

## Fun with Foibles

THE LOCUSTS HAVE NO KING. By Dawn Powell. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1948. 286 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by JAMES C. FULLER

SO MANY sparks of witty observation kindle the pages of Miss Powell's lively comedy of postwar Greenwich Village and its cultural environs that one reads on and on, fascinated and inquisitive for more. Not for the story certainly; that is commonplace enough. Nor to find out what happens to the people. They rarely have a chance to grow from caricatures to well-defined individuals before Miss Powell is at them, dissecting their emotions and motives, and impaling them on their own words. "One never changed, one was merely found out," laments one rejected lover. Found out, she might have added, by her creator. The secret of the hold on our interest, I imagine, is simply that Dawn Powell is running this show; whatever her faults as a novelist, she will not say anything uninteresting about her characters nor allow them for long to try the patience of a reader.

The focus of the story, when there is a focus, is Frederick Olliver, who represents innocence among the locusts of publishers' row, the brain-picking cocktail and bar sets, and the kindergartens of easy culture. A Bank Street recluse and medieval scholar in his middle thirties, he writes esoteric essays for little magazines and every few years turns out an esteemed but unsalable book. By a series of accidents he is propelled, trailing shreds of his cocoon, into a sabbatical in a world he not only didn't make but didn't know was there. His seclusion was first breached by a long-standing though spasmodic love affair with patrician Lyle Gaylor, playwright and wife of an aging and crippled actor. This sub rosa idyll is interrupted when Frederick is trapped sexually by the fretful wiles of an appalling example of Southern infantilism and bitchery named Dodo Brennan. Dodo becomes the Mildred of Frederick's human bondage. His latest book with a medieval message wins an international award and sales; inadvertently he is made editor of his publisher's profitable sideline, a comics magazine; he teaches The Contemporary Novel at the League for Cultural Foundation and finds himself launched as a cocktail lion. Misunderstandings multiply with Lyle until at last Dodo disappears with an advertising genius and the not-so-crippled actor flies to Hollywood and oblivion. Free and reunited, Fred-



—Glidden.

"Dawn Powell is running this show."

erick and Lyle overhear the Bikini tests on the radio. "He went over to Lyle and held her tightly. In a world of destruction one must hold fast to whatever fragments of love are left . . ."

"The unfamiliar elegance of Frederick's mind," so attractive to his new friends, is shared but fleetingly with the reader. Miss Powell's talent—as the recording devil—lies elsewhere. Her natural prey is the more vulnerable and malleable types who swarm around Frederick: the hard-drinking success girls from the world of business art with their hidden hungers, the little-magazine coterie of dead-end thinkers, the self-reassuring barflies of the Village's "Rubberleg Square." Above all she delights in attacking the king-size locusts: Tyson Bricker, "New York's most publicized cultural leader," whose name on banquet menus is as familiar as fruit cup; Strafford, the muddled, opportunist publisher who admired integrity in a man like Frederick ("But it makes people so hard to get along with"); or Sam Flannery, theatrical press agent "with the complacent ego of the ignorant." But she pays for her pleasure and ours in undressing so many stuffed shirts in public. The novel becomes random in its effect.

With amiable malice Miss Powell hunts down our foibles and pretenses and brilliantly damns us with our own dialogue. Is this satire? Not in any Swiftian sense, and perhaps it is time to make a distinction. The reader who laughs at true satire, laughs because he is afraid. An abyss of pain and hatred is there. We, living in a tactful age, have confused wisecracks, caricatures, and ridicule with satire. On cue from Miss Powell we laugh with delight or embarrassment according to whether it is our friends or ourselves who have been found out. But it is all in fun, like a family joke.

## Sweetness and Sanity

PARRIS MITCHELL OF KING'S ROW. By Henry and Katherine Bellamann. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. 1948. 333 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

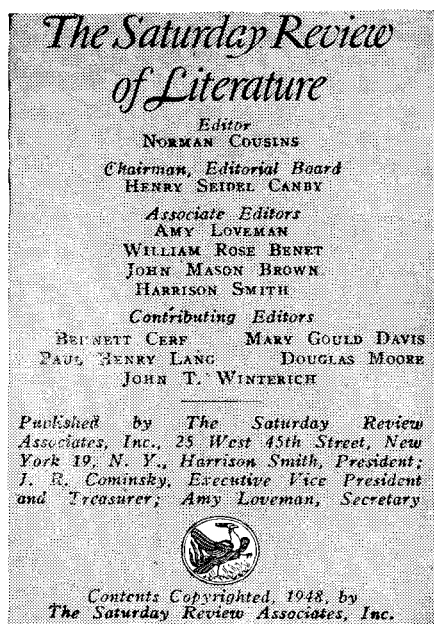
IT IS regrettable that the word "mediocre" has taken on so unfavorable a coloring. In its original sense of something having to do with the middle it was a valuable adjective; but the difficulty is not merely that to call such-and-such a work "mediocre" is to damn it with faint praise but also that substitute phrase like "commonplace," "middling good," "neither very good nor very bad" are also comminatory. Such is the national passion for getting on that everything has to be excellent, first-rate, outstanding, exceptional, sensational, unique, or what have you.

This mild excursion into semantics is occasioned by the appearance of the sequel to "King's Row," which in 1940 had some attention and which was turned into a movie. "King's Row," it will be recalled, had to do with the earlier years of one Dr. Parris Mitchell, a psychiatrist who by and by settled in a small town in the Middle-west. "Parris Mitchell of King's Row" is the next member of a projected trilogy. Mr. Bellamann did not live to finish the book, which has been completed by Mrs. Henry Bellamann from extensive notes left her. Obviously the third member of the trilogy, which would presumably have brought the story down to the 1940's, will never be written.

