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## Sultry Season

*Continued from page 12*

and glaring, while her countenance darkened with rage and anguish—"But, before they shall marry under my very eyes, and live here, maddening my soul and senses, day and night, by the view of their love and joy, I will pull down ruin on the heads of all! Yes, although I myself should be the first to fall!" She paused in silent thought for some time, then rising, said, "Down, tiger heart! Down! crouch! Be smooth, brow! Be tender, eyes! Be soft, voice! And now go and pacify the old man before his vexation betrays me to the others. Come! in time I shall learn to curb wild impulses, and only spring upon my prey when time and place is fit."

In his "Golden Multitudes" Frank Luther Mott says that, "equipped with the gas-mask of tolerance," anyone who today encounters the novels of Mrs. Southworth must dig deep "to discern an indefatigable story-telling talent, a strong feeling for blatant and primitive melodrama, a love for sensational effects in both incidents and characterization, and a faculty for passionate declamations." But such attributes seem strong stuff even for the reader on the trail of the most distracting fiction for his 1960 vacation.

Today the term "summer novel" is more apt to be applied to books that have what some editors call "reader identification." Perhaps the action takes place near the shore, and the plot, stitched up in muted-color petit point, offers to the prurient the vicarious appreciation of a dalliance between an aging young man and his archly cynical stepdaughter. The dichotomy that began with Hawthorne's "Scarlet Letter" and the romances of "scribbling women" may not be so recognizable this summer.

The novel that thrives in warm weather is not necessarily a lasting best-seller, but—as is true throughout the year—the most popular book in any summer is bound to be the one most talked about. As we have seen, initial summer sales can help to make remarkable best-sellers like "Anthony Adverse," "Gone With the Wind," "The Naked and the Dead," and Carl Carmer's "Stars Fell on Alabama." But the weather on the day of publication is a moot point and one continually under debate in the inner sanctums of publishers.

It is only the individual who can predict what he will read this summer. He may be responsive to those titles he sees on best seller lists, or he may go back to his willow tree and read the whole of Proust again. Neither

public libraries nor rental libraries are able to compile statistics that shed revealing light on summer reading tastes. Yet the New York Public Library, like many others, each year mounts an earnest campaign to shape the summer reading of its borrowers. Its Readers' Adviser's Office issues a list of recommended books each June, with a blank verse introduction; in 1958, for instance, these opening lines from a poem by Mary C. Hatch:

Summer is for each of us.  
To each his own is some small way—  
A square of beach, a patch of grass,  
An hour alone, the world in a book.

Under the title "Summer Delights" there followed a list of twenty-three collections of essays—from Charles Lamb to Russell Lynes; fifteen modern biographies; fourteen poetry collections; sixteen plays; and forty-three high-quality novels. Last summer, a similar brochure offered vacation borrowers a list of books the library considered "Highlights" of the years from 1914 to 1959. Interestingly, the list's nominees for memorable books in the peaceful era before World War II had six times as many novels as there were for the postwar period, in which non-fiction dominates the recommendations. Few of the novels could be considered "light." For the New York Public Library, it would seem that summer is the time to read—or reread—the books of other seasons.

Rental libraries, on the contrary, find that their patrons stay in step with the year—and with the books that are currently most talked about. The day when Angela Thirkell was the darling of the lending libraries, a spokesman said, is gone. Summer, winter, autumn, spring, the seasonal changes of those who trudge around the corner to rent a book seldom point to something other than the need to be *au courant* when the conversation turns to literature.

The summer reader, now as always, is no more or less than what he makes of himself. One eighteenth-century summer, the average devotee of light fiction was certainly devouring Mrs. Rawson's "Charlotte Temple, A Tale of Truth." And at the end of the nineteenth century there was a summer when "everybody" was reading "The Honorable Peter Stirling," by Paul Leicester Ford, for gossip said that this novel was based on the life of Grover Cleveland. This summer we'll be reading—well, it's up to you. Summer reading reflects the times, as they appear to any reader through his sunglasses.

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## Seniors and Juniors

By JOHN CIARDI

**P**RACTICALLY every contemporary poet of any consequence has now recorded his own voice reading his own poems, and granted that some poets are poor readers, the fact still remains that all such readings can be useful to listeners interested in twentieth-century poetry, for however badly the poet goes at his own poems, his particular intonations, and especially his breath groups, are always likely to offer an insight into his writing. Such readings are indispensable to scholars. They can be a wonderfully vivifying force in the classroom (particularly when they are listened to with the text in hand, eye and ear following together). And the best of them belong happily among the pleasures of the poetry-lover's private collection.

As the number of available recordings grows, however, it becomes unlikely that private collectors can afford anything like a complete collection, especially since the average price of a single LP runs within pennies of \$6.00. Nor—price aside—is there any reason for any but the most avid collectors to want them all.

