

## FICTION

cigar" is as stale as yesterday's cigar smell, that "he was surprised to see her blush" goes back at least to Ouida, that cigarettes in this style are invariably "proffered," that "an angry shake of his hand" is an unreal, theatrical gesture. For this is the essence of good reading at the mediocre level. And what can you say about it except that for people who like this kind of book, this is the kind of book people like?

### *A War Within a War*

ARABESQUE. By Geoffrey Household. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1948. 312 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by GEORGIANA G. STEVENS

THE MIDDLE EAST, to civilian Europeans stranded there after the fall of France, seemed a fortress, menaced by Rommel's armies to the West, and by a thousand nameless uncertainties from within. The story of "Arabesque" is the story of one of these involuntary expatriates, the enigmatic and glamorous Armande Herne, who found herself virtually a prisoner when the French Army of the Orient sailed out of Beirut harbor, leaving the Levant to the divisive ministrations of the Free French and the Spears Mission.

Armande had arrived in Beirut as interpreter for a French plane maker, whose hasty departure with the evacuating French left her conspicuously jobless and unable to return home to England. Advice from her husband, remotely at sea with the Royal Navy, to get into one of the women's services didn't apply where no such services existed. Yet a lone, attractive, and intelligent woman in Beirut was suspect.

Made increasingly aware of her equivocal position by constant inquiring visits from security officers—both French and British—Armande decided to take measures. She sought out and offered her services to David Nachmias, one of the Jewish Agency's expert Arabists, then working with British Intelligence.

Armande's first assignment was a brilliant success—technically. It involved relieving one of the Lebanon's most gallant sheiks of the best of his hoarded arms, in the name of the British Government. There have been few episodes in contemporary fiction told as well or with such restrained irony as Mr. Household's account of Armande's patient interchanges with Sheik Wadiah. All the delicacy of social intercourse in the East, the finest nuances of courtesy and taste, the wisdom and chivalry of Wadiah and his kind, and, above all, the es-

entially leisured pace of negotiations with the Arab, come through in one of the best vignettes of Levantine diplomacy in many a long year.

"Arabesque" is not just the story of Armande Herne and her checkered fate following the ill-starred arms deal. It is, rather, a story of how political currents mingle in the Middle East, entangling their assorted protagonists in the most subtly contrived complications; and making even the most innocent actor in the drama an unwitting accomplice, possibly, of murder and disaster.

Specifically, Armande discovered that the arms she had wangled so proudly for her country were actually destined for a future war against it in Palestine. Her slow and painful discovery of that fact and the penalties she pays for it make up much of the book. It becomes then a story of a war within a war. There is the big show, against the Germans. But the smaller show appears in full perspective, with all the makings of classic tragedy, as the scene of the book shifts to Palestine, and as it focuses on the tension gathering between the British and the Jewish Agency, personified by Nachmias, and the Agency and the Jewish terrorists, who threaten the great Zionist dream. Mr. Household's insight and sympathy are nowhere more apparent than in his vivid portrayal of Nachmias's last session with the young Irgun leaders. Here, particularly, in the moment of terrible climax, Mr. Household proves himself a master of sound psychological suspense.

Woven through the book is the love story of Armande and Sergeant Dion Prayle of Field Security. Prayle's intuitions and laconic inferences do full justice to British Intelligence tradition. He not only rescues Armande eventually; he makes the book. In creating him—or recreating him out of his own experiences in Middle East Intelligence—Mr. Household demonstrates once more a sure gift for characterization, as well as an enviable talent for weaving his way with assurance through the maze of Middle East politics.

Georgiana Stevens, wartime OSS political expert on the Near East, in 1947 made a visit to the same area.



### *1929 Meridian*

THE TIME IS NOON. By Hiram Haydn. New York: Crown Publishers. 1948. 561 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by WALTER HAVIGHURST

THE YEAR 1929 has become a familiar symbol in America; it stands for the final dizzy spiraling of a heedless prosperity and the crash with which that precarious structure fell. For this novel it stands for the hour of noon, with the morning light gone garish and the evening shadows soon to come. How the forces of 1929 played upon six young Americans is the substance of Mr. Haydn's elaborately developed story. It follows these characters through various encounters, in Florida, in a New England college, in Boston, in New York, in Cleveland, and in Paris. It unravels many tangled strands of relationship and experience, but all of them have a common hectic quality that derives from the symbolic year 1929.

Since this is a 1929 story, beginning in the month of March with a gaudy picture of Flaming Youth on the sands of Florida, it culminates inevitably with the Wall Street collapse seven months after the story's opening. There are other period themes and furnishings—rebellion from Boston, Greenwich Village studios, Montmartre cafes, inspirational big business men, and repeated references to activities in "the Street." This deliberate selection suggests the author's preoccupation with the scene of 1929, a concern that makes his characters belong peculiarly to that year, and so exaggerates and distorts them.

One of the novel's characters speaks of the time as "fabulous," and Mr. Haydn, for all the knowing qualities of his novel, seems to approach it with the same conception. The early scene of attempted seduction in a vast lifeless, unfinished hotel on the Florida beach has a theatrical quality that inevitably shades the rest of the novel. This early sensationalism is unfortunate, because there are better things in the book. Some of the college narrative is alive and stirring. Many of the characters have an immediate credibility, and a few of them grow into convincing, three-dimensional persons.

