

the psychotic young wife whose tottering mind finally regains its stability. Perhaps, from a psychiatric point of view, the case is oversimplified as its causes are traced and cured in flashback indications of its origins. For screen purposes, however, the treatment proves more than satisfactory. We have Olivia de Havilland not only to thank but to congratulate for this. Miss de Havilland gives one of those wonderfully unglamorized and true performances generally associated with only the more distinguished foreign films. She is a woman—any nice young woman—trapped by misfortune, and never the actress at work. Above all, she is brilliant in suggesting the torments of a mind not mad but wavering, and uncertain in its knowledge of when the darkness is settling upon it or the interludes of clarity have come again.

LEO GENN is admirable as a soft-spoken psychiatrist whose gentleness under rushed and cruelly standardized conditions effects a cure. Indeed, the whole of the large cast is so contributive that it is at once difficult and unfair to particularize. Even so, some mention must be made of Betsy Blair's sullen and shiny-eyed maniac, who ultimately speaks; of Beulah Bondi as the ornate patient who fancies herself a great lady; and of Helen Craig as a stony-hearted but jealous nurse.

You may ask why such a disturbing film, however absorbing, on so unpleasant a subject. There are several answers. First of all, if the motion pictures are to function as an adult medium, they must be as free as the novel and the stage to deal truthfully and unflinchingly with adult subjects. Secondly, there is the matter of treatment; of the challenge, in this instance finely met, of doing justice to such themes. Also there is the purpose served. Make no mistake about it. "The Snake Pit" serves one. It forces audiences to become aware of the terrible conditions in understaffed and overcrowded public and private asylums up and down the land.

The amusement seekers at Bedlam in their callous approach to human suffering were guilty of a cruelty which today we find shocking. Ours, in the name of mercy, is a different guilt. They may not have spared the insane; we spare ourselves. We know too little about what happens on the far side of those iron curtains behind which so terrifying a percentage of our citizens live. Knowing little, we do less. Among the many virtues of "The Snake Pit" is that, by opening our eyes and hearts, it should also open our pocketbooks.

—JOHN MASON BROWN.

FICTION

(Continued from page 17)

murky and undisciplined prose. ("He felt a great sob of worship go through him, and it was the worship of woman.") Mr. Williamson knows better than that, as many other pages of this novel demonstrate. There was the stuff of a first-rate novel here, and it could have been, perhaps, if only Mr. Williamson could have been somehow conveyed through his theme.

Patient, Europe

LARGELY FICTION. By Eleanor Palffy. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1948. 314 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by HARRY BULL

THIS is an entertaining picture of an invalid. The patient, alas for the world, is Europe; the particular crisis in the illness, the years of Hitler's rise.

Because the people who are individually afflicted, and whose symptoms make such fascinating reading, are mostly remnants of the feudal aristocracy is no excuse for dismissing "Largely Fiction" as a series of upper-case histories to be easily counterbalanced by the vitality of the rest of the body politic, or lower orders. Countess Palffy is more penetrating than that.

Somewhat in the tradition of Henry James and Edith Wharton, she exposes an attractive young American of independent means to the traditional epidemics of French and Central European civilization; but living in a later generation, her more or less autobiographical heroine observes the later, and perhaps fatal stages of the disease. The ingrained resistance that the Cintré and De Chelles families could offer the onslaughts of Mr. James's and Mrs. Wharton's Americans is now little more than a maneuver. In trying to shield themselves behind outworn forms, Countess Palffy's aristocrats are committing a class suicide that is at the same time part of the mass suicide which adherence to extreme nationalism is bound to bring upon their compatriots.

But if the social implications of the countess's observations are tragic, her light touch and unsentimental attitude toward a wide variety of human behavior may remind you that, in spite of its subject, "The Loved One" made for an hilarious evening. And if she is telling about Europeans

still half immured in their first childhood while much of their culture reeks of senility, her nostalgia discriminates in favor of their more gracious and reasonable patterns of living at the same time that she is by no means unmindful of American failings. Indeed, of her two chapters on the self-consciously simplified retreats of the rich, the Maine island of North Haven, where she hears of the Liberation of Paris, is described more caustically than the Riviera village of Pampelone where she had witnessed the final mobilization for war.

