

Innocent in the Jaws of Life

"Trial," by Don M. Mankiewicz (Harper, 306 pp. \$3.50), which won the Harper Novel Prize for 1955, tells a professor of law who becomes involved in a rape-murder case, and learns much about law, life, love, and communism from the experience.

by Oliver La Farge

PUBLISHERS' prize novels, like O. Henry short-story awards, often leave the reader wondering. But Don M. Mankiewicz's "Trial," picked out of 886 entries for the \$10,000 first prize in Harper's current prize Novel Contest, eminently deserves the distinction.

It is not the sort of book that the *Artisan Review* is going to publish says about. But Mr. Mankiewicz is clearly a natural storyteller; his style is simple and unaffected, he maintains continuous action, and his characterizations are convincing. He is the sort of writer present-day literary critics pass by, since he attempts nothing new and unusual—unless we speak down and admit that telling a story freshly and well is not exactly usual." It is some time since I have read a novel with so uncomplicated a sense of plain enjoyment.

The bare story is an old one, the tale of the cloistered innocent thrust suddenly into a world of wolves, to which the writer has given an interesting twist. His hero, David Blake, is a professor of law who, in order to keep his position, sets out to get some experience in the actual practice of his subject. By accident he lands in a

murder case in which the defendant, a Mexican-American, is due to be railroaded. The defense has been taken over by a likable and eccentric lawyer who, unknown to Blake, is a Communist. Out of this mixture of potential explosives grows the story.

The education of David Blake is drastic. He runs into everything from a jury panel that has been tampered with through mob violence to the typical Communist perversion of a good cause for ulterior ends. The left-wing rally in New York and Communist techniques of money-raising, incidentally, are beautifully handled, revealingly, penetratingly, and without argument or caricature, the straight narrative speaking amply for itself.

The courtroom scenes, to this layman, are splendid. I found them consistently exciting and could have done with more of them. Very nicely handled is Blake's own slowly growing suspicion, his eventual discovery of the position into which he has been lured, and where it all lands him. His innocence, integrity, and ability make an excellent foil for the shenanigans of both left and right in which he has become involved.

There is intertwined with this a love affair that is pleasantly set forth, made to fit well into the story, yet is not essential to it. It is there, one feels, for lagniappe—or to help sales. To the end I found that I didn't know whether the young woman loved Blake, or was simply equipped with left-wing round heels.

What gives Mr. Mankiewicz's book weight is his neat balancing of three interacting political vices—simple race prejudice, McCarthy-type pseudo-anti-Communist smearing, and Communism itself. The obvious conclusion would be to have these factors destroy the hero, who is caught between them. With admirable restraint the author avoids obvious tragedy. The man is defeated, but he is not destroyed.

One very minor item is a constant irritant to anyone at all familiar with Spanish names, let alone the Spanish language. The defendant's Mexican mother is an important secondary character, whose name is mentioned frequently. Mr. Mankiewicz is under the all too common impression that in Spanish there exists a woman's name written "Consuela." There does not.



THE AUTHOR: Precocious, controlled, witty, knowledgeable are some of the adjectives a close friend recently applied to Don M. Mankiewicz, who, at the age of thirty-two, is the author of two novels, "See How They Run" (1951), an examination of American racetrack culture, and "Trial." Before and between novels during the past six years Mankiewicz, who lives in East Norwich, L.I., has kept his wife and two children in bread and himself in cigars as an agile free-lance writer. This has involved a steady round of stories, articles (*The New Yorker*, *Cosmopolitan*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*), television scripts, three screen treatments, and one screenplay—for "Trial," which he is now putting together for M-G-M. When he is not working—he has grossed over \$50,000 on his two books—Mankiewicz plays seven-card stud and the horses with icy aplomb (he published a profitable tipsheet while an undergraduate at Columbia), is a Giants fan, and admires Hemingway, London, Hersey, and Mark Harris. He also ran well but unsuccessfully for the New York State Assembly in 1952, and is vice-chairman of the Nassau County Democratic Organization, a rather formidable office in the ivied landscape where several ribald celebrations were thrown on the day that FDR died. Mankiewicz, who was born in Berlin, owes some of these Renaissance talents to his forebears, for his grandfather was a minor politician, his father, Herman J., was a member of the Algonquin Round Table, as well as an excellent screenwriter ("Citizen Kane"), and his uncle, Joseph L., is, of course, the acidulous fellow who did "All About Eve." Pleased with the reception thus far of "Trial," Mankiewicz is nonetheless concerned about one aspect of the book. "How my book has come to be referred to in publishing circles as 'The Trial' is beyond me," he said the other day, "except that I have a good friend in Hollywood who calls America's leading news-magazine *The Time*. If I wanted to use a title like 'The Trial' I would have chosen 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn'."

