

traits and a lack of interest in company intrigue, Lowry does not make out too badly. His colleagues are shocked at his frugality ("Do you realize that they expect to 'save up' for things?") and the fact that his wife doesn't play bridge (she's an Estonian), but after all, "he's an American and he went to Yale" and besides, he is a first-class executive.

All of Lowry's qualities are put to the test when the gentlemanly old president of Continental resigns and his place is taken by a hustling bounder named D. C. Cramer, whose first official act is to fire the mail-room clerk because he is too old. Lowry's battle to keep both his job and his soul poses a universal problem, and Mr. Swiggett develops it convincingly, without relying on a cast of simon-pure heroes and deep-dyed villains.

"Durable Fire" has a leisurely and satisfying quality amid the current crop of frenetic business novels; Mr. Swiggett's concern is in taking the measure of a man rather than an executive type, and in this he has abundantly succeeded.

—MARTIN LEVIN.

TV TRAVAILS: "He can't be alone with himself, he's a wretched hypochondriac, a contemptible, twisted wreck of a man." Who is he? Give up? Well—let's have a few more clues. His favorite recreational spot is the bathroom, where he drinks hookers of after-shave lotion or iodine (depending on his mood) and makes passes at his wrists with a razor blade. His work is done in an atmosphere of "lies and intrigue, cliques, plots, knifings, snow jobs, bluffs, boasts, flattery, and the rumor factory grinding it all up into tons of guff."

Now, of course, the measure of our man is evident to all: he is a big-time television comedian. This particular incarnation of him appears in Benedict and Nancy Freedman's "Lootville" (Holt, \$3.95). Zane Cochrane is the buffoon's name, and the Freedmans afflict him with everything from melancholia to cancellation. The narrator of Zane's decline and fall is one Pete Munger, a simple cameraman who is almost sucked into the creative end of television by the lure of loot, but who recovers his equilibrium in time to save his soul and his union card.

That there is more than a morsel of truth in "Lootville" we have been assured by the comedians themselves—who have confessed to all who read that they are just as sick as the boy next door. But a morsel of truth is not the whole truth—and "Lootville" is too far removed from the facts of life and television to be more than heavy-handed caricature.

—M. L.

Growth in Brooklyn

"The Assistant," by Bernard Malamud (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy. 246 pp. \$3.50), tells of a small Brooklyn shopkeeper and his family and of the outsider who wins a place among them.

By Meyer Levin

IT IS a commonplace that a writer of true talent will take commonplace material and produce through it in the reader a sense of utterly fresh discovery of human qualities. This, Bernard Malamud has achieved in his new novel "The Assistant." He has succeeded also in individualizing his people to a point where one feels able to continue conversation with them outside the book, and yet he has kept for each of them a symbolic role, so that the tale has moral echoes, indeed almost a runic quality; it is essentially a parable.

Morris Bober, the grocer, is the quintessential small, good man. He labors to "keep going" a dying store in an old Brooklyn neighborhood; Morris will get up before dawn to sell a three-cent roll to the mysterious Polish woman who calls for it every day, and he will keep open an hour later than all the competitors in the block. Yet his daughter Helen has to give up her college ambitions and go to work to help support the store.

The grocer and his wife, in their ruminations to keep the store or try to sell out; in their worries for their daughter Helen, so nice, so decent, so pretty a girl, such a waste in this forsaken neighborhood; in their dealings with the few other storekeeper

