eggs . . . he plans  
to make it come out right, counting each cent  
as a child counts, surely upon his hands  
finger by finger, yet glad for the tenement  
where his wife keeps listening for him at the door  
and children play together upon the floor.

## "The Democratic Spirit"

SIR:—James Truslow Adams's review of my anthology, "The Democratic Spirit," ["The Democratic Fashion," *SRL*, Sept. 27], calls for a reply. I regret that the temper and method of his review make it impossible for me to write in the spirit of polite literary controversy.

Mr. Adams was extremely careful to avoid giving me grounds for a libel suit. Nowhere did he explicitly label me a communist or a Nazi (or a defender of perjury and murder!). But his few remarks about the book itself were surrounded by columns of irrelevant observations about a Nazi female with whom he is acquainted, about Stalin and the purges, about totalitarianism and revolution, and about the writers who lend their names to committees. Mr. Adams was thus enabled to discredit me without assuming the responsibility of a direct charge. It is an excellent example of the classic smear technique.

Only in this one respect, however, was his review carefully written. I doubt that anyone who knows the book will believe that Mr. Adams read more than a few pages of it, and there is some evidence that he deliberately suppressed or distorted what he found in the few pages he did read.

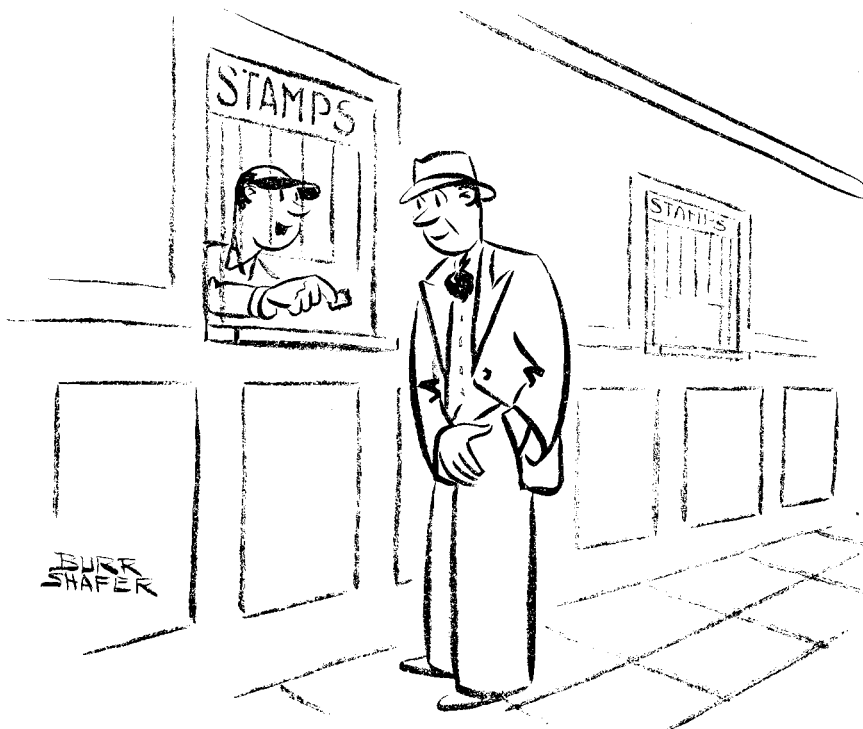
Some examples:

1. Mr. Adams stated that I gave Lincoln six pages. I gave him sixteen. This was not a typographical error in Mr. Adams's review, because he based an important argument on that statement—and the argument was obviously false. (This also disposes of the chief arguments of your two hysterical correspondents, Messrs. Dennen and Gotesky.)

2. Mr. Adams objected to my omitting Woodrow Wilson's first inaugural speech, but he did not inform his readers that the volume contains a fine selection from Wilson's "The New Freedom."

3. Mr. Adams observed that I included writers who opposed John Dewey's inquiry into the Soviet trials. The unwary reader would assume that Dewey is not represented in the volume. There is a selection from Dewey's "Democracy and Education."

4. Mr. Adams quoted a passage from my Introduction in which I said that the people have sought to rule in order to get more of "the good things of life—food, shelter, leisure, education, security, pleasure." He remarked that I said nothing about freedom of speech or press or person or religion. The fact is that in the same paragraph in which the sentence quoted above appeared, I wrote that the people "have constantly enlarged and enforced the application of such doctrines as equality before the law, universal suffrage, free public education, limitation of economic privilege, religious and racial tolerance, and so



"It's a new commemorative to commemorate the first commemorative."

on." The Introduction is loaded with references to freedom of religion, of person, etc.

5. Mr. Adams's list of the modern radical writers who are represented in the volume was fairly complete, but his list of the non-radical writers was significantly incomplete. He omitted Edgar Lee Masters, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Charles A. Beard, Christian Gauss, Jonathan Daniels, Thomas Wolfe, Sinclair Lewis, and Lewis Mumford. No reference occurred anywhere to such other contemporary writers as W. E. B. DuBois, John Dos Passos, James Farrell, Dorothy Parker, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, and John Steinbeck, all of whom are generously represented. Nor was any reference made to my selections from such writers of the recent past as Finley Peter Dunne, William Vaughn Moody, Hamlin Garland, Herbert Croly, Vachel Lindsay, Heywood Broun, and Lincoln Steffens.

6. Mr. Adams said that my selections from the men of whom he approves—Benét, Canby, Brooks, President Roosevelt, Sandburg, and MacLeish—"are not as representative either of the writers or of the subject, or as constructive, as they might be." I don't know what he means by "constructive," but the reader may judge for himself whether the selections are representative. From Benét: "Ode to the Austrian Socialists" and "Ode to Walt Whitman." From Canby: "The Age of Confidence." From Brooks: "America's Coming-of-Age." From the President: the "Address at Madison Square Garden, 1936." From Sand-

burg: "The People, Yes." From MacLeish: "Pole Star for This Year" and "Speech to a Crowd."

These examples are, I think, sufficient to show what Mr. Adams has been up to.

There remains the most important question: was Mr. Adams justified in attacking the inclusion of such indubitably radical authors as Caldwell, Gold, Maltz, Zugsmith, and Wright? The basis of his attack was the fact of their inclusion, not the nature of the material included. In other words, he hated some nine or ten names—but he had nothing to say about the actual writings that appear in my anthology. Since the volume is intended to be a collection of writings and not a passport to Mr. Adams's heaven, I feel justified in asking the reader to examine the works rather than Mr. Adams's index of sinners. Caldwell's piece is a story about a Southern tenant farmer; Gold's piece is a pathetic picture of ghetto life; Zugsmith's piece (which first appeared in *Story Magazine*) deals with the domestic effects of unemployment. Maltz's piece (which first appeared in *The New Yorker*) is a sketch of the "lower depths" of poverty; Wright's piece (from a Book-of-the-Month Club selection) is his famous study of the futility felt by Negro youth denied an opportunity to achieve a full life. There are no other contemporary writings in the volume that deal with unemployment, the ghetto, the tenant farmer, and the slum. Perhaps Mr. Adams thinks that an anthology of literature purporting to express the democratic spirit would be complete without selections ex-