—WHITNEY BALLIETT.





"... all very gay and lighthearted and frivolous."

Trollopian Romp in Plumplington

"The Two Heroines of Plumplington," by Anthony Trollope (Oxford University Press. 128 pp. \$3), is a novelette about Barsetshire, written years after the author deserted the county in which he achieved his greatest literary successes, now published for the first time in book covers. Our reviewer, Bradford A. Booth, edited *"The Letters of Anthony Trollope."*

By Bradford A. Booth

IN 1866 at the height of his power Anthony Trollope overheard two clergymen criticizing his habit of pursuing the same characters through several novels. He promptly went home, killed off Mrs. Proudie, and changed the title of his work in progress to "The Last Chronicle of Barset." Subsequently he resisted the pressure of sentimentalists who urged him to resume the Barsetshire series, and it is a familiar statement that he never returned to his beloved county. Nevertheless, he published in an obscure journal in the very month of his death "The Two Heroines of Plumplington, a novelette whose setting is the second town of Barsetshire." It has recently been made available in book form for the first time.

True, there is not much of Barsetshire in "The Two Heroines." The chief characters are all new. But Harry Gresham, obviously the son of Frank Gresham and Mary Thorne, stirs memories of "Doctor Thorne"; Mr. Greenmantle has often been the guest of the Duke of Omnium at Gatherum Castle; and the great con-

troversy about Hiram's Hospital, central to the development of "The Wardens" and "Barchester Towers," still rages.

Trollopians will also feel quite at home with the story. Emily Greenmantle's father, the bank manager, opposes his daughter's marriage to Philip Hughes on social and financial grounds. On the other side of the tracks Hickory Peppercorn, the brewer, for similar reasons opposes the marriage of his daughter Polly to Jack Hollycombe, the malt salesman. The ambitious fathers are of course frustrated by the determined young lovers, who enlist the friendly aid of Dr. Freeborn, the rector, who invites the families and the suitors to Christmas dinner. The warmth of this happy occasion quickly thaws the parental prejudices.

Trollope had used this plot at least three times before with rather melancholy results. Here he succeeds. Nobody is likely to contend that "The Two Heroines" markedly enhances Trollope's reputation, yet it is a graceful bagatelle, an airy inconsequentiality, a charming *pièce d'adieu*. It is not serious drama, as are his other treatments of the same material, but comedy. Neither author nor characters take the story seriously. There is a conspiracy among all involved to step through the routines solemnly but with a twinkle of amusement at the deception. It is almost as though Trollope were spoofing himself. One fully expects that, as in an Elizabethan comedy, the characters will join hands at the conclusion and dance off the stage to hymeneal music. It is all very gay and lighthearted and frivolous, for

Trollope tells his story tongue-cheek.

So much of the work of Trollope in his later years is labored and tedious that it is cheering to find him writing with something of his former vitality and charm. The old mill horse turned back to the pasture will kick up his heels at the smell of familiar fields. So Barsetshire revisited must have stirred a host of memories in the mind of the failing novelist and revived for a moment the grace of earlier days. In one of his late letters Trollope told Arthur Tilley that there is not a passage in "Barchester Towers" which he did not remember: "The writer never forgets." One can imagine that as he placed his two heroines in Barsetshire he saw once more Septimus Hardcastle standing unhappily in the quad of Hiram's Hospital as the archdeacon made his ringing speech to the bedridden men; Mrs. Proudie rising in terrible wrath against Bertie Stanhope when at the reception her gown is torn by Doctor Thorne throwing about the brother's child the protection of his love; Lucy Robarts, in the inexorable blindness of her pride, bending Lady Lufton to her will; Johnny Eamsett settling his score with Adolph Crosbie on the railway platform, and perhaps most vividly, Josiah Crawley effectively silencing at last the bishop's wife.

Anthony Trollope had a positive personality. On the surface he was gruff, stentorian, and somewhat abrasive; but in his deeper emotions he was shy, tender, affectionate, and almost womanly. It is these softer traits that shine through "The Two Heroines." But as one regards the totality of his work one is impressed most of all with his balance, his normality, his freedom from cant, and his pervasive common sense. These are the qualities which he carried most notably into his fiction, and it is these which have preserved his work in another century. Susceptible to marriage

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—Illustrations from "Barchester Towers" (Oxford University Press)

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