

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.

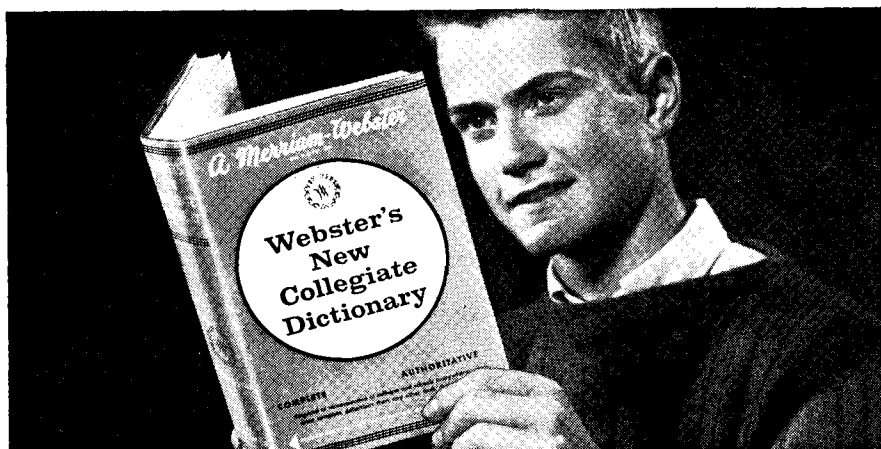
By WILLIAM PEDEN

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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Peter was sent to live with relatives last year because his family was unable to provide for him. But his parents could not bear the separation and now Peter is back home. The 6-year-old Greek boy faces winter without the clothes he needs. But Peter never complains. He knows that his parents cannot afford to buy him any clothing.

Peter's father is a good fisherman but has no boat. He works seasonally as a day laborer. His mother hires out as a field hand. Their combined earnings are \$17 a month. Peter's parents endure many supperless nights in order to give Peter and his three brothers a little more to eat.

XPEIAZETAI BOHOEIA*

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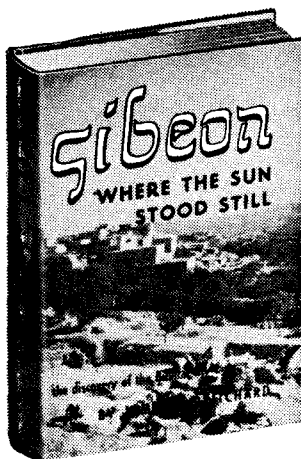
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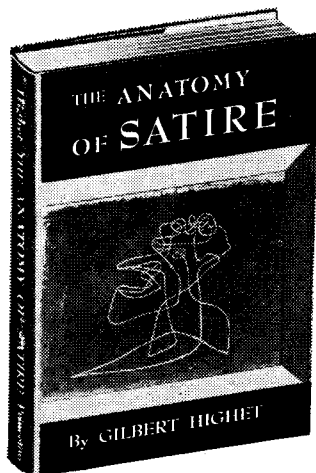


THREE SPECTACULAR FINDS at the site of Gibeon in the Arab village of el-Jib mark it as one of the most important in Biblical archaeology. Here, the director of the dig tells about the dramatic unearthing of a tunnel of 93 rock-cut steps from the city to the spring, "the pool of Gibeon," and the remnants of the oldest wine industry known. 120 illustrations.

Gibeon

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Military vs. Executive

"Seven Days in May," by Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey II (Harper & Row. 341 pp. \$4.95), asks whether a military junta might not connive in North America as well as South. W. G. Rogers is a syndicated writer for the Saturday Review Book Service.

By W. G. ROGERS

JORDAN LYMAN, President of the United States, has just signed an end-to-the-bomb treaty with Russia. To get the time of this novel straight, there were Kennedy, then Frazier, and now Lyman, so it's the early 1970s or, to put it another way, a decade before "1984."

Whether because of the treaty, or strikes, or other troubles, the President's popularity according to the polls has hit a record low of 29 per cent, so low that "popularity" hardly seems the word for it. With a small group of top brass in the armed services, it's not the word at all. The big shots in uniform think the country is being betrayed, and they have found sympathizers, among them Senator Prentice from a state with a lot of fat army contracts, and also a rabble-rousing television orator.

Against this background, Marine Colonel Casey, Joint Staff director, takes over his Sunday stint at the Pentagon. It's the first of title's "Seven Days." For no good reason Casey feels some uneasiness, but before many hours pass, good reasons abound:

A communications officer reveals messages mysteriously resembling horse-racing dope sent through the code room by Chairman General Scott of the Joint Chiefs of Staff;

A friend mentions a base that Casey, incomprehensibly, never heard of;

A practice alert scheduled for Saturday is supposed to be highly secret but it has been leaked to Prentice;

During the alert, the President will be isolated in a deep dugout, while the Vice President will be out of touch in a remote Italian village.

Then it gets fishier: Scott lies to Casey, Prentice voices an odd hint, a Fascist-minded officer appears unaccountably. Adding this and that and coming out he is afraid to guess where, Casey in desperation calls a friend of Lyman's and says he must see the President personally, alone and at once.

So they're headed for a crisis which, developing with inexorably mounting

tension, moves through secret confabs, undercover missions, death, spying, kidnaping, and assignation to a dramatic confrontation right in the White House. The authors, Washington newsmen, are in effect wondering whether after all it can happen here, whether we could have our General Salan, whether generals' juntas can't connive in North America as well as South.

There is a clumsy passage or two. But mostly the story line is handled with enviable skill to produce the maximum of shivers. You'll find this one of the hardest-to-put-down books you've picked up in a long time.

DEPOSED SAHIB: John Masters is a craftsman, not an artist—a storyteller, not a creator. One reads his books for the pure pleasure of following the trail, of watching the plot lines furled and unfurled. At his best, usually in describing moments of high crisis—a wounded man escaping across wild country, or a hurricane-haunted chase after a pregnant woman about to give birth and otherwise unattended—Masters reaches levels comparable to those attained by, say, Paul Bowles. Stylistically, however, Masters is simply competent; and he does not try for more. Nor does he attempt serious characterization, or search for significance; his characters could not be full-dimensional in the quick-paced sequences he designs for them. Consistency does not matter; the important thing is to drive forward, to keep the reader gripped, interested, absorbed, and, ultimately, entertained. These are the goals of light fiction, and Masters attains them with a sure hand.

"To the Coral Strand" (Harper & Row, \$4.95) brings back Rodney Savage, hero of the author's first and best book, "Bhowani Junction." He is no longer Sahib Savage, no longer an Indian Army officer, but a solitary Englishman in love with an India that time and the end of the British *raj* have denied him. Despite the immense, sometimes incredible ease with which he can still manipulate India and Indians both, neither the country nor its people will accept him. Assorted beautiful ladies, tiger and leopard hunts, battle scenes, and the like, keep his defeats from troubling the reader very badly, and true love wins in the end, phoenix-like. Names and places flow by and around, all either very exotic or very English. What counts in this story is the rushing flow of artificial time, hurrying forever through a make-believe world real enough to be absorbing but never real enough to disturb anyone's peaceful dreams. There has always been a place, and a need, for such fiction; I assume there always will be.

—BURTON RAFFEL.