

Fiction. *That there are few contemporary American satirists who can compete with English writers is evidenced by two novels reviewed this week. The rumors that Evelyn Waugh's "The Loved One" was to be a vitriolic and brilliant attack on Hollywood's fabulous burial rites were less than just to a gruesome tale which mixes up the English colony of writers with mortuary antics. Ivy Compton-Burnett's satire on a stolid household of Victorian England belongs to another world; but it is just as refreshing and as effectively cynical. "Bullivant and the Lambs" betrays the kind of acid humor and realism that serious American novelists seem to lack—burlesque being their substitute.*

Angeleno Cult for the Dear Departed

THE LOVED ONE. By Evelyn Waugh.
Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1948.
164 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BEN RAY REDMAN

AS A RESULT of the great popular success of "Brideshead Revisited," Evelyn Waugh paid a brief visit to that geographically indeterminate, but spiritually and industrially well-defined area—composed of scattered chunks of Los Angeles, Beverly Hills, Culver City, and the San Fernando Valley—which is conveniently known as Hollywood. Mr. Waugh found Hollywood highly amusing, in a rather nasty way; and reports which have come East, by plane and super-train, make it clear that the inhabitants of Hollywood were in turn highly amused, in one way or another, by Mr. Waugh. The trade was not quite even, however, for they got nothing more tangible than fleeting entertainment from his visit, while he came away with the makings of an hilarious and grisly satire; a little jewel of a yarn, conceived in a commingling of fascination and nausea, etched in acid, and expertly executed with loving horror. But perhaps the trade is even, after all, for "The Loved One" is now no longer the exclusive property of its author. It belongs to all of us who can buy or borrow it, including purchasers and borrowers of the Hollywood community.

At the outset of any discussion of this gruesome frolic, one point should be made clear for the benefit of readers living east of the Sierra Madre, who might, without admonishment, labor under a serious misconception. "The Loved One" is, indeed, a result of Mr. Waugh's call to Culver City, but the institution round which the action of the story does its macabre dance is not a Hollywood creation. Or, to be more exact, the actual mortuary establishment, of which the

novel's Whispering Glades is a coincidental replica, is not a Hollywood creation. It is a pure product of Angeleno culture. There is no place here in which to explain this extraordinary culture, beyond saying that its ingredients include more than a pinch of Iowa, and that its exponents are separated from the folk of The Motion Picture Industry by a social and ideological gulf, despite the residential juxtaposition of the two races. It is true that the great and small of filmland sometimes cross this gulf, to lie beneath the manicured turf or in the sacred niches of the

resting place that Mr. Waugh calls Whispering Glades; but, when they do so, they come to a sanctuary that is not of their making, and repose among those who are not of their kind. This is, perhaps, a truth that Mr. Waugh himself did not realize, due to the shortness of his stay in Southern California. He may have thought he was specifically satirizing Hollywood when he was really satirizing Los Angeles; but even if he did make this mistake, and we cannot be sure that he did, it in no way affects the quality of his tale. "The Loved One" is, in any case, a thing of beauty and a horror forever.

What is the holiest creed in the canon of American business? The creed of Service. In what operation does this creed find its most exalted expression? Quite fittingly, in the final service that man performs for man. And in what part of the United States is this last service performed with a maximum of theatrical solemnity and commercial ingenuity? In Los Angeles, in the prosperous, preposterous establishment that Mr. Waugh calls Whispering Glades. It is at this high point precisely, at this Pacific pinnacle, that Mr. Waugh subjects American folkways (in their concentrated Angeleno manifestation) to the probing pressure of his satirical pen.

He begins by having a bit of fun



THE AUTHOR: Obviously talking through his bowler, Evelyn Waugh, ex-commando captain, 1935 Abyssinian *Daily Mail* correspondent, and No. 1-3 English novelist, dismisses himself as "quite dull." Now a stocky forty-four, he reports that his tailors, hairdressers, and hosiers "do all they can to render a naturally commonplace appearance completely inconspicuous. I live in a shabby stone house in the country, where nothing is under 100 years old except the plumbing, and that does not work. I collect old books in an inexpensive, desultory way. I have a fast-emptying cellar of wine and gardens fast reverting to jungle. I am very contentedly married. I have numerous children [four, last count], whom I see once a day for ten, I hope, awe-inspiring minutes. When I gadded, among savages and people of fashion and politicians and crazy generals, it was because I enjoyed them. I have settled down because I ceased to enjoy them and because I have found a more abiding interest—the English language." Lansing College inspired an ironical, undergraduate play. At Oxford he wrote for *Iris* and *Cherwell*. After a year of art school ("I have little talent") he became master of a private school as a declaration of economic independence from his father, publisher-critic Arthur Waugh. His first book, on Rossetti, was published in 1927. Next year with the satire "Decline and Fall" he took the spot with, if not from, his famous brother Alec. For nine years thereafter he traveled: Europe, Near East, Arctic, Africa, America. He wrote "A Handful of Dust," "Vile Bodies," "Black Mischief," "Put Out More Flags," "Edmund Campion," and "Brideshead Revisited." The last took him to Hollywood, whose sepulchral refinements proved more fruitful than attempts to reconcile "Brideshead" with the film code. His promise that future works would "represent man in his relation to God" may be but quizzically fulfilled in "The Loved One." —R. G.

with Hollywood's English colony, self-consciously determined to keep the flag flying and play the game, amidst native huts and native customs, on one of the far-flung frontiers of a dwindling empire; and he casts a glance into the busy vacuum which occupies the space where an innocent might look for the heart of a great picture studio; but he is soon off and away, with his *déclassé* hero, to a pet cemetery—the Happier Hunting Ground—and thence to the more sublime regions of Whispering Glades. Once young Dennis Barlow, British poet and ex-script-writer, has come in contact with the amazing necropolis created by The Dreamer, he has touched a magnet from which there is no withdrawal.

