

Fiction. *One of the subjects that should be thoroughly explored in the novel is the reason for the early weakening or destruction of so many marriages today. Three of the five novels reviewed this week enter this investigation on a higher level than the usual cocktail-and-infidelity route to divorce. The heroine of Ellin Berlin's "Lace Curtain" discovers that a convent education and a wealthy Irish-Catholic father lead to trouble when she marries into a prominent Protestant family. In his first and mature book, Constantine Fitz Gibbon, an English writer, reveals the anguish of an Oxford don ill-equipped to endure his son's love for his young stepmother. Taylor Caldwell's "Melissa" is about a narrow-minded and emotional girl wedded to an older and more sophisticated publisher. Its setting is the nineteenth century, but it illustrates the dangers of a marriage of opposite temperaments at any time. Human nature remains constant, but its conflicts are today sharper and more dangerous to society.*

Triangle with a Past, Present & Future

THE ARABIAN BIRD. By Constantine Fitz Gibbon. New York: Rinehart & Co. 1948. 249 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by RICHARD McLAUGHLIN

NOW AND then the domestic triangle theme receives a thorough going over by a novelist with something fresh and pertinent to say on the subject. Constantine Fitz Gibbon proves without a doubt that wonders can be done with the most threadbare plots and stock situations in fiction, providing the writing is of a high enough order. In the case of Mr. Fitz Gibbon, his first novel "The Arabian Bird" not only makes the most of the triangular dilemma of the husband, wife, and interloper on the domestic scene, but introduces us to a writing talent of uncommon brilliance and perceptiveness.

Mr. Fitz Gibbon is a young writer who thinks; and, what's more, he prefers, to our extreme delectation, to write about people who also think without becoming unnecessarily morbid or adolescent about it. The result is that we have here for the first time, in many months of reading in different novels, a mature tale which attempts to examine the complex relationships of men and women without trying to oversimplify their mental processes. Mr. Fitz Gibbon would apparently agree that man is a "thinking reed," a tender, complex, vulnerable mortal tossed on the winds of time. And for this reason, if man is to be depicted against the age in which he lives, he must be seen from three angles, or, as in the instance of Charles Monroe, his wife, Louise, and his son, Oliver, presented as a product of the past, the present, and the uncertain future.

Although "The Arabian Bird" may be read as a surface drama of three people, Charles Monroe, his young wife, Louise Oliver, and his son from a former marriage, in love with his stepmother, it is hardly fair to the author to recommend the book on this level, successful as it is even on this score. Indeed, it would be gross oversight on the part of the reviewer not to commend Mr. Fitz Gibbon's novel for its remarkable feeling for time and place, as well as for its sensitive mood. Its adroit flashbacks cover so much space that we not only get a three-dimensional view of the



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characters but are convinced that time is a wayward heroine and is, perhaps, the real protagonist of the story.

Perhaps more with Charles Monroe than with the others are we made to feel, with an almost Proustian intensity, the past devouring the present. He is the nervous, introspective Oxford don; he is also, on looking at a jar of mint humbugs in his London mews flat during an air-raid in 1944, a little boy again hearing news of his father's death; or standing in Paddington station he is once more the tortured young husband deserted by his first wife. An object, a face, a London street, become associations with buried guilts, lead to tortuous channels of confusion. It is therefore no surprise that Charles should emerge as the most sympathetic character in the book. We are able to appreciate the source of his despair and general helplessness, for in Charles Monroe the author has drawn a recognizable symbol of the inherently decent, well-meaning individual in the world today.

Mixed Marriage

LACE CURTAIN. By Ellin Berlin. New York: Doubleday & Co. 1948. 375 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by PAMELA TAYLOR

MRS. BERLIN's second novel is a sympathetic and provocative study of one woman's search for emotional maturity. Veronica Reardon, seventh of the eight attractive Reardon children, grew up with her sisters and brothers at "Pride's Tower," their Long Island country place. Her father made a fortune and lived handsomely, a leader in New York's Irish Catholic circles. Devout, cultivated, loving their family and their home, the Reardons brought up their children in luxury and security. For little Veronica, being part of a pattern was infinitely reassuring. She watched with fascination but not envy her sister's parties and beaux, knowing that in good time she would repeat the same departure for the convent boarding school, the same promotion to dinner downstairs, the progression from sandbox to croquet and finally to tennis parties.

Although her friendship with Lucy Verity took her, once in a while, into a world where she felt an outsider and unwelcome, although she sometimes overheard remarks which puzzled or troubled her, Veronica grew up secure, protected, and happy, "Pride's Tower" the center of her universe. But when, against her parent's wishes, indeed against the young man's own better judgment, she married young Jamie

Stair, son of a prominent, conventional New York Protestant family, she was made acutely aware of all the narrow prejudices and deep-seated antagonism of the world of which she had, of her own free will, chosen to become a part.

Deeply in love though they are, Jamie and Veronica cannot surmount all the difficulties, emotional and intellectual, of "mixed marriage," nor the prejudices and snobbery of their families. Their children, whose education as Catholics has been agreed to, only precipitate further conflict. Against her wise mother's advice, Veronica Stair seeks to remain a Reardon of "Pride's Tower," refusing to admit, even to herself, that she has voluntarily assumed new loyalties.

Jamie Stair, after Pearl Harbor, goes into the Navy; the marriage has become virtually impossible. It is only after three years without him, years when she has prayed constantly that by some miracle he may come back alive, that Veronica achieves sufficiently mature wisdom to hope that their life may be possible together.

