

Last Call of the Wild

"Moontrap," by Don Berry (Viking, 339 pp. \$4.95), tells of two mountain men in the Oregon of 1850 who are unable to yield to the demands of encroaching civilization. Robert L. Perkin is book editor of the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*.

By ROBERT L. PERKIN

GOOD fictional literature of the American mountain men is scant, rather curiously so in view of the heroic and mythic nature of these lonely, violently self-sufficient individualists who, quite probably, were the last really free men in our society. One thinks of Harvey Fergusson's "Wolf Song," Guthrie's "The Big Sky," Forrester Blake's "Johnny Christmas" and its sequel, "Wilderness Passage," Frederick Man-

fred's "Lord Grizzly," and Don Berry's "Trask." And not much more. To this slim shelf we can now add, with gratitude, Berry's new novel, "Moontrap."

Not the least of the freedoms enjoyed by the mountain man was a large measure of freedom from desires, those supreme tyrants over the human spirit; and it is a deep and sensitive appreciation of these tyrannies that gives "Moontrap" fiber and substance. The price society exacts for itself is nearly always, for better or worse, a further compromise of absolute individual freedoms. Sometimes society pays off the sacrificer in false coin. The mountain man often refused or was unable to accept the privilege of compromise, and so, simply and with dignity, he "went under." His passing has the elements of classic legend.

Essentially, "Moontrap" is the tragedy of two men, one old, one young,

who wouldn't have made it anyway. Old Webb uncompromisingly rejects everything he sees in the "dunghead" civilization of the Willamette Valley of Oregon in 1850. He spits his contempt on the whole business; it "goes agai nature." A wild old man, all sinew and bone, Webb wears a pair of Piegan scalps dangling from a headband under his floppy hat. He took them in exchange for his own. His skull, gray-blue, is bare and exposed under the hat and a matter of great clinical interest to the female doctor-lady out from Oregon City. Yet Webb is also a man so innocent that he apologizes with formal ritual to the spirit of the deer he slays because he must waste part of the meat her body offers him for his survival. And on the night of the hunters, when he is the quarry, he takes time to build a trap to catch the moon in still waters.

YOUNG Johnson Monday tries to go with the tide of the new era, to "float along with the surface, say the expected things," and stay out of trouble. He almost succeeds in reaching a dark, broken-spirited balance with the hypocrisy, bigotry, and cruelty of the right-minded pioneers who are building Oregon around him. But when a vindictive civilization takes from him his Shoshone wife and their first-born, there's no other way but to seek out Old Webb and join him again on the mountain, hunter and hunted and both doomed.

Joe Meek is better equipped for the new society. He has learned the civilized man's art of being several men. (Meek is one of a half-dozen historic persons who have roles in Berry's very real tale; on the Fourth of July, 1850, he is marshal in Oregon City.) "Meek's got friends. Marshal's got no friends." Joe makes it, although not without a stratagem appropriate to a fur brigader.

Berry works out the pattern with a full, level, unstrained consciousness of its elemental implications. He is still the splendid storyteller he was in "Trask," but his feeling for wilderness and for the mystique of the mountain man has deepened, and "Moontrap" is a better book. It is somber, broodingly beautiful, and sometimes almost painfully compelling, with its mixture of rough horseplay humor, lyric romance, and the harshest kinds of reality, a mixture, one supposes, that the mountain man knew on every hand before the pioneers came.

Yes, Old Webb shot the Reverend Andrews after his obscene sermon of hate. Put a hole in his right-thinking gut the size of a punkin and then took off to see the ocean and die. No question but that the old man did it. As Joe Meek said, there wasn't another man in 1,000 miles that'd take the scalp.



"Herbert Brodberg"

"Come off it, Ellen, we're just going over our lines for the Little Theatre Group."

Ship of Dreams

"The Edge of the Alphabet," by Janet Frame (Braziller. 303 pp. \$4.95), portrays four lonely innocents adrift in a limbo between illusion and reality. William Peden teaches English at the University of Missouri.

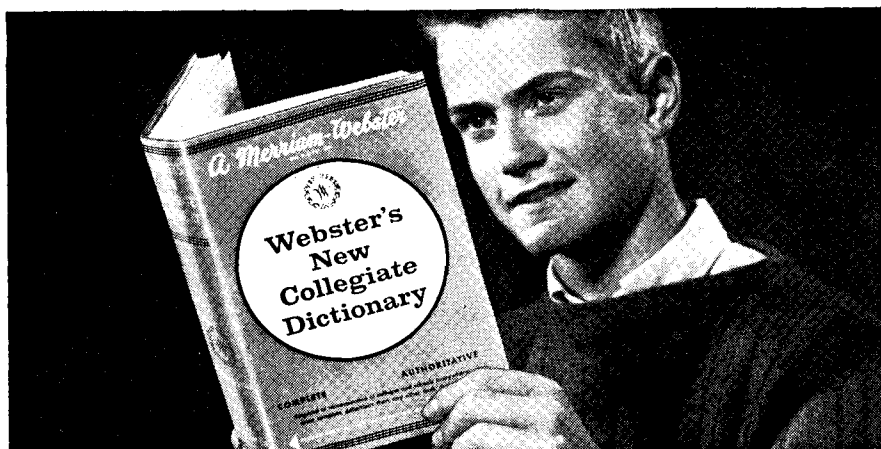
By WILLIAM PEDEN

THE PROTAGONIST of Janet Frame's third novel, Toby Withers, is a thirty-five-year-old epileptic tormented with the desire to go overseas ("there is an affliction of dream called *overseas*") and become an author. As a child in Waimaru, New Zealand, Toby had written a composition on "The Lost Tribe"; as a lonely, childlike man, incomplete as a "house with one wall torn away," he is obsessed with turning the essay into a book. Years after the death of his mother, who had protected him from the scorn of the adult world, the first of Toby's dreams comes true. En route to England aboard Miss Frame's version of the ship of fools, Toby meets two bemused exiles: Zoe Bryce, onetime schoolteacher from the English Midlands, and garrulous Irishman Pat Keenan, master of the bromide and fear-ridden defender of the status quo.

The author filters the history of these three refugees from reality through the consciousness of another stumbling dreamer, Thora Pattern. "Ruined I," Toby and Pat, Zoe and Thora, are all of them adrift in a limbo between illusion and reality which Thora calls "the edge of the alphabet," where "words crumble" and communication is useless.

Miss Frame, a New Zealander whose previous novels include "Faces in the Water," a depiction of mental illness, creates this limbo with skill, understanding, and compassion. Toby is a remarkable achievement; armed only with the ingenuous innocence of childishness, he is appealing rather than grotesque, and as convincing as a sudden cry for help from a burning building. The same can be said for poor Zoe Bryce, whose only crime is her virginity. That the dreams of these two lonely innocents will never be realized is a foregone conclusion: Toby never writes his book on "The Lost Tribe," and no Prince Charming appears for Zoe.

Few novelists since Joyce—Miss Frame's indebtedness to him is considerable—have so successfully portrayed the world of dreams and illusions. Throughout "The Edge of the Alphabet" she maintains a remarkable balance between the comic and the serious, the commonplace and the bizarre.



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