

Guys and Dolls and Gangsters

A Frieze of Girls: Memoirs as Fiction, by Allan Seager (McGraw-Hill, 245 pp. \$4.95), recreates a period between two world wars that already seems to us romantic and remote. Cecil Hemley's novel "Young Crankshaw" was set in the 1930s.

By CECIL HEMLEY

THIS book contains thirteen autobiographical sketches, eight of which first appeared in well-known magazines. None of them is what one would call important, but all are entertaining and worth reading. From them emerges a sketchy, reportorial vision of an era.

Seager, who is both novelist and teacher, tells of his boyhood in Memphis, his college days at Michigan, his sojourn at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar. His narrative begins in the middle Twenties and ends in the early Thirties. Bootleggers are everywhere, selling their near-poisonous beverages. People dance to the music of Paul Whiteman. Bing Crosby is still one of the Rhythm Boys. When Seager returns from England he travels on the *Olympic*. The period is already so remote from us that it has acquired a romantic aura.

But Seager does not depend on mere background for his effects. He is both a persuasive writer and a shrewd observer of people; when he wishes to, he can delineate character with great skill. He tells us of Sarah Egan, the sister of a notorious Chicago gangster, and of Marta van der Puyl, the only girl on campus who understood Marx and Freud. Sarah, known as "the nicest girl in Cook County," attended Northwestern, read the novels of André Gide, and knew who was "hot" in the underworld. Marta was capable of marrying a rich young man simply to get carfare to New York, but she was also an idealist: she became the wife of a Negro and sailed off to Russia. Seager is too wise a man to attempt to explain either woman. It is enough for him to exhibit them. "Sociologists sweat to teach us that we are faceless conformists," he notes in his preface, "but I don't believe it. I think Americans, one by one, are a strange people."

To him the Englishman is not so much of an individual as the Ameri-



Allan Seager: "Americans . . . are a strange people."

can. Most of the English he knew "seemed to be types"—perhaps because he knew them less well than his own countrymen. His English pieces tend to

have more exposition than do the American ones. I don't mean that they are less interesting; but inevitably Seager utilizes a good deal of space to explain customs and attitudes that are not generally known to the average American. I, at least, had no idea how boat races were conducted at Oxford, nor how English swimmers trained in the early 1930s, and I'm not sure that it was important for me to find out; but I enjoyed learning.

Oddly enough, when Seager deals with himself he tends to be rather reticent (perhaps this is due to his English heritage), and consequently the central "I" of the book never quite emerges as a character. Although the author has plenty to say about how fumbling and foolish he was as an adolescent, the situations in which he chooses to show himself are so conventional that he is scarcely distinguishable from any other young man. However, the incidents are amusing, and there is no reason why Seager should be as candid as Jean-Jacques Rousseau if he does not want to be. After all, Rousseau was not writing his memoirs for *The New Yorker*. Nor has Seager attempted a full-scale autobiography. If he decided to write one, I suspect it would be very good indeed.

A Box Within a Box Within a Void

The Golden Fruits, by Nathalie Sarraute, translated from the French by Maria Jolas (Braziller, 177 pp. \$4), a novel about a novel, exemplifies the modern literary impulse toward self-repudiation. Ihab Hassan, chairman of the English Department at Wesleyan University, wrote "Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel."

By IHAB HASSAN

NATHALIE SARRAUTE's first novel, *Tropismes*, appeared in 1957. Her second book, *Portrait of a Man Unknown*, carried an introduction by Jean-Paul Sartre, who coined for it the term "anti-novel." The term now drops easily from the lips of critics and housewives alike; it is used, somewhat recklessly, to describe a group of talented French writers, including Butor, Robbe-Grillet, and Claude Simon. What it stands for, however, is a serious impulse of contemporary letters: self-repudiation.

The impulse is not entirely sterile.

Mme. Sarraute, like others of that persuasion, has continued to deny the novel with some prolificness; she has published three other works of fiction, and an artistic credo aptly called *The Age of Suspicion*.

Suspecting that literature may theorize about itself at the risk of sophisticated madness, I vowed to read *The Golden Fruits* with innocent eyes. But innocence is quickly corrupted by an art so beautifully bent on burlesquing its mystery at the source. Let each reader judge the case for himself.

The Golden Fruits is a book about a book called *The Golden Fruits*. (The contemporary novel, let us note in passing, is now forced to choose itself as subject.) There are, of course, no plot, no characters to follow or recognize; there is only a movement, images on the wing, flickering fragments, voices trailing into silence. We begin with a casual reference to the painter Courbet which leads us mysteriously to the labyrinthine "discussion" of Brehier's *Golden Fruits*. We overhear authors, critics, lovers, enemies, friends comment on that "masterpiece," which worms itself in and out of their exist-

ences, revealing in the process every nuance of human emotion. Above all, we observe the fate of imagination in daily life, and participate in the cunning action of art as it makes and un-makes itself.