As a rebel against her native New England Puritanism and its repression of individuality, Countess Palffy's Mary Elizabeth is attracted to the most bizarre Europeans, and can relate their stories with intuitive understanding. As a woman of the world, somewhat spoiled by her own looks, position, and income, she can score off their foibles with the sharpness that discerns her own failings in others. (Who could appraise the frugality and proud provincialism of the French better than a product of that almost extinct Boston training to live off the income of one's income, and to ask: "Why travel when you're already there?") As a lover of good conversation, she has treasured and invented many excellent *mots* to scatter through her pages with the judiciousness of a *cordon bleu* dispensing the herbs in a ragout. As a traveler who read history before Baedeker, and Baedeker before the "Guide Michelin," she is able to back up her action with settings that are rich in highly personal reactions to architecture and nature, preferably tamed by the taste of man. As one of Mark Twain's good Americans, her ghost will surely figure as brightly on the Right Bank of the Seine as will Elliot Paul's on the Left.

A Canning in reverse, Eleanor Palffy recalls the old world to redress the balance of the new.

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Love Under Fire

A STAR CALLED WORMWOOD. By Martha Bacon. New York: Random House. 1948. 250 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by EDMUND GILLIGAN

IT IS to be expected that when a poet turns storyteller there will be a conflict between the two talents. There is such a conflict in Martha Bacon's first novel, and the poet continually defeats the storyteller. The chief reward, therefore, to the reader lies in frequent sentences that are poetic and in many others from which the poetic cadence is removed but the poet's skill in observation is dominant. Thus she describes, in an admirable first chapter, Louis Meredith, an American boy living in the Italy of Mussolini and wearing the black tunic and shorts of the Italian school-boy: "His hair was cropped close to his skull and its color was so near to that of his sallow complexion that at a distance he looked as though he were carved out of sandalwood and had no hair at all."

Such achievements, added to the quick plunge into the story (a train rushing into an Italian station), indicate that Miss Bacon's next novel, a story of Mexico, should be something

very good, indeed. I say that because I believe the brightness of free Mexico will be more suitable to her talents, surely more suitable than the moral darkness of Fascist Italy, where, it is quite clear, Miss Bacon kept continually looking for light, a light that gleamed only in the poetic skies. She forced herself, during her life there, to look upward with a fixed gaze; and, in so doing, she instinctively rebelled against the darkness at her feet. It did not appall her. So there is little in this book that pierces the heart in the manner of Silone. Nor is there the oblique approach to Fascism that is so terrifying in Katherine Anne Porter's "The Leaning Tower."

A second and, naturally, a more leisurely reading of the novel reveals the defeat of the storyteller in other ways, especially in the devices used to bring her characters to the ultimate position: the one of tragedy. The force employed is that of sexual passion: "Charles turned and caught her to him and kissed her cold salty mouth. Her cool limbs warmed his cold body." Charles, an American tutor, engaged to manage the children of David Meredith, thus plunges

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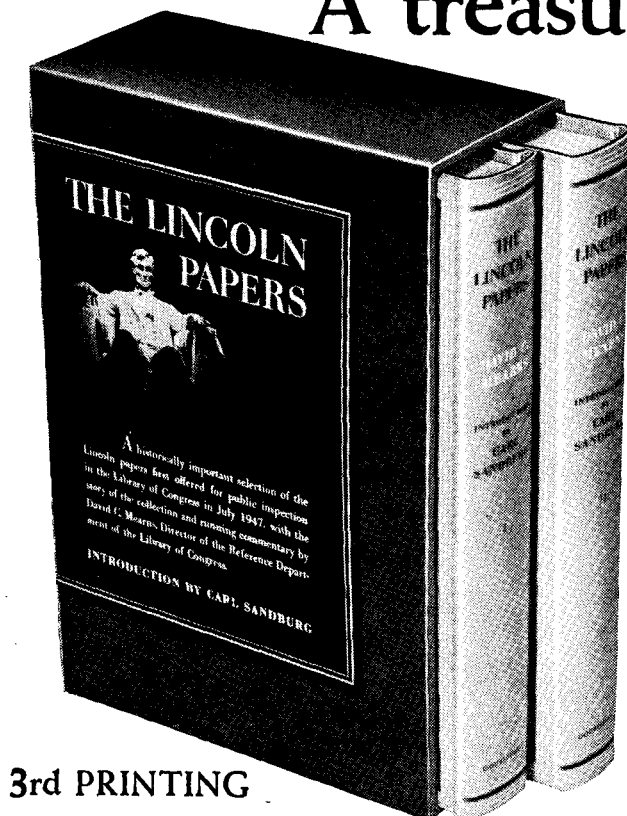
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