


The Saturday Review

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People Still Make the Book

THE trouble with the contemporary American novel is not that it lacks readers but that it lacks impact. During the past decade, fiction has only rarely managed to command important attention. When it did succeed in attracting the spotlight, it was more for matters involving good taste or rather the lack of it than for anything compelling or vital about the book itself.

The most frequent explanation for this is that no story could possibly be as exciting as the age itself. People don't have to draw on the creative imagination; like Alexander Pope, they have only to look up and observe in order to find out what they want to know. For the daily theme is nothing less than war and peace. But there may be an even stronger reason for the decline of the novel. This has to do with the novel itself.

Whatever great fiction is or is not, it is hardly ever without its great characters. And the crying weakness of the contemporary novel is its shortage of vital, memorable people. It would be difficult to think of a half dozen such characters from the novelists of the Forties and Fifties.

The world is willing to forgive a great deal in a novelist if only he can create real people and keep them alive. Dickens lacked the subtler refinements of the novelist's art. He crowded his stories with an infinity of detail and deprived the reader of the satisfying spark that comes from crossing a short gap in completing an image. But he knew how to populate the memories of his readers. Balzac's prose tends towards unevenness, but everything is redeemed in his successful creation of a person like Valerie

Marneffe. Du Maupassant has little philosophical depth and he fails to sustain mood, but he does manage to assemble characters who have a claim on the imagination. Zola had everything but literary economy; he mobilized words and situations like a military commander attempting to overcome an objective through sheer force. But he took great pains to create the people who had to carry his Goncourt series; they have helped in large measure to carry the author's reputation as well. Conrad had an astounding capacity for coping with the boundlessness of nature and the mysterious moods of people in unusual circumstances; but he never allowed himself to forget, as he put it, that fiction is "human history or it is nothing." As for the Russian masters—Tolstoi, Dostoievski, Turgenev—their sense of the epic was always subordinate to their main concern, the need to give birth to characters so real that they could blister the human imagination. One of the greatest achievements in all literature, of

course, is the living person of Emma Bovary. Not far behind is Anna Karenina.

What of the contemporary novel? Is it possible that William Faulkner has never succeeded in building an audience to match the substantial size of his reputation because he has given us so few people to remember? He is a modern master of mood and circumstance; it now remains for him to defrost his characters if they are to win lasting hospitality in the mind. Sinclair Lewis specialized in people but one has the feeling that they are satirical props in which the author himself takes uncommon delight; as a result, they lack a persuasive reality. There are, of course, vital exceptions. Hemingway deals with real flesh and blood, sometimes without even the protective covering of normal skin. John Steinbeck's books are nothing if not full-size people; they fill a large and impressive gallery. And James T. Farrell's place in literature may rest largely on the person of Studs Lonigan.

The Hemingways, Steinbecks, and Farrells, however, are less identified with the Fifties than with the Thirties, though some of their finest work may be yet ahead of them. The novelists who concern us are primarily those who have started to publish since the end of the war. And it is here that the failure of the contemporary novel to achieve effective characterization may be most discernible. Now and then, of course, we come across a Major Jopollo by a writer like John Hersey who has something to say. But for the most part the characters in recent fiction do not seem important enough to remember.

A command of words is not enough to make fictional names come alive. The author must like people, he must believe in them, he must have a special feeling about their worth. This is the life-giving ingredient. There is no need to point to television or the eventful world as reasons for the small impress being made by fiction. It all begins with the book. —N. C.

The Lesson

By Larry Rubin

I WAS stung by a man-of-war
 When I was four;
 It spun purple tentacles about my thigh,
 And though I cried,
 I saw its glistening Portuguese sail—
 A sac of poison, acid with majesty.

I know royalty
 When I see its barbed embroidery—
 The formic wine within the purple grail.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MORLEY THE CHAUCERIAN

FOR ALL that so many people knew Chris Morley in so many ways, there was a handful of us who knew him as no one else did. When Francis B. Gummere died in 1919, Haverford College was put to it to find some sort of replacement for him; and in view of the impossibility of the task had for a year a sort of guest-star system in the English department. I don't know why they asked Chris to give the Chaucer course; but to the lasting joy of a few of us they did.

Chris was no expert in Middle English, and I'm sure he had to put in long and arduous hours working up his lectures; but the effort didn't show. Those Chaucer classes were a delight in themselves, just because Chris was talking. But they were also classes of immense value to most of us, because we found out two facts that we haven't forgotten. One is that Chaucer is a great poet; and the other is that a great poet is exciting and moving reading.

Once you find out those facts, it isn't a great deal of trouble to bone up on your Middle English, and go on with Robinson and Coulton and others to continue your revels all your life long! Chris gave us Chaucer. If he'd never done anything else, that would be enough.

Chaucer went along with Chris, of course, as part of his daily equipment. He found A. Edward Newton and Tom Daly Chaucerian. A young lady named Blanche who turned up at a party became the Duchess. And Chaucer started Chris off on at least one of his urbane poems.

