

## Italy Only Yesterday

**"A Light for Fools,"** by **Natalia Ginzburg** (translated by Angus Davidson. Dutton. 256 pp. \$3.95), is the story of two Italian families before and during World War II.

By Thomas G. Bergin

AMONG the interesting aspects of Italian literature of the postwar period is the emergence of women writers to a position of prominence. There are now a good half dozen on the horizon who must be reckoned with in the assessment of significant contributions to the field of the narrative. Natalia Ginzburg is not the least of these, although she is not yet as well known abroad as she deserves to be. I am not sure whether "A Light for Fools," just published in this country, will do what it should for her "fortune," as the Italians call it. Let me add at once that this reservation implies no doubt about the quality of her writing or the validity of the content.

Her virtues are a sharp perception of the subtleties of emotional states and an unusual quality of terseness in setting forth her discoveries. Both are exemplified in the novel at hand, which deals with the affairs of two rather odd Italian families (but of course all families are odd if you look close enough) in the years of the war and those immediately preceding. It is quite a varied gallery too: the old man with his great book documenting the follies of fascism; the youth Ippolito, driven to suicide by the burden of his humanity; the busy Emanuele, slightly ineffectual; the elderly, eccentric, but truly Christianenzo Rena, and of course the girls. Anna, the younger daughter of the less prosperous family, has the major role. Concettina, to be sure, has many *fidanzati* and has to settle for one she doesn't much want; Anna, seduced by the spineless Giума, winds up in the protective arms of the middle-aged Cenzo and learns to be happy there.

They add up to a picturesque group of irregulars, bound together by bonds that seldom find articulate expression, each character isolated—save in crisis when the bonds are felt—in his own preoccupations. In their emotional, unexpressed dependence on each other as well as in their spiritual isola-

tion they seem to dwell in a nineteenth-century Russian novel rather than in twentieth-century Italy.

That does not of course make them less credible or less appealing. And the events of their times impinge on their personal vicissitudes in a way that no group of nineteenth-century characters ever knew. Most of the boys are engaged in the publication of a clandestine journal in the days preceding the war. When calamity comes and Italy goes in they follow their various destinies, some to Russia, some to North Africa. The boy Giustino, youngest in the cast, becomes a partisan, so does Danilo, Concettina's ex-fiancé. And Cenzo Rena ends as the good must end—though la Ginzburg is anything but an allegorical writer—paying for the crimes of others. At the end, the hurricane past, only three of the original cast are still together, "thinking of all those who were dead and of the long war and the sorrow and noise and confusion, and of the long difficult life which they saw in front of them now, full of all the things they did not know how to do."

The trouble is there are too many characters for the reader to focus easily. If this is Anna's story, then we would like to know something more about her than we get; if Cenzo Rena's, then we wish we could see him more often as he sees himself. A certain diffusion of interest (rather uncharacteristic of Ginzburg) mars the story as a work of art. As a "documentary" one can find no fault with it. The title in the original is "All Our Yesterdays," and Italian readers have found a good deal of their own history in the tale it tells. I think its success here will depend on how much interest American readers may feel in the color and pattern of the trying days which are evoked in these pages.



—From the jacket of "Snow Country."

"... the bleak, other-side of Japan."

## A Lonely World

**"Snow Country,"** by **Yasunari Kawabata** (translated by Edward G. Seidensticker. Knopf. 175 pp. Paperbound, \$1.25), is a mood prose poem about a man and two women experiencing various kinds of love in a grim remote section of Japan.

By Faubion Bowers

"SNOW Country," by Yasunari Kawabata, one of Japan's senior and most distinguished writers, is the latest addition to the lengthening list of Japanese novels translated into English by Americans and for American publishers. The translator in this instance is Edward G. Seidensticker, an expatriate living in Japan and earning his living in the main by his translations. Mr. Seidensticker's earlier translation of "Some Prefer Nettles" did not particularly catch on with the American public. However, in "Snow Country," altogether a better, if shorter, book, Mr. Seidensticker has excelled himself. He has delicately turned into English (except for an irritating repetition of the word "presently") some of the most fragile and evanescent prose ever written in Japanese. As Mr. Seidensticker explains in his simple but authoritative introduction, Kawabata belongs to the school of understated, suggestive, and staccato writing of *haiku* poetry. The fragmentary quality of those tiny seventeen-syllable poems extends to the

incident and structure of Kawabata's novel itself.

"Snow Country" deals with three characters, a man and two women. Its setting is the bleak, other-side of Japan in the mountains along the Japan Sea, utterly different from the more familiar and tourist-traveled sides of Tokyo and Kyoto. It is cold in the snow country. There is skiing. There are hot baths. There are geisha and hotel maids, both of whom are greatly looked down on in contrast to their big city counterparts on the opposite side of Japan. The resorts themselves, too, are totally unfashionable. There are few travelers or customers. It is a lonely world.

