

# The Weeding-Out Process

**"Some People, Places, and Things That Will Not Appear in My Next Novel," by John Cheever** (Harper, 175 pp. \$3.50), relates the writer's duty to discipline his material to the need for order in life. David Ray, of the English faculty at Cornell, edited *"The Chicago Review Anthology"* and is now an editor of *Epoch*.

By David Ray

**"FICTION** can no longer operate as a sixth-rate boardinghouse," John Cheever announces in "Some People, Places, and Things That Will Not Appear in My Next Novel," a volume of stories and satirical notations indicting all that is "sloppy" in American fiction. Readers who object to the sprawling, all-inclusive novels of Thomas Wolfe, or who prefer John O'Hara's stories to his novels, will be happy to see Cheever redirecting the writer to the task of "eviction" of characters who have commanded the artist's involuntary attention, threatening to corrupt his future work.

Though Cheever never refers to total recall as a curse rather than a gift, he clearly feels that both the writer and the mature man—aware of the nearness of madness and death, and thus interested in the "desperate composure" that makes life meaningful, if not altogether tidy—should limit what they allow to claim their attention. Consequently these stories by Mr. Cheever are about people who must be rejected from disciplined lives.

The gallery of "depraved acquaintances" includes a brother whose "aura of smallness" is brought out by his selfishness about an inherited lowboy, his love for which leads to the evocation of family ghosts and his own deterioration; a shipboard friend whose promiscuity represents the lure of "carnal anarchy"; and a drunken, jig-dancing, and dish-breaking neighbor who, though inviting pity, threatens to throw into chaos the life of anyone foolish enough to befriend him. Such stories about rejection, frequently of the socially undesirable, might provoke accusations of snobbery if Cheever did not make it clear—by rejecting a few Italian aristocrats along with American boors—that he is up to something much

more serious. He is asking a major question: "Where does responsibility to another end and to one's own life begin?" Just as writers are corrupted when certain characters run away with their stories, lives are corrupted when certain acquaintances, however fascinating, intrude. It takes courage to reject such intrusions in the interests of happiness and sanity. In asserting this theme allegorically, Cheever clearly feels that life is too short to permit disruption and chaos.

Though Cheever "rejects" these characters whose claim on his attention is "intense but not final," he has given them as loving and three-dimensional a life as any possible in his anticipated novel. Even the most obnoxious of them are charmers, and in feeling Cheever's regret as he evicts them one wonders if writing people out of one's system isn't the most courageous of all methods of eviction, and the most charitable. For it is not so much their personalities Cheever rejects as their responses to life. In chronicling the lives of those who foolishly rely on the past, wealth, or travel for salvation, Cheever directs a sacrificial search for firmer values. This is not the search of a snob, but of an enlightened Puritan aware that the victims of such rejections—made in the interests of keeping life meaningful and the search for love successful—often have an easier ability to survive than those who must reject



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them. In his best story, "The Scarlet Moving Van," Cheever shows that those who would ruin one's life if their demands were met are often self-sufficient and do not need the charities they provoke.

The two themes, then, of the artist's responsibility to control what claims his attention, and man's need to exercise an equivalent concern in his life, mesh beautifully in this book. In rejecting all approaches that seem unworthy, that seem to embrace chaos rather than life as Cheever's (and Thoreau's) God meant it to be lived, the author eloquently insists that the maintenance of sanity is so difficult today that it takes some arranging to manage it. As an investigation of the contemporary writer's search for discipline, this book will stand as a personal and esthetic document of the first magnitude; as a work of fiction dramatizing modern man's search for order it will provide a rich bundle of the wit, insight, and pictorial abilities to which Cheever's readers have long been accustomed.

**THE PETER PAN GENERATION:** In "It's Always Three O'Clock" (McKay, \$4.50), Babs H. Deal, who made a promising debut with "Acres of Afternoon," has by virtue of beautiful craftsmanship soared over the hazards of the second novel. To make this well-orchestrated book, Mrs. Deal had to overcome great difficulties in construction and narrative flow. She wished to give the spirit of four distinct periods in American life: the 1920s, the Thirties, the Forties, and the early Sixties. One of her characters sees history as a train that went into a station "where they played jazz and drank bootleg gin," traveled on "faster now, through the bread lines, the hunger, through fear," into the time when her son is photographed on the flight deck of a carrier, and arrived finally at Cape Canaveral, where there were "the single thrusting surges of light."

"It's Always Three O'Clock" is the story of a northern Alabama generation of teen-agers in the Twenties—"sheiks and flappers"—who got lost as they entered upon adult responsibilities and looked the wrong way as the decades passed. "My mother was a little girl till the day she died," says Martha Ann Holder, and adds, "Aunt Cat too, I guess." Catherine Cartwright ("Aunt Cat") is the novel's most tragic character, brittle, brilliant, reckless, and self-destructive.

Mrs. Deal lets the story grow through the consciousness of a number of characters, but she keeps up narrative momentum and shows herself one of the most skilful of the younger novelists. And no one among them can match

the compressed dramatic excitement of such scenes as the suicide of Marty, who was exhausted by the absurdity of existence, or the death of Veda in the arms of a wild friend.

