

Christ Also Stopped at Sereth

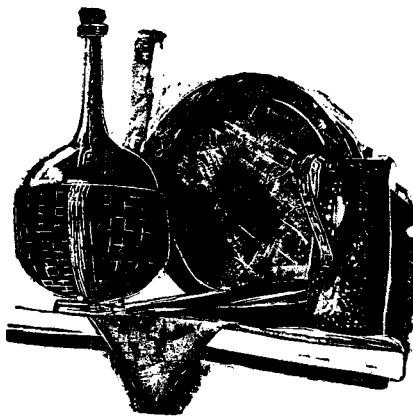
SEEDTIME. By Leo Katz. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1947. 381 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by ROBERT PICK

CHRIST did not stop at Eboli only. Throughout the South and the Southeast of Europe downtrodden rural people have been waiting for Him since time immemorial. Slowly their plight begins to emerge as one of the causes for our century's tribulations. One of the minor rumblings preceding the cloudburst and deluge could have been heard—had there been ears—in 1907 in the kingdom of Rumania: the so-called Agrarian Revolt, a spontaneous, ill-prepared outbreak of the peasants' wrath against oppression and exploitation, which collapsed after a couple of weeks, and was soon forgotten.

Mr. Katz has chosen that historic upheaval as the central theme, or rather the pivot, of his remarkable novel. He was born, some fifty years ago, in Sereth, then a town in the Austrian duchy of Bukovina (it's Russian now), and a place so close to Rumania that, except for smugglers, the border played but a small role in the life on both of its sides. Sereth, then, is his story's locale—a kaleidoscope of national costumes, and, with Rumanian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, German, Slovakian, and even Hungarian to be heard in its streets, a veritable babel of tongues. Yet the Sereth of 1907 painted by this author offers a picture of religious and racial tolerance which many a one-tongued modern city might envy.

Which doesn't mean that Mr. Katz's Sereth is free from the usual strife and antagonisms of men in general, and the people of towns in particular. Their weaknesses, passions, and vices make for the very story that serves as a background for the saga of the Revolt. An "American" oil prospector has arrived in town—who, in fact, is a German-born agent of the Rumanian boyars; and his political intrigue soon involves the city's worthies and many a lowly-born, too. To retell the plot, its achievements and errors, is practically impossible; suffice it to say that a more complex criss-cross of schemes has rarely been handled with such skill in fiction. And through the sinister cabal which holds in its grip the whole of Sereth, Mr. Katz brings to life scores of Serethians, Jews and Gentiles alike. A superb humor and an anecdotal wealth that sometimes suggest the incomparable Sholem Aleichem tinge his portraits of city dignitaries and government officials, tradesmen and



local savants, brothel keepers and publicans, faithful women and sundry ne'er-do-wells. The comical pettiness of their worries and ambitions are at every juncture—and without any trivial historical innuendos—thrown into relief against the darkening skies of the Balkans and Europe.

The story of the Revolt itself, I'm sorry to report, is a far less successful achievement. Though it offers some brilliant scenes, this part of the book suffers from a weakness in portraying the character of the upheaval's local leader, one Vasili, a peasant boy, soldier, and frontier guard in the Rumanian army. His sentimental love for the daughter of a Czech-Austrian customs' clerk as well as the Madame-Potiphar-like infatuation of his superior's wife for the lad are definitely at variance with the well-balanced, detached realism of the rest of the novel. The messianic touch lent to Vasili gives the entire insurrection an oddly idealized flavor.

So this book has its drawbacks. Nor will the slow pace of its narrative be to every reader's taste. Still here is, no doubt, a powerful novelist worth his salt. Mr. Katz knows how to write a many-sided novel, and to present his story from many angles. He lives in Mexico now. The nostalgic irony of the émigré has been all to the good in his moving tale.

New Orleans Rooming-House Revel

MRS. CANDY AND SATURDAY NIGHT. By Robert Tallant. New York: Doubleday & Co. 1947. 269 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

IN NEW ORLEANS Mrs. Candy runs a rather dreary rooming house in a nondescript section which superficially has none of the exoticism and gaiety of the French Quarter, or the spacious elegance of the residential areas bordering the wide avenues. Many a reader will appreciate being spared the deluge of local-color items that spill over every page whenever the *vieux carré* is the scene of a yarn; moreover, the pulse of life is just as strong on Cairo Street as on Bourbon Street. Before one has turned many pages, one feels the languorous warmth and easy tempo of New Orleans—the rigors of St. Paul or Buffalo are not for Mrs. Candy, whose benignity and placid geniality respond to the rays of the high sun but not to high pressure. Although Robert Tallant is fascinated by this Southern city and has made a loving study of its customs, voodooism, etc., he sticks to the point of his book: Mrs. Candy and her Saturday night.

Actually the period covered is the day and night of a warm Saturday, when her roomers have a holiday and lurk about the house too content or unambitious to seek adventure elsewhere. There is the alcoholic police

commissioner who is enamoured of Mary Agnes, a frosty, uncertain young woman rigid with inhibitions; and there is Mr. Petit, who is an excellent cook in a city of good cooks—he has his eye on the buxom widow and knows that the surest way to the heart of a buxom woman is through the stomach. Neighborhood brawlers and snoopers and social workers provide some raw humor and movement to an otherwise quite static collection of sketches culminating in the riotous Saturday night party which Mrs. Candy throws for her guests.