Most poetry recordings belong in libraries, to be sampled there and put back on the shelf. The point to stress is that they very emphatically should be available in this way. It is good to note that many libraries have made poetry recordings an essential part of their collections, some circulating the recordings for home play, some providing listening facilities in the library, and some doing both. It is time, I believe, for every library with anything like a real interest in poetry to add such a collection to its resources.

Of the four new releases by senior poets, I take "John Masefield Reads the Story of Ossian" (Spoken Arts 755, \$5.95), "The Poems of James Stephens Read by the Author" (Spoken Arts 744, \$5.95), and "T. S. Eliot Reads Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" (Spoken Arts 758, \$5.95) to be exactly the sort of poetry recordings that should be recommended to library collections rather than to individual ownership. All three certainly belong somewhere on the shelf, but none of them amounts to much more than spoken footnotes.

Masefield's poetry does still linger on

in the less enlightened reaches of The School System, but certainly he is more laureate than poet, a force for poetic respectability rather than poetic liveliness. Pale and correct, his lines run to the tick-tock metric of an academic exercise and he reads them in a meticulously genteel voice that somehow suggests morning coats and an Adam's apple constricted by high starched collars. I have no choice but to put it down as a colorless performance of colorless poetry.

James Stephens can hardly be called colorless. He is, in fact, more than a bit of a ham. "The three most beautiful things in the world," he asserts in the coyly dragged out brogue of the professional Irishman, "are a goat, a donkey, and a mountain. I mean *any* goat, *any* ass, and *any* mountain." Stephens hangs the reading of his poems on commentary of this order with a fine and wilfully pixyish gusto, yet with a kind of sweetness welling through the coyness. Call it gracefully whimsical. It is worth listening to—once.

**K**ARL SHAPIRO's recent (SR, Feb. 27, 1960) attempt to demote Eliot from commander-in-chief to buck private does not have my entire endorsement. If Eliot has been overrated by the academics and the new critics, he is still a poet of very considerable stature. I must still insist that "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" is dull and prissy stuff. Eliot's dry voice of doom can be a compelling thing, but I find his whimsy much too elephantine for my taste. The poems are all about proper and improper cats, cat etiquette, the naming of cats, the history of cats—all of it intended to be playful, and all of it enunciated in the ponderous voice of a maiden-parson trying to keep a straight face while he tells the most *screamingly* whimsical stories with the most *lovable* twinkle in his eye. Put it down as a queer foible, yet I find myself thinking that these poems and Eliot's way of reading them suggest some interesting reflections on his expatriation.

"Ezra Pound Reading His Poetry" (Caedmon TC 1122, \$5.95) is clearly the exciting one of the present four and the only one I can happily recommend not only to libraries but to private collectors, provided they are not set to

hate Pound at sight. As a matter of special interest this recording is, as far as I know, the only commercial release of Pound reading his own poems.

He does so in a voice that is big, banging, singsong, pretentious, arrogant, and messianic, all in one. It is a voice knocked out by its own sense of importance, yet fervent with something more than simple arrogance. How much of Pound is a paranoid anger and how much is a true and seeking fervor is a question I have come to think is unanswerable, but certainly this is the one true voice of that duality. What actor could dream of inventing such a voice for the role? Yet one feels instantly that this is the only voice for these poems, a voice both astonishing and astonishingly right; the sort of performance one wants to hear again and to share with his friends, if only for a sampling. All four releases, I regret to add, lack an accompanying text.

**T**HE Yale Series of Recorded Poets is an ambitious project, established with foundation support, to release readings by as many as twenty to twenty-five poets annually, and the first three releases breathe a fine, right sense of exciting possibility. Well recorded, with superb photos of the poets on the front of each cover, with intelligent and useful notes on the back, and with an accompanying printed text, these first exemplars seem to be exactly what poetry recordings should be, and we earnestly hope that Yale will continue its series as discriminately as it has begun it.

Robert Lowell (YP 301, \$4.32) reads his poems reticently in a near-monotone varied only by a breathy fade and whisper, with almost no pauses, certainly with no assertion, and yet with great care to register every word. Lowell is no actor, and one senses instantly that he would scorn any actor-effort to project the poems. He does not in fact *recite* them so much as *say* them. He says them squarely, cleanly, without fuss, and in a flat, downright New England voice. Teachers of oral interpretation will, likely, be distraught at Lowell's refusal to reach out for dramatic emphasis, yet the refusal is one that sensitive listeners will recognize as an essence of the reading. Many poets read with this refusal locked into their voices, and though this way of reading is not the best that a voice could do by the poems, it is a clean and honest way, and a valuable sounding of the poems in the voice to whose cadences and breath-groups the poems were written.

Stanley Kunitz (YP 302, \$4.32) reads his poems pretty much in the same tradition of reticence, holding back the dramatic effects while taking care to