

When All the World Was Young

Nostalgia, by Geneviève Gennari (McKay, 270 pp. \$4.50), portrays the conflict between materialistic practicality and the "homesickness" for an ideal world peculiar to those for whom life is a mystery. Dorrie Pagones studied literature at the Sorbonne under a Fulbright grant.

By DORRIE PAGONES

AN OCTOGENARIAN, of course, is a person who has read *Jane Eyre* eight times. Whether this is a matter for congratulation or commiseration becomes an open question when a novelist like Geneviève Gennari appears. For Mlle. Gennari, though sophisticated, contemporary, and French, seems to be a secret octogenarian. The titles of her books might have been coined by Jane herself in a despairing mood: *The Riven Heart*, *The Other Woman I Am*, and now, *Nostalgia*.

Nostalgia begins with a description of Availle, a village so commonplace "that Nathalie Elikof felt her heart sink when she arrived there on a snowy evening of 1938 in the capacity of governess to the Trabert family." Shades of Thornfield!

But as things turn out it is not Thornfield; there is no Mr. Rochester in the château of Availle (though there is one, of sorts, in the town, who goes by the name of Le Pornic), and the whole Gothic atmosphere disintegrates like moonbeams because this is not 1847 but 1938. The Trabert family is an anachronism that could still exist before World War II but could not survive it. Of them all only the gifted young daughter Diane will learn, at great cost, how to "get out of the Middle Ages" (Le Pornic's advice) and come to terms with the world as it is.

The "nostalgia" of the title is of a kind peculiar to those who, like Diane, believe that life is a mystery: a nostalgia not for past grandeur but for an idealized world that materialists like Le Pornic consider meaningless. In a way, it is the world of childhood. Nathalie, a self-styled "fleshpot," sympathizes with first one and then the other as she narrates their story to its foretold end: Reader, Diane Married Him.

If this novel is not entirely successful (and I think it isn't, good as it is), the



Geneviève Gennari—gothic.

failure is not due to lack of imagination or ability, both of which abound, but to a too exclusively feminine point of view. The women seem real; the men don't. This is because Mlle. Gennari appears less concerned with what her men are like than with how her women like them, a defect of female novelists from Jane Austen to Mary McCarthy.

The number of typographical errors is unfortunate. Doubtless every book ever printed has some, but this one got more than its share.

The Baker and the Tart: I have always found V. S. Pritchett's book reviews and literary essays to be among the best around. While seeking out excellence with a clear and knowing eye, he is sympathetic and responsive to the author's aims. Come to think of it, he has most likely been an unconscious cornerstone for my vague—intuitive and certainly uncatalogued—belief that, when they are really good, writers make the very best critics. His constructive criticism can serve as an object lesson to those few critics who seem to view authors as adversaries to be put down and who attempt to make themselves more important than that which they are criticizing, the same learned ones who are not above going for the cheap, easy crack at the expense of their necessarily silent "opponents."

A similar clarity of vision shines through Mr. Pritchett's travel books. He

sees neither what he is told he will see nor what his guides attempt to make him see. He sees and describes simply what is there. And in *The Key to My Heart* (Random House, \$3.95), a pleasant, low-keyed ramble through the harmless and extremely funny scandals of an English village, he illustrates that he can see and record life in his own backyard with equal accuracy.

Bob Fraser, a young man who has newly inherited his father's bakery, tells the tale, and on the surface it is the story of his attempt to collect a long-overdue debt from Mrs. Beckett, the wealthiest woman in the neighborhood. She is also the stingiest and one of the prettiest. But that is only the beginning. It leads into his involvement with Mrs. Brackett and her charming, layabout, car-enthusiast husband, Noisy Brackett, their superlative rows and temporary divorce, his mother's objections to the manner in which he is or isn't running the bakery business, and all the other happenings that are common to small towns everywhere.

Mr. Pritchett's seemingly effortless and simple style must be an illusion. At any rate, it masks an outstanding gift for characterization. The small town in which I grew up is a continent and many thousand miles removed from this village of his, but I kept "recognizing" either the inhabitants or some of their characteristics. At that point, I came to realize that they weren't peculiar characters at all, but superbly depicted human beings with their droll mannerisms laid bare. This modest and slender volume is of the sort that becomes a well-thumbed favorite in one's library.

