

## Five Senses of a Ten-Year-Old

**"Elizabeth," by Henri Troyat;** translated by Nicolas Monjo (Simon & Schuster. 407 pp. \$4.95), which traces the path of the young heroine from a Parisian cafe to a country boarding school, follows, says our reviewer, "the great novelistic tradition." Otis Fellows is a professor of French at Columbia University.

By Otis Fellows

ALTHOUGH "Elizabeth" is the third volume of Henri Troyat's absorbing family saga of life in twentieth-century France, and, as such, will be warmly welcomed by those already familiar with the first two, it can also stand completely on its own. Here, too, the author shows himself to be a master of controlled sentimentality and the ironic touch. The same warmth of understanding, the same deft psychological observations, the same wealth of sensory impressions that characterized Troyat's previous writings give both breadth and universal meaning to this varicolored narrative.

The wonderful and awesome universe that surrounds Elizabeth, a child of ten, is both the teeming, carefree, wanton Paris of the early

Twenties, and the leisurely, at times earthy French countryside of the same period. In swiftly moving yet carefully detailed scenes the author through uncanny insights leads us into the soul of an impressionable, high-spirited child whose five senses are eagerly open to the many-faceted reality that closes in about her. It is largely this world that the reader sees through the clear eyes of an inquisitive, ubiquitous little girl edging toward puberty.

Amelie, Elizabeth's pretty mother—all common sense and scruple—efficiently presides over the Crystal Cafe while tenderly worrying about her ailing husband, whose nervous despondence and abortive love-making cause her to regret the smilingly masterful man she once knew so well. Behind the bar stands handsome, good-natured, irresponsible Denis, Elizabeth's doting uncle. And then there is Clementine, the appealing maid fresh from the provinces, whose clandestine love for Denis provokes Amelie's ire and Elizabeth's sympathetic fascination.

Whether in colorful Montmartre, in the austere boarding school of Sainte-Colombe, or with her provincial relatives in Jeyzelou, Elizabeth's life, at once simple and intricate, is marked by moments of humility and

pride, bewilderment and exaltation. The emptiness of a dark room, a cold night sky, a handkerchief's farewell, a dead bird shrouded in leaves, a half-opened skylight, a somersaulting clown—all suggest a subtle symbolism which pervades and enriches the meaning of everyday experience. As Elizabeth gropes with mysterious riddles hidden behind the familiar world of appearances, we encounter in various guises sex, fear, loneliness, religion, and death.

Troyat is foremost a novelist and artist who compellingly writes of the heartaches and tears, gaiety and laughter, which are at the core of all human experience. Here is no ponderous philosophizing, none of the doubtful metaphysics or of the political moralizing so widespread in contemporary literature. It is indeed refreshing to find that with Troyat the story is the thing. As a consummate craftsman who knows how to weave the threads of individual destinies into a broad pattern through a series of related works, he is continuing in the great novelistic tradition of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The admirers of "Elizabeth," of whom there should be many, will undoubtedly wait with impatience for the inevitable sequel.

## Distilled Heritage

**"The Chosen," edited by Harold Ribalow** (Abelard-Schuman. 352 pp. \$5) and **"Whither?," by Mordecai Zeev Feierberg;** translated by Ira Eisenstein (Abelard-Schuman. 136 pp. \$2.75), are both examples of Jewish prose; the former presents contemporary short stories while the latter is a novel by a nineteenth-century mystic. Maxwell Geismar is a critic, whose latest book is "American Moderns."

By Maxwell Geismar

MR. RIBALOW, one of the best-informed critics of Jewish literature in the United States, has put together an interesting anthology of American-Jewish short stories. Among the better-known writers of these tales are Charles Angoff, Bernard Malamud, Isaac Rosenfeld, Howard Nemerov, Leslie Fiedler, and Herbert Gold—but at least half of the contributors are younger people whose work is also worthy of comment. The book has many values—social, cultural, philosophic—as well as literary merit.

The time of "acculturation" (to use



Make a wish and then blow, man, blow.

a sociological term) is almost over. Most of these writers, and others, like Saul Bellow (who is not represented here), are not so much concerned with the problem of "adjustment" to the melting pot. They are more interested, if I read these stories right, in recalling and preserving their Jewish heritage in the new world—and in trying to find the real meaning of this heritage. The most disturbing aspect of American society today is a bland and oleaginous conformity. If these stories are not mainly rebellious, they are at least diverse and, thank God, different.

