

**Fiction.** *"The Best American Short Stories" had become a literary institution before Martha Foley took over the editorship from Edward J. O'Brien. Its early years were witnesses to the renaissance of American writing in the Twenties. Miss Foley's task is thus in part prophetic, but among the new writers who appear too many have followed their psychoses or are writing mementoes of unhappy childhood. There are a few glimpses of a deeper vein in this year's collection, though most of these stories are episodic and incomplete. An English novel, "Journey Into Spring," by Winston Clewes, satisfactorily completes the circle. A morally disabled veteran finds in new responsibilities adjustment to a normal life. The most important novel reviewed this week is Vasco Pratolini's "A Tale of Poor Lovers." Here the violence of poverty in a Florentine slum street combines with the political murders of early Fascism.*

## Annual Pick

**THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES: 1949.** Edited by Martha Foley. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 334 pp. \$3.50.

By HOLLIS ALPERT

FOR perhaps the first year since Martha Foley undertook the editorship of "The Best Short Stories" the tone of the new volume reflects that achieved by the originator of the annual series, the late Edward J. O'Brien. He was an unceasing searcher through the magazines for the most vital younger writing talent and he packed his compilations with then unknown names. He had a "touch" for spotting coming writers of quality, and a quick glance through his tables of contents (especially those edited during the Twenties and Thirties) will show his keen perceptiveness. One cannot help but wonder (and the future will tell it) whether Miss Foley has shown this same facility with her 1948 selections.

The remarkable fact about the volume this year is the number of inclusions of authors who virtually have been unheard of before. In some cases they are represented by first published stories; the average age of contributors probably wouldn't run above thirty. Nor does any magazine dominate the listing this year. Two stories each have been chosen from *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Tomorrow*. The other twenty stories are from as many magazines.

After the First World War O'Brien noticed a "postwar wave" of writers, and fifteen years ago he told Miss Foley that another great new wave would be coming along. She has watched for it and this book, she feels, shows something of that wave—

that it presents writing which "definitely strikes a new note."

The "note" is discernible, but whether it is particularly new or valuable is a debatable matter. Perceptive stories of childhood are literally a drug on the market; there are many of them here, and the only really noteworthy one is "Departure of Hubbard," by Robert Gibbons. This is accomplished in the manner it shows the emergence of a boy into adolescence—but hardly represents anything new thematically.

Nor are the stories of neurotic sensibility something we have not had much of before—although it is certainly a striking symptom of our times to find so many of them in magazines and so many selected for anthology honors. "Children Are Bored on Sundays," by Jean Stafford, is the most deft example. Here the insight is devilishly keen. The portraits of two soggy New York intellectual types are instantly recognizable—but one feels like hurrying them to the nearest psychoanalyst rather than spending much pity upon them. And the lost soul shown by Elizabeth Hardwick in "Evenings at Home" one would rather not put up with at all. The self-loathing of its heroine (reflected in the loathing of her roots) is undeniably documentary, but painfully confessional rather than revealing in literary terms. To put a name to the "new note" that is found so often here I would choose narcissistic. Our younger writers seem to

be turning inward towards what looks like a morass instead of a rich vein.

Even where the glance is outward the healthy signs are often lacking. The youngest contributor, Madelon Shapiro, looks upon a group of tortured university types in "An Island for My Friends" with bleak eyes, as if to say: "Are these my mentors?" And Ruth Herschberger gives in "A Sound in the Night" as stark a portrayal of city frustration as I have seen anywhere. The writing, though, is so exceptionally good that a real note of horror emerges.

There is relief to be found in some stories that deal with more "normal" people and emotions. Frank Brookhouser does another of his sympathetic character sketches in "My Father and the Circus." Sherwood Anderson is his master, but it is refreshing to find a writer honestly carrying forward what has come to be a worthwhile tradition. Jane Mayhall's "The Men" is tenuous (as some of Chekhov's lesser tales are) but experimental in a promising way. And J. D. Salinger contributes a fine blend of humor and pathos with "A Girl I Knew." Most welcome of all is Jim Kjelgaard's "Of the River and Uncle Pidcock," a gently funny fantasy about a long battle between a farmer and a monster catfish. This truly excellent short story, by the way, appeared in *Adventure Magazine*.

The tendency of popular women's magazines to publish stories of distinction should be noted. Salinger's appeared in *Good Housekeeping*. "Small Miracle," by Adele Dolokhov, is not so well written, but its subject matter—frigidity and its effects on family life—is handled dramatically and courageously. *Today's Woman* published it.

By contrast, the smaller literary reviews seem far too often to be going in for the morbid, the pretentious, and the downright dull in the way of stories. Miss Foley has chosen nine stories from magazines in this classification. They almost invariably lack that good staple element: drama. The influences too depressingly often seem to come from Sartre, James, and Kafka. I would say that it is a note working its way out of rather than into American literature.