One final point: it seems to me that the publishers have overpriced this book. It is puffed out to its 107 pages, actually containing but 85 pages of print along with six excellent illustrations by Paul Hogarth. At a nickel less than four dollars, it does seem a bit steep. —EDWARD HICKMAN BROWN.

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RANDOM HOUSE



A Classroom in Old Afghanistan

Land of the High Flags, by Rosanne Klass (Random House. 288 pp. \$5.95), tells of the author's two years as a teacher in Afghanistan a decade ago. Raymond V. Johnson served as representative of The Asia Foundation in Afghanistan from 1958 to 1962.

By RAYMOND V. JOHNSON

"A BRACELET of sapphires thrown into a clay bowl." With these words Rosanne Klass describes the breathtaking Band-i-Amir lakes sprinkled in a rocky plateau of the towering Hindu Kush of Northern Afghanistan. The same imagery might be applied to her book, *Land of the High Flags*, a sometimes sparkling reminiscence of her two years as a teacher in Afghanistan a decade ago.

By now there are hundreds of American teachers who have had somewhat similar experiences in this landlocked country, and there have been many changes since 1954. But this is neither a period piece nor a prosaic diary, and Mrs. Klass, though inexperienced in teaching at the time, was more than an ordinary teacher. The memories she has dusted off emerge as touching love letters to the Afghans who, in their

humility, would not let themselves believe that she really cared.

Having spent four years in Afghanistan more recently, the reviewer can attest to the accuracy and artistry of her miniature of Dar-ul Mo' Allamein Teachers Training College—really a high school—and the enduring quality of its students, teachers, administrators, and problems. This modest pioneering institution, with patient help from Columbia University Teachers College, has now turned out thousands of dedicated young men to tackle the vast job of improving and expanding educational opportunities in underdeveloped countries.

The author shared the excitement of her pupils when they timorously voted by secret ballot for the first time (to form a student committee) and found to their dismay that the "traditional leaders" had not won. Afghanistan has come a long way since Mrs. Klass fell in love with it. Now that the country is blessed with a more democratic constitution, many of her former students must, on reflection, be overwhelmed at their rapid rise from insignificance.

Like an ancient masterpiece from the Ghaznavid court, this book is illuminated with glowing descriptions of Af-

ghanistan's then stark but now blooming capital, Kabul, and the still and starry nights over the 6,000-foot, mountain-ringed Kabul valley; the sometimes cruel, fuel-scarce winters, and the inescapable summer dust; the pandemonium of *Jeshyn* (Independence Week) and the ferocity of the ageless national game of *buzkashi* (a sort of primordial polo played by hundreds of wild-eyed riders on boundless plains); the splendor of secluded Bamian valley and its colossal, defaced Buddhas, who mutely testify to the alternate waves of culture and depredation that have swept from time immemorial across this troubled land.

In the mellowing perspective of the quarter-century since progressive, impulsive King Amanullah was deposed and replaced by a water-carrier, the author is more charitable to him than most Afghan historians have been. To her, this contemporary admirer and emulator of Ataturk emerges as a leader who tried too much too soon with too little support. Now the odds have changed and the Afghans, always proud of their past, are proudly plunging into the future, trying to achieve in decades what they have missed in centuries of isolation.

THE travelogue that opens and closes the book, though well enough done, is an irrelevant distraction from the poignantly perceptive record of Mrs. Klass's intimate confrontation with Afghan character, tradition, and aspirations. Her experiences with domestic servants, while humorous enough, differ only in degree from the experiences of most Americans living abroad who, unused to servants in the United States, find that they have "been hired by a suave tyrant to be his employer."

For those who know little about this once remote country, the book is an affectionate, almost poetic introduction. For those who have not shared even vicariously the excitement of the American "teacher" at large in the underdeveloped world today, it is a frequently touching tale of the frustrations and small achievements that make such a mission worthwhile—and unforgettable.



—From the book.

Afghan girl—"always proud of their past, . . . proudly plunging into the future."

LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

1. powerhouse. 2. *Corridors of Power*. 3. . . "with all power and signs and lying numbers." 4. *The Power of Sympathy*. 5. Power mower. 6. "The Power of Malt." 7. The balance of power. 8. Power of attorney. 9. The power behind the throne. (What Pitt actually said was: "There is something behind the throne greater than the King himself.") 10. Florida Power and Light.