Scott Fitzgerald's remark "In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning" provides the title of the book, which in times more propitious for fiction than the present would have provoked widespread discussion.

—GORHAM MUNSON.

**DISTURBED HUMORIST:** In one of the pieces in "Lanterns and Lances" (Harper, \$3.95), James Thurber reports that an avant-garde critic has denounced him for an alleged preoccupation with trivia. Ah, good! we think; nothing we enjoy more than a literary brawl. And we read on, anticipating a brilliant, sardonic riposte from *The New Yorker's* legendary wit. What we get, however, is an account of the author's discoveries in the field of alphabetical relativity. Consider, for example, the antipathy of the letters C and M, as illustrated by the morbid combinations of Capulet and Montague, McKinley and Czolgosz, Christian and Moslem. Or the disasters of D, with its doubt, dread, disease, doom, and dusty death. Foul F, with its frightening flow of flop, fourflusher, frying pan, and fire. And what with ghouls, ghosts, goblins, gargoyles, hoodlums, hopheads, hysteria, and hatchet-men, God help us. So take to the tors, Thurber tells the timid, the times teem with terror, tornado, typhoon, television—and trivia.

And, for the most part, "Lanterns and Lances" is a collection of Thurber trivia. The lanterns, he says, are for casting light on areas of darkness; the lances aimed at people and ideas that have disturbed him. What disturbs him especially is the dark area of our language, struggling, he feels, for its very survival. The signs are everywhere: the corruption of advertising (he offers a marvelous slogan to a brewery: "We still brew good like we used to could") and the proliferation of "you know" and "uh." He assails a recent President for converting "gradual" into "gradjl" and "intellectual" into "intellectchl" (bastard sounds, he calls them; if there's anything Thurber hates, it's mispronunciation). And beware of the New Vocabularianism, those vile concoctions of meaningless phrases, like Calculated Risks. Already confused by the abbreviationists who have given us No-Cal and Decaf, we'll soon require a special glossary for decoding inevitable terms like "Pea-Coex," "Mass-Retal," and "Sum-Con." It could happen, too; even in the days of the New-Fro.

But I wonder. Is the world doomed because an ad slogan stretches "pre-

cisely" and "nicely" to rhyme with "icily"? Is education in this country "going to hell" because the children Thurber knows say "library"? (Maybe Johnny can't read, as a slew of scare best-sellers have warned, but the kids I've run into lately have staggered me with the scope and depth of their knowledge; if they can't read, they've picked up an awful lot of information somewhere.)

Validity aside, the real problem here is that of the disturbed humorist. When a humorist becomes disturbed, it seems to me that the one thing he should do is become funnier than ever. Lances dim lanterns and in his new book Thurber is more petulant than funny. It's hard to laugh when somebody's pouting.

—GEORGE KIRGO.

**ERIN IN TRANSITION:** Michael Campbell does not break into Gaelic song and make us weep for the sad sod of Ireland, nor does he climb to the base of Parnell's statue and shout passionate prose at clergymen, Englishmen, or opportunists of the Dublin market place. In "Across the Water" (Orion, \$3.95) he has his way with these traditional Sean O'Casey villains, but his way is affectionate laughter.

"Out with the sawdust and in with the chromium" quips a character in this adroitly assembled novel, and thereby introduces the argument. Should Ireland avoid modernity, or succumb to the televised slickness of industrialized societies?

Ironically, few of the young remain to debate the issue. Despite the success of a new class of gombeen-men ("Irish for usurer, me ould duck!") the economy is grim, and Irish emigration is as familiar a story as ever. Even more ironically, "across the water" is likely to be England, pagan land of the former enemy.

Tom Neelan is one of Father Hanna's Catholics, and one of the gombeen-men. When the Neelans aren't cutting the standard social capers of the new-rich Tom is plotting to buy Edenmore—the estate of the Protestant, Anglo-Irish Murrough-Bryants—for a development of jerrybuilt houses. Major Murrough-Bryant is a crotchety defender of aristocratic values, in contrast to his twice-married daughter Grania and his grandson Patrick, a likable but pliant lad who seems unable to see beyond a London advertising agency. Sociological implications are stirred in by the Neelans' winsome daughter Ann, university-educated and avid for new ideas; and by Mick Trench, a working-class Teddy boy who yearns after Liverpool's high wages and infectious jazz. Grania's entourage of painters and writers provides mordant commentary on the present state of the nation's life and art.

Mr. Campbell makes a consistently believable book out of this diverse company, which is all the more remarkable considering that he gives us a theatre riot, a pub crawl, a splintering party, and a horsey Irish outing at which a Polish count appears. There is many a droll surprise in the shenanigans, and in the writing, too.

Ireland's society-in-transition is to some extent following the historic human cycle. After events have amiably blurred class lines and one pair of inter-faith lovers has boarded the London plane, the somewhat mellowed major observes: "People coming and people staying; pairings and marriages; and occasionally people nudging each other into new directions."

That is contemporary Ireland, although Father Hanna rails heartily against its straying ways.

—WALT MCCASLIN.



"Go ahead and throw it. We can work out the rules as we go along."