As she reviews her heroine's life, Mrs. Berlin brings thirty years of gay and expensive existence into sharp focus. Her unfailingly happy and vivid choice of detail—a snatch of popular song, a bridesmaid's hat, a harem veil—recreate year after year for our delighted recognition. She is devastatingly accurate in her quotations, the intolerant clichés which we have all heard: "All the Jews are thus and so"; "All the Irish Catholics are this—or that. Of course I don't mean *you*, dear." Nor does she spare those arrogant snobs who assume that only Irish Catholics are maid servants, and that all Roman Catholic belief is superstition and inexplicable to the—presumably—more enlightened Protestant mind.

While Mrs. Berlin offers no solution to the problems which her story poses, either of prejudice or of mixed marriage, she deftly avoids taking sides. It is the sensitive, tender study of the emotional development of young Veronica, the warmly affectionate reality of the clannish Reardon circle, and above all the infinitely sympathetic communication of the sustaining force of Veronica's religious beliefs which make this novel quite unusual.

Marriages headed for destruction are far from new as fictional themes. Yet this one, with the family happiness which was a contributing factor in its disharmony, lays hold on our emotions and lingers in the memory, chiefly because Ellin Berlin has so successfully projected the special quality of "Pride's Tower" and of the Reardons themselves.

Perfect Hero Amid Gore and Gadzooks

THE FLAMES OF TIME. By Baynard Kendrick. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1948. 374 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by HERSCHEL BRICKELL

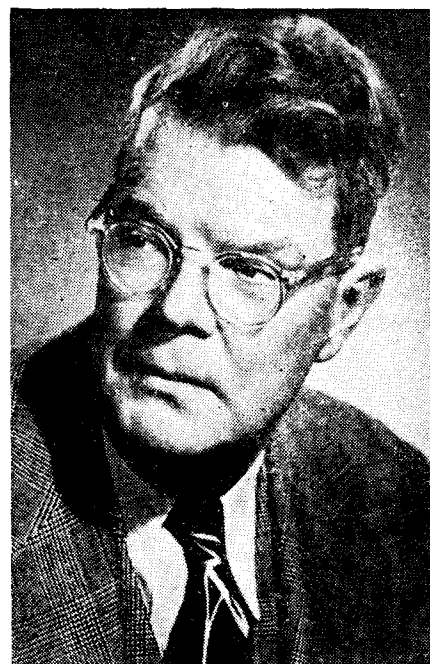
THIS novel of Florida in the stormy early-nineteenth-century days of the transfer of control from the Spaniards to the Americans is the current Literary Guild selection, and is cut so closely to pattern that it ought to be a safe choice for large numbers of readers who apparently know what they want in their fiction. It should be sure-fire for Hollywood, too, which is the only place in the world where most of the kinds of people who crowd its pages have ever been found, outside books, that is.

Its author has been writing mystery and adventure stories for years and has a passion for Florida, which he considers "the most interesting state in the Union." This unqualified statement probably means that all the Guild's subscribers in Texas and California will return their copies of his novel for credit without delay.

Mr. Kendrick's setting could hardly be improved upon for color and drama and it is surprising that it has not been more popular in the past. The story and the characters supplied him by history are first-rate, but his own creative talent continues to function along the lines to which he is accustomed, the romantic formula, in which the Perfect Hero is wanted by two women, and in this case, gets both without sin, thanks to the author's generosity.

The story and plot are simple enough. A boy child is born to two travelers who are killed by Indians, and, being adopted by a planter, is named Artillery Armes, probably the first Hero in the history of the novel to be so christened. Brought up under the tutelage of a backwoods nobleman, Dr. Zeke Buckhart, Artillery masters French and Spanish, along with horsemanship and the musket, not to mention morals. Then he makes friends with the Seminoles, learning to toss the tomahawk with the best of them, and finding a dark girl named Dauna, who throws him in a wrestling match, and is sure to turn up again. How not, since she is the Heroine?

Artillery grows up, after many exciting adventures and narrow escapes, to become a part of the American scheme to take over the territory, meeting the Spanish Villain, Don José de Reduro, along the way. Also he finds a good-looking, wealthy American girl named Bethany, and marries her. Bethany and her two children are conveniently removed by death,



—Glidden.

Baynard Kendrick's artistic boiling point is low, but he has a wonderful time.

however, in time to permit Dauna, suspected all along of having mixed blood, to turn up again in time to console Artillery and bear him a son. (She is really a Greek, not a Maroon, so it is all right for the blonde, blue-eyed Hero to marry her.)

Among the other characters easily recognizable are the Noble Redman and the Noble Prostitute. There are many fights, all of which Artillery wins, since he never forgets to duck, one of the things that makes him a Hero, and also a number of properly developed more-or-less Naked Ladies, some of them being whipped, which seems to be a current convention of the historical novel. In fact, the supply of both gore and gadzooks seems at times excessive.

What makes the book more readable than this review might indicate up to now is its author's own burning interest in the subject and its inherent value as fictional material. Obviously, his own artistic boiling point is low, or he would not have been satisfied with such a collection of clichés, but he has just as obviously had a wonderful time with his research into a very rich background.

One wonders, upon laying the book aside, how long writers will continue to use foreign languages such as Spanish, as in this case, without even an elementary knowledge of them, or how long reputable publishers will fail to exercise, in this respect, at least a cursory control over the manuscripts that pass through their hands.