

Twain Rarely Met

"Amrita," by R. Prawer Jhabvala (W. W. Norton. 283 pp. \$3.50), is a comedy, set in modern India, about families linked through marriage. It is reviewed here by John Frederick Muehl, author of "Interview with India."

By John Frederick Muehl

IN MODERN India, as there are two official languages, in an important sense there are two official cultures. "Hindi for patriotism," as the cynical say, "English for communication." For this reason India is perpetually an embarrassment to anthropologists; in the "literature of the world" it is hard to represent. One either dusts off the exotic anonymities or settles for the ubiquitous Mulk Raj Anand. And rarely, in India, do the twain really meet.

But quite recently some exciting things have been happening. A few years ago it was R. K. Narayan who startled the critics of England and America and drew serious comparisons to Gogol and Chekhov. And now it is a woman, Mrs. R. Prawer Jhabvala, with a simple and brilliant little novel, "Amrita." At least three British reviewers have compared her to Jane Austen and the comparison is not only just; it is inevitable.

"Amrita" is the story of two Indian families and of the complicated matrimonial maneuverings which link them, as pertinent and funny a subject in modern India as it was in early-nineteenth-century England. As there was the Bingley-Darcy axis and the Bennet axis then, there are the Chakravartys and the Sahnis now, eternally preoccupied with family status, perpetually on the lookout for the matrimonial main chance. And as Jane Austen was able to arrange their geometry, sister for sister, friend for friend, Mrs. Jhabvala plays off her two families with the same delightful formality and comic balance. Of course it is impossible to summarize "Amrita" as it is impossible to summarize "Pride and Prejudice." The theme of either would sound shallow and whimsical, for summaries do not capture the quality of genius. But the writing in Mrs. Jhabvala's "Amrita" is as clever as anything we have seen for a number of years, in its wonderful delineation of a wide range of characters, in its penetrating comments on human frailty.

Even the minor characters . . . but there are none such. Every character



R. P. Jhabvala—"formality and balance."



William Buchan—"limpid and seductive."

in the book is somehow essential, and while each is eminently believable in himself, each is also point or counterpoint in the literary fugue. There is Hari, who is secretly in love with Amrita, but who gets preoccupied with a baked fish at the critical moment. There is Krishna SenGupta, the sympathetic suitor with the predilection for tragic poses. There is Vazir Dayal, so plausibly irritating in his ignorant affectation of western manners, and there is Mohini, who is morning-sick from the first chapter to the last, till we finally get used to her retching in the background.

In only one sense is "Amrita" a novel "about India." Like R. K. Narayan's, Mrs. Jhabvala's view is one of detachment, of casual amusement, as she watches the struggle between the old and the new. The phenomenon is universal, but it is perhaps best seen at the cross-current of two cultures. And Mrs. Jhabvala is clever enough to contrive a criticism of each in terms of the other.

So perhaps in this book the two traditions have met. Even better, they have arrived in comic juxtaposition. Don't send to know for whom the laugh rings. As in all good comedy, it rings for you.

Ideals and Symbols

"Kumari," by William Buchan (William Morrow. 287 pp. \$3.50), is the story of an Englishman in India who falls in love with two women, one personifying the best of the West, the other the best of the East. Joseph Hitrec, our reviewer, has written several books on contemporary India, one of which, "Son of the Moon," won the Harper Prize.

By Joseph Hitrec

WILLIAM BUCHAN'S first novel "Kumari" has raised some gratuitous comparisons with the book of his father John Buchan, the late Lord Tweedsmuir. Idle and point less though it usually is, such cross referencing evidently holds unbounded fascination for our literary journalists. The plain fact is: "Kumari" owes no filial debts and, beyond using the patronymic made famous by his father, William Buchan the son on his own. "Kumari" is a highly individual first effort that reveals a new writer well worth watching—a sensitive craftsman of language and stylist of considerable evocative power and luminosity.

Armin Wensley, the central person in the novel, is utterly untypical of a hero in realistic fiction. He is even untypical of the Englishmen who used to live and work in India before 1914. An idealized symbol rather than "character," Armin is a living picture of the author's impressions and perceptions in a land teeming with unexpected, a gently rueful observer of the *untergang* of the old order, exceptional young Englishman who loved India well enough to forgive her excesses of climate and temperament, and to wish to make up for follies of his predecessors in any way he could.

Being neither a man of action nor a reformer, Armin could best nurse his nostalgic vision by seeking emotional kinship with people thought and felt as he did, and justified for him the idealized in life of an East and West met, how briefly, in mutual respect and affection. It was this romantic compulsion that led Armin into two love affairs, personifying for him the best in both worlds—one for Laura Johnston, a beautiful married Englishwoman, mercantile Calcutta, and the other with Kumari, an Indian girl, his employer and college friend about to marry. The two stories occupy about ten years and space.

comparatively secure period before the last war with the electric years just before India's independence.