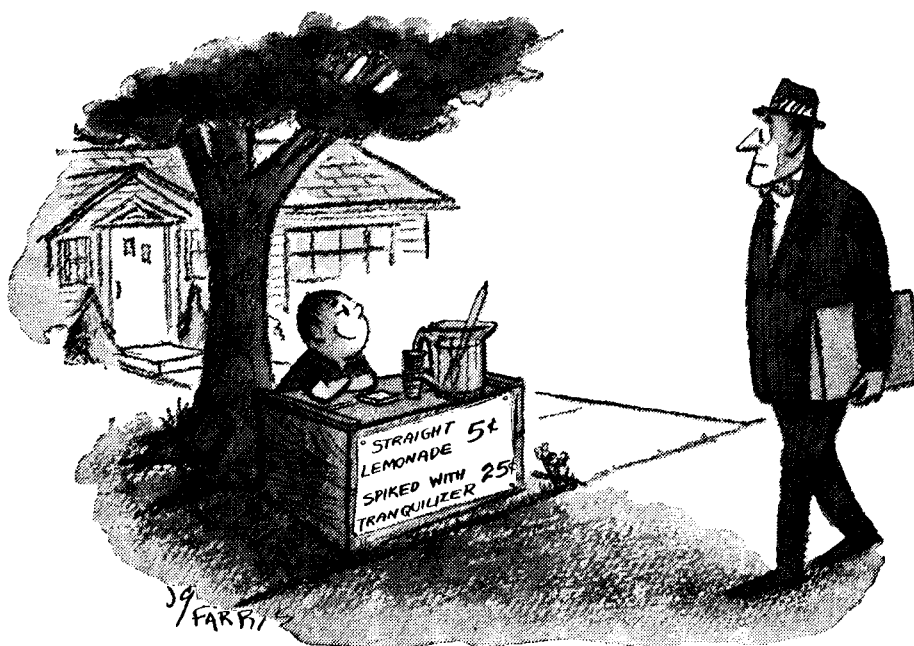
families of their enclave, are so finely written that their dialogues become poetic. Not since Albert Halper wrote of his father's grocery in Chicago has the atmosphere of such a place been so well rendered.

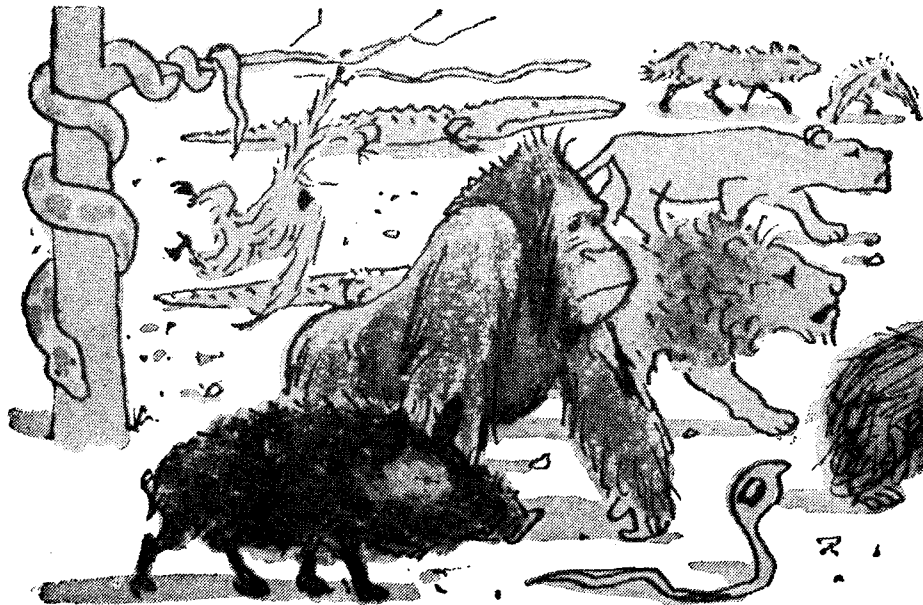
The character of Morris Bober has an affinity to that of another good soul of Brooklyn in this season's fiction, Dr. Abelman of "The Last Angry Man." But Malamud's tale has deeper artistry. And this is not because Malamud eschews plot and action. Indeed, his plot will sound contrived.

Morris Bober is held up one evening, and beaten. On his street meanwhile has appeared a personable young man, but a derelict. Morris finds Frank Alpine sleeping half-starved in his basement. Frank, a roving orphan, settles in, and even revives business. And he has his eye on Helen.

Helen is not simply an idealized slum jewel. She is a modern girl, of character and mind. One summer she gave herself to a suitor, but the experience of sex did not bring love, and so she has drawn back to an emotional virginity. It is through her that Frank finally understands the term self-discipline, and that one can achieve a renewed inner feeling of decency even after transgression. For Frank was one of the pair who helped beat up the grocer.

Malamud creates an amazing tension in his story of the growth of conscience. He keeps his tale refined down to essential scenes, in the manner of the newer novelists who work carefully in a defined frame, revealing with intensity the personal tales of a small cast of characters. He is a writer who certainly will count amongst the literary figures of our day.





—Drawing by Maurice Simont from the book.

Srry Land

"The Wonderful O," by James Thurber (Simon & Schuster. 72 pp. \$3.50), describes what happens in a land so unfortunate and foolish as to abolish the letter O.

