

EDITOR'S NOTE: For several decades social scientists as well as members of the book industry have been concerned about the role of the serious book in American life. The interest of the social scientists grows out of their desire to find means to extend the market for serious ideas. Publishers and other members of the book industry see the question in a slightly different light: "How can we get more people to read more books?" But at bottom the concern of both groups is similar.

It was not until several months ago that social scientists and publishers—under the sponsorship of the Committee on Reading Development of the American Book Publishers Council—met together to discuss their common problem. Chairman of the meeting was Bernard Berelson, dean of the Graduate Library School and chairman of the Committee on Communication of the University of Chicago. The other participating social scientists were Harold Lasswell, School of Law, Yale University; Robert Leigh, director, the Communication Study, Russell Sage Foundation, and the School of Library Science, Columbia University; George Gallup, director, American Institute of Public Opinion; Clyde Hart, director, National Opinion Research Center; Ralph

Tyler, dean, Social Science Division, University of Chicago; Irving Janis, psychology department, Yale University; David Riesman, social science staff, the College of the University of Chicago; Lester Asheim, Graduate Library School, University of Chicago; Morris Janowitz, social science staff, University of Chicago. Representatives of publishing also participated: John O'Connor, Grosset & Dunlap; Harold Guinzburg, the Viking Press; Ian Ballantine, Bantam Books; and Datus C. Smith, Jr., Princeton University Press. The Committee on Reading Development of the American Book Publishers Council was represented by Theodore Waller and Robert Frase.

The Conference reached no conclusions but developed a number of hypotheses which it hoped would become the subject of further investigation. This week SRL publishes an article inspired by the Conference in which David Riesman thoughtfully examines some of the reading habits of the American people. In later issues SRL will publish articles on the serious book and its relation to our society by Bernard Berelson and Harold Guinzburg. To conclude the series Lester Asheim will summarize the principal topics discussed at the Conference and some of the tentative conclusions.

Bookworms & the Social Soil

DAVID RIESMAN

IN THE bringing up of children today there seems to have been a definite shift in the attitude toward what books should and do mean to a child. Ever since Lucy Sprague Mitchell started writing the "Here and Now" books parents and teachers have been told that imaginative books and fairy tales are bad and disturbing; that they may impart false values; that in dealing with princesses and giants they are trivial and unreal. In place of such fare it is said that children should have books that will enlighten them about the world, about reality. Reality turns out to be that of how things work, how water gets into the bathtub, for instance, or milk onto the doorstep; the human meanness of ogres and stepmothers is definitely not reality.

More recently parents have been told that children should not read too much, that it is better for them to learn through experience and to spend their time with other children—as if life were long and varied enough to find out very much about people without the aid of the social storehouse of books and other artistic works. There has been engendered a real fear of books among the very social groups

that once upheld standards of cultivation, on the grounds that books may interfere with a child's development. A psychologist recently wrote in his daily newspaper column that "a child's main interest should be in doing things not in reading about them," and he added, "Living too much in the realm of imagination retards the development of his ability to distinguish reality from daydreams." Parents are also advised not to allow children to become bookworms—they will grow up lacking personality.

In the earlier years of settlement of this country many parents had just the opposite fear. Moving from Europe or from the cultivated seaboard to the frontier, they feared that their children would become illiterates; they struggled desperately to see that their children were taught to read and that a few books, including of course the Bible, would be part of their sparse furnishings. Perhaps, indeed, it is a sign of American abundance that we can now take literacy virtually for granted and can discover some of its ambiguities for personal adjustment.

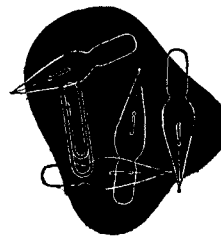
But such tendencies easily become self-confirming, and if psychologists tell us that a bookworm will lack personality we will have fewer bookworms and those we have will feel on the defensive.