The affair with Laura lasts only a few weeks and is marked by that curious blend of deep attachment, self-conscious intimacy, and outward reticence that one might call British for want of a better word. But while it lasts, the world of Armin Wensley takes on a singing, larger-than-life quality; its colors, sights, and moods are quickened until they become unforgettable. The bazaars of Calcutta, the warm milling of native humanity, the haze over the city's maidans, and the shrill compound voice of Bengal become real and infectious. But Laura's husband summons her home to England and Armin must stay behind and learn to live without her.

By a deft narrative device Buchan now moves his hero toward his second destiny—his love for Kumari. The scene is a tea garden in the hills of Assam, where Armin is visiting his old friend Henry Greenwood, now the heir of an enormous commercial empire. Henry has brought Kumari from an obscure village in Rajputana and is "grooming" her for marriage in his hill house at Rongphar. When Armin gets there, he finds that the lovely child he used to know has grown into a beautiful girl, and his affection deepens into love. At first the bizarre triangle exhibits all signs of coming to a sensible and proper end—as planned by Henry and abetted by Armin himself—but then things begin to go out of hand for all three. The affair comes to a swift end in a series of events precipitated by Henry's sudden change of heart, by Armin's revulsion at his treachery, and by violence among the agents to whom Henry has become a symbol of foreign oppression. The climax is grisly and explosive, although it may seem too "stacked" to the people.

With less delicate hands, "Kumari" might have been just another romance with an Indian setting, a pleasant evening's reading with no special claim to attention. And it is true

William Buchan's fondness for improvisation and plot rigging and often neo-romantic attitudes are the flaws that tend to mar his style and artistry. We hope that he will avoid them in the future. But the good things outweigh them, fortunately. His wonderfully limpid and effective way with a sentence, his perception of a vital and baffling oriental land, his sure rhythms and accents in a narrative form that at the same time an aspect of the book's structure and momentum—win for "Kumari" a real and distinction.

AMERICANA

San Simeon's Great Enigma

"William Randolph Hearst: A New Appraisal," by John K. Winkler (Hastings House, 325 pp. \$5), is its author's second biography of the powerful publisher who died five years ago. It is reviewed below by Stanley Walker, onetime city editor of the New York Herald Tribune.

By Stanley Walker

JOHN K. WINKLER, the lively old-time Hearst reporter who turned biographer, is only one of many analysts who have long been fascinated, amused, repelled, and sometimes enchanted by the life and works of William Randolph Hearst. With Winkler the obsession has lasted a long time. His first study of Hearst was done in 1928 and was by no means a bad job. His second study, "William Randolph: A New Appraisal," done after many a moon has come and gone, is an even better piece of work. Whether it really adds much to the Hearst saga, or will explain the Great Enigma, is a matter for debate and considerable difference of opinion.

Despite the subtitle, "a new appraisal," this freshest Hearst portrait covers much of the old, familiar ground without providing any surprises. Here is the story of the rich, untamed youth who took over a dod-

dering California paper and then moved to New York to astonish the known so-called civilized world. Again we see the great innovator fomenting the war with Spain, building circulation, inventing new approaches for the beguilement of the mass mind, trying desperately with uneven success to become a political power, and finally developing into a sort of sinister folk hero.

A great deal happened to Mr. Hearst between Mr. Winkler's 1928 appraisal and the passing of the titan in 1951, in his eighty-ninth year. Mr. Winkler tells much of the devious machinations by which Hearst helped bring about the nomination of F. D. Roosevelt in the 1932 convention, a stroke which enabled him to get revenge on his ancient enemy, Al Smith. Here, also, is an account of how Hearst broke with Roosevelt and backed Alf Landon in the 1936 race; certainly that break was inevitable.

The Great Depression hit Hearst hard, and Mr. Winkler tells of the period when the bankers actually deprived him of control of his properties, cut his salary, and propelled him into a spree of writing for his papers which lasted for several years, until the crisis was over. At the time of his death Hearst was not in financial distress, though all was not well, and it is going a little far to say, as Mr. Winkler does in his final sentence:



The thirty-two-year-old Hearst acquires the *New York Journal* in 1896, a drawing by the WRH-discovered Homer Davenport.



—From "William Randolph Hearst."

"The High Priests of the Sacred Flame," a cartoon attack by Joseph Keppler on Hearst and Pulitzer in *Puck*.