

Down from the Literary Left Wing

CROSS SECTION 1948: A Collection of New American Writing. Edited by Edwin Seaver. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1948. 457 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

THE MANUSCRIPTS submitted for Mr. Seaver's fourth annual anthology of "new writing" are, he honestly says, fewer in number and less creative in diversity and vitality than hitherto; and, he adds, any book editor, any book critic, must have been aware of the same general conditions. He further remarks that the publishers are worried because people aren't buying books more extensively and suggests that "maybe the people simply weren't interested in the books being offered them." Few editors of anthologies are thus candid as they beat the drum and blow the trumpet in front of the booth where they display their wares.

Mr. Seaver has assembled (despite this drouth) a total of twenty-one items for his collection. He divides these into five sections, but I shall differ from him by dividing them into two: fiction (short) and criticism. The criticism is confined to two numbers—a savage rhetorical attack on Mr. Philip Wylie, who seems to deserve this kind of onslaught; and a pontifical utterance about literature in general by Isidor Schneider that rather escapes my understanding. Neither item adds to the stature of the collection.



—Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz, Courtesy of An American Place.

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of love that enabled him to enter the mind of the artist and often actually to assist in the creative process. The correspondence with Sherwood Anderson, included in this volume, is revealing in this respect: Anderson repeatedly expresses gratitude for the spiritual nourishment he received from Rosenfeld. This sort of testimony is multiplied, in varying degrees, by a host of other artists—novelists, poets, composers, painters—who contribute to this collection of posthumous tributes. The table of contents reads like a "who's who" of contemporary American arts and letters.

This book is well-named, for Rosenfeld was a perpetual voyager among the arts—and no other critic of our times was more at home among all the arts. Though not a trained musician, music was the field of his predilection, and several American composers now famous were first "discovered" by him. One of these, Aaron Copland, who points out that, instead of observing the work of musical art with detachment, Rosenfeld "completely involved himself in the very music he was criticizing." This is a shrewd observation that underscores both a strength and a weakness. Another composer, William Schuman, remarks that Rosenfeld's interest in his music "declined in direct proportion to the increased recognition received." Or, as he puts it, when others began to climb on the bandwagon, Rosenfeld jumped off—headed for new discoveries, no doubt.

In the long view, it may be misleading to think of Paul Rosenfeld primarily as a critic. Waldo Frank may be very near the truth when he calls "Musical Portraits" "an authentic and organic work of literary art." Rosenfeld was a literary artist whose medium of expression was the critical essay. The sensations provided by his vibrant temperament and his extraordinary sensibility furnished the materials for his art. It is perhaps trite to say that he also made an art of living, yet that is the only way to explain the lifelong attachment of so many gifted friends, all of whom found his companionship stimulating and inspiring.

To read this book is not only to share an act of homage: it is to relive a period in American culture that is already closed, though it seems so near to us in time. In later years, Rosenfeld had articles rejected because they were "not interesting to the mass of the people." He did not move with the times. His voyage was set for a true course that could not deviate.

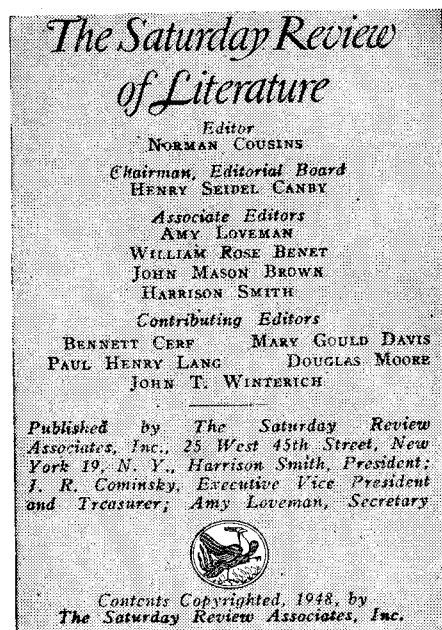
Gilbert Chase, supervisor of music for the NBC University of the Air, is writing an interpretive history of music in the United States.

The remaining nineteen units are, in effect, short stories, or at any rate stories which are short. The opening exhibit, "The Pismire Plan," by Jessamyn West, is a somewhat slow-moving but nevertheless pugnacious satire on Southern California, where everything pretends to be something else, with the result that there are no buyers; and George Pismire makes a fortune by hiring buyers and renting them out as patrons to institutions like "The Doggy Diner" and the "Isle of the Departed," where the corpses of deceased Americans depart via the "River of Memories" to the Los Angeles Sewage Disposal Farm (or at any rate the water in the artificial river departs that way). This is excellent fooling; but it would be improved if it were half as long.

The trouble about most of the rest of these stories is that there is no lift, no rise to them. In one, a bereaved father has to adjust himself to the requirements of taking care of a motherless little boy. In another, a father almost kills a little boy because he doesn't know how to take care of him. In a third, a mother-in-law interferes in a budding middle-age romance between her daughter-in-law and a mediocre male. In a fourth, a roving rural Romeo gets biffed on the bean by an outraged husband. In a fifth, a war casualty scoffs at everybody else and finds escape in the Wars of the Roses. In a sixth, the wandering American GI's turn Rome into a sunny-tempered brothel. And so on. And so on.

These fictional units are all carefully polished, not after the manner of *The Saturday Evening Post* but after the manner of *Story* magazine, *The New Yorker*, or one of the current little magazines. There is nothing wrong with them; the difficulty is that, the first story aside (together with certain scenes in the Rome piece), there is nothing compellingly right with them. No character sticks out as Sherlock Holmes or Falstaff or Little Eva or Chicot the Jester or Sancho Panza or Ulysses sticks out of the literary work which contains him. The writers are like broody hens, and the unregenerate reader comes by and by to feel smothered by their gallinaceous warmth, their close, monotonous nesting.

