

AT HOME WITH COLETTE



—From the book.

technique, there are to be found in the book valuable passages about her habits of composition, her curiosity about words, her profound respect for the structure and cadence of the language, and an awareness which, first instinctive, was to become a conscious part of her art. The spare, taut prose, the unfailingly vital dialogue, the capacity to render a scene with an economy and force unexcelled by any contemporary French novelist—all had their roots in the way she matched her talents to the task in hand.

Personal details such as her preferences in music—a lack of appreciation for Mozart came to me as the most surprising revelation in the book—and her infinite patience with autograph hunters fill out the picture, already clear in her books, that here was a woman who, while not optimistic, was vital and gay. She was orderly, punctual, liked good food and drink and knew how to provide them. “She was both adventurous and home-loving, in the way that cats are, passionately attached to what she possessed and ready to risk or give it away at any moment.”

IF THE reader is looking, however, for “revelations” of Colette’s life before she met Goudeket, he is doomed to disappointment. The author does not try to reconstruct situations which he can have known only at second-hand, and he seems to have been a paragon of a husband in that he accepted and welcomed Colette as *she* was with, implicit in this acceptance, a realization that the life which had made her so must be accepted, and in silence, too.

A piquant illustration of the respect, even veneration, with which Colette’s fellow writers came to regard her is given in Goudeket’s account of a visit from Gide. Though they had exchanged letters, their meetings had been infrequent and when Gide came to call on her after she was already bed-ridden, the two aging authors strove to make a bridge in vain. Yet Gide had confided to his journals years earlier: “[In Colette] there is much more than a literary gift: a sort of very peculiarly feminine genius and a great intelligence. What choice, what order, what happy proportions in an account apparently so unbridled! What utter tact, what courteous discretion in confidence; not a touch that fails to hit the mark and to mark itself in one’s memory, sketched as at random, as if while playing, but with a subtle, accomplished art . . .”

In his account of Colette’s later years, Goudeket has given us a rare understanding of the spirit behind the accomplished artist.

“Close to Colette,” by Maurice Goudeket, translated by Enid McLeod (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy. 245 pp. \$4), a memoir by the third husband of one of France’s foremost modern woman novelists offers many insights into her life and writing techniques. The book will be published on June 7.

By Frances Keene

COLETTE wrote many books which have strong overtones of reminiscence, from “La maison de Claudine” (which has much in common with the later “Sido”) to “La vagabonde” (from the whole Claudine series itself, begun in 1895) to “Le fanal bleu” of fifty years later. She built her books from life, a synthesis of her own experience caught in minute, unsentimental observation and screened to eliminate the merely subjective. Her aim was to communicate her awareness of what was universal, hence valid, in each phase of living which was reflected in the single novels and plays.

But this system of screening out the too personal, though intrinsic to her art, has left many gaps in the reader’s understanding of her as a human being. That is why Maurice Goudeket’s admirable yet modest memoir of her last thirty years, entitled “Close to Colette,” has particular interest and is, indeed, of unique value. Goudeket, as the “beloved friend” and husband of this woman of genius, had day-by-day opportunity to relate the mature artist to her work and to evaluate her cumulative experience in terms of her final product. That he did so without invasion of privacy is convincingly revealed in this moving, devoted but never cloying account. (“If I had not completely forgotten, in our daily behaviour, that I was concerned with an extraordinary person, our relations would have acquired a sort of constraint which both of us would have disliked,” he writes. A sublime under-

statement if ever there was one!)

Goudeket, almost twenty years Colette’s junior, met her at the home of friends in 1925 when she was fifty-two. He had been reading her books for two decades and still remembered the “delicious shock” of his first literary discovery. The generation that had passed since then had, one gathers, made of the young man a fairly self-conscious poetaster, sufficiently well-heeled so that his own scarcely-promising literary future need not disturb him too much from a material point of view. He had learned to check, or at least to camouflage, a “madly imaginative” nature so that “by the time I was thirty-five I had still not sobered up much [but] in order not to betray this childish state of mind I behaved with the greatest circumspection, which made me appear cold and formal, not quite at ease.”

