

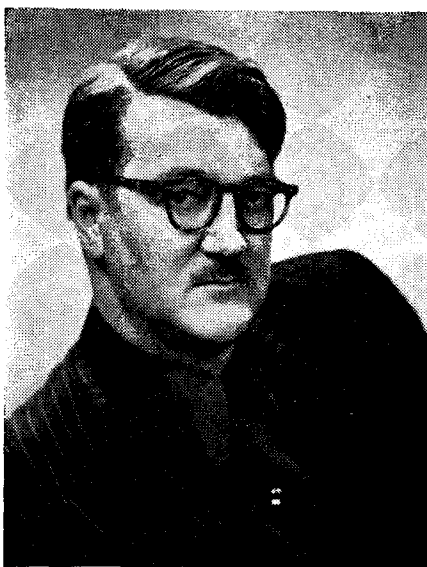
## Miss's Masters

**"High Water,"** by Richard Bissell (Little, Brown. 280 pp. \$3.75), tells, with amusing incident and salty dialogue, about a group of modern steamboatmen shepherding eight coal barges up the Mississippi.

By Thomas E. Cooney

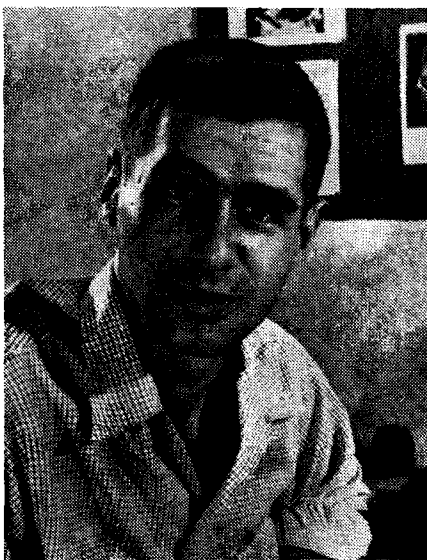
THE steam packets with their grand ballrooms and crystal chandeliers have disappeared from the Mississippi, but the men who run today's diesel-powered tankers and towboats are still called "steamboat men," and they still work on the river for the same reason Mark Twain did: they love it. Duke, the Mate of the towboat *Royal Prince*, who tells Richard Bissell's story in "High Water," says that "there is something about it that you might call Romance, or you might call it feeble-mindedness depending on your age and state of mind, which gets under your skin and you can't get away from it; somehow there is one hell of a lot of charm, as the travel folders say, about the Upper Mississippi River . . ." Casey and Ironhat the pilots, Grease Cup the engineer, and One Eye the deckhand think so, too, but they'd never admit it.

When the *Royal Prince* leaves St. Louis to shove eight coal barges up to St. Paul the river is swollen with rain that has fallen days before in Minnesota and Wisconsin. As the tow passes Hannibal, Missouri, making seven miles an hour through the water but less than two over the bottom, the river is still rising because it is still raining up north. By this time the crew are snapping at each other, chicken coops and houses are floating down the river, and there is something wrong with the steering engine. When they rescue Marie Chouteau, sixteen years old and half naked, from the roof of her father's island farmhouse, the men are sure that with a woman aboard they are headed for real trouble. They are right. The flood is so strong that the *Royal Prince* has to "double trip." This means that they have to tie up half their barges, take half of them up the river twenty miles or so, and then go back down to leapfrog the first group of barges up past the second group. One Eye is left camping out on the tied-up barges with plenty of rations and a whole library of comic books, but when the towboat comes back he has disappeared. Darkness, rain, and the Captain's worry about the flood make the search for One Eye short and fruitless. The *Royal Prince* goes plugging back



—Hruska.

Richard Bissell—"same old river."



—P. Charbonnet.

Evan Hunter—"a complex organism."

up the river, and just above the railroad bridge at Quincy, with most of the crew asleep below and Marie locked in her room, the steering goes out completely. Boat and tow quickly broach to the current and go sweeping down onto the concrete bridge pier . . .