There is a formula for the slick magazines; but there is also a formula for the literary left-wing, which both bedazzles and bedevils these honest, painful, and highly respectable penmen. Less technical skill and more elementary exuberance seems to be what the new writing stands in need of.



Woman and the Male Animal

A SHORT TIME after its publication male critics from varied professions, medical, legal, and scientific, all over the country surveyed Dr. Alfred Kinsey's "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male" with a notable lack of indignation, moral or otherwise. The varied sexual outlets, whether socially or ecclesiastically sanctioned or not, and the impressive and solemn tables of periodicity, properly arranged in rural and urban groups and on graded economic levels, were assumed to be satisfactorily authentic and scientific. On the average intelligent male who was not privileged to write about it the book had a chilling and awesome effect; the laboriously ribald jokes that pass as humor among unregenerate males fell flat or were silenced at the abysmal revelation of man's ultimate fall from grace. Sired by the Medical Division of the Rockefeller Institute, and brought to birth by an old and respected medical publishing house, its overwhelmingly respectable ancestry, combined with its startling title, gave it a news value not unlike the tabloid's headline "Socialite Heiress Caught in Love Nest." It was immediately obvious that the Rockefeller Foundation and the W. B. Saunders Company, after an uproarious and lucrative cackling, had laid a golden egg that might be worth its weight in platinum or plutonium, to say nothing of its effect on our laws and mores.

So far, almost no women have publicly had their say about the famous Kinsey Report, though there was no way of keeping them from it, from the time the first husband brought it surreptitiously home, and, after some

hemming and hawing, handed it over to his wife, with a grin that might mean almost anything from, "I'd like to know what you really think," to "It's about time you discovered I'm not so bad after all." Now that the book has become a top best seller of the country, in spite of its forbidding price, it can be assumed that half or more of its readers are women. The manager of a large New York bookstore has assured us that at least fifty per cent of the people who put down six-fifty on the barrelhead are women, and mostly young women, and furthermore that it is bought with more assurance and less beating around the bush than the average man displays. Nevertheless, our inquiry of its publisher in Philadelphia brought the answer that, among the collected mass of clippings they have received, there is almost nothing women have written or publicly said about a book in which they are so vitally interested.

There are signs that a flood of protest from the distaff side will soon make its appearance. An editorial article in the May issue of one of the largest women's magazines states its position and asks for the opinions of its readers. It seems that youth is no bar to reading the Kinsey Report and that boys and girls in high school, and maybe younger tots, solemnly discuss it amongst themselves. Why should children, who are forbidden liquor, the writer asks, be permitted access to a report whose real significance and intention will escape them and on whom only its astonishing revelations will make an impression? Why was the book so elaborately promoted that it became familiar to tens of thousands of households? In what a Washington newspaper calls a scathing denunciation of the Kinsey statistics, Mrs. Eugene Meyer, writer and wife of the chairman of the board of *The Washington Post*, is quoted as saying, "We all know that there is too much sexual promiscuity, marital infidelity, and homosexuality in our country. What does it add to our knowledge to know the exact percentage in each of these three areas? . . . This attempt to equate us with the animals by statistics is as revolting as it is silly."

There will be no hint of Victorian prudery in what women have to say about Dr. Kinsey's labors on behalf of the animal nature of the human male. In fact, as one listens to women discussing the Report in mixed company, the conclusion is inescapable that men are more reticent, more frightened, or shy of what are known as "the facts of life" than women. This is not a new discovery, but with many other arguments about the differences between the sexes, this old dispute is being revived. Women and girls are

the realists, it appears, men and boys the sentimental romanticists, and why not, since it is the female of the family whose duty it is to clean up the sink, diaper the baby, and take care of brother or father when they come staggering home from fraternity or lodge meeting.

The daring and unvarnished sex talk and discussion in the Twenties and later were the result of the impact of Freud and Jung on women readers, or on those who had to take their troubles to the psychoanalyst. For lack of new fuel this conversational gambit had fallen into disuse for a decade or more. It can be noted that the wide dispersal of the Kinsey Report has revived sex as parlor conversation, this time more impersonally.

The famous report can only with difficulty be used as a more acceptable form of gossip about one's friends' private lives and personal misadventure. Since it is devoted exclusively to the male animal, whose sins are usually taken for granted by the nicest women; and since its tables of periodicity and so on can only with the greatest circumlocution be applied to one's absent best friend, talk centered on Dr. Kinsey's tables must consist of generalities, or be devoted to the habits of an unnamed acquaintance whom one met years ago. There is something extraordinarily revealing about these conversations. It is shown in the average man's embarrassment, his concealed and almost pathetic pride in the discovery of the frightening virility of the sex of which he is both the vain inheritor and the guilty transgressor. It can be seen in the woman's calm acceptance of her immemorial role as the tamer and trainer of wild animals of all ages in the household, until the little boys cease from bloodying each others' noses, and the over-virile young male becomes the stolid father.

It is safe to say that women will discover nothing that is new to them in the Kinsey Report. They are the readers of the latest books on psychiatry and on how to avoid and watch for the sexual complexes that hover like gremlins or bad fairies over their children's heads. They are the repository for household secrets that father never hears about. He can come home, inspect the garden, smile at a placid and happy family, eat his dinner in peace, and settle down to the evening newspaper without knowledge of the fires that may be alive under the surface. When the Kinsey Report has become a forgotten interlude in his life, he can peacefully rest until the next book of the series, Dr. Kinsey's report on the human female, arouses him with a jolt from which he may never recover.

H. S.