

## Guilt-Ridden Dixie

**"The Innocent,"** by Madison Jones (Harcourt, Brace, 370 pp. \$4.75), is a story of the South, and particularly a horse, a woman, and a moonshiner.

By John Cook Wyllie

**I**N HIS first novel "The Innocent," Tennessee-born Madison Jones tells three brutal stories (one of a horse, one of a woman, and one of a moonshiner), and he tells them superbly. When an unannounced talent can so emphatically assert itself on first appearance, one bows and pays the author the compliment of candid criticism.

The form of this novel (and incidentally, the only thing innocent in it is its title) is intricate and convoluted; its design is never fully comprehensible. The protagonist breeds a horse, a sort of Metzengersteinish reincarnation of the Gentleman of the Old South, selectively and symbolically inbred to a walking gait, a towering passion, and a glass eye. Then he breeds a woman, and destroys her in the fashion Gentlemen of the Old South have of destroying the objects of their passion. Then he throws down his rod where it is promptly swallowed by the rod of one Aaron McCool, no gentleman at all. (See Exodus 7: 10-12, this being strictly a product of the moonshining Bible Belt.) The book ends in pure cops-and-robbers style, triple-distilled from the sour-mash school of Mickey Spillane.

The prose, unmatched narrative skill aside, is undisciplined. Three different people, for example, have "rusty" voices, and there is a truck "which abrupted onto the square and crossed it shatteringly." At its best the style is sharp, scabrous, and ironic, but this best is often eclipsed by the rem-

nants of an academic love for the merely pretty or the unnecessarily symbolic.

Thematically the novel stands up fine, decisions at last being made in Mr. Jones's guilt-ridden South, whether men accede to them or not. The novel, in fact, ought to be popular in the South, because Southern readers are in general malicious, injecting their malice into anything within their reach, and there is no moral goodness in this book anywhere. The Southerner, when he finds moral goodness in literature, as in Faulkner, is baffled, and mistakes it for indecency. There will be no such mistake made here. This is rough stuff, and the Southerner ought to love it, especially the Gentlemen of the Old South, who have now mostly moved west, even beyond the distant Tennessee about which Mr. Jones so excitingly writes.

### TWO ROMANTICS AND A CHILD GENIUS:

Margery Sharp's "The Eye of Love" (Little, Brown, \$3.95) is the story of a plain, middle-aged couple devoted to Romance with a capital R. At a Chelsea Arts Ball—the time is around 1932, the place, London—Dolores Diver (*née* Hogg) met Harry Gibson, in the fur trade, also romantic by nature. They were in costume. Dolores was a Spanish dancer, naturally, and Harry was done up as a brown paper parcel. It was love at first sight and Miss Diver became a "lady of ambiguous status," set up in a little house with rose-colored curtains and knickknacks provided by Harry. From then on, these two called each other "My Sranish Rose" and "My Big Harry, My King Hal!"

The plot is slight and we know pretty much how it is all going to work out from the start. It is all in the telling—that slightly impish Sharp style. The fur business languishes in the Depression. Harry can no longer maintain the love nest. He gets roped into an engagement with a wealthy girl, as an alternative to, or way out of, bankruptcy. But the Spanish Rose and King Hal languish apart. We hear every sigh and creak of the broken hearts. It is no fair telling who or what brings them together again, but it is no surprise to the reader when it works out that way. After an emotional free-for-all, involving a number of people, there is, of course, a return to True Love in a Cottage.

Wandering through "The Eye of Love" is Martha, Miss Diver's nine-year-old orphan niece, a marvelous creation, a fearful and wonderful young one. Stolid, unresponsive, matter-of-fact, intent on her own affairs, she is compared to "a young pachyderm." Martha turns out to be a child genius

of a sort who, in her own untrammelled way, apparently draws like Modigliani. She has a good deal to do both directly and indirectly with the workings out of our romance. As a character, she is a wonderful oddity, a true independent, and she alone is worth the price of the book. My dream child!

"The Eye of Love" has the usual light touch, the unmistakable Sharp flavor. The reader will know at once whether or not this is to be his dish. So many puns must have been made on the author's name that I will forbear, except to say that this has again the expected formula, a mixture of humor, satire, and *Sharpness*.

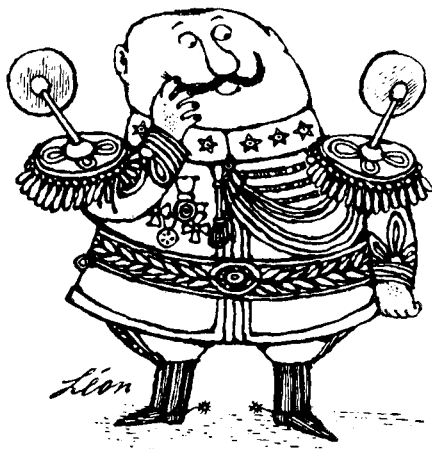
—ROSEMARY C. BENÉT.

### NON-CONFORMIST ON MADISON AVENUE:

William Murray's interesting first novel "The Fugitive Romans" depicted the skirmishing of an American intellectual with the forces of conformity—as represented by a Hollywood motion picture company on location in Rome. In "Best Seller" (Harcourt, Brace, \$3.95), Mr. Murray continues his battle report but shifts his ground from the Via Veneto to Madison Avenue. Young Max Daniels, a hungry writer who rarely ventures out of Greenwich Village except to borrow money, decides to hoax his way to literary success by writing a calculatedly bad novel. After blackmailing a grubstake out of his respectable brother, Max retires to his cold-water flat and grinds out "Hang Me Twice Before I Die," a two-bit dreadful of the gutsy school, in which a Dorian Gray motif is camouflaged in the bloodthirsty monosyllables of the paperback thriller. Max's best friend, a Fourteenth Street dada named Nick Shatov, is afraid that the writer's individuality will be flattened by his diabolically contrived success, but Max is confident. "I'm not selling my soul," he says, "I'm hocking it."

