

**Fiction.** Now that it is out of fashion to write amusingly about one's relatives (grandmother was so quaint), there is an appalling absence of humor in the American fiction that may be more than a reflection of the stresses of life today. In the novels that begin with boyhood and youth no one seems carefree, happy, or youthful. Nobody laughs or is allowed to be just silly, as if the characters were inwardly brooding about what is going to happen to them after the first hundred pages. Of course, the author knows, but he ought to keep his knowledge from his subjects. Two books deserve special attention this week, Willa Cather's posthumous "Old Beauty and Others" and a fine Canadian love story, Hugh MacLennan's "The Precipice"—called here the first North American novel.

## Willa Cather's Legacy

**THE OLD BEAUTY AND OTHERS.**  
By Willa Cather. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1948. 166 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM PEDEN

**A**DMIRERS of the late Willa Cather will find this volume of three hitherto unpublished pieces of short fiction much to their liking. Two of these stories, "The Old Beauty" and "The Best Years," are among the finer productions of a highly skilled craftsman and deeply perceptive observer of life whose work at its best is a real contribution to the literature of the American short story.

Since the publication of her first volume of stories over forty years ago, Miss Cather's primary interest has been in character. A realist in the tradition of Henry James and Edith Wharton, her approach to the short story has been distinguished by high seriousness and artistic integrity. Resembling the naturalists in her interest in the effect of heredity and environment on the development of the individual, she broke with them almost completely in her sympathetic attitude towards her characters. It is this mature and sympathetic under-

standing of men and women which is one of Miss Cather's most valuable literary assets, and which brings her work closer in spirit to that of Irish writers like Michael McLaverty and Frank O'Connor than to the stories of many of her younger American contemporaries—such as James Farrell, Eudora Welty, or Truman Capote.

Nowhere is this attitude towards her characters better illustrated than in Miss Cather's treatment of Gabrielle, the heroine of her title story. Gabrielle, daughter of a Martinique mother and an English colonial, had come into the England of the 1890's as fresh and unspoiled as a quiet country dawn. The delicacy of her beauty, its harmony of modeling and line, gave her an air of "having come from afar off" to conquer London as she did. With the passing of this beauty, she became a ruin. Unrecognizable, she muffled her face in furs, shrank from the eyes of the curious, hardened into scorn. She lived in the past, with the memory of the great men who had loved her, loving them more than when they were alive because now at last she understood them better.

It is interesting if fruitless to contemplate what some of Willa Cather's major contemporaries—Dreiser, perhaps, or D. H. Lawrence—would have made of Gabrielle; presumably, we might have been presented with the case history of a somewhat damaged biological specimen, the victim of suppressions, frustrations, or an arrested emotional development. Miss Cather's Gabrielle, however, is depicted with sympathetic understanding as both victor and victim of the times and circumstances which shaped her destiny. Gabrielle is the result, almost indeed the creation, of a romantic tradition already obsolescent in her youth, and



—Photographed by Steichen.

**Willa Cather broke with the naturalists "almost completely in her sympathetic attitude towards her characters."**

of an "attitude in men which no longer existed" in her maturity. With dignity, restraint, and an unerring selection of the significant incident and detail, Miss Cather has captured the essence of an individual and a way of life. Gabrielle, like her ruined face in death, becomes regal, calm, and victorious.

"The Best Years" is the story of Lesley Fergusson, a young girl school teacher in Nebraska's horse-and-buggy days. Like "The Old Beauty" it is an evocation and a romantization of the past, made memorable by its characterization of Lesley and her mother. In the final analysis, however, its chief virtue lies in its quiet beauty of language and nostalgic recreation of the past rather than in character or incident. In effect it is a tone poem, praising the "home place" and family ties, the abiding pleasures of simple life and people who "for some reason, or for no reason, back from the beginning, wanted the blood to continue."

The third and final story, "Before Breakfast," adds little to the value of this volume or to the many studies of the misunderstood man unappreciated by his family. The central character, Henry Grenfell, is a puppet rather than a human being; the author fails almost completely to enlist the reader's sympathy or interest, and weakens what little is left of either by an obviously contrived ending. In idea and execution, it is far inferior to "The Old Beauty" and "The Best Years" and hardly seems to merit inclusion in the same volume with them.

### Oriole

Louise Townsend Nicholl

**H**OW many generations of the bird  
Since the full splendor of his heart  
we heard—

The unquenchable compulsion of his  
vow.

He speaks in fragments now,  
In segments of the song,  
And not for long,  
Having said all there was to say  
In that one May.