Near the middle of the book the story deserts the thoroughly realistic method and blossoms into fantasy when the ghost of Mr. Candy reveals to his widow that he detests the zinnias which she brings to his grave. However, the happily dead cynic promises to help her bag Mr. Petit for her second husband, and does so, although with considerable ineptitude. Actually the sketches gain little or nothing from this excursion into the supernatural, except a few more touches of farcical comedy.

The rough and hilarious Saturday night party (aided by the novelists' and dramatists' pleasant but fantastic myth that drunks are delightful, amusing, and witty) ends on an extravagantly "happy" note—a wholesale reconciliation and mating which almost insures a celluloid destination for the book.

Days of Youth

LINDEN ON THE SAUGUS BRANCH. By Elliot Paul. New York: Random House. 1947. 401 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by AMY LOVEMAN

THIS is a mild but agreeable book, a volume of reminiscences of a New England boyhood which takes its episodic and meandering way pleasantly through the early experiences of its author. It is a loosely integrated chronicle, rambling from subject to subject as the recollection of the moment inclines Mr. Paul toward one incident or another, enlivened with anecdote and embroidered with pen portraits of individuals and the sights and sounds and smells of country life.

Mr. Paul was born and spent his early youth in Linden in Massachusetts, a detached precinct of Malden and "as obscure a little community as there was in the broad United States." It was still in the gaslight horsecar stage when he was born into it, compact in its interests, deeply concerned with affairs of the church and local politics, a hamlet which could grow violently excited over the cutting down of a Balm of Gilead tree, where the entire neighborhood knew when anything was amiss with one of its members and the approach of a doctor or a fireman was a matter of general attention; and where children were quite as alert to any untoward or unexpected event as their elders. Mr. Paul writes of it in all its aspects, of church services and the mishaps of choir or minister, of the coming of spring and the birds and insects of the region, of the village blacksmith and the village inn, of its codfish trade and its festivities, in short, of everything that went to make up the life of the locality. A small gallery of personages passes through it and the author gives us spirited pictures of his mother and grandmother, of his playmates and schoolmates, of a certain Miss Townsend, a teacher whose strange hysteria brought on by humiliation would interest present-day psychoanalysts and who makes recurrent appearances throughout the narrative, though the elaborate build-up of her personality fades out without any climax.

The days of his youth evidently left an indelible impression upon the mind of Elliot Paul and his memories of the past bubble up easily and vividly. Some of the bite and pungency, as well as the rollicking good humor which Mr. Paul's earlier books have led us to expect from him are lacking but it, too, is good reading.

MURDER

among Murder Story Writers

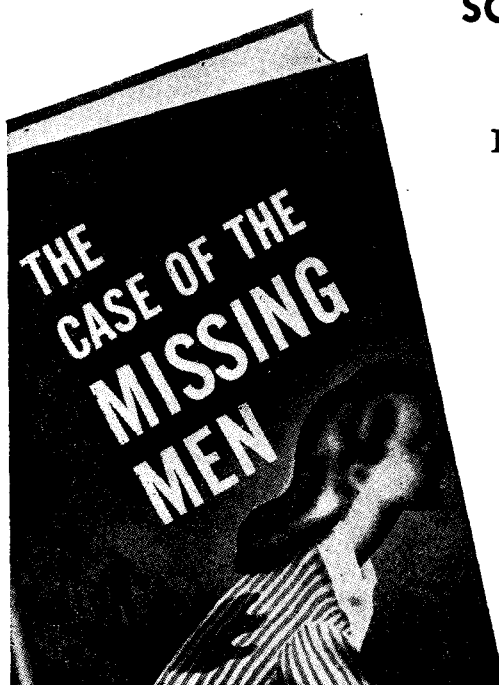
That is what Ludovic Travers found, when he went to Beechingford at the invitation of Austin Chace, a successful mystery author. Travers, a consulting expert for Scotland Yard, had written a book on criminology, and Chace wanted his help in compiling a manual for detective story writers. Two other authors are at hand, an authors' agent — and Mrs. Chace, whose charms are literal rather than literary. Examples for Chace's manual on homicide are presently available, as one murder follows another. \$2.00 at all bookstores.

MACMILLAN

YOU'LL MEET THAT GENTLEMAN FROM SCOTLAND YARD— LUDOVIC TRAVERS

Ludovic Travers, a master of deduction in the classic manner, is already known and loved by English mystery readers, for he has appeared in many books by Christopher Bush. This is his first introduction to the United States. But watch! He'll turn up again soon.

By
CHRISTOPHER BUSH



HANDY WAY TO SUBSCRIBE ➔

SATURDAY REVIEW
25 West 45 Street
New York 19, N. Y.

Avail yourself of "the magazine thinking people talk about . . . a place where ideas start. . . ."

52 issues of the *Saturday Review of Literature* for \$6 will bring you a weekly visit from Cerf, Benét, Brown and a host of other literary stars.

1 yr. ☐ \$6 2 yrs. ☐ \$9 3 yrs. ☐ \$12

Name

Address

City Zone State

719