

# A Small Miracle

CANNERY ROW. By John Steinbeck.  
New York: The Viking Press. 1945.  
208 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by NATHAN L. ROTHMAN

WHEN you have finished reading "Cannery Row" you know that John Steinbeck has passed another of his small miracles. It is the best thing he has done since "The Grapes of Wrath," although it is not quite like that, in ways that we shall discover. This goes back in style and substance to those other brilliant little tales he wrote, to Monterey County in California again, where once we met Lennie and George, and Danny and the paisanos. Add to these the people of Cannery Row: Doc, and Mac, and the boys, and the bright-haired Dora, for they are likely to seem as memorable. They are caught up alive for us, stirring and functioning, in the whole, integral atmosphere of their row of shacks along the shore line, the canneries, and the flophouse, Lee Chong's store, Doc's marine laboratory, Dora's Bear Flag Restaurant.

There is one fairly consistent thread of plot that runs tenuously through the book. It will seem trifling when it is mentioned: the blundering and fantastic attempts of the other inhabitants of the Row to show their love for the Doc, to throw him a party, to serve him in their untutored ways, like the fabled Juggler at the altar. But more important is the series of individual and group portraits revealed along the way, and most important of all the spiritual correspondence between place and people. Lines of force and sentiment run between them; the places breathe and suffer changes of mood, the humans assume the gnarled qualities of salt air and rickety structure, and the whole thing runs together fluidly, people and place, into a vital organism, Cannery Row. We have seen Steinbeck do just this at least once before, with his "Tortilla Flat," but it is still a revelation to see it done again, in the strictest, easiest, and most beautiful economy of line.

In the presence of this craftsmanship, of what I have termed a small miracle, it must seem irrelevant, certainly ungrateful, to point out that it is not a great one. Yet there must be some accounting for the gnawing dissatisfaction that one may feel along with admiration for the finesse of this little book. There is something Steinbeck is doing, consciously, with his power, that seems to point him, I hope tentatively, in the wrong direction. I can show this best by quoting a few lines from one or two places and making what I can of them. Chapter Two is a kind of rhapsodic interpolation,

of which there are a few. He is speaking of the Row and what it means to him. He says:

The Word is a symbol and a delight which sucks up men and scenes, trees, plants, factories, and Pekinese. Then the Thing becomes the Word and back to Thing again, but warped and woven into a fantastic pattern. The Word sucks up Cannery Row, digests it and spews it out, and the Row has taken the shimmer of the green world . . .

Steinbeck is explaining the wonderful thing that happens when he looks upon his materials and feels stirring within him the power to transmute them into the evocative word. It is the intoxication of a god looking upon his handiwork, and of a good writer in the realization of his re-creative talents. This kind of consciousness is a natural prelude to the work to be done, yet we expect the work itself to blot it out. We do not expect to see the writer rear up among the pages to watch himself functioning, lift his people up and turn them over before our eyes like a conjuror. He can write an essay on how he wrote his novel—as Wolfe did—but he cannot do both simultaneously without casting a film of self-consciousness over some of the bright and natural and sincere qualities of immediacy.

In the very presence of the contriving god, some of the art will become artifice. (Was he not aware of this, writing, "warped and woven into a fantastic pattern"?) Here is an example. In one episode, William, the doorman at Dora's Bear Flag, falls prey to melancholy, contemplates suicide, and actually performs it. The chapter ends as follows:

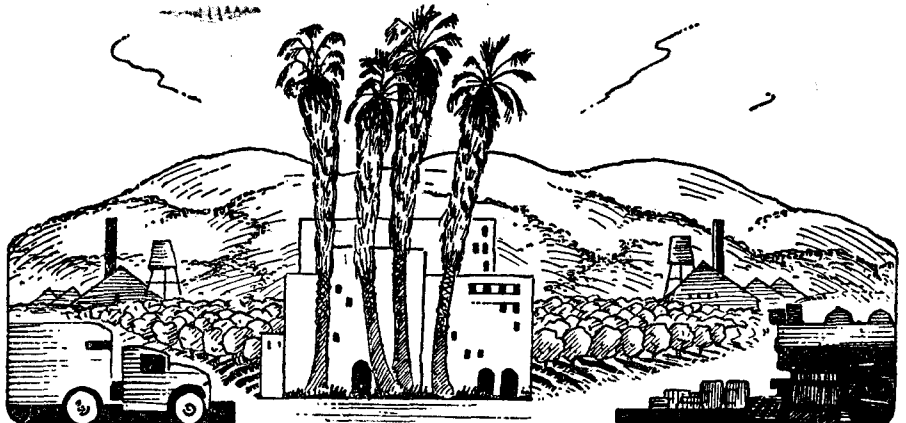
His hand rose and the ice pick snapped into his heart. It was amazing how easily it went in. William was the watchman before Alfred came. Everybody liked Alfred. He could sit on the pipes with Mack and the boys any time. He could even visit up at the Palace Flophouse.

Now this is cold, cold as a puppet-master. This is reaching for insou-

ciance. See—the man dies, and we slip away at once on an oblique angle, to Alfred, for effect. But Steinbeck's powers have not sprung from angles and effects, from being a contriving literary god. They sprang out of love and pity and understanding of the men he knew, Danny, Jim Nolan, Tom Joad. He is using William, effectually, without sympathy, and this is the measure of our discomfort about "Cannery Row."

"The Grapes of Wrath" was a big book because it was big with love for its people. There is much of that here too, in such chapters as the tenth, about Frankie, and the twenty-fourth, about Mary Talbot, each of them compressed and poignant with unimaginable tenderness. But they seem hardly to belong to the tale; they are supernumeraries, very much like the starfish, the anemones, and the octopi in Doc's marine lab, upon which Steinbeck lavishes, similarly, some of his easiest and finest pages. It is Doc, the central figure, whose bearded face is described as "half-Christ and half satyr," and you can see the trouble with that right away, the masking and contrivance that will go into making this man interesting and mystical and complex, at the expense of simple reality. The story will focus upon Doc, yet some of the simple things at the periphery, the way an anemone expands or the way Mary Talbot talks to her husband, will come out with the most clarity and freshness, because Steinbeck wasn't toying with transmutation and the Word, wasn't trying to do anything but give them to us unaltered, with original vision.

We don't have to have "The Grapes of Wrath" every time, but we do need the original vision, and the loving, intimate identity of author and subject that made "Tortilla Flat" and some of the short stories and the parts of this book that are best. "Cannery Row" is exciting for the way in which this key problem in a writer's development is spread before us visible in its workings, like a tinted cross-section of one of Doc's specimens, as well as for the characteristic, lusty excitement of a Steinbeck narrative.



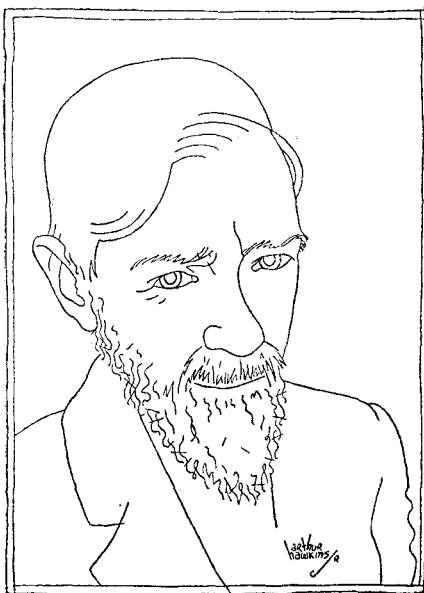
# Escape to the Irrational

**PAUSE TO WONDER.** *Stories of the Marvelous, Mysterious, and Strange.* Edited by Marjorie Fischer and Rolfe Humphries. New York: Julian Messner. 1944. 565 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by THOMAS SUGRUE

**"O**NE of the most beautiful things we can experience is the mysterious," said Albert Einstein. "It is the source of all true science and art. He who can no longer pause to wonder is as good as dead." Pondering this remark of a great, good, and sensible man, Marjorie Fischer and Rolfe Humphries chose it as an inspiration for an anthology of literature devoted to the breakdown of barriers between our little hovel of thought and the mansions of other-dimensionality. The result is a book full of excellent entertainment, fine writing, and first rate examples of the eternal freshness of man's imagination and sense of humor. There is nothing of the macabre or gruesome in this volume; the editors have had the good sense to realize that in relation to other forms of life man's situation is essentially comic, and their admirable taste has excluded the type of story which properly belongs in a commentary on surgery.

