

"The Horse's Mouth," by Joyce Cary (to be published in Nov. by Harper).

"Flames of Empire," by Peter Bourne (Putnam's).

"The Storm and the Silence," by David Walker (to be published Oct. 25 by Houghton Mifflin).

PAUL JORDON-SMITH
Los Angeles Times

General

"Philosophy of Civilization," by Albert Schweitzer (Macmillan).

"Guests of the Kremlin," by Robert G. Emmens (Macmillan).

"The Thread That Runs So True," by Jesse Stuart.

"The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick," by Howard Vincent.

"No Banner, No Bugles," by Edward Ellsberg.

Fiction

"Eight April Days," by Scott Hart.

"The Primitive," by Feike Feikema.

"The River Line," by Charles Morgan.

AUGUST DERLETH
Madison (Wis.) Capital Times

General

"Quintessence of G. B. S.," by Stephen Winsten (Creative Age).

"A Writer's Notebook," by W. Somerset Maugham.

"Best of W. H. Hudson," edited by Odell Shepard (to be published Oct. 31 by Dutton).

"American Heartwood," by Donald Culross Peattie (to be published Oct. 14 by Houghton Mifflin).

"The Thread That Runs So True," by Jesse Stuart.

Fiction

"Loving," by Henry Green (Viking).

"Knight's Gambit," William Faulkner (to be published Nov. 7 by Random).

"As a Man Grows Older," by Italo Svevo (New Directions).

"Story: The Fiction of the Forties," edited by Whit Burnett (to be published Nov. 21 by Dutton).

"O. Henry Prize Stories of 1949," edited by Herschel Brickell (to be published Oct. 13 by Doubleday).

H. RUSSELL AUSTIN
Milwaukee Journal

General

"The Vital Center," by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

(Continued on page 47)



OCTOBER 8, 1949

Fiction. The present revival of and public interest in religious novels is encouraging at a time when so many writers seem to be convinced that humanity is burning in a hell of its own invention. Sholem Asch is one of the few writers of this generation who has succeeded in presenting the birth, the life, and the death of Christ in a manner that is emotionally, intellectually, and artistically satisfying. His great trilogy, now completed with the publication of "Mary," may be ranked with the most inspired interpretations of the ageless Biblical drama, and it is not at all remarkable that it should come from the pen of a great Jewish writer. ... Three other novels reviewed this week deserve the reader's attention. A. B. Guthrie's "The Way West," the story of emigrants on the Oregon Trail, is even better than "The Big Sky," its successful predecessor. "The Hero," by Millard Lampell, is a savage and well-documented attack on commercial sports in college. Louis Golding's "Honey for the Ghost" is an eerie and well-told story of witchcraft in Scotland today.

Mother of Christ

MARY. By Sholem Asch. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 436 pp. \$3.50.

By EDMUND FULLER

WITH "Mary," Sholem Asch adds the third panel to his extraordinary extension of the Christian drama. It stands in an interesting relation to the two fine novels that have preceded it. For it seems to me that "The Apostle," and now "Mary," have each marked a perceptible deepening of the sense of mystical celebration of his theme. "The Nazarene" had a cryptic quality, emphasized probably by the elaborate narrative devices employed in it. This was gone in "The Apostle," giving way to affirmation. Now, in this last work, the mystic, the ecstatic are uppermost.

In some aspects, "Mary" could be called the best of the three as a work of art. It is altogether free of the cumbersome framework burdening "The Nazarene"; it has a greater unity than the massive novelizing of The Acts of the Apostles. I have a feeling that there is a more lyrical quality in the style, but judgment of this is complicated by the fact that with this volume Leo Steinberg succeeds Maurice Samuel as translator.

Telling the story of the mother of Jesus is a perilous enterprise because of the many pitfalls of sentimentality or sectarian overtones for the author to fall into. Asch avoids these almost—if not quite—entirely. The basic story-telling obligations of the undertaking lead him, at times, to assign a degree of crucial importance to Mary's role in her Divine Son's mission exceeding that which many readers of the New Testament would grant. But

this portrayal of Miriam—as he calls her—is perceptive and tender and rich in intuitive insights into the heart of the devout young girl who finds herself marked for the glorious but terrifying role of which every Jewish girl dreamed—that of bearing the Messiah.

The details of the Annunciation, the complications of the betrothal to Joseph, the birth, and the key episodes in the youth of Jesus are adapted directly and literally from the New Testament—largely from Luke—in their full miraculous aspect.

Along with this a rich fabric of folklore is introduced concerning the efforts of the powers of darkness and evil to prevent the birth of the Redeemer. Mary is assailed by occult manifestations and possesses supernatural discriminations among the qualities of foods and plants, being able to discern by odor the foul in the midst of the apparent sweet and the wholesome in the supposed rank.

A distinctive element in the book is its detailed account of the childhood and boyhood of Jesus, scarcely touched upon in the gospels. We are given a fine picture of the first subtle intimations of a mission, of attributes which set this child apart from his parents, his brothers, his fellow Nazarenes. These qualities engender love, but also resentments. A few perceive the man to come; many foretell, gloomily, a headstrong course that can come to no good end, to find the vindication of their predictions in his later career.

To young Jesus are given a few advance miracles, his first scarcely conscious tapping of the mighty powers with which he is armed. His radiant

nature draws to him a following of children. Even a few adults, willing to perceive, detect the living miracle among them. One such, the gentle and pious Taddi, the foul-smelling tanner, becomes a kind of thirteenth disciple even before the Baptist, in the Wilderness, has sounded the cry for the proclaiming of the mission.

