

## Cattle for the Couch

*From more than thirty Western stories published during the past several months Seth Agnew has selected a half-dozen that he believes deserve the attention of SR readers.*

By Seth Agnew

THE standard "Western" used to chronicle a sort of cow-country Never-Never Land where it was sheriff against road agents, cowboys against rustlers, good guys against bad ones, six-guns flaming, all riding madly that-a-way towards the happy ending. This is the kind of Western which still flickers crepuscular der-ring-do in the intervals between televised cartoons extolling breakfast cereals; which forms a staple of the Saturday double feature and of the newsstand comic book.

This is the kind of Western which, it gives me pleasure to record, is vanishing like the longhorn. Today's range cattle are better built, with more meat on their bones. Today's Westerns are better written, with more of the substance and flavor of the stormy, tumultuous settlement of the American West. The emphasis may still be on adventure and action, but the old clichés of plot and writing, the old stereotypes of hero and villain and virtue invincible are giving way to craftsmanship and historical research.

During the past season there have been some half dozen new novels of the West which seem to me good stories, well told, of the not-so-distant days of the pioneers, the cattlemen, the miners, the homesteaders, the Indians.

While the years after the Civil War were prosperous ones for many cattlemen as the bawling herds spread out across the grazing lands, the same railroads that brought prosperity by opening up the Eastern markets to the stockmen also brought an end to unlimited grazing by opening up the Western lands to the homesteaders. The life of the homesteader was not an easy one; the new land, with its harsh winters, its dust storms, its parching summers, extended no warmer welcome than the ranchers on whose grazing lands the settlers staked out their claims, than the Indians whose country it was by tradition. It is hardly surprising that not all of the nesters

stayed to prove up, but enough did to settle the West, to start farms and small ranches, to people towns, to make a new way of life.

"*Prairie Guns*," by Ernest Haycox (Little, Brown, \$2.50), suffers from a title only slightly less misleading than its subtitle, "stories of pursuit and danger on the plains of the pioneer West." For these are stories of the homesteaders and the townspeople and the small ranchers. Very good stories they are, too, for the late Mr. Haycox was a top-flight storyteller. There is "Lady Out West," a tale of Cary Kittredge who stuck by her homestead despite unfriendly neighbors who were sure she was too much a lady to be a Westerner. There is "The Land That Women Hate," in which mother and daughter see life differently on a dusty, windswept ranch. There is "Free Land," where a cattleman wins a peaceful settlement with a belligerent sodbuster who has claimed his spring. The collection makes a vivid panorama of frontier life.

More melodramatic, but also convincing, is "*Saddle the Storm*," by Harry Whittington (Gold Medal, paperbound, 25¢). To the Fourth of July celebrations at Malpais come Cay Elliot and his wife, Adiam, for their first trip away from the homestead in many long, harsh months, for their first trip to town since their marriage. The boisterous celebration of the holiday, the gaiety of the parties, the excitement of the rodeo, the macabre

tragedy of a lynching make a gaudy picture of a Western town on a spree. In the frenzy, Cay and Adiam find their marriage tested, and they return to the homestead with new courage to face the hardships of their life and new understanding of each other. It is melodrama, yes, but effectively done.

As the homesteaders claimed the land which once had been open range for cattle, the cattlemen often found that the lands which were left to them were overstocked—or would be overstocked if their herds grew to the size that would satisfy their ambitions. One solution, if ambition was strong enough to overcome scruples, was to move in on some neighboring rancher's range. Or perhaps to scare off the homesteaders and buy up their claims. When ruthless ambition went too far, the end was often a range war.

"*The Fourth Horseman*," by Will Henry (Random House, \$2.75), is a story of such a range war. Like Montana's Johnson County war, like New Mexico's Lincoln County war, Mr. Henry's Peaceful Basin war is a fight to the finish in which neither side wins and both sides lose. Into the Basin comes Frank Rachel, a man with a shadowed past. He tries to settle down as a horse rancher, holding aloof from the trouble which is coming to the Basin. But when the war comes he is inevitably drawn into the fight and brings it to its bloody end. Mr. Henry can occasionally overdo the notes of doom and destruction; but his characters and his creation of the Basin life are thoroughly convincing, and his range war is tough and fast-moving.

More standard fare is "*Smoky Valley*," by Donald Hamilton (Dell, paperbound, 25¢). John Parrish had come West after the war to regain his health. He made his ranch pay and kept out of the valley politics. The neighbors resented his aloofness and the fact that he did not carry a gun; some of them made the mistake of underestimating him. When the fight to control the range was forced upon him he fought back with a fierceness and efficiency which made them revise their estimates. This one comes nearer to the old pattern, but there are good pace and characterization.

While some went West to make their livings from cattle or out of the land, others found their fortunes in the ore lodes of the mountains. Boom towns sprang up and as suddenly died. Fabulously rich veins pinched out into nothing, and today's millionaire tomorrow was back to chipping rocks in search of a new strike. Silver, gold, copper—these could spell riches un-



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told, and a likely claim was something to fight and die for.

