



BOLT

Ten New Talents

By HARRISON SMITH

EDITOR'S NOTE: This week SRL presents its eighth annual survey of new talent in the field of fiction. In the following article Harrison Smith discusses the writers whose first work, published during 1950, was received warmly by the nation's critics. Ten of the most promising of the newcomers are profiled by Eloise Perry Hazard, of the SRL editorial staff, in "Notes on the Novices," on page 9. Margaret Cousins (no relation to SRL editor Norman Cousins), managing editor of *Good Housekeeping*, describes the search for new writers now being conducted by the editors of the large-circulation magazines in "Combing the Haystack," on page 12.

ANY ACCOUNT of the most significant books of writers new to fiction published in this country in the course of 1950 must be based on one's personal and often prejudiced opinion. None of the reviewers engaged in the task of sorting out the weekly or monthly outpouring of novels and collections of short stories are infallible; all of them have their prejudices and even moral convictions which may blind them to the merit of a work that reveals a new and authentic experience in the art of fiction or a genuine talent whose first endeavor shows promise for the future. There are many hidden traps in the way of an honest report of this nature—among them a feeling of kinship with an author who has written in a style one happens to admire or whose theme illustrates a conviction

that is emotionally or intellectually akin to the critic's. Then there is the author whose struggle to get a first book into print appeals to even the slightest feeling of generosity and fair play or an author whose characters and their deeds seem debased or loathsome, chosen to shock and in other ways to appeal to what are known as the reader's baser instincts.

All of these traps for the unwary must be cleared away and also any feeling that an author included in such a list must reveal an ability to continue to produce books of equal merit. There have been many fine novels which have never had a successor, many writers who have one story to tell and must thereafter play variations on the same theme or remain silent. The one-book novelists are not difficult to discover, for they write from a single personal experience which has had so strong a hold on their imaginations that they are unlikely to discover in the future another of equal power. An examination of the books chosen only over the last three years is a melancholy proof of this. How many readers can remember the names of authors of the best war novels published in 1948 or those that resulted from our occupation of Germany and Japan—such as "Dario," "The Steeper Cliff," "The Side of the Angels," "The Black Fountains"? What was the title of Jean Bloch-Michel's book, Elio Vittorini's, Van Van Praag's, Fritz Peters's, or William Sansom's, all of them among the thirteen chosen by

SRL at this time last year from those published in 1949. That recent authors of fine works of fiction or their books are not easily recalled today need not signify that they may not write other distinguished books in the years to come, but it does illustrate the ephemeral nature of a good deal of contemporary writing, as well as the indifference of the reading public to the best in favor of the most popular. How many readers are there, for example, who cannot recall John Horne Burns as the author of that fine war novel "The Gallery," but who will instantly name Kathleen Winsor as the author of "Forever Amber"?

THE ten books we are announcing this year are by no means assured of a long life nor are their authors certain to continue to write books as distinguished as their early venture into fiction. The list is more diverse in subject matter than that of any previous year; in fact no two books are alike in theme, and, astonishingly enough, none of them is a war novel or a book which has, with one exception, any relation to the experiences of Americans abroad.

That single exception is Anthony West's "The Vintage," a thoughtful and complex novel by a young man who is the son of H. G. Wells. It was heralded by an enthusiastic press in England and by receiving a Houghton Mifflin fellowship award in this country. It is centered around the adventures, after he has blown his brains out, of Colonel Wallis, a British prose-

cutor of the Crown at the Nuremberg War Trials, which are apparently resting as uneasily on the conscience of English writers as they are on Americans'. A few years ago "The Vintage" might have had difficulty in making its way, but we are now acquainted with the introduction of fantasy into serious fiction, either as satire or as a method of illustrating the agonizing perplexities in which the Western mind is involved.

The reviewers who said the book was overwritten and "lushly convoluted" were correct, but it cannot be dismissed on that account. It is imaginative, intensely dramatic at times, and at others ironic or filled with terror. It is obviously a young man's novel into which he has poured his discontent and malaise at the modern examples of the eternal struggle between good and evil, guilt and justice, the pillars on which nearly all vital novels rest. Mr. West's afterworld, whether purgatory or heaven, is vaguely like the one Colonel Wallis has left; there are trains, vast concentration camps, seaside resorts, human beings who seem to be oddly eviscerated. The hidden rulers of eternity have the best intentions toward the millions who daily are freed from mortal flesh; they want them as contented as possible, and

they have a great deal of trouble with the Colonel's conscience, finding it necessary to equip him with a guide, an urbane young man who is a devil in his own right. He is released to heaven only when he understands that "the heart of a man is remembering." The hedonistic purgatory from which he escapes is obviously a symbol of the world in which the Colonel had once lived and committed, like all of us, his smaller or greater sins.

