

# THE LITERARY SAMPLER

## EXCERPTS FROM NEW AND FORTHCOMING BOOKS

### O'Hara off the Cuff

**I**F EVERYBODY who claims he owned a Stutz Bearcat had actually owned one, the Stutz people would be in business today. . . . Will some well-read reader kindly help me track down the aphorism that goes, approximately: "There is nothing worse than an ignorant man (writer) with a readable style"? . . . The reader—and this applies in all criticism—can get to know fairly soon what kind of person the critic is. After that it's easy: the reader simply approaches the criticisms by saying: "Well, what's this jerk shooting off his mouth about today?" or "I wonder what literary treasure has been uncovered this morning by this brilliant, keen, searching, wise, witty, lovable man?" Anyone in the habit of reading critics knows that a single critic is undependable, unless you know what Critic X likes and doesn't like and how he and his likes and dislikes match up with yours. . . . One way I have learned to hoard hours and days for possibly more useful and certainly more pleasant expenditure is to refrain from reading practically all books about Harry Luce's news magazine, *Time*. . . . One thing I have learned in all these years of appearing in public—appearing in print in public, I mean—and that is, when you write about the Irish, anything or anyone Irish, you had better



The youthful Ellen Glasgow, who was to win fame as a Virginia novelist.

be careful what you say. Sometimes you almost wish you hadn't said anything, and at other times you wish you had become an apiarist. (For the benefit of certain of my Irish clientele, an apiarist is not a religious fanatic.) An Irish byline, like mine, is all that some fellows need as an excuse to write you letters that apparently are intended to make you sign a confession and hang yourself.

In a triumphant restatement of the obvious I call your attention to the fact that you can love your work and hate it in much the same way, to the same degree, that you can love a woman and still have moments of feeling like belting her one for luck. Mind, now, I am not recommending this disorderly procedure. I'm just calling attention to it.

—From *"Sweet and Sour,"* by John O'Hara (to be published by Random House on Oct. 18).

### How Laws Are Made

**Y**OU see the tractors laboring majestically across the field, cultivating the land. You don't see the earthworms. They are even less conscious of the magnitude of their achievement than the lawyers are of their part in legislation. The Congress in Washington and the legislatures in the state capitals pass laws. The administrative agencies turn out regulations. The courts hand down judicial decisions and opinions. We forget, even the lawyers themselves forget, that it is the lawyers in their offices who make the bulk of our law.

I spent this morning working on a draft of an agreement for the publication of cheap paper-bound books. The signatures of an author and a publisher would turn that agreement into law. This afternoon I watched a client execute a codicil to his will. After he had signed I took the pen. I took it because it was my own. But if it had been his he might well have given it to me as a governor might give me the quill with which he had signed a statute which I had drafted. For this codicil was nonetheless a part of our law. This evening I read the announcement in the afternoon paper of a new bond issue. I recognized one which three of my partners had been working on, drawing the mortgage which secured it and the agreement under which it was to be under-

written and sold. This was law for everyone who bought or sold those bonds.

Where two or three, or more, are gathered together in contract they set up a small momentary sovereignty of their own.

—From *"It's Your Law,"* by Charles B. Curtis (to be published Oct. 22 by Harvard University Press).

### National Treasure

**C**HINA was the ideal country for the old, a pleasant place where one achieved honor merely by growing old. How often had I come upon a village, anywhere in China, to find sitting outside the door on a bench at the edge of the threshing floor a comfortably dressed old man or woman, dozing in the sun, pipe in hand, idle without reproach, loved and cared for and made much of, merely because he or she was old! Old people were treasures and no one was afraid to grow old. When an aged one spoke the others listened, eager for the wisdom of his accumulated years.

It has been a shock to discover how differently the old are treated in my own country, and how pathetically they try to hide the number of their years and pretend themselves still strong and able to do a full day's work. Worse almost than the injustice to homeless children was it to find



—Illustrations from *"Shadows in Silver"* (to be published Oct. 11 by Scribner).