ONLY wish they were more so. Mr. Angoff's "Uncle Pinchus" is a tender and nostalgic sketch of a Jewish ne'er-do-well—a synagogue loafer—in Boston. Mr. Fiedler's "The Dancing of Reb Hershl" is a rather demonic and Poe-esque tale of Jewish symbolism during the Polish pogroms. Among the contributions of new writers in this volume, Sylva Grossman's "The Happy Ending" is a superior tale of family life in its warmth and humanity, while Robert Kirsch's "Said Hillel" is a rather tricky anecdote of a Negro rabbi from Ethiopia. Then there is the well-known Malamud story, called rather cheaply "The Last Mohican," about the American "art critic" in Rome and his scoundrelly "friend," the European Jewish refugee. This again is a symbolic story, though well done, as is to a certain degree Howard Nemerov's "The Twitch" and Isaac Rosenfeld's "The Grossmans."

All these stories are well written, well constructed, clever, and entertaining. Their main trouble is that they are "reconstructing" a Jewish tradition of childhood or of grandparenthood from a more or less academic American point of view. The melting pot has done its work too well perhaps; what emerges here is a distillation of Jewish life in the new world which lacks something of the vulgar, acrimonious, and comic folk tradition of an earlier age.

Mordecai Feierberg's "Whither?" also makes clear the deep historical chasm between the Jewish tradition of the old and new worlds. The former was a heritage of centuries during which the Jews were cut off from Western civilization, were betrayed and hounded and persecuted, and immured themselves behind the "Book" and the Talmud while they waited for the Messiah. The autobiographical hero of "Whither?" is raised in a Polish-Jewish ghetto, where religious and scholarly study is the only path of hope, or at least of salvation, in a blank vista of social misery.

Yet it is just through the discipline



Howard Nemerov



Charles Angoff



Bernard Malamud

of religious study that, while he yearns for the simple pleasures and gaiety that life should yield "Nachman, the Madman" discovers the "forbidden books" of Jewish culture and then reads the heretical books of Western culture in the nineteenth century. The description of provincial Jewish life on the eve of the Enlightenment, the Haskalah, is the achievement of this novelette. The spiritual conflict of its

hero is conveyed with beauty and insight.

Feierberg was a young mystic writer, who recorded barely more than a few stories before he died; but it is good to have him become part of our wider literary tradition. Both his brief novel and Mr. Ribalow's anthology are valuable contributions to cultural diversity in this age of standardization.

## All for the Sake of Minnie

**"The John Wood Case," by Ruth Suckow** (Viking. 314 pp. \$3.95), set in Iowa during the early years of this century, tells of the effects of embezzlement upon the family and friends of the guilty man. Novelist Helga Sandburg is the author of "The Wheel of Earth" and "Measure My Love."

By Helga Sandburg

TWO parts compose this novel set in the early 1900s. The first hundred pages, almost devoid of action, set the stage where the crime of John Wood will be exposed. The following pages explore the reactions of the embezzler's family and friends, and of the townspeople of Midwest Fairview, when he is found out. John Wood's son, Philip Sidney, seventeen, extraordinarily devoted to his parents, is the "youthful king," the chosen valedictorian, of his senior class. It is with his story, and his total but pallid nobility, that the book is concerned.

Because Philip's mother, Minnie, has been a chronic invalid since girlhood, the boy and his father have undertaken housework and cooked the meals, assisted through the years by friendly neighbors. There is no rebellion in Philip, who has regarded himself as the satisfactory product of a Browningsque love. And since John Wood's crime was undertaken

for the sake of Minnie, the judgments of the townsfolk are not simply come by. There lies the interest of the tale; the last pages are absorbing.

There is no suggestion of suspense prefacing the discovery of John Wood's act. If a reader is in a hurry this book is not for him; it is no mystery thriller.

Two of the most successful people who emerge are John Wood's employer, the Civil War veteran Colonel George Merriam and his Puritanical wife, Lydia. The Colonel had looked on John Wood as a substitute for his own inadequate son. There are minor characters that retain a nondimensional quality: the pastor, Jerry Storm; Philip's invalid girl friend, who is the Colonel's granddaughter; the town photographer, Mr. Rakosi. John Wood himself is but lightly touched on. We are informed he is handsome, and though his "clothes were not ministerial there was a correctness about them and about John himself with his well-brushed hair and trim mustache." But we are never permitted to delve into his soul as into, for example, Mrs. Merriam's. There are implications at times of an aberration in John Wood. Miss Suckow repeatedly refers to a "slight misalignment" of his inscrutable blue eyes. The mystery is unsolved. However, John Wood's self-concerned motive is acceptable.

Miss Suckow writes in her well-