

Prime Crimes of '56

By SERGEANT CUFF

THERE is, inevitably, considerable duplication of detail among mystery stories; the wonder is that there is not more. At bottom, of course, mystery stories are *all* duplicates. Crook acts, cop reacts—there's the formula, and it restricts the manipulator much more rigidly than does the only slightly more ancient formula of girl steps out, boy steps after. By duplication, of course, we do not mean deliberate copying. Many mystery gimmicks jelled into mere trade conventions long ago. Take, for instance, the convention of the cop (almost invariably, in this situation, a private eye) who is summoned by telephone to the residence (hotel room, office) of his client and finds the latter stretched out on the floor (bed, desk) shot dead (strangled, knife in back). It would save time and white paper if the author could simply employ a symbol here—Gimmick Number Seven, for example—to indicate that at this point the investigator is called to the residence of his client by telephone and finds, etc., etc. Every reader (and writer) of mysteries can add a hundred items to the list.

Not uncommon, too, are duplications in which the basic structural situation is identical and the details widely different. Two mysteries have appeared in recent months, one by an English

writer, one by an American, in which the premise in each instance was this: Detective goes on warm-water vacation cruise, accompanied by wife; violent death ensues; vacation ends as detective leaps to action. This formula aside, the stories were as different as they could well be; both were published so closely together in point of time that by no stretch of the imagination could either author have been looking over the other author's shoulder during the process of composition.

It is this inevitability of duplication that makes the mystery writer seize with his own particular avidity on any piece of business, any situation, any novelty that real life is willing to toss his way. Two conspicuous examples of this eagerness to grasp at flung crumbs are apparent in mysteries of the past two years.

Crumb Number One is the tape-recorder. The tape-recorder was certainly not unknown before 1955, nor is it at all likely that it had not been employed in English prose fiction in advance of that date. But 1955 and 1956 were the years that saw it transferred in quantity from the status of crux of the courtroom and plaything of the living-room into the imaginative world of the mystery writer. Some of the fictional handlings of the tape-recorder have been highly effective. Its dramatic potentialities are,

after all, pretty obvious and have just begun to be used.

Art has borrowed from life, also, in the composition of several mysteries which have been inspired by the Burgess-McLean affair. These borrowings have been commoner in England than in America, for the transparent reason that the actual case was England's baby. The fictional Burgesses and McLeans are, of course, always caught or killed or reconverted—they are never swallowed up in That Country.

A YEAR ago we noted that one of the more encouraging phenomena of 1955's mystery picture was "the submergence of the toughie yarn." This conclusion was almost certainly inspired by thoughtless wishing. One mystery writer took us good-naturedly to task for this rather offhand generalization—said he wasn't able to sell anything else, much as he wanted to forego pistol-whipping, toe-stamping, shin-kicking, and groin-kneeing in favor of sweetness, light, and nice clean corpses. Well, let us generalize again and say that 1956 saw a resurgence of the toughie, but with a difference. Going over our CRIMINAL RECORDS we note that we have assigned the Verdict "literate toughie" far more frequently than in any previous year.

We subjoin, according to custom, a list of mystery, detective, suspense, what-you-will novels that we read and liked during the year. It is in no sense a "best" list; in this particular cultural field one reader's thrill is another reader's ennui. The arrangement is roughly chronological. We should like to make special mention of "The Mystery Writer's Handbook," edited by Herbert Brean, with contributions by forty-plus members of the Mystery Writers of America (Harper, \$3.95), a manual which the mystery reader too will be able to read with enjoyment and profit.

Fiction

"The Ninth Hour," by Ben Benson (Mill-Morrow, \$3).

"Kiss Her Goodbye," by Wade Miller (Lion, 35¢).

"The Cautious Overshoes," by Margaret Scherf (Crime Club, \$2.75).

"The End of the Track," by Andrew Garve (Harper, \$2.75).

"Mystery Stories," by Stanley Ellin (Simon and Schuster, \$2.75).

"Unappointed Rounds," by Doris Miles Disney (Crime Club, \$2.75).

"What Crime Is It?," by Dorothy Gardiner (Crime Club, \$2.75).

"The Big Bite," by Charles Williams (Dell, 25¢).

"Gideon's Week," by J. J. Marrie (Harper, \$2.95).

MERRY CHRISTMAS, MR. BOOKMAN: This week the gentlemen of Publishers Row had ample cause to make merry. Since last Christmas, according to *Publishers' Weekly*, they had produced a grand total of 13,000 titles, a few more than in 1955, while their sales (\$750,000,000) were up almost 10 per cent from 1955's all-time high. Children's books had done especially well, though there was some question as to whether quality had kept up with quantity among these. Civil War books were also booming. And the publishers noted some even newer trends that boded well for the new year. The number of published novels, which had slumped to 1,923 during the first eleven months of 1955, had risen to 2,049 for the first eleven months of 1956. In addition there had been a noticeable rise in the number of high-priced paperback books. With the entrance of such houses as Van Nostrand, Harcourt, Brace, and several university presses into this field profits for many houses were rolling in from new sources. (Prices on paperbacks went as high as \$1.95 in many instances, a price as high as that commanded by hard-cover books in the not-too-distant past.) The more sober (albeit still merry) gentlemen of Publishers Row were also pleased by a development that may prove of even greater long-term benefit. This autumn three committees of the publishers' jointly sponsored American Book Publishing Council tackled the problems of modernizing some old-fashioned methods of book distribution, book marketing, and book promotion. Christmas in 1957 could be even merrier.

