

gaily as his purely humorous pieces, while their factual framework restrains him from the zany excesses which occasionally overload his briefer efforts. He can present a tremendous amount of information and erudition, as blithely as if the subject had come up at a jolly dinner party. There is no reverence in his dissections and no discernible malice.

It does seem unfortunate, though, that two of the four Profiles should deal with ornithologists. Mr. Hellman can make bird-lore as fascinating as it can be made, but there's just too much of it for a book of general appeal. The selection seems stranger still in view of the jacket statement that there were fifty Profiles to choose from.

The author lets himself go with considerably more abandon in the shorter pieces and, once in a while, he falls on his face. As long as he is digging out incongruities and absurdities in our national life and institutions, he is fine. There is the case of the Taft School's missing alumni, a lot of whom Mr. Hellman finds placidly roosting in the telephone directory and Social Register; the remarkable account of winter life in Nantucket as culled from the *Nantucket Inquirer and Mirror*; the New York Public Library's difficulties with William Saroyan; and the Strange Behavior of Mr. A. Bryan who advertised millionaires' names for sale.

But the trouble begins when Mr. Hellman feels he must embroider his sketches with instantaneously funny beginnings and madly whimsical endings, as if he didn't trust the rest of it. For instance, he starts the title story like this: "Last Tuesday, stopping in at my dentist's to have my porcelain fillings exchanged for platinum as a hedge against inflation..." It sounds strained and it doesn't add anything to the genuine merriment that develops. Furthermore, one becomes uncomfortably aware that, in these artificial starts and finishes, Mr. Hellman is imitating his fellow *New Yorker* contributor S. J. Perelman. Mr. Perelman doesn't need the flattery, and Mr. Hellman has plenty on the ball without imitating anybody.

This sort of fault-finding is almost bound to arise when a group of magazine pieces, especially funny ones, finds its way into collected form. Devices, that didn't look like devices when separated by the weeks, begin to stick out. They're like the mannerisms of a girl that seem delightful in courting days and become irritating after a year of marriage. It can still be a happy marriage, and there is no reason why everybody shouldn't be happy with "How to Disappear for an Hour."



Since there is a twenty-yard penalty for writing about a *New Yorker* collection without using the word "sophisticated," it may be added that Saul Steinberg's illustrations, or, more accurately, decorations, are decidedly that.

## Each Link Linked

ADVENTURES WITH A TEXAS NATURALIST. By Roy Bedichek. New York: Doubleday & Co. 1947. 293 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by LOUIS J. HALLE, JR.

IN A RECENT issue of *Life* John Chamberlain called attention to the poverty of our contemporary literature by comparison with that of the Twenties and Thirties. His particular concern was for fiction, and it was evident that he identified contemporary literature largely with the production of novels, perhaps of novels suited to certain attitudes. The critical appreciation of literature today is professionally practised by critics who breathe the intellectual atmosphere of big cities and who give importance to what is written for an urban environment. Even novels of the soil have their worth

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## All About Geoffrey T. Hellman

GEOFFREY T. HELLMAN, author of "How to Disappear for an Hour," brilliantly reviewed on this page, was born in New York City, in a home of culture and refinement, on February 13, 1907, and is thus an Aquarius type astrologically — like Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and several million people who have never amounted to a hill of beans.

Young Hellman began to write at the Westminster School, in Simsbury, Connecticut, when he was thirteen. His first published work, which appeared in *The Westminster Review*, was a poem called "The Storm." Its concluding line ran: "And nary a sheep did die." The thought behind this is typical of Hellman's kindly philosophy, which embraces all of God's creatures. "A sheep is a real person," he says.

He continued to write relentlessly at Yale, where he became columnist of *The Yale News*, and an editor of *The Yale Record* and *The Yale Literary Magazine*. He disappeared from Yale in 1928, having been voted the Second Wittiest Man in his class. He rarely left his room except to stroll to the Elizabethan Club, and received three sardonic votes for Best Athlete. Thornton Wilder, who had read his college effusions with sympathy, gave him a note of introduc-

tion to Irita Van Doren, editor of the *New York Herald Tribune* Sunday book supplement, which read in part: "Catch him young." Mrs. Van Doren caught him at twenty-one, and for several months he wrote book reviews for the *Tribune*. Armed with these, he solicited employment at *The New Yorker* office in the winter of 1929, and was hired as a reporter in the Talk of the Town Department. He began to write Profiles the following year (the first was on Graham McNamee), and has, to date (September 1947), had fifty of these, in seventy-two parts, published in *The New Yorker*. In 1936, he drew the attention of the Talk of the Town to the fact that a dog was listed in the *New York Social Register*. The ensuing paragraph caused worldwide repercussions, and was *The New Yorker's* outstanding scoop until it printed John Hersey's article on Hiroshima, a decade later.