The fly-leaf describes the theme of "Snow Country" as "the possibility of love in an earthly paradise." It also adds, "Does the perfect fulfilment of sensory pleasure nourish love or does hedonism defeat itself through satiation . . . ?" I must admit that I did not find this theme. In fact, there seems to me to be no theme at all—only some of the most beautiful and perfect mood writing I have ever read, and all expertly conveyed into English. The first half of this short book, which is far better than the last half, is curiously prurient—the hero and the heroine, if so attenuated a plot can have heroes and heroines, spend their time in bed, talking and drinking water (only to sober up with) and finally turning out the lights. It is clear that the girl loves the man. It is eminently doubtful whether the man reciprocates that passion. In the second and final section the other girl, with whom the hero has exchanged scarcely a word, is destroyed in a fire (how the Japanese love to write about fires; and how well they do it!). At the end of the novel the reader doesn't really know what has happened. Is the other girl dead? Will the hero and heroine go off together and leave the hot spring and the snow country, which grow more depressing and squalid with each page? Or does nothing happen, or will ever happen?

Writing about "Snow Country" (or almost any Japanese novel for that matter) is deceptive. In critics' words and hands the novel sounds uneventful, unimportant even. But such an impression is not correct. "Snow Country" is an experience. A reader is changed and moved by it. Somewhere in the depths of his mind he will find he has lived in that cold, snowy air, seen the landscape, stopped over in the inns, spent the night with the geishas, and even longed for the spring that seems so far away. Somehow the reader ends by understanding far more than ever comes to words in the pages of this fine novel.

## Behind the Secret Door

**"The Green Kingdom," by Rachel Maddux** (Simon & Schuster. 561 pp. \$4), is the tale of five Americans who find a magic land somewhere in the Western mountains.

By Ben Ray Redman

THE THEME of the secret door that leads into a secret garden or a hidden world is as old as the imagination of childhood and as new as the newest novel, and its attraction is eternal. In "The Green Kingdom" Rachel Maddux takes us through this door once again. This time it is a rocky cleft somewhere in our Western mountains that opens and closes every ten years; and we make the journey in the company of five men and women who, with no more than a roughly sketched map and a drunken grandfather's story to go on, set out to find a fantastic green land in the existence of which they only half believe.

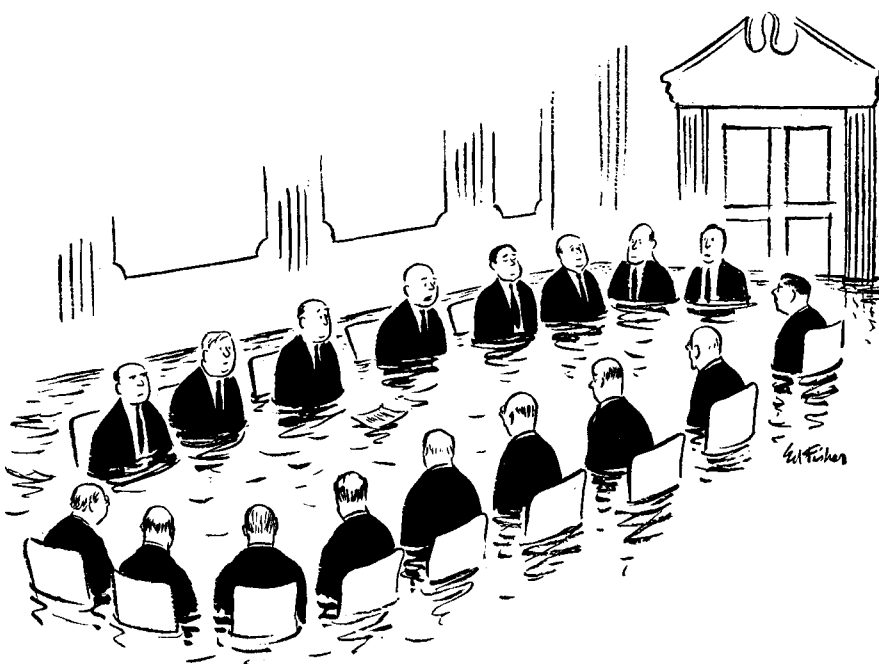
They are a mixed lot, these five—Justin Magnus, a successful composer, with a full lifetime already behind him; Erma Herrick, an attractive, vital young woman, born for motherhood that is long denied her; her husband, Arthur, a printer who cannot bear the idea that most men die

without leaving behind them any record of their having lived; his partner, Joe Roberts, a practical fellow who can do almost anything with tools; and Gwendolyn, Joe's beautiful fiancée, whose whole life revolves on the axis of her own self-love.

Miss Maddux's story is the tale of how these five persons receive the gifts and meet the challenges of the Green Kingdom, how they make for themselves a kind of life that might have been idyllic, had not tragedy followed them past the barrier of the secret door, in a land so strange that they even have to invent names for its flora and its fauna. It is a tale that is alive with adventure, romance, drama, and melodrama; a tale in which surprises for the reader wait along the way, in which the pull of "What will happen next?" is strong. It is a carefully thought out, carefully worked out story, by a novelist who can pause in the midst of action to scrutinize the great and lesser mysteries of life.

Ortega y Gasset has said that a novelist "must see to it that the reader is cut off from his real horizon and imprisoned in a small, hermetically sealed universe. He must make a 'villager' of him and interest him in the inhabitants of this realm." Miss

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"Well, Clambertson, a fine botch you've made of the Department of Rivers and Highways!"