Is Brehier like Constant, Rimbaud, Mann, Sterne? Is his image of life closer to Watteau or Courbet? "The Golden Fruits, I don't like it. I think it is dead-ly. It's obscure, it's evasive," says one. "Pure work of art—this self-enclosed, solid object, so smooth and round. Not a crack, not a scratch through which a foreign body could infiltrate," says another. "Oh, you know me, I know nothing about these things . . . Who am I to judge?" a third one protests.

Still another reader observes: "And so it happens that books whose emptiness everybody did their best to make up for . . . The most sensitive, most intelligent persons poured all their treasures

into them—and with what generosity."

In the spirit of parody and of poetry, literature acknowledges the void in the human situation, and ends by contesting, even cancelling, its own effectiveness. When the novel ends, we see Brehier, that author of a book within a book, fade into anonymity, his work nearly forgotten, his art become a dim memory or dream. *The Golden Fruits* proves to be a novel that makes, evaluates, and un-makes itself in the deceptively simple act of reading it.

What then remains? A reflection on the authentic quality of reality in our age, as Sartre claims? An ingenious theory of anti-literature, which the form of the novel proposes? Or a subtle and comic experience, perhaps too refined to leave any lasting impression? Quite possibly Mme. Sarraute's ideal audience will be that which declines to read *The Golden Fruits*, in honor of her theory.

the honors he no longer sought now came to him, in the church he had been reluctant to serve.

Elizabeth Vining does not describe Donne's life as a famous preacher, though her account of his conversion from worldly to heavenly aims makes a brilliant and most moving climax to the story of his wild youth and his love for "a wife most dear, most pure; a mother most gentle, most dutiful."

Fictionalized biography is a hybrid art, full of traps for the unwary. Miss Vining escapes them all. She makes no attempt to reproduce the speech of Donne's day; but her quotations from his intricate verse and stately prose show her deep understanding of a man who was both a sensualist and a mystic, a melancholy man whose joy was the way words took shape and danced to an ordered pattern in his mind.

The London scene with its great palaces and stinking alleys is sharply depicted. Historical figures, the aged queen, her drooling successor, doomed Essex on trial, Ben Jonson and his friends at the Mermaid Tavern make brief, effective appearances. But of them all it is Donne, the man so long overshadowed, the gentleman-beggar, the scholar for sale, who is most real and who most nearly speaks the language of our century. This masterly presentation of a complex character, outlined with firm yet subtle simplicity, is writing of a very high order.

Kaufman, Hart and Cudahy: In his *A Winter's Tale* (McGraw-Hill, \$4.50) Nathaniel Benchley, a sometime Down-Easter, recreates a New England island resort town during the winter season. His fictional year-rounders resemble the crew of the U.S. Navy Cargo Ship AK-601, until their tedium is relieved by an "almost made it," mostly off-Broadway director. This unemployed Mr. Roberts is hired by the town spinster, who suffers him to produce a "popular" past hit with parts enough for most of the populace. Although he had Ibsen in mind, he settles on Kaufman and Hart (*You Can't Take It with You*), and the entire citizenry auditions for roles that offer long hours, heatless rehearsal halls, and no pay.

And so the story becomes a study of the cast and how, once ego and ennui are eased, they all miraculously change for the better under this new direction. Indeed, by opening night we are given to understand that the curtain is going up on an emotionally restored community and a respectable repertory group.

All of which should have been a pleasant if none too inspired winter's tale if only Mr. Benchley had taken a cue from Messrs. Kaufman and Hart, whose characters, though pretty improbable, were always lovable. But ap-

Preacher and Scholar for Sale

Take Heed of Loving Me, by Elizabeth Gray Vining (Lippincott, 352 pp. \$5.95), portrays the marriage, dogged by misfortune, of the poet-preacher John Donne to his patron's daughter. Aileen Pippett often comments on historical fiction.

By AILEEN PIPPETT

"JOHN DONNE, Anne Donne, Undone." A bitter rhyme, a neat summary: John Donne had never been lucky. Returning from an ill-fated expedition against Spain under Essex (who had since been executed), he had learned that his patrimony was spent, his mistress false, his amorous verses a grave scandal, his Protestantism shaky. Nevertheless, he had found a new patron, the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, as whose secretary he seemed at last on the way to making a career at Queen Elizabeth's court. Now he was ruined; dismissed, blacklisted, jailed for marrying a minor without her father's consent.

The contested marriage was declared legal; John might have his Anne. But they were penniless, and lived for years on charity. Babies came, but not the position that would have enabled him to support a family. He worked himself nearly blind, writing anything that might earn a fee or procure a favor: elegies, odes, sonnets, bridal songs, a pamphlet suggested by the new king, issues of the day. John humbled him-

self, danced attendance on the great, trailed about Europe with a man who hoped to become an ambassador, while Anne, handmaiden to her sister, bore yet another child.

At last, though he felt no real vocation, John took holy orders and obtained a living as an Anglican parson. Hardly had he gained this security when misfortune struck again. After fifteen years of marriage and thirteen pregnancies, Anne died of puerperal fever, leaving eight young children to be cared for. "Her husband," he inscribed on her tombstone, "made speechless by grief . . . pledges his ashes to hers in a new marriage under God." Ironically,



Elizabeth Gray Vining—"firm yet subtle simplicity."