"Fall Over Cliff," by Josephine Bell (Macmillan, \$2.75).

"State of Siege," by Eric Ambler (Knopf, \$3.50).

"Catch a Killer," by Robert Martin (Dodd, Mead, \$2.95).

"Angel's Ransom," by David Dodge (Random House, \$3.50).

"Murder in the Wind," by John D. MacDonald (Dell, 25¢).

"Kiss the Boss Goodbye," by Peter Rabe (Gold Medal, 25¢).

"The Man Who Didn't Fly," by Margot Bennett (Harper, \$3).

"Portrait of Renée," by Harry Davis (Greenberg, \$3).

"Rebecca's Pride," by Donald McNutt Douglas (Harper, \$2.95).

"Voyage Into Violence," by Frances and Richard Lockridge (Lippincott, \$2.50).

"Might as Well Be Dead," by Rex Stout (Viking, \$2.75).

"The Enormous Shadow," by Robert Harling (Harper, \$3.50).

"Tender Is the Knife," by Joan Shepherd (Washburn, \$3).

"One-Way Ticket," by Bert and Dolores Hitchens (Crime Club, \$2.95).

Fact

"Alphonse Bertillon," by Henry T. F. Rhodes (Abelard-Schuman, \$3.75).

"Policeman's Lot," by Harry Söderman (Funk & Wagnalls, \$5).

"The Genteel Murderer," by Charles Norman (Macmillan, \$3.75).

"The Rise of Scotland Yard," by Douglas G. Browne (Putnam, \$5).

"Portrait of a Bad Man," by Tom Tullett (Rinehart, \$3.50).

Verse to Remember

By JOHN CIARDI

AS ONE sits at the year's end and thinks back over the books published that year, it is often difficult to be sure that all the books that come to mind were indeed published within the calendar year. I find myself writing in Rome, where I have not been able to locate an index. Let me trust memory then: a poor way to audit fiscal accounts perhaps, but probably a sounder way to locate an impression of the year's publishing.

Certainly one need pay little attention to the low points of poetry publication. The low points of any one year are always the same, and as bad, as the low points of any other. If there must be special honors for the worst 1956 book by a known-name poet let them be granted to Anne Morrow Lindbergh for "The Unicorn and Other Poems."

Had I to choose the three best books of the year I would certainly list in the order of their publication: Richard Wilbur's "Things of This World," John Berryman's "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet," and Marianne Moore's "Like a Bulwark." Miss Moore's book reached me only days ago, and I can report only that at first reading my high expectation was neither over-

whelmed nor in any way disappointed. Mr. Wilbur's and Mr. Berryman's books add exciting new dimensions to already substantial talents.

For those who live on the eroded side of Parnassus, Edna Millay's "Collected Poems" have appeared, and many a bird is now in the air, including a few real warblers among a number of shot and falling ducks. Among other already established names Roy Campbell's "Talking Bronco," which might better have been titled "Talking Bunco," turns in the usual Campbell performance consisting mostly of sledge hammers beating a half-strung piano; and Peter Viereck's "The Persimmon Tree" manages to turn up a line here and there among badly mangled stuff.

The recent flow of excellent translations continued in 1956, with Richard Wilbur's translation of Molière's "Misanthrope" and William Jay Smith's "Selected Writings of Jules LaFargue" standing out as the two most memorable of the year.

Among other books just received is W. S. Merwin's "Green with Beasts," certainly the one I am most looking forward to in the current stack. Certainly, too, one must pause to acknowledge the latest in John Hall Wheelock's Poets of Today series, a presentation of three first books by three separate authors within a single binding. Wheelock has not missed a year so far (the current volume is Number 3) without turning up at least one of the most interesting new talents of the year.

In general 1956 has confirmed the tendency of the younger poets to work in stricter forms and to have less to say, as it has confirmed the tendency of the older poets to have rather less to say. It may be that the enormous dimensions of the human difficulty can only offer subjects so large as to overwhelm the poem. I still find myself inclined to think that our poets, despite their enormous technical sophistication, have not yet found a form equal to what they must learn to say if our poetry is to express what all poetry must finally express, which is the center of human value in its time. The mistake I feel most of the poets are making is in turning either to conventional forms or, in reaction, to various kinds of formlessness, without enough attention to the possibilities of strict unit and structure in non-conventional forms

