

FICTION

(Continued from page 19)

to scrambling young Mulots. Domestic life is almost completely without grace, it is gritty with bickering, harsh accusation, petty dishonesty. Only in time of great affliction do the Mulots and Soyeux shed meannesses and show any grandeur of spirit.

This first novel (by the manager of a Quebec lumber company) is undoubtedly partly autobiographical, and like many another first novel deals with a young man writing his first novel. (That Denis could write a novel is hardly credible.) In its original French version "The Town Below" became an immediate and controversial bestseller in Canada. One would surmise that the controversy arose not only from the unflattering picture of the Lower Town, but also from the attitude toward the Church. The book is not directly anticlerical or hostile, but it pokes gentle fun at shrines and miracles, seminarians, money-raising contrivances, dull sermons, etc. Most objectionable, perhaps, is the complete absence in family or community life of any Christian or humane influence of the teachings of the Church.

A Slick Toughie

NEVER LOVE A STRANGER. By Harold Robbins. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1948. 443 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by NATHAN L. ROTHMAN

MR. ROBBINS writes with a harsh vitality. His novel—about the amazing career of a tough-skinned New York character from orphanage to bullet-proof limousine—never lacks for force or interest. Mr. Robbins has been around. He has seen a lot of things, and remembers them vividly enough to run them through 400 pages without ever suggesting monotony. Yet his book is irritating because of its peculiar pretensions. It is sub-titled "A Novel of Passion and Struggle" and it seems to suggest, from the very outset, that it is going to come to grips with some of the grimmest, some of the primary problems of life in the big city. Frankie Kane, a tough kid, a foundling, shuttling around among Catholic orphanage, parochial school, and poolroom job, is the focal point. From there we proceed with him outward in all directions; before we have gone very far Frankie has made contact with one of the town's master racketeers, he has discovered that his parents were Jewish and lived for a time with some relatives on Washington Heights, he has run away to Baltimore and become, of all things, a bouncer in a

bawdy house, he has done a term of duty in the Navy, he has dabbled at the fringe of socialist agitation and been in at the death of a martyr, he has made and lost friends, found and taken and tossed away all the varieties of love, and he has reached his destined niche of power as a dominant organizer of incorporated rackets, New York's Enemy Number One!

All of this, unreeled before us in the sober and self-conscious accents of realism, while all the time we are increasingly aware that it isn't real or realistic at all, that it is a modern variety of false-face to cover what is at core a piece of slick drug-store fiction. The trappings are those of the social novel, but the values are those of pulp, and the irritation I have mentioned grows out of this mismatching. Why the elaborate build-up? Frankie Kane is a slick toughie with a heart of stone, irresistible to all ladies sacred or profane and victorious over all males. Passion and Struggle? The only struggle here is the one to give Frankie a social significance. Hammett and Cain and Burnett know better than to do that, and they know more about passion, too. Frankie's meetings with robust females remind me too much of Perelman's piece: "Somewhere a Roscoe. . . ."

I don't mean to be as derogatory as all of this may sound. As I have said, Robbins' writing is strong, his pace varied, and his invention admirable. I say his novel isn't realistic or important because it lacks vision and purpose, because it slithers across anything that might turn out to be serious (like religion, like the prostitutes, like love, like socialism, all of which are turned up and then over like cards) and makes a strong play for such nonsense as the business about Frankie Kane, Enemy Number One, and his duel with the D. A. (his old friend, too!). This is strictly for Alan Ladd.



Royal Refugees

I THEE WED. By Gilbert W. Gabriel. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1948. 340 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by ROBERT PICK

THE AFFAIRS of the diamond necklace, that never fully-disentangled scandalous court intrigue on the eve of the French Revolution, has, over the past hundred and fifty years, generated a goodly number of stories. And the great tribulations of the aristocratic French émigrés of the early 1790's have—down to the "Scarlet Pimpernel"—fired the imagination of uncounted writers. Now Mr. Gabriel has combined these two well-proven subjects, bringing to this task the fruit of what seems to be much research. He has produced a readable novel. What makes it even interesting is the authentic story of Azylum, Pennsylvania, a village built by a group of royalist refugees and some Americans who took pity on them, and which included what is said to have been the largest log cabin ever constructed, a sanctuary that had been planned for Marie Antoinette herself.

