

somewhere along the way man has made a hell of a mess of it" as freely as he scatters his illegitimate children, black, yellow, and white. He is a dedicated one-hoss doctor, a great human being. Some of his big scenes—as a young man burying the just-delivered body of one of his bastards, as an ancient walking naked through the mists and communing with his Gawd—are real and moving, and bear on them the touch of greatness. But Old Doc, like the novel he dominates, is a curious mixture of the real and the unreal: he is also a fraud and a leather-lunged windbag. I can never believe in him completely; I can accept him as a human being about 50 per cent of the time.

Herein lies the major weakness of Mr. Brandon's novel: the characters are credible up to a certain point only. Young Doc, for example, the consecrated modern surgeon, is a case in point. At times he is as real as rain, as compelling as hunger. At other times he is just one more long-winded spouter of rhetoric in the Byronic tradition. Similarly Jezebel, who wants Young Doc the way a cat wants catnip but marries instead a wealthy, well-born "toad"; Young Doc's brother, who becomes a mealy-mouthed



hypocrite of a "fashionable" minister; their light-fingered mother; and many others. Even Mr. Brandon's magnificent Negroes say, think, and do things so incongruous as to shatter the illusion of reality; witness Mama Amazon's "Lawd, I's just ugly enough to be good-lookin, built lak a Persian mare, and once I plunges into that church with my thighs encased in this pink taffeta, people's eyes gonna pop." In the words of Young Doc when Jezebel, spread out like a bowl of overripe fruit upon her opulent couch, insists that he take her: "This was beyond belief."

What a dedicated, creative editor like the late Maxwell Perkins might have done with Mr. Brandon's manuscript is interesting to speculate. I think the result might have been a great novel. For there is some greatness in "Green Pond," and much goodness. But it is frequently overwhelmed by bombast, repetition, and artificiality. One can only hope that Mr. Brandon will not stop here.

Notes

CRAZY, MIXED-UP WORLD: In "Cards of Identity" (Vanguard, \$3.75), Nigel Dennis sets out to satirize a sizable hunk of contemporary chaos. "One comes home with the keys and finds that all the locks have been changed," complains a character in search of solidity. "All the initials have gone from inside the bowler hats. All the value's gone out of the currency. There's no meaning in the church bells, no punch left in the hyphens of surnames. . . . If I don't get an identity soon I shall start looking as helpless and vacant as everyone else." Mr. Dennis obligingly tries to fill this vacancy and others by means of a spiritual *Turnverein* called the Identity Club, which provides characters for its faceless members. The Identity Club meets for its periodic soiree at Hyde's Mortimer, a present-day Crotchett Castle (staffed by locals who have been mesmerized into assuming the identities of servants who work without pay).

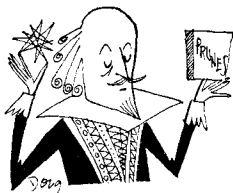
With the stage thus set for a round of caustic hi-jinks, "Cards of Identity" proceeds to topple in all directions. The club members read papers lampooning all manner of things—but the wit in these lengthy perorations is too labored and too meager to excuse the stalemate they inflict on the novel. A Shakespearean masque of overwhelming dullness is performed, in the course of which the club's president is realistically done in. The law arrives and the members slither off to reassemble their plastic facades. (Maybe in Jekyll's Mortimer?)

The biggest question mark in this melange of missing personalities is the precise identity of the submerged author himself. When the last schizophrenic has flown Hyde's Mortimer Mr. Dennis's own point of view is still the Identity Club's best kept secret.

—MARTIN LEVIN.

GROWING UP IN MICHIGAN: Stories about the growing pains of American adolescent boys are not uncommon, but they have often been uncommonly well written. Richard Erno, in a first novel called "My Old Man" (Crown, \$3), doesn't measure up to Twain or Hemingway or Sherwood Anderson, but, though he owes a bow of acknowledgment to all three of the above-named, he has obviously told his own story, or his own version of a universal one, and he has brought an honesty of feeling to many of his scenes which makes them ring very true.

Set in a small town in Michigan in
(Continued on page 39)



Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

SHAKESPEARE AS A ONE-TIMER

Please find below an assortment of Shakespearean quotations each of which contains a word that the playwright used only once in all his plays. You are asked to identify, in each instance, the word, the play, and the speaker. Scoring is in abeyance this week—let your conscience be your guide, and park as long as you want. Answers on page 22.

1. "The play, I remember, pleased not the multitude: 'twas caviare to the general."
2. "This my hand would rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine
Making the green one red."
3. "And I have heard, Apollodorus carried
A certain queen to Caesar in a mattress."
4. "It shall be full of poise and difficult weight
And fearful to be granted."
5. "Come on, sir knave, have done your foolishness
And tell me how thou hast disposed thy charge."
6. "I find my zenith doth depend upon
A most auspicious star."
7. "Four pound of prunes, and as many of raisins o' the sun."
8. "She did show favor to the youth in your sight only to exasperate you,
to awake your dormouse valor."
9. "Thou hast caused printing to be used, and, contrary to the king, his crown
and dignity, thou hast built a paper-mill."
10. "I fear not Goliath with a weaver's beam, because I know also life is a
shuttle."