To be sure, not only books can disturb "adjustment." Once, doing a study of teen-age attitudes towards music, I talked with the mother of a fourteen-year-old boy. "John likes to practise [the piano]," she told me, "but I don't let him play more than an hour a day. I want to keep him a normal boy." Possibly a daughter would have been allowed somewhat

more freedom in this as in other areas of genteel accomplishment, though on the whole girls even more than boys would seem to be defenseless against the demand that they be adjusted. At any rate, when they grow up they do not take upon themselves the duty of read-

ing books on behalf of the whole society; after leaving school both boys and girls in nine cases out of ten drop anything that could be called serious reading.

The bookworm, then, is the one per-





"Barnaby, I just bought some terrific cover paintings. I want them used on the next three novels you buy."

son in ten who reads 70 per cent of the books, including the pocket-size books, that are sold or shelved in the United States. I am inclined to view these bookworms as performing something of the same service in aerating our society that earthworms perform for the soil. Yet worms and other invaluable contributors to the earth's ecology are sometimes considered "varmint" by farmers, despite all the Soil Conservation Service can do—very much as even adult bookworms are considered to be poor personalities by some personnel managers. Fortunately, the Committee on Reading Development has set itself up as a kind of Soil Conservation Service for the field of ideas and has gone to bat on various fronts to defend the bookworm's interests, including not only the stimulation of research but also a lobby in Congress.

ONE thing seems pretty clear, namely, that books remain the least censored of media. This is in part, I suggest, precisely because of the smallness of their audience; as pocket books somewhat widen the market the problem of censorship is bound to grow more acute. But print has an old tradition to defend—older than that of movies and radio—and it has had for many reasons less intimidated defenders. True, minds may be closed to new ideas even if books are not. But since people are seldom all of a piece books can usually get into their crannies and use parts of them for leverage to open

up the rest. Books, that is, can be disturbing, disintegrating forces in people and in society.

There is actually little evidence that the people who read the most books have in general the fewest social contacts and hence suffer for performing the bookworm function for the community at large. Most studies of the audience for books and other media serve rather to demonstrate the principle of "the more, the more." The more books one reads, the more magazines one reads, too, the more movies one is apt to see, and the more organizations belonged to, and so on. Books, in spite of all I have said, still carry enough of a prestige tag so that many non-readers will tell the interviewer: "I would love to read but I have no time." Freudian implications to the contrary, if they do not have time to read they are also apt not to have time for much activity of any sort.

On the whole I cannot feel that by allowing children to be bookworms one is providing for the aeration of the social soil at their emotional expense; reading is one of those functions where tragic contradictions between social and individual interest are at a minimum. But obviously this judgment depends in part on my view that "adjustment" is one of the sadder fates which can overtake a child in our society and that "integration" of personality is a somewhat doubtful ideal as usually defined—that contradiction and discontinuity of personality have to be part of any ideal

which is not merely wan and flaccid.

Some people who have given thought to the problem contend that a short way to get rid both of the allegedly high price of books and of any ambiguities in being a bookworm is to go over completely to pocket books, which could be disposed of without a pang or trace as readily as a magazine, and beyond that to substitute transmission of information by facsimile for books altogether. Apparently, it is now technically feasible to scan entire libraries electronically, so that by pushing a button a "reader" could have flashed onto a television screen a series of moving images containing the capsulated information or amusement that he wanted. When these prospects struck horror into some of the more cultivated members of the publishing fraternity one of the Conference experts urged us to abandon any sentimental attachments we might have to the moss on the bucket which had previously dragged up ideas and to focus our emotional eye only on the bucket's content.

Yet it is precisely on the good-sized, hard-cover book that the bookworm is nourished. He cannot bury himself in a moving image or even, unless he is very small, in a pocket book. He is a creature who needs wide margins. For he tries to create amid all the pressures of contemporary culture a kind of "social space" around himself, an area of privacy. He does this by tying himself in his thinking and feeling to sources of some relative permanence—hence impersonal—while remaining somewhat impermeable to the fluctuating tastes, panics, and, most menacing of all, the appeals to be "adjusted" from his contemporaries. Hard-cover books are essential as protection for our all-too-small tribe of "hard-cover men."

