

THE SNOPESES REVISITED

By JAMES B. MERIWETHER

WILLIAM FAULKNER'S novel "The Hamlet," which appeared in 1940, told the story of what happened to the Southern crossroads community of Frenchman's Bend, around the turn of the century, when it was invaded by the rapacious Snopes family. Now, after seventeen years, a second book about the Snopeses is provided by "The Town," one of his finest novels. (Random House will bring it out on May 1 at \$3.95). His publishers announce that Faulkner is at work on a third volume "The Mansion," which will complete the trilogy devoted to the rise and dominance of Flem Snopes in Yoknapatawpha County.

Members of the Snopes tribe had appeared from the beginning of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha series in short stories and, as minor characters, in novels. But "The Hamlet" made it possible to see clearly the whole pattern of Snopesism. The invasion of Frenchman's Bend was spearheaded by Flem, son of the Civil War bushwhacker and horse thief Ab Snopes. To escape the poverty of his father's life as a sharecropper, Flem became a store clerk. By shrewdness, by ruthlessness, by bringing in an infestation of his relatives, Flem rose and prospered in Frenchman's Bend until he dominated it and sucked it dry. "The Hamlet" ends when he sets out for Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha's county seat, and a new world to conquer.

In "The Town" Faulkner chronicles the history of Snopesism in Jefferson from Flem's arrival there as part owner of a little side-street restaurant, around 1908, until he becomes bank president in 1927. In Jefferson, however, his progress differs from his rise in Frenchman's Bend. His cold-blooded, unprincipled ambition remains the same, but the differences between the two communities and the two times are reflected in the changes he makes in his methods. Flem soon discovers that to achieve power, he needs respectability. He had brought his numerous tribe of cousins into Jefferson as he had into Frenchman's

Bend, but he ruthlessly sacrifices his kinsmen Monty and I. O. Snopes when their activities threaten his precarious respectability.

Soon after Flem's arrival his wife, Eula, becomes involved in an affair with De Spain, the mayor of Jefferson, and Flem's progress in the town is assured. De Spain, a dashing bachelor with the first real automobile in Jefferson, had been elected mayor by a generation who saw in him, and in the coming of the automobile, a symbol of freedom and change from the domination of an older order whose ways had remained unchanged since Reconstruction. "The Town" records the effects of the almost simultaneous impact of Jefferson, of Snopesism, and of the automobile. It is the death of old Bayard Sartoris in an automobile accident that makes it possible for Flem Snopes to climb to the vice presidency and ultimately the presidency of the Sartoris bank.

The events of "The Town" are narrated, a chapter at a time, by three of Faulkner's most important characters: V. K. Ratliff, Gavin Stevens, and Chick Mallison. Ratliff, the itinerant sewing machine salesman, had been the chief opponent of Snopesism in "The Hamlet"; in "The Town" he warns Stevens, who is Chick's uncle, about Flem, and later the two men teach the youthful Chick to fear what Snopesism stands for and to help them fight it. Faulkner uses the different points of view of the three narrators of this novel with brilliant effect: the formal structure of the novel is given unusual vitality and variety by the changes from the imaginative country shrewdness of Ratliff to the discursive idealism of Stevens, to the boy's innocent acceptance of events.

The term "Snopesism," often used by Ratliff and Stevens in "The Town," is not to be equated with the behavior of that entire family, which includes formidable enemies of Flem. It is, rather, the sum of the qualities exemplified by the amoral, devious, unprincipled Flem Snopes himself, dedicated only to the acquisition of money and power.

If Faulkner has made one man the symbol of these characteristics, he is careful to suggest their universal application. Snopesism, it is clear, represents a danger to society not only



from without, but from within. Flem Snopes achieves his greatest successes at the expense of people who usually act in accordance with ethical code, but who yield to the temptation to adopt Snopes's morality at some moment that allows Flem to get the best of them. Flem Snopes got his start in both Frenchman's Bend and in Jefferson when someone tried to cheat him and was himself taken in. De Spain wants Flem's wife and is willing to flout public morality to have her: Flem permits himself to be cuckolded because it gives him the upper hand and he breaks both De Spain and Eula when it serves his purposes to stop overlooking the adultery.