Creative Thaw in Russia

"The Thaw," by Ilya Ehrenburg (translated by Manya Harari. Henry Regnery. 230 pp. \$3.50), the latest novel of Soviet Russia's best-known writer, provides Professor Ernest J. Simmons of Columbia University's Russian Institute with an occasion to discuss the new turnings of the USSR's official policy towards the arts.

By Ernest J. Simmons

IN THE case of Ilya Ehrenburg's "The Thaw" we have a perhaps unique instance of a novel to which the publisher has added at the end a lengthy supplement concerning the work and related matters. And the procedure becomes more mystifying, at least from the publisher's point of view, when we read in the supplement, contributed by Russell Kirk: "This novel is so overpoweringly dull and formless, so flatly and falteringly written, so deficient in analysis and description of its characters, that it seems like one subtle burlesque of letters in modern Russia." The mystery is somewhat clarified, however, when we reflect that "The Thaw" is a novel by a Soviet author and that this translation of it is appearing in the United States in 1955.

The quoted judgment of Mr. Kirk seems a bit harsh. The novel is not "overpoweringly dull"; it might be more charitable to say that there is an amiable dullness about certain sections of it but that the rest sustains interest. There are at least three characters that are pretty well realized (Volodya Pukhov, his father, and Lena), and the style is not exactly flat—it has more verve in the original Russian. However, the novel is formless, and the whole gives the impression of having been written in considerable haste.

Ehrenburg is more of a journalist than a novelist. Among his Soviet rivals he lacks the profound engagement with life that so wonderfully dignifies the best fiction of Mikhail Sholokhov, nor has he anything of the sensitivity and feeling for human character of Konstantin Fedin, or the psychological density and brilliant language of Leonid Leonov, though at times he is capable of a witty, ef-

fective style in fiction. "The Thaw" cannot be compared with the often amusing and competent early tales of Ehrenburg, and it is even inferior to his war and postwar novels, such as "The Fall of Paris," "The Storm," and "The Ninth Wave."

Yet "The Thaw" deserves the attention of American readers, for it has become an historical document in the extensive postwar protest against the extremes of Communist Party dictation in the arts. Contrary to Mr. Kirk's view, this protest was not initiated by Stalin's death, though it was very much accelerated by that event.

It began, in a timid fashion to be sure, two or three years after the 1946 decree of the Central Committee of the Party on literature, a decree which was officially interpreted shortly thereafter, in a speech by the late Andrei Zhdanov, as demanding a literature that would "further the fulfilment of construction and rehabilitation plans . . . promote the development of our country's national economy," and be written in accordance with the Leninist principle of *partiinost'* ("Party spirit" or "conformity to Party dictates").

The result, of course, was a literature of hopeless sterility—"industrial" and "agricultural" fiction, drama, and poetry. The heroes and heroines were Communist supermen and superwomen, with about as much individuality as a row of telephone poles. The plots invariably involved a conflict between the positive hero's fresh ideas on production and the backwardness or "bourgeois survivals" of negative characters, and the resolution of the struggle was nearly always aided by an all-wise district secretary of the Party. The hero fulfilled his personality by completely identifying himself with society in the joy of collective labor. The Soviet reality portrayed was largely an embellished or idealized one, for Socialist realism justifies a presentation of life in the Soviet Union not as it is, but as it should be or must be—the Utopia of the Communist future.

CRITICISM of "Zhdanovism" in literature, tempered by fear and often taking the form of a "criticism of silence" on the part of some famous authors, gradually mounted. The re-

pressive censorship tactics of editors of magazines and publishing firms and of the government Committee on the Affairs of Arts were particularly singled out for attack. After Stalin's death in March 1953 this criticism was intensified and a new note was introduced which demanded that literature be humanized, that love and family life and not the need of crop rotation or the operations of the Bessemer steel process should become the themes of novels and plays. The protest reached its height at the end of 1953 with the publication of two long and remarkable critical articles.

The first was by Ehrenburg, who stressed the artist's need for creative freedom, for the right to select his own subjects and write about them as he pleased. "Is it possible," he pointedly asks, "that there exists a writer so impersonal and so indifferent to everything that one must tell him what to write about?" The second article, "Sincerity in Literature," by Vladimir Pomerantsev, insisted that sincerity must be the test by which a literary work should be judged and not ideological reliability or political loyalty.

It is in the light of this whole postwar period of protest against a literature of hypocrisy and artistic stagnation that the historical significance, if not the esthetic appeal, of "The Thaw," which first appeared in a magazine in the spring of 1954, must be appraised. Actually it had been preceded, by a few months, by Vera Panova's "Seasons of the Year," which, like Ehrenburg's novel, was fiercely attacked by the official critics because it also attempted to describe simple Soviet life and people with a minimum of embellishment. "The Thaw" differs in one major respect—it deliberately singles out the Party's



Ilya Ehrenburg—"spirit of dissent."