

The Whopper

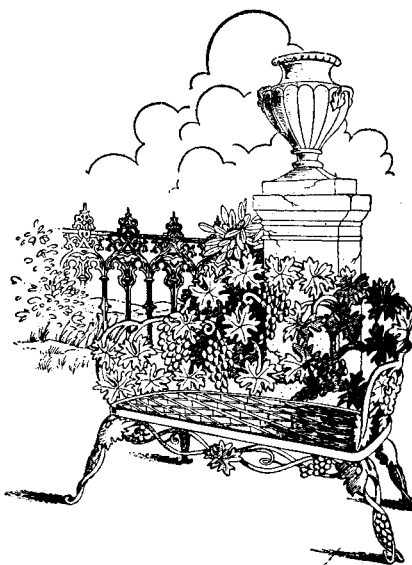
SIRONIA, TEXAS. By Madison Cooper. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 2 vols., 1731 pp. \$10.

By MARTIN RICE

THE publishers of "Sironia, Texas" have for some time been letting the public know that they were planning to present what is "probably" the longest novel ever to be published in America. Let us without qualification agree that "Sironia, Texas" is big, as definitely outsize as the state which it celebrates. It contains over seventeen hundred pages, close to five million orthographic symbols, slightly less than a million words, hundreds of characters and scores of plots, neatly interwoven. It weighs three pounds six ounces.

This emphasis on size is perhaps a little vulgar and might distract attention from other qualities one usually looks for in a novel. But size is, I'm afraid, the most important quality of this latest contribution of Texas to our modern life. Without it Mr. Cooper's work might be seen in proper perspective as another reasonably competent, not too well written, "community" novel, heavily charged with melodramatic incident, overly spiced with sex. Actually much of the length is unnecessary. Mr. Cooper has supplied at least two of everything: two class-doomed loves, two village idiots, a dozen or more extra-marital liaisons, at least as many violent deaths, three "unsolved" murders, innumerable parties, social feuds, and community crises. There is also, to add to but not complete this inventory: a flood, a fire, a lynching, an attempted rape, and quite a deal of fornication. Since all these are not merely alluded to but described in considerable and dramatic detail, a lot of words are understandably required. In addition, the author has thoughtfully provided, for readers who may have lost their way in the welter of incident, a philosophical editor who every so often sums up in a letter, an editorial, or a report to his boss (a flagellant with a social heart of gold) everything that has gone before.

What Mr. Cooper has attempted is a history of a small town in Texas from the years 1900 to 1920, told in terms of its dominant families and the relations with them of some of the town's other families. During the course of his narrative Sironia grows from a town with a population of under 5,000 to one with a population of more than 40,000. But our attention is directed throughout to the fortunes of the aristocratic Thax-



—By William Barss for "Sironia, Texas."

tons, Storrows, and Haydns, and those of the commoner families, the Lipscombs, the Lanes, the Blys, and the Rogans. Interwoven with the fortunes of these are the stories of the faithful, serving Negro families, most of them tied to their employing "masters" by bonds of miscegenation.

The main narrative thread (there are at least a dozen) treats of the love of common, earthy Tam Lipscomb, son of the town's chief merchant, for the aristocratic Nelia Haydn. Another has to do with Miss Milly Thaxton and her attempts to cover up the fact that her handsome son Lance is feeble-minded.

Mr. Cooper has constructed his heavily freighted melodrama admirably, neatly fitting each melodramatic incident into a giant "economy size" package. His prose is sturdy and awkward, burdened with a plethora of italics, presumably used—though not successfully—to compensate for his inability to capture speech rhythms in any other way. His narrative has tremendous drive and a kind of frenzied vitality that makes it highly readable. But his book fails of its purpose to recreate a Texas small town. This failure is largely one of creative imagination. Every stock legend about town "characters" that has ever been told in any town has been dusted off and trotted into play, and the author has added nothing to what others have done with these stock legends on a somewhat smaller scale. In addition, he has been so busy rattling the innumerable skeletons in the closets of his families that he leaves the impression that Sironia was a town in which the principal industry was fornication, with a secondary interest in talking about it.