"Highgrader," by Hal G. Evarts (Popular Library, paperbound, 25¢), is a rousing tale of murder, forgery, and assorted skulduggery in connection with a mining claim. Little Terry Cavanaugh is claimed for adoption by his uncles, the unsavory Hayden brothers, after his father has been shot in the back. Dave Renick, Terry's guardian, refuses to give the boy up until he can discover who killed Terry's father and why the Haydens have taken such sudden interest in him. There is plenty of action here, and plenty of feel for the raucous vitality of a mining boom town.

Of course, all this new land into which the cattlemen, the prospectors, the homesteaders were moving was, if only by prior settlement, Indian country. The white men, however, did not see it that way, and for several bloody decades the Army went about its task of "protecting" the white men by rounding up the Indians and sending them to reservations. The Indian resistance was fierce, spirited, and hopeless.

"Arrow in the Moon," by John and Margaret Harris (Morrow, \$3.50), is a story of the Northern plains in the 1870's. It is in part the story of an Easterner, Jim Macklin, learning the ways of the West and his efforts to build a ranch. But it is also the story of Dull Knife and his band of Cheyennes who fought their way north from their reservation in the Indian Territory in a vain attempt to return to their traditional lands. Captured by the Army, the tribe is ordered to return to the Southern reservation. In desperation, the Cheyennes try to escape, and when the break comes Macklin has his role to play. While the story of Macklin is rather pedestrian, the Harrises have vividly evoked the tragedy and the heroism of Dull Knife and his tribe.

These six books are a sampling of more than thirty which have been published in the past three months. They are good stories and make good reading. More than that, they are good historical novels which call up stirring pages from our past.

### LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

1. William Wordsworth. 2. G. Martinez-Sierra. 3. J. B. Priestley. 4. T. S. Eliot. 5. Edward C. Sackville-West. 6. Percy Bysshe Shelley. 7. Stuart Cloete. 8. André Gide. 9. James Joyce. 10. Fannie Hurst. 11. Witter Bynner. 12. Dorothy Parker. 13. Sydney Dobell. 14. Adelaide Procter. 15. Aldous Huxley. 16. Leo Tolstoy. 17. Don Appell. 18. Nelson Hayes. 19. J. D. Scott. 20. John Galsworthy.



—SR drawing by Doug Anderson.

## The Maternal Cannibal

"Sidestreet," by Robert O. Bowen (Alfred A. Knopf, 212 pp. \$3), is about Edna Roberts, who was confident that what she believed was unquestionably right, and of the lives she blighted as a result of the conviction.

By Durham Curtis

THE side street from which one of the most horrifying women in contemporary literature comes is "a good street. . . . No one along it spoke any language but English. . . . The street was apart from the world, calm, secure." Here, with her nondescript parents, Edna Roberts, "heroine" of Robert O. Bowen's novel "Sidestreet" began to develop her assurance that the little she thought and felt was unquestionably right, to acquire a reputation for depth because she lacked mirth, for propriety because she lacked the capacity for affection.

She is married by Bill Gavin, a truck driver she calls William, accepts his marital advances with detached repugnance, delights in his departure for World War I because it frees her from his presence and enhances her prestige on Side Street. The physicalness of having his baby makes her avoid the Catholic Church she belonged to because the word womb in "Hail Mary" seems to her "like an obscene hand." The return of her husband, "brutalized" by the war, does not prevent her from raising her son as though he had no father and as though the outside world did not exist. Her husband lives with her like a boarder, takes to drink, intermittently tries to reform himself and prevent Edna from making his son become a sissy. But Bill never gets the upper hand in anything,

though he disturbs his wife sufficiently so that she murders him (very efficiently). After the murder, which is never detected, she thinks, "I was very patient . . . much too patient."

Her time after this is given over altogether to ruining William, Jr., who is never called Bill. She prevents his accepting a fellowship to Harvard, keeps him by her though he increasingly grows to wish her dead. He partially relieves his aggressive feelings by marrying Pearl (with whom he has no sexual contact) and by later becoming an exhibitionist and getting sent to an institution. But Edna is not affected. She takes up the new career of ruining Pearl's illegitimate child, training her to stay on a side-street where nothing of reality can penetrate.

ONCE you've finished "Sidestreet" you find it difficult to believe in Edna, but while you read you do. Mr. Bowen is a master at introducing the little details that convince more than extended psychological explanations. His admirably compact narrative hurries from chapter to chapter without allowing you to suspend belief. And you end up wondering whether it matters very much whether Ednas exist or not. By exaggeration Mr. Bowen drives home what is nearly true of all of us: we fancy ourselves and our prejudices central in the universe; we prefer to avoid the intrusion of any reality that makes us doubt the omniscience of our side street. Though Mr. Bowen sometimes hurts his narrative by too heavily ironic statements of his bitterness against the Ednas of the world and never explains adequately why the Bill Gavins marry them, "Sidestreet," his third novel, is good in itself and shows that he has the ability to write even better fiction than he has so far.