Virginia-born Nancy Langhorne, who became Lady Astor in England.

white-haired parents and grandparents in old people's homes and even in mental institutions, often without mental illness beyond the gentle and harmless decay of age. I suppose that the uncertainty of economic life and the insecurity of the individual alone in his struggle to maintain himself, his wife, and children make thoughtful tenderness too rare between young and old in our country. The aging feel their children's dread and they try to care for themselves and are guilty if they cannot, and so the generations pull apart in a mutual fear which stifles natural love.

Somehow our society must make it right and possible for old people not to fear the young or be deserted by them, for the test of a civilization is in the way that it cares for its helpless members. Thus when Hitler began to destroy the old I knew that his regime could not last in a civilized world. It was an anachronism, and the laws of human evolution would provide its end—and how quickly did that end come!

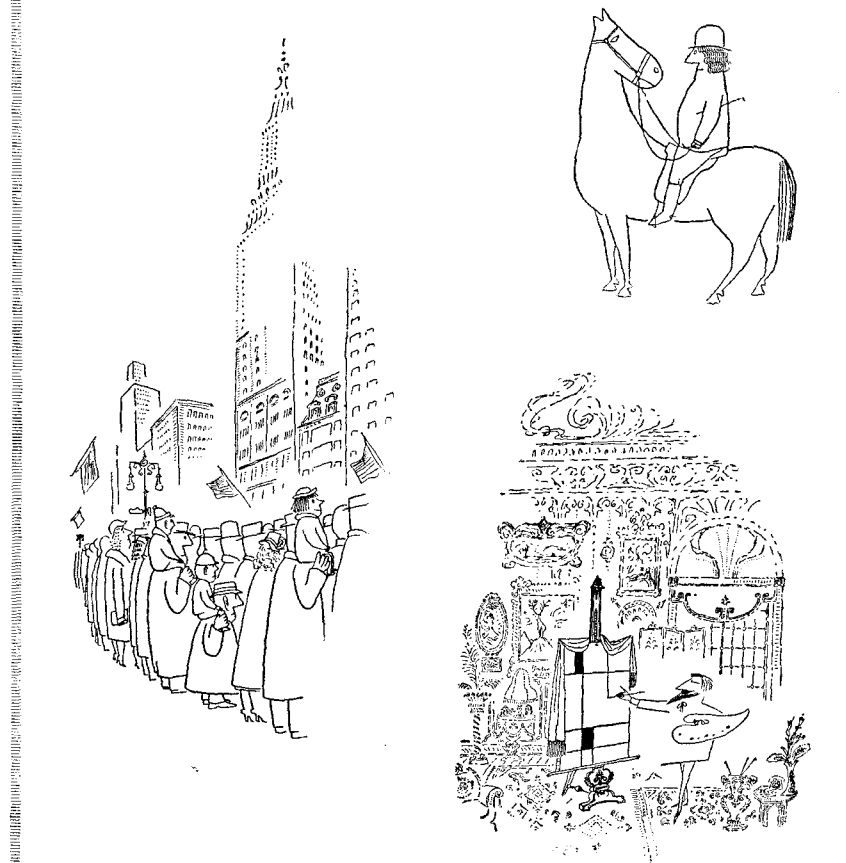
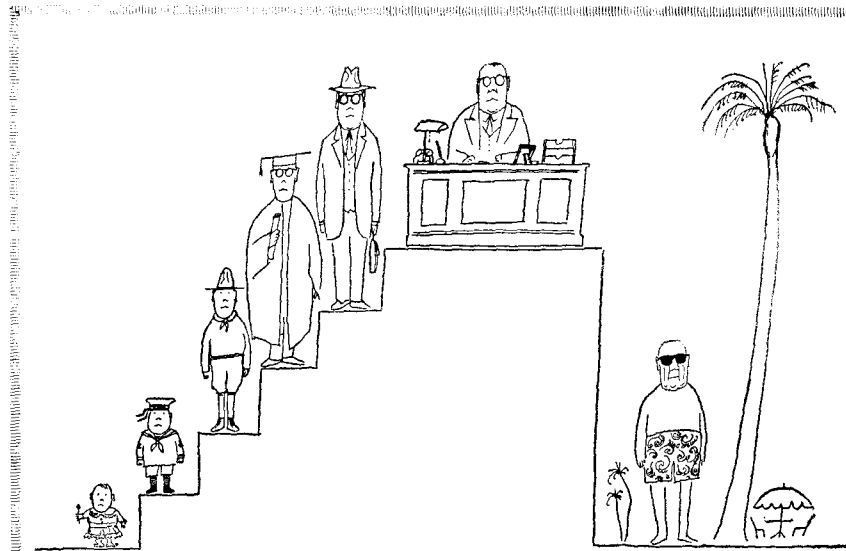
—From *"My Several Worlds,"* by Pearl S. Buck (to be published by John Day on Nov. 8).