Colette, on the other hand, was thoroughly established as novelist and journalist. “Cheri,” her greatest early success, had come out in 1920, and 1923 had seen the publication of two small masterpieces, the short novel, “Le blé en herbe,” and the evocation of home, “Sido.” The three powerful volumes inspired by the Paris music halls, most important of which is “La vagabonde,” had been out and had run into many editions during the decade that preceded her Easter-holiday meeting with Goudeket. He must have seen her as the literary lion that others considered her to be, not as the literary hack she sometimes called herself.

From the start, the two friends gave each other something each was lacking. Goudeket says: “The world she restored to me was the real world, the world of everyday poetry, which was to become our dwelling place.” And though he never states or implies that Colette would have been the poorer had she not met him, the reader is left with the conviction that Colette herself knew this to the core.

For those interested in Colette’s

THE STRUGGLES OF GYPSY: Miss Gypsy Rose Lee, ever a lively feature of the entertainment scene, has unexpectedly succeeded in writing an un-lively book. In the elegantly titled "*Gypsy: A Memoir*" (Harper, \$3.95) she tells of her childhood days in tanktown vaudeville, her entry into burlesque, and finally her rise to glory in the Ziegfeld Follies. She ends on her departure for Hollywood and presumably another book will follow. This may well be a better one, for the only part of the current memoir that shows brightness comes at the end where Gypsy ends the preoccupation with her indomitable mother, who as Madam Rose shepherded flocks known as Madam Rose and Her Dancing Daughters around vaudeville circuits. Both Gypsy and her younger sister (June Havoc, to be) were members of these bedraggled groups and it is with the mother's efforts to make a living from show business that this book largely deals. Yet it is in the way she handles her mother that Gypsy herself lets the reader down. As presented here, Madam Rose lacks even the appeal of that other indomitable stage mother, Mrs. Sandra Berle. But why? Gypsy obviously thinks Madam Rose is a rare character indeed and it is even possible that the experiences so lovingly recounted here might, if told at a party, be side-splittingly funny. Yet Gypsy has failed to give her mother's ruthless determination any basic motivation. Was Madam Rose a thwarted actress herself? Did she love money—or did she just like to travel? No effort is made to explain the intrepid lady, with the result that she appears callous, depressingly eccentric, and at times cruel. Her clever remarks have a raucous edge that rob them of humor. The grasping way she fights for her rights with theatre owners might be amusing if she were not at the same time graspingly victimizing the girls in her troupe. When at last Madam Rose and her private menagerie are dumped on a chicken farm, the book shows some life. But this is page 306 of a 337-page book. A little late, Gypsy—but better luck with the next.

—ALLEN CHURCHILL.



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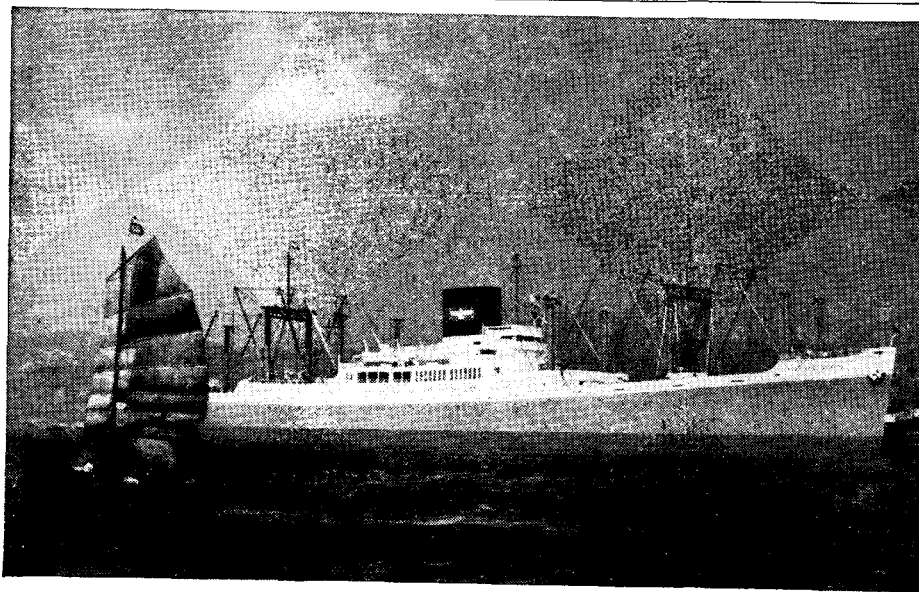
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