

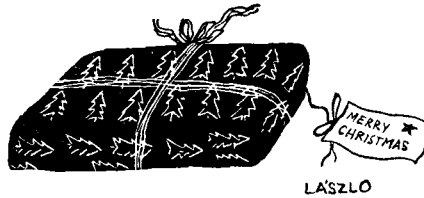
Out West in '89

SHANE. By Jack Schaefer. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 214 pp. \$2.50.

By EDMUND FULLER

FOR those who like this kind of book, this short special Western is just the kind of book they will like. Its pace is steady. Its tension is of the uncoiling spring variety. It is as clean as a hound's tooth, if you'll pardon the expression, and manly as all hell.

In a certain Wyoming valley, in the summer of '89, a classic conflict is brewing between a handful of



homesteaders with fenced-in claims and a big, open-range beef baron, who wants the land unimpeded. Strength of character and industry have made solid Joe Starrett the focus and symbol of this struggle. If Fletcher, the beef man, can uproot Starrett, all will go. If Starrett stands, all will stand.

It is through the eyes of Starrett's boy, Bob, that we see the drama that begins with the arrival of Shane. No other name or hint about identity is ever given by the quiet, slender, hyper-tense man who rides up to Starretts and accepts Joe's invitation to stay the night. He remains as hired man, though clearly he is not a farmer. There was something deadly about him and at the same time something charming. As Joe explains it to his wife, Marian, he is "a special brand you get out in the grass country; a bad one is poison, a good one is straight grain clear through."

The struggle to the death with Fletcher resolves itself around the figure of Shane. An Homeric friendship exists between Shane and Joe that's enough to make you weep, what with Bob's hero-worship thrown in. Even Marian succumbs to the power of Shane (in spirit only, I hasten to add) and Joe, with a breadth of outlook uncommon in the he-man, assures her that anything that happens is all right with him 'cause he knows a better man when he sees one.

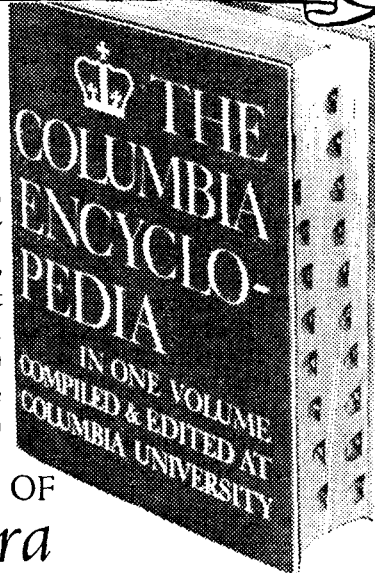
This is the frame of the story and it works out its inevitable course. It is smoothly and adroitly executed by the standards of the teller of tales. We are offered it as a specimen transcending the quality and audience appeal of the ordinary Western. This I am not so sure about. I confess I don't know how good it is.

I think, however, that Mr. Schaefer would have done better not to spin the tale so completely in the familiar clichés and bromides of the genre. This is his first novel and shows ability. But if, next time, he chooses again a primitive story type and sets out to transcend it I hope he will define his intention more clearly and realize it more fully.

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Fiction Notes

THE FREEHOLDER, by Joe David Brown. William Morrow. \$3. It is odd how many novels have tolerably good beginnings and peter out before the book is done. A case in point is "The Freeholder," which starts out competently enough as a piece of rough-and-tumble fiction obviously designed for adult men who have never ceased to be boys and for boys who have yet to become men. Plausibility is a necessary requirement of popular fiction as of any other. This requirement is met in the first half of this energetic tale, but somewhere in the middle we begin to raise our eyebrows; it's a bit trying to keep them up to the end.

In the year 1800 a humane doctor

delivered a young woman confined in the Yarmouth gaol of a lusty youngster, Horatio Tench, the hero of this story. He was brought up in the Waifs' Home, whence Samuel Tompkins, more brute than man, accepted him as an apprentice in his rope-making shop. A Yankee at the Yarmouth docks told Horatio about an American poem called the "Preamble to the Constitution," which gave him the idea of becoming a free man in America.

After a quarrel in which he killed Tompkins, Horatio fled to America as an indentured servant. How he came to be an overseer on a Carolina cotton plantation, the fights he had, and the betrayal he suffered at the hands of the owner and his daughter Clover, how in the end he gained both his freehold and his true love is the burden of the rest of this melodramatic tale.

—JOHN CURNOS.

THE DIVIDED PATH, by Nial Kent. Greenberg. \$3. It must be admitted in advance that reviewing this novel about a homosexual man is very much like reviewing a first-hand account of life among the pygmies. I can judge it only on the basis of other books I have read on the same subject, or according to the presence or absence of that unmistakable sense of universal truth which arises from a work of integrity. On neither of these counts do I feel this to be a good book. It exhibits its homosexual hero, Michael, as citizen in an extraordinarily widespread and ribald society, vigorous and content; and it skirts entirely the essential fact of conflict in his life—that he is alien and islanded amongst us by every virtue of his especial sensitivities.

Paradoxically, we are even further from him now than ever. For while it has always been possible to understand the alien spirit, even to identify ourselves with him, since we are each in some way alone—it is quite another thing to behold a whole world of extravagant creatures, acting like nothing so much as college lads cavorting in a brothel, except that you look again to see there are no girls present. Their concupiscence is our own greatly magnified, and there is but little more to the fairly lengthy history of Michael than that: his love for Paul, his love for Nikki, his love for John, and so forth, with the parties they go to, the nauseating letters they write, their infidelities and broken hearts.

Surely there is more to say of the world of the homosexual than this. It has been better said in at least half a dozen novels that come to mind.

—NATHAN L. ROTHMAN.

DECEMBER 3, 1949

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