## A Question of Taste

**A** GREAT many people enjoy having taste, but too few of them really enjoy the things they have taste about. Or, to put it another way, they are like a man who takes pleasure in his excellent taste in women but takes no pleasure at all in a woman. One of the things that is most the matter with American taste is that those who worry hardest about it are not worrying about enjoying the fruits of their taste; they are just worrying about taste itself. . . .

No one that I know of who talks about taste defines it, and one of the reasons they do not is that they cannot. I do not know what good taste is. I do know that taste is not constant and that it is a creature of circumstance. I also know that one measure of a man's taste is what he will put up with. Furthermore, it seems apparent that not only is one generation's good taste very likely to be the next generation's bad taste, but one individual's ideas about what is good taste and bad taste change as he matures, moves to a different place or a different way of living, and acquires new sets of values for judging not only his surroundings but what he wants out of life. It is not easy to pin a definition on anything so fluid or so elusive.

But it does seem to me that taste is made up of three things that are common to everyone. One is education, which includes not only formal



—From *"The Passport,"* by Saul Steinberg (to be published Oct. 7 by Harper's).

but informal education and environment. Another is sensibility, which Webster's defines as "the ability to perceive or receive sensation." And the third is morality—the kinds of beliefs and principles which direct one's behavior and set a pattern for judging the behavior of others. Education, sensibility, and morality—these seem to me to be the components of taste.

—From *"The Tastemakers,"* by Russell Lynes (to be published by Harper on Oct. 6).

## Women as Professors

**O**F RECENT years I have been troubled occasionally by the thought that in schools and colleges there has arisen a particularly cruel and unwholesome discrimination against unmarried women for some teaching and administrative posts. This is due in part to the attitude towards the unmarried of certain of the less responsible psychologists and psychiatrists of the day, which tends

to voice disrespect for spinsters in the teaching profession as "inhibited" and "frustrated." After all, many of our sex can never marry; women outnumber the men. There are plenty of other lines of work open to them today, where the spinster status is not unwelcome. But why drive them away from a profession which for generations has been natural and congenial to them? In the past hundreds of thousands of pupils have owed and given them deep gratitude and affection. Children have at home married women for mothers, to provide them with maternal instinct and care. Why should they not profit from a different type of nurture in school? The tendency of today to regard celibate teachers as "frustrated"—except the respected and competent nuns in the Catholic teaching orders—threatens deprivation to many children and hardship to women who, like those of past centuries, could give talents and wholehearted devotion to the teaching profession.