There can be no doubt that many publishers do take very seriously their crucial mission in the defense of the hard-cover men. It is often this that leads them to be troubled by the rising break-even point of hard-cover books which makes it difficult to take chances with those first novels and non-fiction not entirely sure-fire. However, in view of the social and psychological pressures generally operative against becoming a bookworm it seems doubtful that the high price of books is one of the more serious deterrents to good reading (though, as just indicated, it may be a deterrent to new, creative writing). Rather, the fact that books are *believed* to be high-priced would seem to be a sign of public hostility to books and reading: the publishing industry is one of the few whose costs and prices create comment on the outside and guilt on the

(Continued on page 31)

Fiction. *After years of self-imposed exile from Ireland Liam O'Flaherty returned to write his greatest novel. "Insurrection" is a violent account of the Easter uprising in Dublin in 1916. It is a masterpiece of suspense, full of the sound of guns and shouting people. He describes this glorious and doomed gesture with the humanity and the fury of which he alone is capable. Shirley Jackson's "Hangsamen" belongs to New England and to the other side of the literary world; it is a combination of the satirical comedy and nightmare fantasy which made her short story "The Lottery" famous. A revolution in a West Indian island in wartime provides Robert Carse with an authentic background for an exciting and romantic story. Oswald Wynd's "The Gentle Pirate" is a more sophisticated tale of a Chinese girl's adventures around the Malayan seas. Both of these latter are pleasantly reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's introspective romances.*

Peace Bored the Lady

THE GENTLE PIRATE: *An Entertainment.* By Oswald Wynd. New York: Doubleday & Co. 249 pp. \$3.

By LETTIE ROGERS

THIS novel, as its subtitle suggests, is much less serious in intention than Oswald Wynd's 1947 prize winner, "Black Fountains," which was concerned with the struggles of an American-educated Japanese girl returning to Japan shortly before the Pearl Harbor attack. "The Gentle Pirate" is sophisticated, cynical, and wicked. It is a romance written by a tough-minded, intelligent, but poetic man with a sophisticated taste for violence; the sum of these parts, plus one part vitriol, makes for a curious whole. Mr. Wynd's is a queer brand of charm, based as it is on scorn and disillusionment. It is not, of course, without precedent.

The setting is exotic—the Malay Peninsula, its adjacent islands, and the waters thereabouts. The story opens just as the Japanese have read the handwriting on the wall and the British are about to take over again in 1945. Tseng is the youngest daughter of the prosperous rice-trading Chinese family of Tai, adroit at adjusting itself to each new political development. Tseng, very young and beautiful, finds life at the close of the war dull. "There was no escape. Peace was something which could go on for years, perhaps even for a lifetime." Such an intolerable situation.

Tseng becomes a pirate, making off with her father's junks and a poor thing of a brother whom she has blackmailed. For three years she plies those tropical waters, combining her pirating activities with an anti-piracy

insurance racket, to which nice respectable pirates like her father fall victim. But alas, Tseng's love of power causes her to attempt a job too big—an attack on the *Pung Ha*, a magnificently painted wreck of a ship, equipped with Colin MacDonald, the conquering male. The account of this voyage of the *Pung Ha*, on which the disguised Tseng has booked passage, and her hold-up of it with the able assistance of an aging sing-song girl

named Morning Convulvulus is high comedy and by far the most entertaining part of this entertainment. Tseng's pirate career winds up with her return to the bosom of her family, all her crimes having been conveniently hush-hushed in the best Oriental tradition.

It is a neat plot neatly turned, but the elements are never altogether satisfactorily fused, though historically the Chinese themselves have done it well enough, that fusing of the cynical with the romantic, the burlesque with the serious. It may be partly the fault of our times, of our present attitude toward the Far East and the dead seriousness of our stakes there, rather than Mr. Wynd's fault. We are so apt to ask when we shouldn't: is it a parable?

It leaves me feeling prudish—this necessity for pointing the finger of blame, for having to say that from page one I was bothered and troubled and never completely convinced, though I frequently laughed when I was supposed to. Withal, it will be a pleasure to hear from Mr. Wynd again. In the future maybe he will leave these romantic trappings, which suit him about as well as a toga, to others.

Lettie Rogers, a member of the English department of the Women's College of the University of North Carolina, is the author of "Storm Cloud," a novel of China.



—Jacket design by Doris Reynolds from the book.