It seems to me, too, that Chris followed the suggestion of Chaucer that appears toward the end of the "Troilus"—the poem Chris loved so well, and brought us to love. There, in perhaps the saddest lines of our poetry, Chaucer looks at life, and sees it, and makes the suggestion that Chris, I think, followed as he looked and saw and lived:

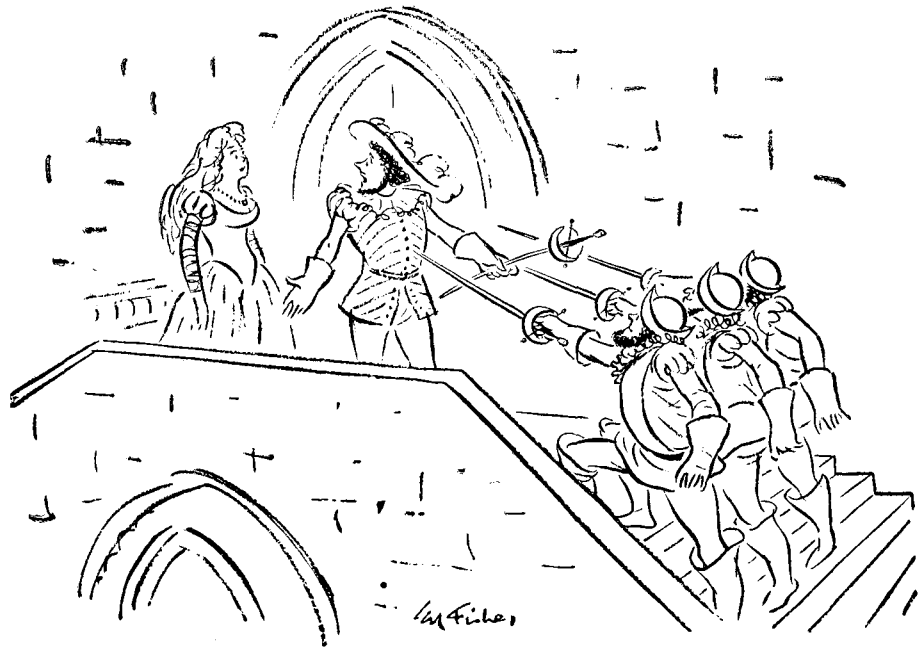
Swich is this world! Whoso it can
byholde,
In ech estat is litel hertes reste!
God leve us for to take it for the
beste!

S. A. NOCK.

Denver, Colo.

THE CHARM OF MR. BROOKS

I SUSPECT THAT Gorham Munson and a number of other writers' conference directors are wondering where Van Wyck Brooks got his idea that "summer writers' conferences were largely in the hands of a literary avant garde" (SR Mar. 13). Mr. Brooks attended his first—and, I suspect, last—writers' conference here at Montana State University in 1952. During one panel discussion in particular, I remember that he did go to the literary mat with Leslie A. Fiedler, a member of our faculty and, I suppose, a representative of the avant garde. It



"What can I do, honey—it's three against one!"

was a mighty battle concerning the future of American life and letters and included a noisy defense of Mr. Brooks by conferees, who pounded on their chairs and shouted "No! No!" as Fiedler made his points. Possibly Mr. Brooks felt, because of this magnificent rhubarb, that our conference was avant garde and somehow representative of all such meetings. Of course this is not so. Certainly that year the success of the conference was due largely to the stimulating mind and quiet charm of a conservative—Van Wyck Brooks.

HENRY V. LAROM, *Director,*
Montana State University
Writers' Conference.

Missoula, Mon.

ANACHRONISTIC AX

H. S. SAYS IN HIS editorial (SR Mar. 30) that the feminist revolt in America was well under way in the 1880s, when Carry Nation wielded her ax and Amelia Bloomer shocked Washington with her short skirt and long, loose trousers. Amelia Jenks Bloomer died in 1894 at the age of seventy-six. Carry Nation did not hit the front page with her ax until 1900.

C. COAPES BRINLEY.

Staten Island, N. Y.

DEMOCRATIC EVOLUTION

I SEE THREE fallacies in Mr. Steinbeck's thesis. (SR Apr. 20):

1. Not all "creative" men are as guilty as he implies. The distinction between insurrection and defending one's inherent human rights can be a very complex one.

2. Does the United States as a nation want or need Adam, Cain, Noah, Sappho, Caesar, Petrarch, Napoleon, Martin Luther, Robin Hood, or John Brown?

3. What is there about one who claims to be creative that makes him immune to "moral" or legal restraint? My acquaintance with "genius" is somewhat limited, but it seems to me that true genius would not need to claim special privileges in those areas.

Perhaps such an eminent man as Mr. Steinbeck might have a little more faith in the democratic evolution of our laws. God knows it is cumbersome, but most of us think it has its good points.

NOEL LOOMIS.

Minneapolis, Minn.

UNLUCKY EDITOR

MANY YEARS ago my old father warned me that I was born unlucky (otherwise, he said, I would have been born of a rich father). He has been consistently right for over a half-century. For instance, in your most recent TRADE WINDS *The Saturday Review* finally mentions my paper, *The Carolina Israelite* (thousands of Americans wait for it each month like the watchers of the night wait for the rising sun). And what happens? You place me and my paper in Charleston, South Carolina, instead of in the Queen City of the Carolinas: *Charlotte, North Carolina*. To paraphrase the sentiment of a great man; "I am a Tar Heel in nothing except my devotion to all the other Tar Heels."

HARRY GOLDEN, *Editor,*
The Carolina Israelite.

Charlotte, N. C.