But as always this volume is a good reflector of the moods and temper of the people and their time. If it cannot continuously be read with pleasure it can at least be read with profit. There can be no question of the sincerity and the honest evaluation which Miss Foley brings to bear upon a difficult task, and since the nature of her task ultimately involves individual preferences a full agreement that she has found the best is not to be expected.



## From Vet to Squire

*JOURNEY INTO SPRING.* By Winston Clewes. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 223 pp. \$3.

By WILLIAM S. LYNCH

**M**OST American readers will remember Winston Clewes for his first-rate novel of Jonathan Swift, "The Violent Friends." Now he has done another first-rate job, this time of an English war veteran making adjustment to civilian life.

Fletton, the hero, is unique in that he comes back from harrowing war experiences to a run-down estate and village of which death and circumstances have made him the unexpected and not too willing squire. He is a fairly familiar literary figure in that, like so many of our storied veterans, he is psychologically a mess—in this instance the result of brutal war prisons and an unusual childhood. Books on morally disabled veterans always seem to this particular observer to reflect more of their authors than of their characters. If there is anything at all to this notion, then Winston Clewes is an intelligent and sensitive speculator on the motives and nature of troubled man; he is a person with a fundamental sense of the basic decency of human beings and an honest hope that they will meet their destiny with intellectual fastidiousness and social awareness.

Fletton takes his place in the village of Fletton, bitterly resentful of the nastiness of what he has been forced to endure and determined to be about nobody's business but his own. He finds out the truth of the old adage that man cannot live alone, the old veracious saw rediscovered in our generation that "no man is an island." In his case the problems of villagers, made mean by environment and history are thrust at him, the new lord of the manor. He neither wants the role nor will take it, but the troubles of two young villagers who have got themselves through ignorance and folly into a bad scrape are foisted on him. He meets them in a manly and intelligent way and, in doing so, reaches out from the welter of self-pity in which he had been wallowing.

The novel therefore makes a welcome and creditable change from the more conventional ones of the "life is too terrible" school.

It is a good novel, interesting and convincing despite the overly melodramatic qualities of some of its parts. In fact the melodrama is fine. Fletton's journey through the blizzard for assistance when Sue is having her baby is vivid and exciting. Harriet,



Winston Clewes—"a positive philosophy."



Mary Deasy — "themes elemental and universal."

the rector's daughter, who gets there in time meets all the requirements for a story of this type.

Most appealing, however, is the positive philosophy of the author, a welcome, healthy, and convincing one. He knows people are mixtures of good and bad, made so by accident and place. He accepts, too, that they have responsibilities to themselves and others, and that given a chance, some at least will meet them. His thesis is not intrusive for he is too good a craftsman to draw a moral obviously. But it is there for the reading and the reading is easy and pleasant, made so by the skill of practised hand and thoughtful mind.

## A Lady's Aid

*CANNON HILL.* By Mary Deasy. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 310 pp. \$3.

By KENNETH S. DAVIS

**H**ERE, in this second novel by Mary Deasy, at least for this reader, is a sense of that peculiarly mid-American individualism whereby each person borrows a kind of integrity from the space surrounding him: so much space seems available for staging, in sharp and lonely outline, the isolate personality. Here, too, are those slow, steady rhythms of vital triumph and defeat, of birth and growth and decline into death, which differ so sharply from the nervous jangle, the quick mechanical beat, of coastal urban areas.

I hasten to add that the book has far more than a merely regional interest. With a life-affirming compassion rare in serious fiction these days, Mary Deasy deals with themes at once elemental and universal. She is skilful in the evocation of quiet moods, often joining these with weather and landscape in ways highly effective.

At the heart of the story, which runs its course during the first two decades of this century, is the character of Rhoda Beauchamp, who operates a boarding house for men in Cannon Hill, a suburb of Bard City. She is a lonely woman of forty or so when the story opens, her father having just died and her only lover having jilted her some twenty years before. Her only near relation is her brother, Virgil, who has been so completely taken over by his wife's family, the close-knit, property-minded Kroeners (whom Rhoda dislikes), as to prevent much fraternal intimacy. Thus her present is without purpose and her future bleak when Robert Brand, a widower a dozen years her junior, with a seven-year-old daughter, comes into her life in 1906. Thereafter, until the story ends in the early 1920's, the meaning of her existence develops richly and fully out of her relationship with Brand—a profoundly beautiful relationship of love purified of all physical sexual elements. Brand had been forced to go into the Pennsylvania coal mines when a lad of thirteen, but he is determined to make himself a doctor—and through a decade of heroic effort, in which he is sustained by the faith and help of Rhoda, he achieves his aim.

Around this central story are entwined the stories of Brand's daughter, Browen; of Virgil Beauchamp's