Settle then for the fact that "Sironia, Texas" is a big book, a readable one, with lots of dramatic incident and—except for its size—one of little importance.

A Homeless Ideal

YET OTHER WATERS. By James T. Farrell. New York: Vanguard Press. 414 pp. \$3.75.

By OLIVER LA FARGE

THE fortunate continue to change as they age. Not infrequently they grow younger in mind, shedding the agedness characteristic of intense-minded young men. "Yet Other Waters" suggests that Mr. Farrell may be one of these, and that he has shed some of the pessimism that shadowed his earlier, remarkable reportage. Given his distinctive, perhaps I should say peculiar, genius, this is good news.

Much of the novel analyzes the capture, or attempted capture, of writers by the Communist movement of the early Thirties before the glossy deceptions of the Popular Front period. It is a penetrating analysis of why men become and remain Communists. Among writers the greatest appeal was to the third- or tenth-raters, who by embracing the "movement" could receive the applause of a group, earn a little money, and save their souls with the fiction that capitalism, not their own inability, was what denied them the national recognition that would be theirs come the Revolution. The story shows neatly how Communism became essential to these men, until the emotional tie to it transcended reason, integrity was killed, and they were enslaved.

The story is told through the disillusionment and eventual break with Communism of the hero, Bernard Carr. Carr is another valid type: a successful writer who first allied himself with the movement through honest indignation, then, as its corruption of mind and spirit was exposed to him, found that leaving it meant the enmity of his circle of friends, calumny, and at least the threat of blackmail.

The period is past and dead, but this study of the extreme Leftist mind remains worthwhile in its own right. The novel is not, however, a mere fictionalized study of a political subject. It is equally a study of Bernard Carr, a devoted, lonely writer, his relations, and his difficult inner decisions. He seems a trifle slow to make up his mind—but we read the story with hindsight. Ordinary, quiet men make big decisions with difficulty, advancing toward and retreating from the final conclusion. They are never concerned with that alone; there are the family relationships, the plan of work and its progress, temptations of the flesh (not too convincing in this case), and in this particular story some quite de-

lightful observations on the behavior of a baby.

Mr. Farrell is a curious phenomenon. Often he writes badly. His conversations are flat. One is aware of laboring as one reads—but one continues reading. Except when, as with Studs Lonigan, he lugs the reader mercilessly through an endlessly detailed recital of the incidents in the short life of an ordinary man, his characters tend to be cardboard, two-dimensional. This last effect is due in part to his apparently not yet having mastered—or, perhaps, accepted—the techniques for working from inside, instead of from outside, expositoryly, of his characters. When he does get inside Carr, for instance, Carr comes to life.

For all these faults, one reads the books, and afterwards they stay in the mind for years. It is a strange gift. In "Yet Other Waters" from time to time Carr speaks, or thinks, for us, as a writer on writing. We are getting, I suspect, Mr. James T. Farrell, who on this evidence is a dedicated writer with purity of purpose and a shining love of people in general—a bit inept, perhaps, in relationships with individuals. The book leaves this reviewer somewhat breathless, and cherishing the hope that the writer just described is in the process of exploring new and excellent avenues of further growth.

America's Backyard

STORY: *The Magazine of the Short Story in Book Form: Number Two.* Edited by Whit Burnett and Hallie Burnett. New York: A. A. Wyn. 289 pp. \$3.

By WILLIAM PEDEN

THE PRESENT volume marks the 131st appearance of "Story: The Magazine of the Short Story," and is the second volume to appear in hard-covers. Like "Story: Number One," this collection contains twenty hitherto unpublished short stories sufficiently distinguished in concept and attainment to maintain the high standards of their predecessors.

