

# Fads and Follies in the Forties

*THE MAD FORTIES.* By Grace Adams and Edward Hutter. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1942. 294 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by CHARLES DAVID ABBOTT

**I**F the immaculately sane among us think they have been living in an age too given to cults and isms, let them read this chronicle of a decade that began just a hundred years ago. Our foibles are doubtless many and will, presumably, provoke plenty of mirth a century hence. It is quite possible that our descendants may see in them elements of comedy not dissimilar to those we see in the foibles of our ancestors. They can have their fun when the time occurs, as we have it now in examining this array of fads, follies, and frivolities that Miss Adams and Mr. Hutter have so gaily and so adroitly surveyed for our benefit. If we cannot rise to the same heights of sheer idiocy, it is only our progeny who will be the poorer—or, would our rationalists say, the richer.

There was, for example, in 1840 the "water cure." The advance guard found it a most remarkable panacea. It banished all ailments from dropsy to melancholia. Just wrap yourself in a wet sheet and your woes disappeared. Or, if you were too busy to spare the time for a full cure, damp girdles buckled around your middle would do almost as well. Why pneumonia did not follow, we don't know. Perhaps it did. But the devotees of the water cure soon turned to other fascinating pursuits, particularly to phrenology which in the hands of the

learned became a science of magnificent proportions. Politicians and clergymen found its prophecies irresistible. Men made fortunes by feeling the bumps on other men's heads, and university presidents wrangled over the exact location of the Organ of Union for Life. It was bumps and bumps alone that set Henry Ward Beecher on his career. And then close on the heels of phrenology came Mesmerism. Hypnotic seers answered for the destinies of all who had faith. Spiritualism burgeoned; the Fox sisters knew ghosts who could outmaneuver Swedenborg. Fruitlands, Brook Farm, the whole esoteric fabric of New England transcendentalism, lent its support to the ideologies of the moment. Abolition, homeopathy, woman's rights all had their fanatical mouthpieces, usually the same who

had been vociferous over phrenology and spiritualism. Intellectual confusion and an infatuation with whatever was new and experimental seemed to be normal with everybody except a few hard and independent sceptics like Edgar Allan Poe who just would not be taken in. Of course, the mysteries of sex came in for much attention. The elder Henry James was an enthusiast in that field. He even visited the Oneida community where he was considerably shocked.

The facts about all this intellectual and emotional upheaval of the eighteen-forties are not misquoted in this hilarious narrative. Of course they are presented with some inevitable distortion, since ridicule demands that kind of emphasis. The authors, however, have never let their sense of fun run away with their honesty. They have laughed at everything but their laughter is sympathetic and without malice.

## Their (93 Authors') Best Foot Forward

*THIS IS MY BEST.* Edited by Whit Burnett. New York: The Dial Press. 1942. 1180 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

**T**HIS is apparently a year of anthologies. Mr. Burnett, who modestly acknowledges that the idea for this anthology originated with John Pen, says he has put it together with the help of the public. The names of 169 representative authors were sent in ballot form to many readers of books and magazines; polls were taken among subscribers of the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, and *The New Yorker*; ballots were sent to librarians, literary critics, and persons professionally connected with reading, writing, teaching, or publishing. The response he characterizes as "serious, intelligent, discriminating." The introduction does not say on what basis authors not included in the 93 were eliminated. T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein were unavailable because they are in Europe.

The authors being selected, the task of securing from them a choice of what they considered their finest, or at least their most representative, unit of writing suitable for inclusion was then before the editor. (It is not, I think, quite true that we have here "over 150 self-chosen and complete masterpieces," inasmuch as many authors selected chapters from novels.) In addition, Mr. Burnett asked the author to say why he thought the selection chosen to represent him was his best, or most representative, work. Despite this ambiguity, the writers

have done very well. About 58 have explained at some length either the circumstances in which a work originated or the reason why they regard it as their most satisfactory production. The others content themselves with a sentence or two, or with a simple expression of choice, or with a choice made by somebody else.

Counting noses is not necessarily a means of determining literary worth, but the method pragmatically results in one of the most representative anthologies of the season. Mr. Burnett has interested himself in "writing," not in "literature," the result being that he has not cast out as unworthy of the muse people like Allan Nevins, John Dewey, or Stuart Chase. I am glad to see recognition given to the excellent prose of William L. Shirer, John Gunther, and Vincent Sheean. The representative quality of the volume is also increased by including the work of George Ade, Booth Tarkington, and Agnes Repplier. Perhaps the weakness of the book is a certain flaccidity in front of a poll of "favorites," but on the other hand I don't recall any other recent anthology that gives so inclusive a cross-section of the rich, varied, and contradictory writing of the last twenty or thirty years.



Whit Burnett gave the authors the job of compiling a new anthology.

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# Through a Son's Eyes

**THE TURNING POINT.** By Klaus Mann. New York: L. B. Fischer Publishing Corp. 1942. 366 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by LEO LANIA

THE autobiography of Klaus is the story of a family, with all elements of an exciting psychological novel. Here you find the father, the great writer Thomas Mann, the Magician as the children call him—here you find Uncle Heinrich—he, too, a great writer. You cannot imagine greater contrasts than these two brothers, the sons of a senator of Lübeck and of a Brazilian mother. "They were closely akin to and yet infinitely different from each other. Their characters and visions seemed to be the utterly divergent variations of one basic theme. The *leitmotiv* both had in common and assiduously paraphrased, was the blend of races—in their case, the Northern element and the Latin streak—as a stimulus and a problem." The author of the "Magic Mountain" lived for the greater part of his life in the ivory tower of his art, was often denounced as conservative, even reactionary and "bourgeois," while brother Heinrich, the author of "The Subject," even as far back as 1914 prophesied and warned against the German catastrophe. During the whole First World War the two brothers did not see each other.

In the son's book you find also the mother, the daughter of an eminent Jewish scholar and of a gifted actress who descended from the intellectual élite of Berlin. You find uncles and aunts, unusual people with unnormal destinies. And you find at last the hero of the book Klaus, disconnected, restless, wandering; "one who spent the best time of his life in a social and spiritual vacuum, striving for a true community but never finding it" and carrying the burden of

being the gifted son of a great artist.

Klaus Mann proves his talent as a novelist once again in the first part of his autobiography. The portrait of the Mann family is excellent. Klaus Mann is at his best describing his childhood and the family life. Less successful are the chapters in which the author tries to give an interpretation of the political and social evolution of the period between the two wars and of the postwar generation. "Life in a social and spiritual vacuum" makes it difficult to gather all the knowledge and experiences necessary for an analysis and understanding of this complex time. And on the other hand, Klaus Mann's personality and life are too out-of-the-ordinary to be presented as a typical example of the German postwar generation.

The value and the interest of this book lies—besides the fascinating portrait of the Mann family—in the intimate impressions and memories of many celebrities who crossed the path of Klaus Mann during his wanderings through the whole world. Among these impressions I like two



Klaus Mann

best: the portraits of André Gide and Jean Cocteau. Those are masterful. In others Klaus succeeded less well; they are too sketchy, too superficial. But to the last page Klaus Mann keeps the interest of the reader.

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