By Golbort Soldos

A SWEET reasonableness is one of James Thurber's prime attributes. In his new book he starts with a premise no rational man can dispute: in this case it is the raging hatred a sea captain has for the letter O. We've had parallel, if not identical phobias, and the only difference is that we haven't been in a position to do anything about it. Thurber's man does.

Believing implicitly in the premise, we have no difficulty in accepting the story of "The Wonderful O." An allusion to a man named Gunn indicates that it is the story again of Treasure Island, but the search is long and tedious and in the course of it the leaders of the expedition decide to abolish all things (I daren't say objects) the names of which include the letter O. "And so the locksmith became a lcksmith and the bootmaker a btmaker"—but that was only when they deleted the letter. Later they banished the thing itself, animal, vegetable, or mineral. And the natives of the island gathered in the forest at night and wept for lve and told themselves they must keep up hpe.

Hope is one of the four words with O which the oppressed natives must not lose or forget. Love is another "and valor, I should think" says an old man. But the fourth they have to seek for, not without dust and heat.

If I were to admit for a single moment that the book is a parable, as the dust jacket hints, I'd say that this fourth great O'd word has to be created.

There is a traitor on the island and after the invaders have been despatched "the outlawed lawyer Hyde, looking for a loophole through which he might escape, was caught in one whose O's collapsed and buried him beneath the wreckage." The battle had been won because the tyrants had forgotten to banish all the O-animals who had never been—and therefore were eternal: Little Jack Horner and Tommy Trout and Cock Robin and King Cole and all the others. And when victory has come: "Working with valor and love and hope, the islanders put the O back . . . Ophelia Oliver . . . returned wearing both her O's again, Otto Ott could say his name again . . . the robin and the oriole returned." And of course the fourth word was found.

Thurber has for some time been writing monographs on various letters of the alphabet, but this is the first time, so far as I know, that he has woven his love for letters into a story. To say that it is the story of suppression and rebellion and victory is to say only that it is the characteristic story of our dreams—it is not necessarily the story of our lives, but of what we want our lives to be.

At the end I felt sorry for Thurber, because unlike all beautiful things, his name has no O. Then I felt sorry for myself, for the same reason. But, if the editors will permit, I can rectify that. See above, left.

THE SEARCH FOR SEX: Amanda Vail's "Love Me Little" (McGraw-Hill, \$2.75) is a teasing tour de force leavened by the innocence and pride of its slightly younger than usual heroine. Another sexy bit of chatter in the soon to be classic "I, Françoise" style, this is pretty short and sweet to be called a novel. But it's well done—and might be just the right amount of froth and fizz for some weekend train trip back to town.

Emily, the precocious child of precocious parents on New York's upper East Side, at fifteen is haunted by a sense of failure. "When one can say nothing for oneself except *I go to school*, one feels a pressing need to add items. Such as: *I go to school and I've had a lover.*"

Reading Rilke, listening to Dylan records, and helping her near-famous father buy a Jaguar, Emily becomes a sort of modern reverse play on Samuel Richardson's "Pamela." For although she and her friend Amy want desperately to part with their virtue, the young men of their acquaintance talk only of diesels, dogs, or Princeton.

Finally while summering on Blount Island with their parents, the girls determine to have an Interesting Experience. With a secret shoebox raffle, they divide up the eight eligible males, rate their quarry, and systematically launch The Quest. There isn't much left of the stronger sex by the time they're through with the demolition, but there is always l— to look forward to.

—JEAN CAMPBELL JONES.

R.I.P.: THE TRUE BLUE CLUB: The True Blue club, in St. James's Street had been built on a buoyant Victorian tide of prosperity and bad taste. Vast and oddly ventilated ("No odour that had been admitted . . . had ever been allowed completely to escape"), the True Blue was originally designed for two sets of people, "members with a comfortable number of spendable thousands a year, and servants who would work happily for a limited number of tens." In 1947, when young Peter Grant assumes the club secretaryship, both of these classes are in short supply, and the old club is tottering on its massive foundations. "The Club," by Andrew Graham (Reynal, \$3.50), charts Grant's manful efforts to keep the establishment going in the postwar era of the spiv, shortages, and the new poor.

In spite of the fun which Mr. Graham pokes at the True Blue's dingy grandeur, dubious cuisine, and hilarious decor (on the grand staircase is a larger than life size Venus de Milo with a huge clock ticking away in its belly), he writes the True Blue's obituary with considerable wit and a good deal of affection. —M. L.