

**Fiction.** *The novels that dominate this week's reviews have, like most modern fiction, more than a simple or dramatic story to tell. Behind the Mexican bullfighter and his associates in Tom Lea's "The Brave Bulls" are the passions that beset the human race and man's eternal struggle against fear. Louis Bromfield calls this work by a new American writer very close to perfection. In Pearl S. Buck's "Kinko" there is the conflict between American and Chinese philosophies and ways of life motivating her story. James Branch Cabell's "The Devil's Own Dear Son," the last of a trilogy, wanders from modern America into the familiar lands of Cabellian fantasy. The fine translation of an old French novel, "Jean Barois," can be recommended as a brilliant study of the effects on French society and thought of the famous Dreyfus Case.*

## Triumph in the Arena

**THE BRAVE BULLS.** By Tom Lea.  
Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1949.  
270 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by LOUIS BROMFIELD

**T**HIS is a beautiful book. It is a distinguished book. Quite possibly it is a great book. Certainly it could be read at any time in history by readers of any nationality or cultural background and lose none of its depth, validity, or universal appeal and timelessness; and that is one of the profound tests of a great book. Primarily it is about a Mexican bullfighter; fundamentally it is concerned with man and his struggles. It is certainly a book which will hearten the great number of readers and reviewers and editors who have been distressed at the low estate of American novel-writing during the past few years.

The story is comparatively simple and concerns Luis Bello, a bullfighter, and his struggle against fear. Surrounding him are a variety of characters created with great skill, warmth, and reality—the mistress whom he acquires in a surging fit of overwhelming passion, his manager, his bullfighting younger brother and his zoot-suit following, a parasitic family, the manager of the bull ring, and the battered, heroic figure of the old man who raises at the great ranch of Las Astas the finest, fiercest fighting bulls in Mexico. Like all great novels it is not simply a story of several characters but the story very largely of the human race itself, and more directly the story of mankind's fight against fear, a struggle which at this moment in the history of the world is one of the greatest significance.

It is always difficult to analyze a book which rouses great enthusiasm

in the heart of the reviewer, for one is inclined to overlook its faults altogether. In this case I have tried diligently to find faults but have been unsuccessful. As a work of art, in conception, form, and execution, "The Brave Bulls" is very close to perfection. The writing has a clear, spare quality like the strange light that hangs over the Spanish and sometimes the lean, bare landscape of Mexico. There are no extra words, no overwriting, and yet the effect of the book is one of great color in primary values and of great richness. Part of this is achieved, I think, by invocation, and in some respects the success of the book depends upon how much of beauty, of knowledge, or cultivation there exists waiting to be invoked in the reader. The author is a painter and a very good one and he has carried over into his writing the eye of the painter so that every scene exists clearly in the mind and the eye of the reader. One can see and feel the sunlight, smell the dust and blood and sour wine. The book has another quality of great books—that within



—Drawing from the book by the author.

two or three pages it creates a world in which the reader can lose himself completely and which has for him as much reality as the world about him, or perhaps more reality, for, like all good novels, "The Brave Bulls" raises life onto a different plane in which the daily pattern of living takes form and has significance. That, too, is the test of a great book—that it illuminates for us the things we ourselves do not have the power to see and understand or fit into a coherent pattern of significance.

It is a heartening book not only because of the qualities recorded, above, but because much of its success and beauty lies in its form. One could almost say that it marks the return of form to the American novel, that form without which any attempt at art becomes meaningless confusion. The book begins in a bare, sunbaked, flag-bedecked arena and returns there in the end, having explored in the intervening pages all the characters and situations which have to do with Luis Bello and his triumph over fear. In the last chapter it rises to a kind of white heat which sets the blood to tingling and in a curious fashion restores faith in the courage of man and those indestructible and indefatigable qualities which have made it possible for him to survive and conquer plagues, wars, and his own weaknesses back through history.

It is not the first time that an American writer has turned to foreign scenes and foreign characters for a depth and strength and an almost primeval quality which is difficult to find in our own American life and background. It is difficult, for example, to find in this country characters who love to the death, who think and feel simply but deeply, and who live in direct contact with the primary forces of nature. We are too materially comfortable, too happy as extroverts, too superficial in our approach to human relations. Too many of us look upon plumbing and automobiles as civilization. Too many of us divorce and remarry over and over again, not to count all the superficial dallying along the way. If you tried to find a character like Luis Bello in the United States, it would be very nearly impossible, and if you attempted to write about him, you would not be believed. It is, I think, curiously significant that perhaps the three best novels coming out of the war, "A Bell for Adano," "The Gallery," and "Tales of the South Pacific," all concerned themselves very largely with foreign characters and backgrounds and from these much of their richness and humanity was derived. It is just possible that one thing wrong with American writing

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*The Saturday Review*



—From the end papers of "The Brave Bulls."