The beautiful Park, with its various zones, each planned round "an appropriate Work of Art," where the Loved Ones may rest at various prices; the administration building, churches, and chapels—all replicas of Old World structures; the Slumber-Rooms, where the Waiting Ones take leave of the Loved Ones, the latter posed either "on the chaise-longue or in the casket"; the efficient young lady on whose white smock the words *Mortuary Hostess* are embroidered "over her sharply supported left breast," and whose professional patter is a joy to the ear; the piped and pervasive music of the "Hindu Love Song"; the Before Need Provision Arrangements; the Lake Island of Innisfree—all these could hardly fail to fire the imagination of a poetic Britisher who has never known their like before. But when Dennis meets the deft and beautiful mortuary cosmetician who bears the apt name of Aimée Thanatogenos (a dedicated artist who can do wonders with Loved Ones fresh from the embalmers' hands), he is, indeed, a lost man.

The tale of his courtship and of his rivalry with the gifted Mr. Joyboy—a mighty virtuoso among morticians—must not be retold here. Too coarse a summarizing touch might reduce all its curious loveliness to a mere handful of dust. The publishers take the little story rather too seriously, I think, when they suggest that "the immense motives of love and death" may be found lurking at the novel's center. The book is, after all, a trifle. But it is a damnably clever trifle, which will be enjoyed by many readers, and condemned by others as being in the worst of taste. As for those who are constitutionally unfit to swallow this gruesome mixture of satire and fantasy, farce and grim realism, Mr. Waugh warns them off at the outset. "The squeamish," he declares, "should return their copies to the library or the bookstore unread."

Victorian Household, Upstairs and Back

BULLIVANT AND THE LAMBS. By I. Compton-Burnett. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1948. 299 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by RICHARD McLAUGHLIN

OUR ENGLISH cousins across the sea have every reason to be proud of the writing talents of Ivy Compton-Burnett. Certainly the publication of her novel here will give cause for endless chuckles to those of us somewhat starved for original wit in our reading today. And to an even greater number Miss Compton-Burnett's conversation piece will come as a refresher in an era of stale and labored prose.

Perhaps if we could imagine E. Nesbit writing "The Bastable Children" with a pen dipped in vinegar or acid instead of treacle, we could visualize better Miss Compton-Burnett at her work desk. She writes about children and the people below stairs in a late Victorian household with as cynical an approach to life and the motives behind human behavior as we have ever encountered in all our readings of Saki, Peacock, and Swift. From the start we know that with Miss Compton-Burnett, although her touch may be light, and some of her dialogue might even be labelled delicious nonsense, her unfailing eye and penetrating wit will never miss a thing. What she is concerned with here might even be open to conjecture. One reader will possibly feel that Ivy Compton-Burnett has a deep-rooted contempt for the conventions of our age, and gets at all her pet dislikes and taboos by exposing the caste system of middle-class England only to come to the conclusion that there is not much choice between servants and their masters. Another may just as rightly feel convinced that the author is purely interested in the drama of every-day existence, and has written a highly profound book about singularly unprofound matters. Somewhere between these two poles of opinion undoubtedly lies the answer to Miss Compton-Burnett's rare charms and enviable gifts.



Of course it is entirely possible that some folk will become very angry with Miss Compton-Burnett, particularly readers who like to retain their illusions about life. Miss Compton-Burnett has few, if any; but what she has got is a healthy curiosity about human beings and what makes them tick. Also she knows her middle class English household intimately, and with her wonderful talent for a terse phrase, shows off people and places with a reality that does not do any injustice whatsoever to her economy. For example we would like to know what kind of a house the Lambs live in. There can be no doubt in our minds after such a description—"Good to look at, less good to live in. Large and light and chill, and furnished with few and stately things." The same is done for the various members of the household, both upstairs and in the servants' world. They are real from the moment they enter the scene; a word, a line, a snatch of conversation brings them to life-size shape—Horace Lamb, the tyrannical, miserly master—"Fire piled right up the chimney! Who is responsible?" said Horace, opening the door on his children. "And on a day when many people would not have a fire at all."—Bullivant, the omnipotent butler,— "We cannot choose our walk in life," said Bullivant, "and there would be many fewer, if we could. And that would not make for the balance of things." And the incomparable Cook, even Bullivant is in awe at the range of her language—"I was always one for expression. More than one has said to me that they would be glad of my power in the line. 'Thought falls short, Miss Selden, if there is not the wherewithal to clothe it' were the words of one."

Also there is Charlotte, Horace's wife,— "Are you always going to be against father now?" said Marcus to his mother. "Only when I think he is making a mistake. He has been so careful with my money for so long, that he forgets that I like to spend some of it on my children. Mothers do like to do that." And finally there are the children, who in their "hand-me-downs" and wretched state of fear and loathing for their father, present at once a frightening and pathetic picture. Precocious, somewhat evil, they speak their minds and reveal the depths to which Miss Compton-Burnett has explored the dim, festering recesses of the nursery world. It is no wonder that two of the four children should plot their father's death, or that Horace Lamb should call them, "a pack of little cynics!" "We are