Angus Wilson, another young Englishman, showed up with "The Wrong Set" (Morrow), a volume of short stories which had stirred up a certain amount of commotion at home, some of which may have been caused by the odd fact that he was a librarian of the sedate British Museum. All the people in his stories live shrouded in what Orville Prescott called "a miasma of decadence"; they are highly unpleasant to meet even on the printed page. In one of the stories two gentle old ladies tear a bird to bloody fragments in the presence of a small boy, in others a malicious mother destroys her son, a girl is brutally callous, and a group of young men experiment with sadism. There is a savage contempt and hatred of contemporary English society throughout this book which is profoundly disturbing. The stories are not shilling shockers but

brilliantly executed scenes in the lives of completely recognizable social groups disturbed with emotions familiar to all but human saints. The dialogue is excellent, the backgrounds are obviously meticulously accurate. From the evidence of this book Mr. Wilson is certainly one of the most accomplished short-story writers of this day; his restraint and detachment from any intrusion of his own emotions give his work a diabolical vitality which is not apparent in the stories of H. H. Munroe, who also knew how to create horror stories with deft twists at the end but who did not, like Anthony West and Angus Wilson, conceive of human beings as living in the midst of the torments of hell.

TWO other novels in this list, though as far apart as the poles, portray evil and unpleasant views of perverted or tormented minds. Frederick Buechner's "A Long Day's Dying" (Knopf), a story of the intrigue in which an obese, wealthy, middle-aged eunuch involves a group of light-minded and depressingly complicated New Yorkers, is written with remarkable virtuosity for so young a man. He is concerned with decadence and the frustrations and discontent of a superficially urbane society. His men and women are not overtly sadistic as are Mr. Wilson's; they are playfully and sometimes obscenely corrupt, posturers and pathetic egotists trying to create sensational moments in which they can mirror the virile emotions of a less superficial world.

Francois Boyer's "The Secret World" (Harcourt) belongs in this dismal category only because it plays with intense realism and fervor on the distorted mind of a child, a French girl who with her parents stumbles along the purgatorial country road crowded with massed refugees fleeing from the German invaders, bombed incessantly by enemy planes. Her father and mother and her pet dog are killed before her eyes. Rarely has any writer revealed so pathetically and yet humorously a child's mad world. The reader might compare it with "High Wind in Jamaica," but Richard Hughes was using irony and not the emotion of pity which fills the French writer's brief novel. But there is callous cruelty here too, for the little girl and the son of the rude farmer who gives her shelter play a game with death and a miniature graveyard that lends to the last chapter the chill of genuine horror.

These French children were innocents thoughtlessly engaged in diabolism, and among these novels there are two others which have for



"Dear, I once read of an author who got his ideas from his fellow employees. Now if you got a job . . ."

Notes on the Novices

ELOISE PERRY HAZARD

major characters adult innocents, in the true sense of the world. One of them is Max Steele's "Debby," the Harper prize novel of last year, a deeply touching story of a woman whose mind has never developed beyond childhood and who consequently has had no intimations of evil. All of her emotions and her love for the family that has adopted her are pure and generous. Mr. Steele's work is a remarkable accomplishment, for he handles this difficult theme with compassion and never loses his feeling for the dignity and essential nobility of Debby's mind or descends to the sentimentality which in another writer's hands would have been inherent in such a story.

The second adult innocent is a virile and powerful man, the parish priest of a village in the Po Valley, who owes his simplicity to his belief in his religion and to his most intimate friend, Christ. Of all of these ten books Giovanni Guareschi's "The Little World of Don Camillo" (Pellagrini) is the most exquisitely wrought and the most moving. It has a quality of which today only the Italian writers seem capable, a quality that must come from the soil and some changeless and harmonious human relationship with nature, with God, and the people whom the earth nourishes. The novel is like a legend, a tale addressed to whatever is still childlike and simple in our minds. Don Camillo's dangerous adversary is a Communist and the mayor of the village, and their struggle for the souls of their people leads to the most amusing and touching scenes in any recent book. The figure of Christ on the church cross is the third protagonist, the mediator between them, who permits his stalwart priest at one time to kick the mayor in the seat of his pants and at another forces Don Camillo to baptize the mayor's baby Lenin Libero Peppone. In the end both men at Christmastide are sitting together in the church patiently repainting the Virgin, the Christchild, and the familiar creatures that surround the crèche.