It has been said that perhaps the greatest contribution the editors of "Story" have made has been their encouragement of little-known authors who later achieved real distinction. The present volume is no exception. Half of its authors are under thirty, several of them are appearing in print for the first time, and only a few—like William Sansom, for example—possess established reputations. This, I think, is just as it should be. As the editors comment, "Short-story writers are the first line of the national defense of literature.

They are the young. It is with the small arms of the short story they face the world. . . . Rarely, in this country, does one find a big gun of letters who has not put in his years first with the short story."

The stories by these talented newcomers are as varied as are their authors' backgrounds and vocations. For example, there is the story "Survival," a psychological study involving a small-town high-school principal, his moonstruck wife, and her gigantic lover, by Robert Canzoneri, a twenty-six-year-old former Navy tail gunner, now teaching in a Mississippi high school. Or "The Girl on the Lake," a sympathetic portrayal of the trials of a pair of youthful lovers, by twenty-seven-year-old David Roberts, a Navy veteran and now news editor for a New York radio station. Or "The Gun on the Wall," another understanding and intelligent story involving a problem of adolescence, by Gladys Garber, a young housewife now attending Boston University.

Or "Honeymoon," a compelling picture of sadism with a Mexican setting by German-born Kurt Wincelburg, a twenty-eight-year-old veteran of the Okinawa invasion. Or "I Am Edgar," a rousing horror story involving a psychopathic university instructor, by thirty-five-year-old Jerry Wexler, an Army veteran now associated with M-G-M music subsidiaries. The promise displayed by these young writers argues well for the healthy condition of American literature.

Outstanding among the work of the more established writers included are William Sansom's "Miss Haines and the Gondolier," a character study of an emotionally arrested Englishwoman and a Venetian gondolier, set in the decaying splendors of contemporary Venice and written in a lush, richly-textured prose, and Nelson Hayes's perceptive portrayal of a father's love for his teen-age daughter, "The Weaning of Laura Wade."

This good collection of stories makes us hope that "Story" will continue to withstand the pressures it has weathered during the last twenty years. "Story in Book Form" continues to provide a refuge where "good writers of good stories can pre-

(Continued on page 30)

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Your Literary I.Q.

By Howard Collins

WORDS TO THE WISE—AND OTHERWISE

A. C. Palmer, of Pomfret Center, Connecticut, asks you to match these familiar quotations with the poets who wrote them. Allowing five points for each correct pairing, a score of sixty is par, seventy is very good, and eighty or better is excellent. (Don't worry if your score isn't perfect; Mr. Palmer has been reading and writing poetry for most of his 85 years.) Answers on page 35.

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|---|-----------------|
| 1. Go down to Kew in lilac-time. | () Arnold |
| 2. Did the Hand then of the Potter shake? | () Browning |
| 3. Hew down the bridge, Sir Consul. | () Byron |
| 4. Why don't you speak for yourself, John? | () Coleridge |
| 5. Will no one tell me what she sings? | () Emerson |
| 6. Charge, Chester, charge! On, Stanley, on! | () Field |
| 7. Take thy beak from out my heart. | () Fitzgerald |
| 8. What are the bugles blowin' for? | () Gilbert |
| 9. While stands the Coliseum, Rome shall stand. | () Kipling |
| 10. Notice Neptune, though, taming a sea-horse. | () Longfellow |
| 11. Children dear, was it yesterday? | () Macauley |
| 12. Why, say, "Sail on! sail on! and on!" | () Miller |
| 13. Now, don't you go till I come. | () Noyes |
| 14. Hold off! unhand me, gray-beard loon! | () Poe |
| 15. We left him alone with his glory. | () Scott |
| 16. Here once the embattled farmers stood. | () Shakespeare |
| 17. But what good came of it at last? | () Southey |
| 18. You must wake and call me early. | () Tennyson |
| 19. Farewell, my own, light of my life, farewell. | () Wolfe |
| 20. Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambition. | () Wordsworth |