Married or unmarried, women's chances of getting professorships in colleges or universities have deteriorated, I fear, during the last thirty years. Most colleges for women, which during their early decades had a large majority of women on their faculties, have during the past quarter-century made great efforts to secure a considerable proportion of men. As it is far from easy for women to obtain a post of professorial rank in a co-educational institution, this has made the situation rather worse than it used to be. I do not know the solution except to try to persuade the men's colleges and the coeducational ones to realize that it is good for

young people to be taught by both sexes. Sometimes I think this can be done if we train up a sufficient number of distinguished women scholars and teachers. But can we, if girls are taught almost entirely by men professors and develop a kind of inferiority complex?

A few days ago (December 1952) I asked a young woman who was a junior with top marks at one of our best universities whether she had any woman professor. "No," she answered, "I haven't. I never thought of a woman professor. I don't believe I should like to study under one."

—From *"Many a Good Crusade,"* the memoirs of Virginia Crocheron Guildersleeve, former dean of Barnard College (to be published by Macmillan on Nov. 19).

## Bird Gag

"**R**UNNING GAGS" were very important in radio. A running gag is a comedy bit of business carried over from program to program that will stimulate the listener's interest to the point where he will want to tune in every week to follow the development of the gag.

They are difficult to develop. We stumbled on one that showed promise. We interviewed a retired fireman who owned a talking mynah bird. The mynah bird looks like a small patent-leather crow. Most of the talking birds repeat words they have been taught. The parrot will say "Polly wants a cracker" only if you start the conversation. The mynah can answer questions. The man we planned to interview would say, "What does

Mae West say?" and the bird would answer, "Come up and see me sometime. Come up and see me sometime." The first time the mynah bird appeared it talked all afternoon at rehearsal. It talked all night backstage. But when we were on the air and the bird was brought to the microphone it was mute. The owner pleaded with the mynah. He threatened it. Nothing audible happened. The audience started laughing. The owner was embarrassed. Finally, I invited him to bring the bird back on the program the next week and we would try again.

The following week the bird talked all day and night around the studio. When it was brought to the microphone the owner addressed the mynah with his usual opening line, "What does Mae West say?" The bird not only said nothing—it looked at the owner as though he owed three years' dues to the Audubon Society. Again the bird was speechless. Again there were threats, cajoling to no avail. Again I invited the owner back.

For five or six weeks the bird was brought back to the program. It still refused to talk. We were receiving hundreds of letters telling us how to get the bird to talk—"Put out the lights in the studio," "Soak its birdseed in hot milk," and so forth. We were getting newspaper publicity from coast to coast. Some Congressman down in Washington had advised another Congressman to listen to our bird and learn to shut up.

Just as we had a running gag that had caught the country's fancy, one of the advertising agency executives sent word that the mynah bird would have to be taken off the program. There was a rumor, he intimated, that we had concealed the original bird and were using a feathered decoy to make sure there would be no bird talk. We argued and argued and got no place. Trying to move the agency man was like an armless man trying to move his rook in a chess game.

For the final appearance of the mynah bird we allowed thirty minutes to permit the owner to shout his "What does Mae West say?" to his heart's content. After about twenty minutes of this solo the mynah bird gave up and answered, "Come up and see me sometime. Come up and see me sometime." Our running gag had run its course. The advertising man was wrong about the feathered decoy, but I learned early in radio never to argue with an executive. I always say, "The only thing you can tell an advertising man is that he is fortunate that he isn't in some other business."

—From *"Treadmill to Oblivion,"* by Fred Allen (to be published Nov. 4 by Little, Brown).

## Nocturne

By Elizabeth Bartlett

**I** HAVE stilled my heart with silent words  
To listen to the violins  
And sit and nod and dream of birds  
Flown far beyond their origins

The coward years have curbed my tongue  
That once spoke music of its own  
For rash it is to quote the young  
With voice grown harsh in feeble tone

In the quicksands of my mind I hear  
The brave loud cries—like sunken stones  
They croak bass to the fiddling year  
While an old man clings to tired bones

Half listen, half hear the cheating viols  
Sing the closing in of wings on strings  
As though a meeting were of souls  
To end all winters and all springs