I would be doing Mr. Bissell an injustice, though, if I left the reader with the impression that this is just an adventure story. The author of "A Stretch on the River" and "7½ Cents" was a river pilot himself, and with the salty monologue of Duke, the anecdotes of life in the modern river towns, and the lonely individualists who man the *Royal Prince*, he demonstrates that the Mississippi is still the same old river. When Duke goes ashore at Hannibal he runs across an old man with a white moustache, long hair, and a rumpled linen suit. It is a tribute to Mr. Bissell's skill that the reader does not resent this apparition.

## Cold-War Class

**"The Blackboard Jungle,"** by Evan Hunter (Simon & Schuster. 309 pp. \$3.50), is the story of an idealistic young man named Richard Dadier and his disillusioning first year of teaching at a New York City vocational high school.

By Nathan Rothman

EVAN HUNTER'S "The Blackboard Jungle" is the most realistic account I have ever read of life in a New York City vocational high school. I can testify to its accuracy, having had some years of experience in one of them, as has Mr. Hunter. His novel more than matches the sensations in some of the stories we have seen recently, in newspapers that have become happily school-conscious. But it is free of their distortions and dishonesty; it makes no easy moral assumptions nor does it arrive at righteous judgments. Mr. Hunter's North Manual Trades High—it is fairly typical—is a complex organism, the resultant of many forces, economic facts, social emotions, hostilities, suspicions. It can, if it is not to be considered irreparable, be handled only with understanding, courage, in the last analysis, humanity. Nothing else will work. You won't find that in the newspaper accounts, but it is here, implicitly stated in Mr. Hunter's story, and Richard Dadier, the young teacher, is a human and spirited embodiment of that statement.

Dadier's history as we read it covers one term, five months, of teaching in his new job at North Trades. It should be said at once that Mr. Hunter has telescoped a vast body of material into that five months. Nobody ever experienced so much, learned so much, in one term of teaching. The alternative, of course, would be a longer and less integrated document, and I am willing to accept this telescoping as a necessary device. Otherwise Dadier's history is incontrovertible. If you have been teaching in a vocational high school for four years, all of this has happened to you, or your neighbor. You have been greeted with, "Hey, teach!" You have set down some requirements and been told, "Dig that cat, he's playin' it hard," or "Teach', you ever try to fight thirty-five guys at once?" You have faced the cold war in the classroom, and sometimes the hot war in the stairwells or outside the school on a dark night. You have seen the offerings you made riotously rejected—the phonograph records broken, the pictures de-

faced, the windows and blackboards cracked. And you have had to face a boy with a knife.

How do you take all this? Josh Edwards, who expected teaching to be something else—and he had a right to expect that—quits, a broken and disillusioned man. Solly Klein, the school philosopher, knows how to let it all run off his back. He says, "This is the garbage can of the educational system. Our job is to sit on the lid . . . In a dump like this it's only the philosopher who survives . . ." And the Solly Kleins are the strong backbone of the North Trades schools. But there are other philosophies; there have to be. When Richard Dadier learns to pass beyond Klein's survival level to one of actual dedication to his difficult job, when he struggles to reach that unreachable gang of his, catches them by surprise with his eager, unhackneyed use of the Heywood Broun essay "The Fifty-first Dragon" and exults inwardly, *I've broken through, I've reached them*—then we are as close to the meaning of his whole experience as we can come. There is no happy ending. This very lesson is followed by a vicious experience with Artie West, the blind antagonist, the kid with the knife that you read about. But the whole picture is here, every element of it. Mr. Hunter has been particularly good with his portraits of the faculty and, even more, the pupils. Most memorable is the Negro boy Gregory Miller, himself so complex a figure.



## Eminent Ancestress

**"Katherine," by Anya Seton** (Houghton Mifflin, 588 pp. \$3.95), is a novel about Katherine Swynford, who as a girl made Chaucer's pilgrimage to Canterbury and in time became the ancestress of every English monarch from Edward IV to Elizabeth II.

