

the end of the first page, and the rest of the book is an intolerable embroidery of the frowsiest theme in recent fiction.

The suspicion grows on one that Mr. Seley originally conceived his book as a sympathetic portrait of a young novelist groping his way to maturity through a wilderness of confused and confusing experiences. Gradually it became clear that these experiences,

with all the ironic self-revelations they engendered in the hero, could be depicted more successfully in satire than in the traditional *Künstlerroman*, and Baxter began the long descent, another unhappy victim of Dedalism.

There goes Baxter Bernstein, man of undistinction, back to the tequila-soaked Nighttown that gave him birth. All we can hope is that Baxter will prove to be *sui generis*.

Life with a Blue Pencil

THE BIG WHEEL. By John Brooks. New York: Harper & Bros. 239 pp. \$2.75.

By LEE ROGOW

SHALL the Bright Young Man trade his ideals for a mess of martinis? This is the central conflict of a growing group of postwar novels which have concerned themselves with aspects of "word-mongering," as Henry Seidel Canby called it in his *SRL* Anniversary Issue piece. Frederic Wakeman and Herman Wouk did a brass-knuckle job on radio advertising, Jerome Weidman's latest took the lid off newspaper syndicate houses, and others have explored the literary agencies, the publishing houses, the movies, and magazines of both the slick and pulp persuasion. There seems to be no field left for the novelist coming up except sky-writing.

In almost every case the major conflict of these novels is the same: how simultaneously satisfy the urge for a high standard of morality and a high standard of living?

There must be thousands of sensitive and talented young people to whom this is an important problem, who daily face the sticky truth that in order to have good things to eat and drink and nice places in which to live they must make themselves an accessory to the cultural and moral corruption which occurs when big business penetrates the arts. It is not surprising that so many of these sensitive and talented people have put this conflict into their novels. To my knowledge, however, none of them has yet made really exciting literature out of it. Gossips that we are, we're delighted to get the inside dope, yet we find that we can't get deeply involved with the fates of the succession of cardboard characters who have been the heroes of these books.

The John Brooks first novel has many of the advantages and more than the usual number of disadvantages of this genre. This one is about a big-time magazine, which I make

out to be that colossal compendium of science, religion, and Texas high-school drum majorettes, *Life* magazine. The novel is the story of a young man who gets put on the book because his cousin is the editor, and who then becomes involved in a local squabble about whether the help are going to be required to believe what they write. The staff members get sufficiently worked up about this to make up a petition affirming, in effect, their right to make a dishonest dollar. The news that some of his underlings aren't sincere so unsettles the idealistic editor that he gets drunk, resigns, and moves to California. The man and the moral involved in this choice were both so shadowy that it was impossible for me to be affected by them.

What did delight me in the book were the portions I have already referred to as gossip. Brooks has a witty sense of the quality of the lives, personalities, and politics of that inbred little community which is the editorial floor of a magazine. And he does have a nice, crisp, flexible prose style, which prejudices me strongly in favor of any man.



—John Glidden.

John Brooks—trading "ideals for a mess of martinis."

Fiction Notes

IRIS IN WINTER, by Elizabeth Cadell. William Morrow. \$3. This is Angela Thirkell and Margery Sharp reduced to the fiftieth degree, described on the jacket as "warm, slightly mad, thoroughly delightful." It is the story of a group of people who have retreated, for various reasons, to the small village of High Ambo, some six hours from London. There is Caroline West, a beautiful young widow escaping from her husband's solicitous relatives; her sister Iris, on assignment from her newspaper; Robert, their fascinating and irresponsible brother, and Polly, Robert's scatterbrained fiancée, who appears to have a bad case of juvenile regression.

There are also a number of local eccentrics, including a Colonel Brock, who cadges small sums of money from the ladies on the pretext of doing some shopping for them and who borrows new magazines and returns ancient ones; there is a young headmaster of the nearby boys' school who falls in love with Iris and she with him, in accordance with the well-worn formula of boy meets girl, instant hostility, gradual thawing out, then misunderstanding, renunciation, and final happy ending. There are a lot of small boys from the school who keep turning up on Caroline's doorstep, and a wicked cat named Solly who introduces a further note of comedy by lacerating anyone who approaches him.

It is all so determinedly light and slightly mad and so veddy, veddy British. "I say, Iris," says Ted, a young London suitor, "I popped in to ask whether you'd marry me." "No, Ted," replies Iris absently. "Thanks awfully, just the same." And the little boys are always shouting, "Oh I say! I would jolly well like some tea, rather!"

I have a great respect for the printed word, and I am always conscious that in any book even the "ands" and "thes" have been sweated out by the author. But some books—and this is one of them—remind me of those frothy desserts constructed at great pains by the hostess out of gelatine and scraps of soaked cake and whites of eggs and bits of fruit. Some guests find this delicious. *Chacun à son goût*.