Hellman's initial salary as a Talk of the Town reporter was thirty dollars a week. His boss, Ralph Ingersoll, who in 1929 was *The New Yorker's* managing editor, advised him that at the end of six weeks he would either fire him or give him a substantial raise. Six weeks passed, and nothing happened—or at any rate

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**Personal History.** *William Vaughn Moody, a poet of great achievement and even greater promise, died when he was only forty-one. Three years later began the American poetic renaissance of 1912-1916, to which Moody might have contributed verse of distinction and a mature guidance. For Moody, with his graceful carriage, wavy hair, Vandyke beard, and musical voice, was not only the picture of a poet but was, too, a careful scholar, an inspiring teacher, and a man of deep feeling. His early poems achieved nobility and lyric power. Best known, perhaps, is "An Ode in Time of Hesitation," written in indignation at the imperialism of the Spanish-American War. Although no writer of free verse, Moody's zest and critical spirit marked him as a forerunner of the new poets. A year before his death Moody married a woman altogether as distinguished as himself. With full poetic justice, Harriet Tilden Moody, whose story is lovingly told in "A House in Chicago," reviewed below, became the friend and mentor of those poets—Vachel Lindsay, Robinson, the Colums, Robert Frost—whose company her husband had not lived to join.*

## F.D.R.'s Choice

**HARRY TRUMAN: A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY:** By William P. Helm. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 1947. 241 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by JOHN D. WEAVER

WHEN he first came to Washington, a few weeks after his successful Senatorial race of 1934, Harry Truman looked up William P. Helm, the Washington correspondent of the *Kansas City Journal-Post*, which had supported the Pendergast-picked candidate largely because the powerful opposition paper, the *Kansas City Star*, had fought him. Helm was drawn to the modest, friendly junior Senator, who admitted he was "green as grass and ignorant as a fool about practically everything worth knowing." A Republican with a profound distaste for the Roosevelt reforms, Helm became the "Black Republican friend" of Senator Truman who was voting for all the New Deal measures of which Helm disapproved.

Now with Truman in the White House, his "Black Republican friend" has written a book about him. It is a very friendly book, filled with anecdotes to show Truman as "a good fellow," a man who enjoyed the fun and fellowship of the Senate, got a kick out of beating Vice President Garner at poker, and could drink five powerful cocktails without showing any ill effects. The other well-documented Truman virtues are generously attested to, his modesty, integrity, political loyalty, capacity for hard work.

As a campaign puff designed to prove that all the American virtues have come to full flowering in the inevitable Democratic candidate of 1948, Helm's book could be passed over as a routine work with the mortality of its genre, a book which would

soon be at one on second-hand store shelves with a similar work on Alf Landon, but Helm has chosen to label his book a "political biography" and that raises questions quite beyond Truman's gregarious capacities with the bottle and seven-card stud.

A political biography would normally be expected to deal with the maturing of a political philosophy, but there is nothing in Helm's work to suggest that Truman has ever acted on any problem save by impulse. His instincts, according to Helm, are good, but the author goes no further than that. Helm's obvious deficiencies as a biographer are passed on to his subject, so that in attempting to perform a friendly service for Truman, the author has succeeded only in making the President appear as superficial and small as this slight, superficial work. By ignoring the larger issues of Truman's time Helm

gives the impression that, as far as Truman is concerned, such problems do not exist. There is no mention of foreign policy, inflation, housing, budgets, taxes; and two contemporary phenomena about which a Truman biographer might conceivably concern himself are not even touched upon: the United Nations and the atom bomb. Yet it was Harry Truman whom Roosevelt picked to carry out his program for world cooperation in the event of his death, and it was Harry Truman who had to make the horrendous decision on the bombing of Hiroshima.

Helm's thesis, if such an ill-constructed book could be said to have a thesis, is that, as a Senator, Truman consistently supported Roosevelt in his ruinous policies because of his instinctive sympathy for the underdog, and now as President he has the trying task of liquidating the program because, with administrative responsibility, he has come to see how unworkable were the Roosevelt visions of change. Helm writes as though Truman had run against Roosevelt in 1944 and won.

As a writer Helm is a man of the most modest gifts. His style has a city desk slovenliness without the small corrective graces of a good copy reader. The cliché comes naturally to him, and when he essays a metaphor to make his writing "fancy," it is a clumsy and unfortunate effort. He has nothing to add to the Truman record (outside of a few naïve conclusions and a somewhat remarkable explanation of why Truman booted Wallace out of his Cabinet), and his retelling of the familiar material from the files lacks both interest and distinction.



—Seibel in The Richmond Times-Dispatch.

"Mule from Missouri, too?"