

Humor. One of the nicest ways we know to bid a friend a Merry Christmas in the grim year of 1950 is to give a book that will provide him with a few laughs. The publishers obligingly offer books tailored to fit every sense of humor. If your friend prefers to get his laughs from pictures, he will be grateful for Helen Hokinson's posthumous "*The Ladies, God Bless 'Em*," Cobean's "*The Naked Eye*," "Charles Addams' Monster Rally," and SRL's own "*Through History with J. Wesley Smith*," by Burr Shafer. If he enjoyed Horace Sutton's Parlogram pieces in SRL some months back, he'll go for F. S. Pearson's "*Fractured French*." If he likes his ribs tickled by words as well as pictures, you have even greater choice: Cornelia Otis Skinner's "*Nuts in May*," John Kobler's "*Afternoon in the Attic*" and H. Allen Smith's "*People Named Smith*."

The Buoyant Mrs. Blodget

NUTS IN MAY. By Cornelia Otis Skinner. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 188 pp. \$2.75.

By ROSEMARY C. BENÉT

EVERY now and then I meet someone who says in what is obviously a self-satisfied voice, "Oh, I never read light fiction." Now why ever not? Where is the virtue in that? Light fiction is quite as hard to do well as the grim, stark school. Do such people like only serious conversation, preferring endless Ancient-Mariner accounts of major operations, nervous breakdowns, stock-market curves, and the effect of the atom bomb? If so, they will not like "*Nuts in May*" for it is definitely light fiction, designed to amuse, and Miss Skinner's tone is that of an entertaining dinner companion, making a story diverting, embroidering an anecdote with humor, but not necessarily enlightening us. Like her friend and erstwhile collaborator, Emily Kimbrough, amusing things seem to happen to her and nothing is lost in the telling.

It is as though she said to the reader, "Did I ever tell you about the time I tried to send a wireless to a ship from Paris?" or, "Will you ever forget the trials of my opening night?" or even, "Do you remember the day Mother and Father Skinner had an audience with the Pope?" Her stories move easily and lightly and they are sufficiently varied, since her own background is varied. As Mrs. Blodget, her domestic life is here in some detail. She visits her son at prep school, she receives his guests, she and her husband buy a house. As Cornelia Otis Skinner, the actress, her professional life takes the fore and there is an account of the trials of benefit performances, the problems of

first nights, and the lady who insists she must have come from Butte, Montana. Then there are some general sketches, like the report on Dr. Kinsey or one called "Laugh Happy," where she says the nervous giggle is both prevalent and a nuisance. The only sketch I didn't care for, and here I seem to agree with *The New Yorker*, which published all but this, is "Seaweed Sewer," a takeoff on Steinbeck. Her son appears in a number of the sketches and he is quite clearly Cornelia's jewel. We see him at various ages and in varying moods. He is ten years old when he is collecting horse bones hoping they will turn out to be those of the ichthyosaurus; he is fifteen or so when he takes to entertaining diverse strong, silent, and anonymous guests and a shade older when he gets his



—From "*Nuts in May*."

first dinner coat. I suppose one's favorite piece is apt to be the one nearest one's own experience. I like "Ordeal for Sons," the maternal visit to the halls of learning, and "Parcel of Land," the account of trying to purchase a house, legal minds to the contrary, which is word for word from my own experience.

The thirteen sketches have gay pictures by Alajálov. "Nuts in May" will amuse you and so far as I am concerned that is enough. That is just what it sets out to do, and it succeeds.

Oddities & Addams

AFTERNOON IN THE ATTIC. By John Kobler. Illustrations by Charles Addams. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 135 pp. \$3.75.

By HOWARD CUSHMAN

PERHAPS you thought your fellow man

And all his works were hunky-dory,

Constructed on a normal plan—

Well, brother, it's a different story!

This book with strange recitals rife is,

From which you learn how cock-eyed life is.

The antic, attic gamut runs

From barkeep schools (Advanced Martinis)

To circus gentry shot from guns

(You surely know the mad Zucchini's!)

And all the guys and all the madames

Are grimly limned therein by Addams.

(That extra fancy "d," my pet, Stands for "demoniac" in our set.)

The spiritualistic medium

Is here to ease your tedium,

With spooks and poltergeists aplenty

That levitate along Route 20.

(For cultist, mystic, nut, or crackpot, York Staters always hit the jackpot.)

The gentleman in Paris who'll

Be glad to help arrange a duel;

The doings at Le Grand Guignol—

And Madame Tussaud's, quite as droll;

Gibraltar's apes that breed and clown, Protected by the British crown;

And many another lad and wench

With quirks too numerous to mench.

A gay and leering tome, my lads,

And worthy of your salary,

To brighten up the home, my lads,

This wild and winsome gallery.

Besides, it's nice to know for sure

That someone's screwier than you're!

Not Toynbee, but . . .

THROUGH HISTORY WITH J. WESLEY SMITH. By Burr Shafer. New York: The Vanguard Press. 128 pp. \$2.

By FRANK A. CLARVOE

A COUPLE of years ago, before it became fashionable to quote from Arnold Toynbee, I lost my way one night and stumbled into a meeting of intellectuals discussing "A Study of History." Somebody caught me looking slightly intelligent for a moment and asked me if I'd read it. "No," said I, brightly, "I'm waiting for the movie to come out." In the ensuing freeze I slipped home to a stack of back copies of *SRL*. I spent the evening with history according to J. Wesley Smith.

Burr Shafer, the artist, and Robert Gardner, research companion and caption writer, have been interpreting history in *SRL* for both the whimsical and belly-laugh sets.

Mr. Shafer has brought his indestructible character, J. Wesley Smith, from the caves to modern times. With a bold-stroking brush the artist has kept Smith in dress and expression faithful to the incident portrayed. Mr. Gardner has provided the twist in caption to supply both information and humor.

Now these cartoons have been collected in a book, and for my money it's the happiest thing that has happened to encourage general interest in history since H. G. Wells's "Outline."

Messrs. Shafer and Gardner have done some original research, as the book will remind their admirers. For example, we can see how the Smith Brothers looked before they grew beards and became Trade and Mark; that our fearless hero tried to sell insurance to the feuding Hatfields and McCoys; what actually was said when the wheel was invented; and what inspired Chippendale's table legs.

But why go on? And why let even a shred of criticism creep in? Yet, what would a book review be without an attempt at profound disagreement with the publisher—or the author?

I wish two things had happened in preparation of the book: one, that it might have been arranged in historical chronology; two, that the facts involved in the pictured incidents might have been put in a footnote on each page. These are minor faults. Perhaps lack of sequence adds to the charm, and historical footnotes might have deprived the curious of doing some research on their own.

Frank Clarvoe is editor of the San Francisco News.



THROUGH HISTORY WITH J. WESLEY SMITH
"Please sit down, General Washington—you're rocking the boat." (*SRL* Aug. 18, 1945)



THROUGH HISTORY WITH J. WESLEY SMITH
"I had no idea these Sabine women were so heavy!" (*SRL* June 3, 1950)



THROUGH HISTORY WITH J. WESLEY SMITH
"Bread and circuses! Bread and circuses! I want Social Security." (*SRL* Dec. 24, 1949)