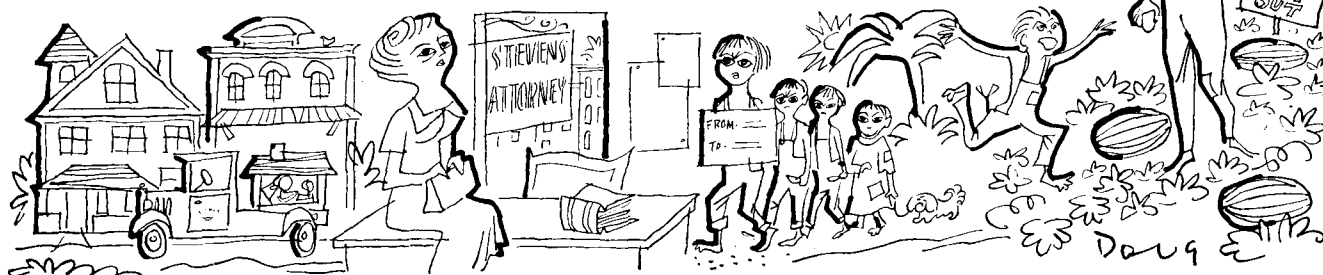
In spite of its serious theme, "The Town" is a genuinely funny book. Ratliff brings with him from "The Hamlet" a countryman's sense of the comic that is representative of the long tradition of Southern frontier humor. Of a somewhat different flavor is a very distinctive small-town humor, which appears in the edgy table talk of the Mallison household and the town gossip about Linda and Eula and their admirers. Faulkner's highly individual touch is evident in the humor of the names of the Snopeses, in the revelation of what Ratliff's initials stand for.

But many episodes of what seems to be pure comedy, like those in the two chapters which incorporate previously published short stories ("Centaur in Brass" and "Mule in the Yard") turn out to have serious overtones which are important to the main thematic development of the novel. Thus the unfortunate Gavin Stevens falls in love with Eula and is mercilessly and comically satirized in various encounters with the virile De Spain. The humor of the book, in such episodes as these, is as basic and profound as its seriousness, and as inseparable from it as in Shakespeare or Cervantes.

"The Town" is a masterpiece. In style and content and structure, or the inseparable combination of all three, it reveals Faulkner at the peak of the powers which at his best have distinguished him beyond his fellows among the writers in English in this century. A self-sufficient and integral work of art, this novel also provides us with an increased understanding and appreciation of the other

works of the Yoknapatawpha series. It will send us back to its predecessor "The Hamlet," because the two works have so much in common and are yet so totally different. It will send us back to "Intruder in the Dust," because it is now easier to see Gavin Stevens in his true light, rather than as the spokesman for Faulkner for whom so many critics have mistaken him. And it leaves us eager to see the whole design of the Snopes trilogy, begun in "The Hamlet" and continued so brilliantly in "The Town," brought to completion in "The Mansion."

GUIDE TO THE SNOPEZ FAMILY. In the novels of William Faulkner members of the infamous Snopes clan, like vermin, have a habit of springing up from anywhere, thereby confusing readers. (This confusion, say the critics, is purposeful. Faulkner wants to emphasize thereby the ubiquitousness of people who behave like Snopes.) Here, however, artist Doug Anderson has provided readers of "The Town" with a guide to the Snopes. All are related to Old Man Snopes (lower right), a dirty fellow who grows watermelons solely in the hope of throwing stones at boys who try to steal them. Old Man Snopes's reputed son Flem, a thoroughly reprehensible fellow, has become president of a bank (upper right). Flem's wife is Eula Snopes (lower panel), who tries to seduce the town lawyer. Eula's daughter reads poetry. The other Snopes of "The Town" are Flem's cousins: Montgomery Ward Snopes, who keeps a scrapbook of pornographic pictures in his photographic studio (lower left); Wallstreet and Admiral Dewey Snopes, who run the town's grocery store (upper left); Byron (upper right) a bank clerk who absconds with funds and later produces four half-caste wandering children (lower right); and Mink Snopes, a murderer locked up in jail (upper right) and the most vicious member of the clan. The most likable Snopes in the book is Eck Snopes (left panel), an ineffectual nightwatchman with a broken neck who, in a vain search for a lost boy, peers into an open oil tank by light of a kerosene lantern and leaves little to remember him by except his steel neckbrace.



Yankee Hector

"The Big War," by Anton Myrer (Appleton-Century-Crofts. 463 pp. \$4.95), undertakes to give meaning to the disintegrative, inhuman, and meaningless experiences that befall a Marine outfit battling on a Pacific island.