By Thomas Caldecot Chubb

**"W**HAN that Aprille with his shoures soote," as Katherine Swynford's brother-in-law so liltily put it, had, in the year 1366, "the droughte of Merche perced to the roote," there rode forth from the little Kentish convent of Sheppey, a girl of sixteen who had "large gray eyes fringed by dark lashes . . . [a] skin milky smooth with a rose flush . . . [and a] full mouth wider than the pouting lips admired at court," yet one that "betokened a lustiness that any man would find challenging, as did the flare of her nostrils and the cleft in her round chin."

She had a rendezvous with legend and history. The daughter of a plain but vain Flemish knight, Sir Payn (i.e., Paon or Peacock) de Roet, the sister of that keen, practical Philippa who was to keep Geoffrey Chaucer both contented and slightly sharp in his attitude toward women, Katherine—for it was Katherine Swynford who thus rode—was to become first the unwilling bride of a loutish Saxon, Sir Hugh Swynford, and then the lifelong mistress of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. When they were middle-aged the Duke married her, her children were legitimized, and since royal standards were less rigid than in 1936, she became in effect the second lady of the land.

In her first role, she took her place beside fair Rosamond—Henry II's Rosamond Clifford—as the heroine of one of England's most fascinating royal romances. As the wife of John of Gaunt, she became, through her daughter Joan and her son John Beaufort, the ancestress of every English monarch from Edward IV to Elizabeth II.

She is now the subject of a bulky and well-documented historical novel—the 588-page "Katherine," by Anya Seton. Justly or unjustly, Miss Seton has hitherto been regarded as an author whose works had more popular appeal than literary merit. Nothing could be less true of "Katherine."

For my money, this intricate and amazing story, with its keen analyses of human character, and with its stirring background of an England dis-

turbed by the Black Death and the consequent social turmoil led by Wat Tyler and John Ball, is one of the best pieces of historical fiction, not merely of 1954, but of the past half dozen years. Not that the popular appeal is lacking—in this respect, it should equal anything by Samuel Shellabarger or Thomas B. Costain. But it has much more to commend it than easy readability. Like the new technique of Cinemascope, it has depth as well as color and élan.

Basically, it is the book of Katherine Swynford, and as such it deals with a starry-eyed young lady; with an unhappy wife; with a matured woman deeply involved in a love affair that she knows has its fringes of disaster; with a deeply loyal mother; with a patient Griselda; and finally with a happy, if but briefly happy, ending. But though it is Katherine's book, there are other people in it, and they are real too—whether they be the appealing escaped serf, Cob o' Fenton; the anchoress, Dame Julian, or the sultry, moody, and wilful young King Richard II.

Not being a specialist on Plantagenet England, I cannot comment on the book's accuracy. It gives the effect of accuracy. (The only error I detected was small. Miss Seton calls the Visconti—whose name means Viscount—merchant princes.) But I can point out that "Katherine" has action, vividness, and insight. The first two qualities are frequent in modern historical fiction. The last gives the book its distinction, being more rare.

## Notes

**POOR WHITE ON THE MAKE:** Following in the tradition of the local colorists who flourished after the Civil War, Francis Irby Gwaltney concentrates his attention in "The Yeller-Headed Summer" (Rinehart, \$3) on a local group that he knows intimately—the Bedders of Arkansas. These are the sharecroppers, the poor whites who farm the river beds: characteristically "thin people, long-faced and narrow-headed," traditionally in constant conflict with the Good Families.

Jack Winters, a Bedder by birth and the requisite physical characteristics, attempts to defy tradition by gaining a tenuous foothold within the G. F.'s select circle. This he accomplishes by talking his way into the position of town constable—which, in Walnut Creek, Arkansas, carries with it the distinction and privilege of wearing a badge, carrying a gun, and blowing the siren on the State Police car. But when Faye Williams (a daughter in the best G. F.) is murdered and Jack

(Continued on page 32)