Few biographers of the hapless queen contend that the hopes of her loyal friends to bring her to America ever went beyond the stage of wistful plotting and day dreaming. But Mr. Gabriel, taking it further, has spun a by no means incredible yarn, deftly mixing it with a new version of the life story of Marie Antoinette's double, that girl who—innocently, as both the French court and most historians decided—had a part in the affairs of the diamond necklace. The hero (and later husband) at hand is a likable Scotch-American war veteran by the name of Alan Ruff, who holds his own in France as well as on the Susquehanna, not least with the help of his faithful orderly and friend.

Alan Ruff does a good job as the narrator of the present tale. Perhaps there is a little bit too much perfumed court life corruption and "gay Paree" on the one hand and too much plain-spoken republicanism on the other to make the book a really well-balanced novel, and the role allotted to the famous Count Fersen seems more than a trifle overdone. Yet compared to some of the historical formula romances high up on our bestseller list, "I Thee Wed" is a fairly serious book.

It represents an attempt to reenact a fantastic episode by richly embroidering it, but also tries to give some meaning to the adventures of the French noblemen in the American wilderness.



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HARPER & BROTHERS, N. Y. 16

Music. Fifteen years ago Norton published a book called "From Bach to Stravinsky." The very title may have outraged many at the time who had never considered bracketing any "modern" composer with Bach. But, gradually, Russian-born Stravinsky has come to be accepted today as a major composer fully equal to any in the past. . . . It is heartening in these tense days to note how many of the favorite composers are Russian: not only older composers like Tchaikovsky and Musorgsky, but also contemporaries like Shostakovich, Khachaturian, and Prokofieff. Although Stravinsky has lived most of his life in France, a comparison of his earlier music with that of Musorgsky makes clear his link with the Russian tradition. . . . "The Musorgsky Reader" (below) is the second in a distinguished Norton series which has included Bach and Schubert.

Slavic Musical Phenomena

STRAVINSKY. By Eric Walter White.
New York: Philosophical Library.
1948. 192 pp. \$3.75.

THE MUSORGSKY READER: A Life of Modeste Petrovich Musorgsky in Letters and Documents. Edited and translated by Jay Leyda and Sergei Bertensson. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1947. 474 pp. \$6.

Reviewed by ABRAHAM VEINUS

AMONG contemporary composers, it cannot be said that Stravinsky has suffered any conspicuous neglect. His music has been well and frequently performed and recorded, and he has been graced by an articulate group of admirers whose missionary work on his behalf now comprises a substantial bibliography in a variety of languages. Mr. White's recent study is a modest and readable essay composed (to borrow a phrase from Schumann) ten paces away from his subject in order not to praise him too warmly to his face.

The modicum of critical evaluation with which Mr. White leavens his admiration for an acknowledged master is all to the good; and the lay reader, at least, will find his summary of Stravinsky's work (musical and literary) a convenience. It is unfortunate, however, that Mr. White is sometimes content (as in the section on the "Musical Poetics") with merely a summary of material already more fully and as readily available elsewhere. It is difficult not to expect of him (even presuming that he had only the general reader in mind) an attempt at analysis and evaluation. Nor even from the point of view of the general reader is his constant failure to develop any sort of historical, social, or cultural context as a framework for Stravinsky's thinking and creating at all justifiable. Minus such a frame

of reference the consequences of Stravinsky's music upon the work of others cannot be grappled with and is almost of necessity omitted. The sources of Stravinsky's art and esthetics, and the resemblances between certain of his surface mannerisms to seemingly similar procedures in Eliot and Picasso, are treated unfortunately on a rather superficial level.

In brief, although Mr. White has been workmanlike in his study of the scores, and while his prose is tastefully modest in tone, his is a study in a vacuum. At this late date, with so much of "modern" music, so-called, already in perspective, this constitutes a near fatal limitation. However kindly disposed he may be to his subject, he can scarcely exhibit the fulness of Stravinsky's stature from so limited a vantage point.

It may be supposed that there is some profound purpose behind so restricted a study, but this illusion is soon dispelled; for upon the few occasions when the author ventures beyond his cataloguing of chord juxtapositions, tonal centers, etc., and his itemization of scenario details, the results are distressing. His discussion, for example, of the distinction between classical and romantic music is still anchored smugly in a few Victorian clichés quoted from Fillmore's "History of Pianoforte Music" (1885).

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