By Maxwell Geismar

FOR our young American writers the war experience was catastrophic; and one begins to realize that the boundaries of their life may extend only from the adventures of adolescence to the maelstrom. That is the central defect of Anton Myrer's new novel "The Big War," which in other respects is perhaps the best of all the recent tales of the Pacific.

Mr. Myrer has had it, all right. His descriptions of the Marines in action against the Japanese on the Fanerahan Beachhead—after Tarawa and Saipan—are brilliant and terrifying. This is some of the most eloquent war writing that has been done. But he is also one of the most intelligent and sensitive of these new war novelists, and a writer who is seeking the meaning of compassion. And one realizes what an effort of the will, of moral responsibility, it must take to return to the "norms" of society and civilization. What norms, and what irony!

The purpose of the novel is to give meaning to the most disintegrative, inhuman, and meaningless of all human experiences. Instead of adopting the role of the saint or of the killer, Mr. Myrer has chosen the myth of Hector and Andromache—of the warrior who knows the futility of war—

as a kind of Homeric parallel to his modern story. The hero of "The Big War" is also a "Greek." But Danny Kantaylis was born in a factory town on the Housatonic; he is in love with a respectable middle-class American girl. He returns to the Pacific War not through a lofty "patriotism" (or a yearning sadism) but because there is no other way out of a dirty job.

Mr. Myrer has consciously attempted to draw the portrait of a heroic average man, though it is the American base, and not the Greek archetype, that makes Danny Kantaylis so attractive and tragic as a common soldier. Then there is the cinematic Lieutenant D'Alessandro who collapses in the first battle. There is Alan Newcombe, the Harvard esthete; and Jay O'Neill, the wild Irish boy with the derelict father. There are the slow-moving but canny farm boys in this typical Marine outfit too; and the wise guys who reach for power without mercy and without compunction.

Yet Danny is the conscience, the life spirit, of the group. What the novel affirms is not a belief in social or military institutions—far from it—but the capacity of human decency to survive the worst effects of these institutions. (The group portraits and group relationships within this company of Marines are beautifully done.) It is interesting, too, that while the writers of the First World War turned to social protest, the new generation seeks only the solace and refuge of art. One may wonder how long even the Danny Kantaylises of this world can survive the ravages of another war; and to what extent Mr. Myrer's own return to the classics is a confession of social despair. But meanwhile here is a good new novelist, and an impressive novel indeed.



Anton Myrer—"brilliant and terrifying."

Eyes on the Heights

"Far, Far the Mountain Peak," by John Masters (Viking. 471 pp. \$5), follows five men and women as they achieve in various parts of the world, and especially in India, the destinies they marked out for themselves during a May Week at Cambridge.

By Walter Havighurst

TO HIS projected thirty-five-volume panel of fiction unfolding the three hundred years of British rule in India, John Masters now adds the seventh title, "Far, Far the Mountain Peak." Its period is the first twenty years of the twentieth century, a time of rising nationalist feeling in India and, of course, a period culminating in worldwide war. But the ferment of India and even the upheaval of war are subordinate in this novel to the rigor and drama of mountain climbing. The story ranges from England to the Alps to the Punjab to the high Himalayas, and back again, with some battle scenes in the Dolomites and on the Somme. Its most intense passages, and they are grippingly dramatic, take place on the ridges of the Matterhorn and the ice cliffs of the forbidding mountain Meru.

Peter Savage is a grandson of General Rodney Savage who figured in the Indian Mutiny of 1857. A young man without parents and without fortune, he has a driving ambition and an icy will. He first wonders about mountain climbing in the magical May Week at Cambridge, when a



Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Here, selected by Bonnie White Baker of Fairhope, Alabama, are familiar tag lines which run into other familiar tag lines. Just give the next few words—no worries this time about sources and authors. Continuations on page 27.

1. And now abideth faith, hope and charity, these three: . . .
2. Dearly beloved, we are gathered together . . .
3. Mine eyes have seen the glory . . .
4. We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .
5. When the frost is on the pumpkin . . .
6. The world will little note nor long remember . . .
7. 'Tis better to have loved and lost . . .
8. I pledge allegiance to the flag . . .
9. Experience keeps a dear school . . .
10. Praise God from whom all blessings flow . . .