It would be pleasant to grow exclamatory over "Parris Mitchell of King's Row" if one could. Obviously the ethical intent of this book (as of the series) was and is laudable. Obviously the theme pleased a good many readers of volume one. Some of these I have talked to; they are a little vague about it, but they thought it was a "good book." Others remembered it as "preachy." The present work is necessarily aimed at that vast mid-section of the reading public where novels are briefly dismissed as "good" or "bad," and the adjective "preachy" sums up the whole intricate problem of ethics and esthetics in a work of art.

The sequel is some more of the same thing. A formidable motto from the letters of Rainer Maria Rilke furnishes an epigraph for its humdrum pages, but I suggest that an equally applicable motto would be that there's so much bad in the best of us and so much good in the worst of us that it ill behooves any one of us to speak ill

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## The Pulitzer Awards

FOR THIRTY-ONE years the trustees of Columbia University, on recommendation of an advisory board of the School of Journalism, have used the income of Joseph Pulitzer's endowment "for prizes and scholarships for the encouragement of public service, public morals, and the advancement of education." This year's prizes were as usual prefaced by guessing contests, arguments in newspaper and publishing offices, and by published attacks based on the board's past errors of omission and commission.

The charges that the selections of the board "compelled writers to become soft, obedient and sterile" and "vitiating and embarrassed art at its source," made by Sinclair Lewis and William Saroyan when they refused to be honored for "Arrowsmith" and "The Time of Your Life," were repeated. In 1934 three judges stated their reasons for resigning from the Board in no uncertain terms. One of them wrote that the awards had been arrived at "without reference to established standards of criticism." The next year, professional dramatic critics formed their own organization to select the best plays of the year in opposition to the Pulitzer decisions. It seems that Maxwell Anderson's "Winterset" based on the Sacco-Vanzetti case had been turned down in favor of Zoe Akins's harmless and now forgotten "Old Maid." Mr. Anderson declared that the Pulitzer drama prizes had been an encouragement to mediocrity and a confusing and misleading influence in the theatre. In 1941, the American Newspaper Guild set itself up in the prize-giving business after Reuben Maury, the *New York Daily News's* and *Collier's*

double-gaited editorial writer, had been crowned by the Pulitzer Committee, apparently for writing with equal facility on both sides of the great debate on isolation or war.

In this year's April issue of the magazine '48, Kenneth N. Stewart cites some of the past revolutions against what has become a national institution and adds a few sharp comments of his own. He accuses the Pulitzer Advisory Board of being tied to the academic skirt of Carl W. Ackerman, dean of the School of Journalism, whose words and acts identify him as "an academic apologist for the American Newspaper Publisher's Association, which is business-minded, publicity-wise, and suspicious of change." The magazine quotes a 1942 editorial from *The Saturday Review* protesting that Ellen Glasgow's novels had been neglected too long, and that Ernest Hemingway, Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, and William Faulkner had never received an award. This is equally true for H. L. Mencken, Charles Beard, Heywood Broun, Thomas Wolfe, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Carl Sandburg, T. S. Eliot, and many another writer who helped to create the American literary renaissance of the Twenties and Thirties.

Against these objections and denunciations of the choices of past years it can be argued that the terms of the founder's bequest inevitably lead to conservatism. Morality, education, public service are the watchwords and the catchwords. Nothing could be more admirable than these three aims, but it is often hard to fit a crusading newspaperman, a radical editor, or a novelist or playwright experimenting in what are thought to be dangerous waters, into these three categories. Perhaps there is a higher morality in literature for its own sake, or art for art's sake; but when an august board of judges surveys the yearly offering, the kind of morality that is the convention of the moment must win out every time.

The selections for this year in all fields must seem to be admirable in any way you choose to look at them. Some of them are surprising enough,

as the reader will see if he examines our list of nominations by professional newspaper and magazine reviewers on the opposite page. Not one of these twenty-three critics selected the winners of the prizes for biography or fiction. The award for the most distinguished fiction in book form went to James Michener for his "Tales of the South Pacific," passing by A. B. Guthrie's "The Big Sky" and Gerald Warner Brace's "The Garretson Chronicle," which won eight votes each on our lists. On the race track the odds against Mr. Michener's dark horse would have been about a hundred to one, for it was his first attempt at popular writing, and a collection of nineteen short stories, at that, so realistically written that many readers must have mistaken the book for an autobiographical account of the adventures of the author on the forty-nine atolls and islands to which he was sent as a trouble shooter in aviation maintenance.

IT must have occurred to very few people, including the author, that another newcomer to popular writing, Miss Margaret Clapp, assistant professor of history at Brooklyn College, would win a prize for her biography, "Forgotten First Citizen: John Bigelow." Admirable as was the almost forgotten Mr. Bigelow in civic virtue and noble causes, he is hardly a romantic figure, though his biography exemplifies the committee's worthy definition for that field, the best American biography "teaching patriotic and unselfish services to the people." Everyone likes a success story, and the award to Miss Clapp is certainly that.

Bernard de Voto's "Across the Wide Missouri" could hardly be improved on as the Pulitzer choice in history. It is in many respects the best of his numerous books. His account of the wild and woolly years of the fur trade in the West over a century ago is less dramatic than his "The Year of Decision: 1846," but he has subordinated his somewhat aggressive opinions expressed in that book to the leisurely mastery and development of an epic

## Noctambule

By Ben Ray Redman

ALL NIGHTS are dawns, and every dawn a night:  
The life that wakes beneath nocturnal skies  
Sleeps through the day, when soporific light  
Darkens the sight of moon-enchanted eyes.  
No brisk companions of the sunshine guess  
A shadow moves among them, quick as trade,  
Efficient, sly, and avid of success;  
As if won chips were real, or bankers paid.