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# Surmounting the Border

*THE PRECIPICE.* By Hugh MacLennan. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 1948. 272 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by MERRILL DENISON

HUGH MACLENNAN'S new book should greatly strengthen his position as one of Canada's leading novelists and win him a larger American public than either of his two previous works. As in "Two Solitudes," which won the Governor-General's Prize (the Canadian equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize), he has chosen to deal with a theme that has long awaited the attention of a Canadian novelist. But where the earlier work had to do with a problem that was peculiarly Canadian, the racial, religious conflicts between French and English-speaking Canada, his new one has a Canadian-American background. "The Precipice" is an interesting departure in the field of serious fiction and can properly be hailed as the first North American novel.

It is doubtful if this was Mr. MacLennan's principal intention. In this third book he has grown into a mature craftsman with a complete command of his medium. His first and main interest is with people, as it should be; with character and the interplay of personalities. But in telling the love story of Lucy Cameron and Stephen Lassiter, the one a Canadian woman born and brought up in a small Lake Ontario town, the other an American engineer sent north to overhaul the town's lone factory, he has had to examine and describe the two environments which produced their sharply conflicting attitudes. In doing so, he has set forth for the first time many fascinating contrasts between two peoples who are so fundamentally the same and yet so subtly different.

The comparisons are neither lugged in by the heels nor imposed upon the story. They grow naturally out of the background of character and action which moves from the suspended animation of a small Ontario town to the surging drive of metropolitan and suburban New York to end, finally, on a kind of middle ground in the Middle-west. Neither Lucy nor Stephen is self-consciously Canadian or American; not once does the eagle scream or the beaver flap his tail, but they are nonetheless representative of two peoples with different temperaments and outlooks. For all that the author is interested in them solely as human beings and in their man and woman relationship, he has to explain them and in doing so has made them microcosms of a larger whole.

The gift for description which enriched "Two Solitudes" is found again in "The Precipice." For example, Mr. MacLennan's Grenville, a synthesis of all the Lake Ontario towns between Toronto and Kingston, is a brilliant achievement. No single place can be identified but the life-patterns, the spiritual essence, and all the sights, sounds, and smells that exist in all the towns along King's Highway Number Two have been recaptured with revealing fidelity. The effect is not unlike Stephen Leacock's "Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town," but the town has been seen through more penetrating and discerning eyes. More remarkably, perhaps, Mr. MacLennan is equally at home with the American scene.

His most notable advances, however, are to be seen in the development of

character and situation. Where "Two Solitudes" was more impressive for its subject matter than its execution, "The Precipice" is a completely satisfactory work of fiction. It is a love story rather than a problem piece and its characters are intensely real and interesting people. Its situations are handled with a new skill and adroitness. Mr. MacLennan now writes about women as well as he did about men and, more importantly from the selling angle, is able to write about them together in all and any circumstances. Lucy and Steve are nice people but by no means pallid lovers and their emotional conflicts are not wholly by-products of geography.

"The Precipice" is absorbing rather than exciting. It builds slowly and takes its time to establish its effects. There is not a false note in it and, like all worth-while novels, it helps to illumine life and casts a shadow somewhat larger than itself.

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## American Village

(Old Deerfield, Mass.)

By David Morton

THE old names are here,  
And the old forms  
—Not alone of doorways, of houses.  
The light falls the way the light fell,  
And it is not clear,  
In the elm shadows, if it be ourselves, here,  
Or others, who were before us.

The elms have an air of knowing;  
They were before us,  
They listened to our fathers' talk,  
To the women coming and going:  
The lonely man in meditative walk,  
The man busy with affairs;  
The young, too, the lovers, these,  
Whispering in the dark privacy of trees.

The grass,  
The patient and attentive grass,  
On the spread lawns down the still street,  
The grass knows;  
The grass is recognition without surprise,  
Seeing us leave our doorways, seeing who goes  
Single, or in pairs, again,  
Seeing us meet in the new morning,  
Hearing us repeat  
What the grass heard from earlier men.

The meadow, at the town's end,  
Looks in, looks down the long street's green arcade,  
Seeing the meditative man, seeing the friend  
Meeting with friend, in the elm's shade,  
And the lovers, whispering.—  
And the meadow is not sure  
If this be seeing, or remembering,  
If time be past, or present, or a long spell. . . .

There are times when we, ourselves, cannot tell.  
The old names are here,  
And the old forms  
—Not alone of doorways, of houses. . . .