

# The Saturday Review

of LITERATURE

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## A Year of Books

THIS has been a disappointing year for the publishers and the writers of American fiction. There were few writers of promise discovered, while nearly all those who in their first books had established a reputation were absent or brought out inferior works. The fact is that the younger novelists have failed to see that the tide was changing and with it the mood of the public. The threat of another world war and the power of atomic weapons is as alarming as ever, but we have become adjusted to it, so that when the air-raid warnings are sounded in our cities the idlers in our streets and parks are not stirred with alarm. People no longer enjoy shuddering at ominous novels symbolic of the end of man or civilization.

Arthur Koestler's "Darkness at Noon" has left its impression on too many of our writers who are still clinging to the existentialist's mood of despair and chaos fashionable not long ago in Paris. There is nothing new in this. Twenty-five years ago Joseph Wood Krutch in "The Modern Temper" wrote that tragedy was out of date because men thought too meanly of themselves to produce a hero, and in his book "The Confident Years" Van Wyck Brooks notes that most of the stories of the Twenties were tales of disaster, futility, despair, in which every man sold out or fell defeated. "Man was never the victor; he was always defeated." He adds that after the First World War the state of mind that prevailed in New York was not unlike the prevailing mood of Paris when so many American writers fled to exile in France in disgust at the barbarity of their homeland.

But there is a profound difference

in the attitude of the American people between the ten years that followed the First World War and 1951. The despair of the writers in the earlier generation was in complete contrast to the resurgence of a new hope for peace and the evidences, however false, of unlimited prosperity. Today there is little of this exuberance in the public's mind or heart, but there is a grim spirit of resistance to despair at what appears to be a most ominous future. It is an unpleasant trait of human nature to enjoy the spectacle of the misery of others when the observer himself feels secure. There is an element of fantasy in it or the sobering reflection, "There but by the grace of God go I." For the first two years after the end of the last war there was a sense of hope, which has been followed, first, by evidences of atomic hysteria and, finally, by our present determination to see it through come hell or high water.

In the process the country has charted a course that appears to the average thoughtful man to offer hard work and heavy taxes for an unknown length of time. In the present state of mind few people are likely to find relaxation or pleasant fantasy in the flood of abysmally depressing novels our writers are continuing to produce. That James Jones's "From Here to Eternity" was the year's best-selling novel does not destroy this contention, since it dealt with the peacetime American Army on a distant island and was therefore not involved with our present or future dilemmas. The state of mind and the behavior of our armed forces before Pearl Harbor has little relation to that of the men who have been fighting in Korea.

In spite of the complaints that 1951 has been a bad year for fiction it has on the whole been a good year for the

publishers of non-fiction. The public has turned to non-fiction in an unprecedented way. There they could at least find the facts of life and some encouragement for its continuance. In 1951 it began to appear less likely that civilization and mankind itself should suddenly disappear in a cloud of atomic dust. There were books like Crankshaw's "Cracks in the Kremlin Wall," George Kennan's "American Diplomacy, 1900-1951," and John Fischer's "Master Plan, U. S. A." that diluted our fear of Russia and gave evidence that we had established a foreign and military policy that might avoid a world war or win it if it broke upon us. The various histories and biographies of our forces in the war revealed, unlike the war novels, that we produced first-rate fighting soldiers and sailors by the millions and some of the world's best leaders.

A number of sound books, like Archibald MacLeish's "Freedom Is the Right to Choose," so stoutly defended the liberties granted by our Constitution that it began to appear less likely that McCarthyism would triumph. There were biographies and collected letters of our statesmen and political leaders from George Washington and Jefferson to Hoover, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, and Forrestal, whose diaries have been made into a best-selling book. Philosophy and religion were well represented. It was a memorable year for criticism, belles-lettres, and literary biography, which included Henry Seidel Canby's study of Mark Twain and Henry James, J. C. Furnas's biography of Stevenson, Hesketh Pearson's life of Disraeli, and the selected letters of Katherine Mansfield, Henry Adams, and William Cowper. Books in almost every non-fiction category found eager readers. An account of the vast deep, Rachel Carson's "The Sea Around Us," rose to the top of the best-selling list two weeks after publication. But there were no new humorists discovered or a modern poet of any significance to a wider public than the coteries and aficionados who surround this dying art. —H. S.

## Travel Award

THE editors extend congratulations to Horace Sutton, SRL travel editor, who recently was awarded first prize for the best magazine travel story of 1951 in the fourteenth annual competition sponsored by Trans World Airlines. The award was based on four of Mr. Sutton's *Saturday Review* articles: "400,000 Diplomats on the Loose"; "Pax, C'est Wunderbar"; and the two-part "Return to the Reich."