The village of Nazareth does not find it easy to forget the unconventional chronology of the child's conception. Virgin birth is not lightly claimed and upon Joseph falls the onus of "one who eats his grapes before they are ripe." The saintly Joseph bears this, and the other problems of his strange parenthood, with a courageous and compassionate spirit. He is movingly characterized and we feel the loss when he is gathered up, saying: "Take back, Father in heaven, into Thy hands the pledge Thou gavest me to keep."

The complex problem of being brother to a budding Messiah is well observed with all four of the sons of Joseph and Mary, but particularly with the passionately pious Jacob (James in the New Testament).

In spite of the design centered upon Mary, in spite of the anguish of the mother as she must watch unresistingly the agonizing fulfilment of what has been written, the story escapes her. Inevitably, with his emerging self-realization, the figure of Jesus captures and dominates the book.

However great the changes in stress, and in selection of detail, there is a certain amount of repetition from "The Nazarene." Enough, in fact, to suggest what Asch might vehemently reject, the desire to restate and re-examine elements in the former book free of any cryptic reservations it may have contained. In any event, he tells a part of his chosen story twice.

In the last few years one aspect or another of the Christian story has been novelized by many authors. This has resulted in such things as the appalling title "Antioch Actress"; in an ingenious story about the woman of Samaria; and in the works which Dr. Lloyd Douglas writes for his large following. Sholem Asch towers over these. His finished trilogy is an epic work in the grand tradition, intellectually, spiritually, and in literary stature. Among Biblical re-creations only Thomas Mann's is its equal, with Gladys Schmitt's "David the King" deserving honorable mention.

By contrast with the nearly fool-proof elements in the drama of Jesus, "The Apostle" is the grandest in scale, the most difficult, probably the most notable achievement of Asch's trilogy. "Mary," however, in its simplicity and tenderness, is likely to move its readers the most deeply.



THE AUTHOR: In the early 1880's in the little Polish town Kutno, Sholem Asch, the fifteenth child of a Jewish cattle and sheep dealer, as customary with a lad of scholarly bent, was enjoined to become a rabbi. From early morning until late evening he was kept at *cheder*, the Hebrew school, studying the dry canonical law of the Talmud. "I was not allowed much time to read the Bible," he muses. "Nor was I permitted to occupy myself very often with the Hagadah, that part of Jewish writings which expounds the law through parables and tales. . . . That was regarded as pastime." The happiest time for the devout little boy was the

Sabbath, which, with its benediction of lighted candles and bright silver, seemed "not as a day of temporal life, but as one of the days which awaited us in the next world. . . . When I saw the gentile 'Strusch' [porter] sweep the yard while we sat at the dazzling white-covered table, I broke into copious tears because God had created such luckless people as the *goyim*."

Before long, however, he discovered that in an environment of dual religious fanaticism there was more than one definition for lucklessness. And during the Feast of Corpus Christi the habitual taunts and torments of the peasantry would reach an inflamed crescendo of violence. "On one of these occasions, peeping out from under my mother's bed and looking through a crack in the shades, I saw what appeared to be a figure of a Jewish rabbi with a beard and wearing a Hebrew inscription on his head. From an open wound in his naked body, streams of blood seemed to be pouring down. I started to cry and called out, 'Mother, the gentiles have killed another Jew!' Actually, it was a life-size figure of Christ on the crucifix. This impression has always remained with me. In my mind and spirit, I have never separated Christ from the Jewish people. On the contrary, I have always considered, from my earliest youth, that Christ is the everlasting sufferer for the sins which are committed by all of us."

In 1906, with "The Little Village" and three plays to his credit, Asch went to Palestine. "Walking through the narrow streets of Jerusalem, climbing on her hills and walls, I saw in my imagination the things that happened in this holy city, which became a cornerstone of our modern civilization. Since that time I have never thought of Judaism or Christianity separately. For me it is one culture and one civilization, on which all our peace, our security, and our freedom are dependent." Returning to Warsaw the next year, he began a life of Christ, but, fortunately, soon realized his unpreparedness and laid the work aside. Thus began three decades' research, which took him again and again to the Holy Land and resulted in the trilogy "The Nazarene," "The Apostle," and "Mary."

Asch came to the U. S. in 1910, became an American citizen, and wrote several plays and novels of Jewish American life, among which were "The Mother," his first marked international success. Max Reinhardt produced his "God of Vengeance," Maurice Schwartz his famous "Three Cities." There were other books: "Children of Abraham," "Mottke the Thief," "The War Goes On," "In the Beginning," "What I Believe," "Song of the Valley." "Salvation," the story of the Chasidim sect in Poland, is, some believe, his best work.

He has four children—Nathan, a novelist; Moe, who records ethnological music; John, a botanist and writer, and Ruth, who is married and lives in England. Now sixty-nine, and happier physically living in Florida, Sholem Asch has withal lost none of his characteristic zest. On the tip of his old-fashioned penholder are four or five new novels, which, as always, will be translated into English from the original Yiddish—a language he has made vastly more flexible.

Despite his seeming preoccupation with Christianity, Asch has with the years become an increasingly pious Jew. "I have never considered deserting the faith of my fathers," he says, "and I never intend to do so. My books have made enemies for me in some quarters, but I have shown how deeply rooted Christianity is in Jewish history and Jewish religion. And my intention has been to demonstrate the interdependence of the two faiths, in the hope that mutual understanding may lead to a better world."

—R. G.