In the course of his merchandising campaign, Max runs across some interesting cultural fauna: publishers, editors, publicity men, Bennington girls, even a good agent (surely his most remarkable discovery). About some of these exhibits Mr. Murray's observations are both witty and illuminating. His montage of the bloodless tastes and party conversation of the semi-intelligentsia is devastatingly funny ("Have you read Pogo today?") and his barbs at the publishing dodge (which the blurb uneasily refers to as a "parody") draw fresh blood. In other departments, though, Mr. Murray's observations are too superficial to be penetrating: the protean Max is a wayfarer in several

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## Housewife in Hollywood

*"To See The Dream," by Jessamyn West (Harcourt, Brace. 314 pp. \$3.95), is the notebook of a writer who underwent the pleasures and tortures of seeing one of her novels—"The Friendly Persuasion"—made into a movie.*

By Helen Beal Woodward

WHAT shall it be in the way of food for the visiting school administrators? Shall it be cheese fondue? Jessamyn West, journal-keeping housewife, is considering menus for the morrow.

"I wish I could cure myself of the habit—or need—of making a crisis of each party by serving a dish I have never cooked before," she writes. "Why, I wonder, must I do this? Perhaps giving a party is like writing a story. Failure is better than repetition."

"To See the Dream," which begins with this meditation on experiments, is a dish Jessamyn West has never served before: her first book of non-fiction. What exactly has she cooked up? At first riddle it seems to be a book about movie-making, the story of Miss West's nine months as scriptwriter and technical adviser for her own "The Friendly Persuasion"; a book on the order of Lillian Ross's "Picture" with the same intimate air of being backstage in Hollywood. If the deadpan reporting in "Picture" made readers want to see "The Red Badge of Courage," "To See the Dream" should have a far more stimulating effect on the box office since it is a story not of failure—not even admirable failure—but of achievement against odds. As the author does battle with scene designers, costumers, stars, and producers in defense of her story and her characters, as she wins or is argued down, one has the sensation of taking part in a creative process—and one grows concerned. Did Jessamyn's ideas for the cannon scene prevail? Did Gary Cooper touch that gun? Which neighborhood theatre is showing "The Friendly Persuasion" and are we too late for the second feature?

But "To See the Dream" can't be publicity blurb; not coming from Jessamyn West. What is it then? Will the movies buy it, casting an unknown

actress as Jessamyn or maybe hiring the author herself and thereby giving her material for another book? The idea has a certain charm—after all in "The Jolson Story" we watched Larry Parks play Al Jolson watching Larry Parks play Al Jolson. But it would be silly and unjust to infer that "To See the Dream" was written as a potential movie script, or indeed for any reason than that the author had something to say and a new way to say it. She happens to keep a journal. She has chosen to present her movie adventures in journal form (I would guess) not only because she enjoys experiment but because, with five important books of fiction to her credit, she is enough of a personage to get away with it. She interests us in her own right, as the author of "The Friendly Persuasion," the beguiling "Cress Delehanty," the grotesque and heartbreaking "The Witchdiggers," many distinguished short stories, and the lovely, too-little-celebrated libretto about Audubon, "A Mirror for the Sky." Beginning "To See the Dream" with a mild appetite for first-person impressions of Hollywood, a casual curiosity about what it's like to have dinner with Gary Cooper, one finishes it three hundred pages later with an absorbing interest in Jessamyn West.

WITH hint and clue, bit and fragment, we construct our image of the author. She lives in Napa, Calif., with her school-administrator husband. She grew up in a little town called Yorba Linda, in a region of orange groves southeast of Los Angeles that was settled in the last century by Quakers from southern Indiana. Richard Nixon's father was her Sunday school teacher (and her mother's maiden name, we note, is Nixon's middle name—Milhous). Miss West suffers from migraine; she loves sunshine, deserts, horseback-riding, and the flight of buzzards; she hates noise, intruders, insincerity, and herons. Though childless she yearns over children, and is so tidy by nature that she cannot bear to sit down to write before she has made the beds and stacked the magazines. "Is there anything more beautiful," she writes, "than a room you have cleaned yourself?" And again, "I love the motions of sweeping, the push and swoop of



—Hans Namuth.

Jessamyn West: "reverent . . . ribald."

body and arms, as much as I love shining floors."

How shall we, on the evidence of her journal, sum up Jessamyn West? Domestic, nature-loving, reverent; so far, we might be describing the ideal columnist for a ladies' magazine. Ribald, crotchety, anti-social but wonderful company, intensely creative, well-balanced yet almost hysterically alive . . . The leisurely discovery of character through the pages of a good journal is one of the most pleasurable forms of reading, as Miss West reminds us. (She is herself a devotee of Thoreau and liked pretending that a Hollywood swimming pool was her Walden pond.)

Like the great nineteenth-century diarists, she interprets incessantly. Sometimes this leads to a kind of instant-philosophy, or theories-while-you-wait. Her theory on bosoms, for instance, struck me as not only specious but dated. Doesn't Miss West know that the new generation of young mothers, the ones who swear by Dr. Spock, are using their breasts for a lot more than stuffing sweaters? But even when she is being a little bit smart-aleck Miss West writes delightfully. At her best Jessamyn, standing on a studio lot at twilight, wonders about the universal human hunger for a story. "Who am I?" "Who am I?" we ask ceaselessly, and we get partial answers at least from every character with whom we feel some kinship. "Who am I?" we ask as we read "To See the Dream" and, every now and then, back comes an answer.