THE three other novels are excellent examples of their kind, honest and solid in their fields. "Stranger and Alone" (Harcourt) is the tragic story of a mulatto who never knew his father, who had the tenacity to obtain a college education and finally to become the supervisor of schools in a Southern city. It is also the story of a man who betrays his own people by trying to live in the world of the white man and that of his own people. The author, J. Saunders Redding, is on the faculty of Hampton Institute and in 1949-50 was visiting professor of

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FOR THE second consecutive year heavy competition from abroad is one of the interesting sidelights on *SRL's* round-up of new fiction talent—half of the writing deriving from England, France, Italy, and Canada in 1950, 46 per cent the previous year. Noteworthy, also, is the fact that only one woman survived this year's critical weeding out, whereas last year there were three.

ANGUS WILSON is a wholehearted supporter of England's social experiment. The revolution wrought in the social conditions of the industrial areas alone would convince him of its rightness, he insists, "whilst the general fairness of a rationing system when there is not enough to allow for luxury without want seems self-evident." But more of that in his new book, a novel under way. On the personal level, he says, he has never been rich enough to feel any loss as a result of the welfare state, and "many, many of my friends are much happier." Others of his friends disagree, "but that doesn't matter to friendship in a country of free speech."

Social inequities have troubled him since the hydra of racialism loomed over his South African childhood and laid the foundation for his general liberalism. But life for him has fallen on pleasant lines. He comes of solid upper middle-class English folk (actually his father was Scottish, his mother South African) who had seen better days, though, he adds, "perhaps they were never quite so grand as they became in retrospect"; he was sent home to England to public school and Oxford, and since, except for two war years in the Foreign Office, has been happily employed on the staff of the British Museum Library.

South Africa, the Museum, Oxford, residence in a hotel while a day pupil—all was grist to Wilson's wry literary mill when at 34 he first started writing stories—just two years ago. His second collection of stories, "Such Darling Dodos," recently made its bow in the States, and a book on Zola is forthcoming. Present spare time is devoted to researching into the English literary scene from 1919-25, though his zeal is channeled mainly toward Dickens, Dostoevsky, Proust. America's "Moby Dick" and "Jurgen" also appeal strongly to him.

BRENDAN GILL, a valued *New Yorker* staffer these dozen years, prefers that his writing speak for him. "Interview

me?" he shrieked. "Do you have to? I'm appalled, even though I realize that comes with very poor grace from one who earns his living as a reporter."

So we learned—but not from him and not from his barren book-jacket—that he is an attractive, lean black Irishman, with an Irishman's gaiety, wit, loquacity, and melancholy—"obviously a sad man deep down, judging from his book"—and that his diffidence is not feigned. He is a very serious writer, laboring hard and wanting only his best work published. It was his determination to start out as a novelist that has kept his short stories, known to *The New Yorker* constant reader, from appearing between hard covers to date.

Mr. Gill's thirty-four or so years have been spent in Hartford, Conn., his birthplace; New Haven, Conn., where Yale deemed him worthy of a Phi Beta Kappa key and a poetry prize; Bronxville, N. Y., his present home, and Manhattan. The aforementioned short stories are extramural writing and have no connection with his daily work, which consists of sitting at a desk in Eustace Tilley's workshop and sandpapering someone else's prose.

We, further, learned about Mr. Gill's marital status. But not from him. And, since he specifically said, "I want to have people not know whether I have a wife and children. It's nobody's business," we are not telling, either.

ANTHONY WEST, also, disapproves of emphasis on the writer as a personality. "The work is the interesting thing, and it is interesting or it is not."

Aside from literary criticism for *The New Statesman and Nation* begun in his early twenties, wartime news-writing for BBC (arrested TB prevented combat service), and "The Vintage," his work consists of a second novel, "Another Kind," already in Houghton's hands; another novel, untitled, nearing completion, and a D. H. Lawrence biography being published in England, while 1951 will see him