The most interesting of them is Sol Krassovsky, who was forced out of Emerson College because of the vehemence of his newspaper column. Sol's post-college journalistic experience has a significance that is lacking in Charles Hoyt's initiation into industrial management or in Lathrop Stone's introduction to New York publishing. Sol's love affair with the



—Von Behr.

David Goldknopf relieves "the burden of doom on his characters with wit."

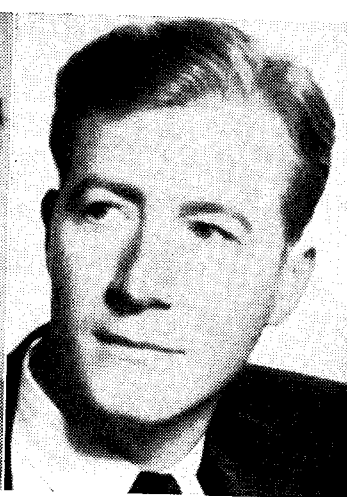


—Percy S. Smith.

Geoffrey Household weaves "his way through the maze of Middle East politics."



Hiram Haydn "unravels many tangled strands of relationship and experience."



Frederick Laing "shows all the familiar moves in the familiar chess game."

Florida girl Sand Warren is more meaningful than Tom Robinson's uneasy marriage with the rebellious Harriet Hawthorne from Back Bay Boston. And Sol's ironical education among the New York revolutionaries is something to remember after the precocious dazzling girls and the grim young men are forgotten.

## Hucksters in Gems

*SIX SECONDS A YEAR.* By Frederick Laing. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co. 1948. 307 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by  
HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

THIS book is described on the dust-jacket as "a deep and thoughtful novel, a story of first-rate importance." The blurbs on this cover include encomia from Burton Rascoe ("likely to be one of the most closely read. . ."), William Rose Benét ("Sheldon's final surrender to the business system . . . a searingly personal kind") and Struthers Burt ("impressive piece of work"). All this leaves me a little gasping, and I wonder whether we all live in the same universe of discourse. I sadly report that "Six Seconds a Year" is, to my taste, just another novel. It is "The Hucksters," if you will, transferred to the clock industry and the jewelry trade, with a smart ending which takes advantage of the current rage for the race problem as a fictional bang. Some casual sex, an instructive chapter or two on clocks and what makes them tick, clipped dialogue, and a vague attempt to catch the feel of the Twenties—these are the chief ingredients, plus the love story.

Possibly, as one gets along through the years, one begins to recognize the truth in Dr. Johnson's remark in his later life, that the biographical parts

of literature attracted him most. Possibly, despite Macaulay's notion of bliss as lying on a sofa and reading novels all day long, fiction gets a little tinny by and by. But I wonder. I wonder if the current alarm in the general trade departments of most of our publishing houses doesn't point to something deeply wrong with our fiction, our mode of plugging it, our notions of what will sell. Mr. Laing's "Six Seconds a Year" is smartly tailored for what used to be called the carriage trade. It's metropolitan, it's sophisticated, it shows a rising young businessman losing his last ideal to the system, it shows how the hucksters work, it shows—well, it shows all the familiar moves in the familiar chess game. But is that quite enough?

In fact, is ballyhoo about fiction quite enough? Is anybody deceived by these glamorous dust-jackets, these quotable bits, these tantalizing previews ("Anita . . . watches Floyd maneuver [sic] expertly among the other salesmen, playing on their jealousies, jockeying for position . . .")? Isn't it about time that some of the high-powered boys in the "book promotion" world re-thought their problem? Is anybody much concerned about Anita and Floyd, when their "maneuvers" are presented at this catch-penny level? I wonder if there is any connection between the refusal of the public to buy books in quantities satisfactory to publishers, and the quality of the books' publicity?

All of which isn't a book review, and I beg Mr. Laing's pardon. His story is well enough, he has talent, his theme is up-to-the-minute, he is aware of social maladjustments, and one can have a sort of interest in his characters. But "first-rate importance"? Not if words have their usual meaning. "Deep"? No. "Impressive piece of work"? Honest and conscientious and well carpentered.

## Young Man of Ideals

*HILLS ON THE HIGHWAY.* By David Goldknopf. New York: Harper & Bros. 1948. 242 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by HARRISON SMITH

THE theme of "Hills on the Highway" is perennial and always vital; and, as in the book under discussion, it can be absorbing. There have been many novels concerned with the sincere young man of ideals who tries to solve the old dilemma: how to be both honest and successful. They are sometimes agonizing to read; the reader is haunted by the memory of night-long sessions in college dormitories, bars, and the bleak rooms of Bohemia, crowded with young men and girls, arguing over the ideals of the moment. The theme is constant; only the characters, the objects and men revered or hated, the beliefs enunciated, change over the years. Even the ending of these novels of frustration remains the same. The youthful protagonists, lacking rare genius, finally succumb to two possible solutions; they compromise with the world, or they destroy themselves.

The author of the "Hills on the Highway," who has spent the last decade as a student of philosophy and psychology, must have a retentive memory. His title is apt, for the dilemma of Leonard, the veteran who gives up a job to create literature, is literally to go over the hills either to the poorhouse or to a reasonable existence. Leonard possesses everything that he should to undertake his battle with fate, except adequate talent. He even has a family eager to loan him money, to nurture his art while he makes the Great Experiment. His crippled friend Homer, another veteran, is the novel's devil's advocate.

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