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Shortage of Great Ideas

SIR: I read your editorial "The Incomplete Power" [SRL Dec. 1] with great interest, but I do believe the emphasis is somewhat lopsided.

When you refer to the Paines, Jeffersons, Popes, Voltaires, etc., you neglect to take into consideration that these men lived in times when the average man was illiterate, uneducated, and largely unaware of what transpired around him. A man of learning, culture, or education was then a rarity and held in esteem. Today, when the majority of people are sufficiently educated to read, write, and pour forth ideas, it is vastly more difficult to produce *giants*. The output of ideas therefore becomes a multi-colored mosaic, rather than one finely cut stone.

Secondly, the art of contemplation and thinking essential to the birth of great ideas and great men becomes more difficult to pursue and practise because twentieth-century man, whether he likes it or not, must to some degree live in the twentieth century in order to be its spokesman or prophet. No reasonably intelligent human being could delude himself into thinking that he can grasp even part of what goes on around him today. Because of the vast amount of knowledge available to us, we become specialists of one kind or another. We have probably a larger number of capable and intelligent men today than at any time before, but it is vastly more difficult to hear them and know them in the hectic jumble of mass communication.

When you place the blame so heavily on the shoulder of the writer, you tend to overlook these factors. . . . The serious author today is in much the same category as the college professor who teaches ancient Greek or philosophy. Everyone concedes he is a most learned man, vastly underpaid. But who cares? Please bear in mind that in an age where a strip-teaser can sport a Cadillac and a movie actor earns more in a week than most authors do in a year it is high time to give the poor writer a boost instead of making life tougher for him.

I suggest a "Be Kind to Writers Week"!

ANN THOMAS.

Miami, Fla.

SIR: There is something breath-taking in your indictment of modern American literature — breath-taking because it is so saturated with the very defeatism, cynicism, despair, and subjectivity which it ascribes to the writer.

There has never been a time when American literature was more vital, more passionate, intense, alert, mature, and searching than it is today—except for the time of Melville, Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau. The non-fiction of 1900 to 1940 cannot compare for intensity of searching out the problems of man's social and spiritual life with the non-fiction of today—from



THROUGH HISTORY WITH J. WESLEY SMITH

"Oh, Jefferson is a good man—but I'm not sure I like the idea of a civilian being President."

Sandburg's books on Abraham Lincoln to Douglas's "Strange Lands and Friendly People"; "The Sea Around Us"; "The Seven Storey Mountain"; "Talks with Nehru"; "The Conduct of Life," by Lewis Mumford; "A Walker in the City"; "On Being a Negro in America," by J. Saunders Redding. We are in the midst of an enormously rich outpouring of ideas and feelings precisely on the subject of America as "much more than a nation . . . as an idea." For fiction I speak not as an American novelist but as a reader, and after all, the writer and the reader are only two sides of the same coin. Never has American fiction been so vital, so living, so engrossed with the "wholeness" of life, its calamities and failures, its endurance and courage since, I repeat, the days of Hawthorne and Melville.

The awarding or withholding of prizes has no significance for American literature except to indicate perhaps "a paralyzing disease that enfeebles any sense of obligation towards the future" on the part of the editors.

It is a mistake to speak of "solace" and distinguished fiction as if they were somehow integrated. Distinguished fiction never was and never will be a "solace"—its Socratic duty is to arouse; its democratic duty is to question; its religious duty is to embrace all of life.

In poetry it is the same—May Sarton, Peter Viereck—one could go on and on. Instead of lashing out at American writers, your job is to continue to help them. . . . Rouse yourselves out of these dismal and, happily, unrealistic complaints, for you are discrediting one of the most deep-

ly aware and expressive periods in the history of American literature.

CORNELIA JESSEY.

Cathedral City, Calif.

SIR: Your editorial "The Incomplete Power" about the "shortage of great ideas" begs the question: What is the criterion of a great idea? How about "USA: The Permanent Revolution" or Lewis Mumford's "The Conduct of Life," to mention only two of the more significant? President Conant of Harvard holds that our social "conceptual schemes are equivalent to what the chemists and physicists were using in the late eighteenth century," but neither President Conant nor anybody else, to my knowledge, advances a yardstick with which to evaluate the validity of a "conceptual scheme."

PHILIP WEISS.

St. Louis, Mo.

SIR: Allow me to question your assertion that America's most critical shortage is in the realm of "great ideas." To say this is to imply that the great ideas we have inherited have been translated into conduct, individual and collective, and that we need new inspiring and guiding ideas. Surely, this is not the case. Lip service to great ideas is very common, here as elsewhere, but if an idea is great, it must be realized, lived up to.

Democracy is certainly a great idea. Even E. M. Forster, the skeptic and realist, is giving it two cheers. Have we established genuine democracy? Emphatically not.

The Parliament of Man, the federa-