MY LAMP IS BRIGHT, by Dorothy Evelyn Smith. E. P. Dutton. \$3. Here is a pleasant, sentimental Victorian novel—Victorian both in its setting and in its author's romantic conception of plot. It is the story of Christine Bentley, who at the age of eight or

so recognizes in Johnny Weatherhead, ten years her senior, a sturdy, upright young farmer, the love for which she will keep her lamp alight all the years of her life. Christine and Johnny, whose remarkable lack of initiative as a lover keeps him from expressing his ardor by more than kissing her cheeks (or the tip of her nose) and calling her "Blue Eyes," are united at last, when Christine is in her late forties and he, naturally, still ten years older, after both have made bad marriages (with the noblest of motives) and been extricated by the convenient deaths of their unworthy partners.

This curiously ingenuous plot is counteracted considerably by Mrs. Smith's really charming and sensitive portrayal of Christine as a child and a girl and a young woman; particularly as a child growing up in the picturesque little village where her father works in an apothecary shop, and where her family, despite their growing poverty and ill health, are idyllically happy. Christine's devotion to her father and mother, and to her brilliant, erratic, crippled younger brother, for whose sake she marries her wealthy cousin Charles, coldly incapable of real love, is touchingly and credibly shown. The numerous supporting cast of the story, and the setting in which the drama of Christine's and Johnny's life unfolds, are drawn with warmth and color and understanding. The book has something of Louisa M. Alcott's stubborn inspirationalism and naïveté, though it must be admitted that Mrs. Smith at least calls a spade a shovel. And, as a welcome relief from stream-of-consciousness analyses of tortured people in torturous situations, this gentle, leisurely, and idealistic book will entertain many readers, particularly feminine ones.

—SARA HENDERSON HAY.

A MATTER OF TASTE, by Richard Lockridge. J. B. Lippincott. \$2.75. In this instance Mr. Lockridge has ventured off without Mr. and Mrs. North, and without Mrs. Lockridge too, in quest of a serious and solitary enterprise. It is murder still, but this time murder plus psychiatry, murder in which we are apprehending not the killer (we know him from the very beginning) but the quirk in the mind, the slow sickening that drives him inexorably to his crime. Oliver Hillard fancies himself as an esthete, a deliberate hedonist who has tasted every experience a man of culture might imagine desirable, from naive wines to naive women, always in good taste, of course, and with the proper restraints. Is there anything he has missed, Oliver wonders one day at

the age of fifty-two. Why yes, he has never killed anyone. He has read of it, seen it portrayed, lived isolated amidst two generations of men who have experienced it at first hand—yet he has not known it. The idea becomes tantalizing, then pressing, finally an obsession; and in the course of this mental reorientation Oliver's relations with people change. He takes on at last the qualities of thought of a paranoiac. Thus, by the time he has at last selected a victim and killed her and begun to thirst for more he is no longer cool and objective about his venture. He is mentally sick and blinded, he blunders, he drags a trail of damaging clues behind him and is caught and killed like a mad animal. Mr. Lockridge has done an interesting job of it, within his own set limits. Oliver Hillard is an interesting figure without being an important one, and his history too is interesting without being profound. "A Matter of Taste" rests easily in that shadowy realm just above murder thrillers and just below novels of character.

HEAR THIS WOMAN!, by Ben and Ann Pinchot. Farrar, Straus. \$3. Faith Holmes (This Woman!) is the embattled heroine of a fearful succession of affairs accidental, emotional, romantical, marital, political, local, and national. Any of her dramatic moments would serve very well as the mainspring for a full week of episodes in one of the more potent soap operas—and it is my feeling that "Hear This Woman!" offers an approximate idea of what it would be like to hear about fifty weeks of it in one gulp, no breathing. Faith Holmes is being condemned, at the book's opening, as a corrupt and ruthless woman who has stepped across prostrate bodies to her high position. There is a dossier of her life, written by her detractors and held like a club over her head. Now we, the readers, are going to judge her. We go back along this dossier to retrace step by step the perils and heartaches of a good and courageous woman. Somewhere on this merry-go-round of all her tattered passions we are supposed to fall in love with her. But that is rather hard to do, since we should have to believe in her first. The Pinchots haven't treated her any too seriously, and how can we? They would have it that Faith is a magnetic political leader among women, yet they have failed to endow her with the qualities for the role. Faith isn't even convincing as the most popular girl at school, much less as the spellbinder on a national hook-up. It is a matter of casting. You will have to imagine Miss Betty Grable as Miss Clare Luce.

—NATHAN L. ROTHMAN.

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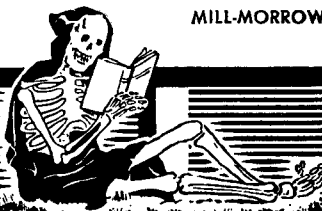
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