Entertainment is the sole aim of the editors, and in this connection they quote another modern thinker, a man who, like Columbus, made a mistake which benefited mankind. Said Dr. Sigmund Freud, "when life imposes its stern discipline upon us . . . reason becomes an enemy that keeps us from so many possibilities of pleasure. One discovers what a joy it is to escape from it, at least for a moment, and give oneself up to the fascination of irrationality."



D. H. Lawrence

In a sense this is correct, but flight from reason does not presuppose, as the editors point out, a destination in Cloud-Cuckoo Land. It means, rather, an excursion into a new aspect of existence, where the rules governing the forms of life are different from those in our world. There must be order there, just as there is order here. It is the intermingling of the two, the carrying over of limitations into a field where such curtailment is not in force, that provides the puzzlement, the wonder, and the laughter. Thus the artist who purposes to convey the reality of both sets of order must be master of the logic which governs each, and must place the opposites against each other in a manner calculated to catch the intuition of the spectator; for it is only the intuition which is attuned to both dimensions.

A master of dual logic like Mark Twain, for instance, has a grand time in "Extract from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven." Captain Stormfield, an old sea captain, is not dismayed at the tremendous speed at which he travels through outer space, but he is betrayed into racing comets by the hangover of his competitive spirit. Thus he gets off his course and arrives on the wrong side of heaven, a place which, though it fulfills the hope of every man, has only partially eliminated time and done nothing at all about space—a natural result of man's inability in his imagination to disperse these enemies of his eternal happiness. Another master of the dual logic, Oscar Wilde, enjoys himself hugely in "The Canterville Ghost." The ghost, quite accustomed to timelessness and the other phenomena of extra-sensory life, fails to take into account the growth of a new form of reason on earth, the American mind. A classic example of the bumping together of laws occurs in Ovid's story of Philemon and Baucis, where the gods, when they come to the home of the couple, have to duck their heads to get through the low doorway. This entanglement of the gods in the laws of man was used throughout ancient literature not only as an inspiration for comedy, but as a basis for most of the pagan spiritual teaching. Nowadays the teaching phase is obscured by the cosmic use, but it is evident in such modern writers as Virginia Woolf, Frank R. Stockton, Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, and E. M. Forster, all of whom are represented in this collection.

The editors have limited themselves, except for the classic authors, to English, Irish, and American writers. This is due partly to the difficulty of getting good translations, partly to the trouble nowadays in obtaining per-



Sylvia Townsend Warner

mission to reprint. But it also rests upon the fact that much of the success of this branch of literature depends upon a mental and social background which is common and familiar to reader and writer alike. At any rate there is more than enough to go around here, and all of it is good. Old favorites abound, along with selections hitherto neglected. For so large a group there is an amazing level of excellence. No story or poem is dull; every one of the 565 pages is highly readable. Particularly recommended are the contributions of Liam O'Flaherty, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Frank O'Connor, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Winifred Holtby, Antonia White, and such tried and true masters as Ambrose Bierce, Mark Twain, Finley Peter Dunne, E. M. Forster, and John Masefield. Such special inclusions as "A Blazing Starre Seene in the West," Cotton Mather's account of the witches of New England, and the script of Orson Welles's famous broadcast of the invasion of the Martians, provide pause for thought as well as wonder. All in all it is an ideal mixture for the bedside table, the weekend bag, or the friend who "has everything."

## After the Star

Sara Van Alstyne Allen

**A**FTER the Star had risen  
Along the Eastern sky,  
The branches of the chosen Tree  
Stirred of a sudden, and shivered  
As a new wind passed by.

Three berries lay along the snow.  
Of these I make my song,  
Of how they lay night-long  
Upon the silent snow,  
Three crimson drops below the tree,  
As round, as red as blood they lay,  
To greet the rising sun  
On Christmas Day.

*The Saturday Review*