## A Tribute to Tom Lea

**K**NOWING Tom Lea has proved to me that genius is not being born with a gift for painting or for writing; the inborn factor is a great desire to do a good job. The artist may be born with a steady hand and a clear eye but the characteristic that gets the job done is integrity. No compromise with half-way methods. No sloppy work to be excused by "spontaneous" inspirations. Work is the answer. Hard work. Know-how comes from hard work, intense and vigorous.

When Tom was learning about the bulls, I waited two hours in a cold wind while he talked low Spanish to the peon truck driver who delivered the bulls to the Plaza de Toros. This peon had ideas which might be deeper than those of the hacendado who was supposed to know all about the bulls. Tom's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm as he interviewed this unexpected aficionado. Here was a new angle—more know-how—the inside dope. No bits of knowledge are too small. No compromise with half facts. He had to know everything, regardless of the hours or energy it took.

When Tom painted pots for the Laboratory of Anthropology at Sante Fe in 1933, he said it was just to pay the grocery bill but I'll bet he was enthusiastic at the time. You can't be around Tom Lea without being enthusiastic. The job to be done or the conversation to be carried on is vital. I guess that's why he makes such a good old-fashioned.

Tom Lea has known death three times in his own family circle and many times in the South Pacific. Perhaps that is why he understands so well the inner thoughts of the matadors and the bulls. One is going to die, the way he does it is important.

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Tom Lea was born July 11, 1907, in El Paso, Texas, and went through school in this border town, speaking Spanish, hunting and riding with cowboys. He studied at the Chicago Art Institute (1924-26) and there became a protégé of John Norton, mural painter. Tom has many murals to his credit. This work developed his ideals of perfection and accuracy; a mural may stand a hundred years and ultimately be the only record of the details shown.

Tom's first bid for fame was influenced by J. Frank Dobie. Frank often came to El Paso, and talked with Tom's father, a pioneer lawyer, who had a fund of yarns about the frontier town of El Paso. Frank was so impressed with Tom's drawings that he asked his publishers to have Tom illustrate his "Apache Gold and Yaqui Silver." Tom made all these drawings on ruled paper

because he didn't want the publishers to think they were finished. He wanted to perfect them after the ideas were approved. I kidded him that his double work probably cut his pay to 25¢ an hour but two weeks after the book was published, *The Saturday Evening Post* sent him a fat envelope containing a story which they asked him to illustrate.

This work led to a contract with *Life* magazine as a war artist. On December 7, 1941, he was assigned to the North Atlantic Patrol. His war work is well known. A hundred pictures were used by *Life*, most of them in color. He was with the Navy at Guadalcanal, the Marines at Peleliu, the Air Force in Assam, the Army in England and Africa; he was in or flew over every major front except Germany. At war's end he decided to do a series of pictures on the history of beef cattle, but in research he ran into the high breed—fighting bulls. He was diverted to a new field. The color, traditions, tragedy attracted him so that he spent two years of hard work studying and learning the bulls.

Tom was always a good letter-writer but while he was working for *Life*, he had to make written reports on his war experiences. He even had to write copy to fit under the pictures. He was well qualified for this exacting work, and his ability was recognized. Two small book editions of his war stories were published and his success with writing developed confidence. His intense feeling for the bulls created an idea that just had to be written. "The Brave Bulls" is the product of thirty years of experience in developing style and understanding, two years of concentrated research and hard work.

If you are an average citizen who visualizes an artist as a long-hair with a windsor tie, you will be surprised when you meet this stocky, aggressive, regular guy with the close-cropped hair. He lives with his wife and son on a modest street in his old home town which is anything but "arty." His only eccentricities are wearing Marine dungarees while he paints or writes, and standing up to an elevated typewriter—a mural painter never learns how to sit down to work, even when he becomes an author.

—CARL HERTZOG.

Tom Lea, as illustrator, and Carl Hertzog, as designer and typographer, have collaborated in El Paso on numerous bibliophilic treasures, among them last summer's masterful "Twelve Travelers." Although Mr. Herzog has also done limited editions of contemporary verse and historical reprints for E. De Golyer's and Elizabeth Ann McMurray's Peripatetic Press, his forte is Southwestiana, vide "The Journey of Three Englishmen."