

carried out conscientiously its mandate of finding the most distinguished writers of an idealistic temperament. It is equally apparent that man's bellicosity and perversity (of which Alfred Nobel was quite aware) have inevitably disturbed the intellectual economy of the world and rendered more difficult the task of the Swedish Academy. On fifteen occasions men had made such a mess of the world that Stockholm could find no effective candidate for the Peace Award. Similarly, there were seven years when warfare so convulsed society that the Academy felt compelled to "soothe and moderate" passions by refraining from making an award for belles-lettres. During other turbulent years prizes went to neutral nations, even though on a few occasions this meant the bypassing of such as Proust and Joyce for candidates like Sweden's own Heidenstam.

It would seem that the idealism of the Swedish Academy has sometimes motivated it to embarrass autarchic governments. It attacked Hitler through occupied Denmark's Jensen, Stalin through Finland's Sillanpää, Bulganin and Khrushchev through Pasternak, Franco through the exiled Juan Ramón Jiménez. Other candidates considered seriously were equal symbols of disapproval: Gorki against Stalin (who was just ousting Trotsky), and Jorge Luis Borges (1965) against the dictator Perón, who had humiliated this brilliant thinker by assigning him a job as chicken-plucker. By awarding eleven of its fifty-eight literary prizes to Scandinavia, the Academy would seem to be emphasizing that this area is a stronghold of idealism—which, by comparison, it is.

Alfred Nobel did not require that his prize for literature go to the "best" writers in an absolute sense, but to the writers of "the most distinguished works of idealistic tendency." The word "idealism" occurs in most of the citations. Since politics at its best—ever since Plato—is an attempt to find a utopian form of government, since literature is an expression of the society as well as the individual, the Nobel Prize for Literature could hardly be emancipated from politics. Even as its judges have striven to reward literary excellence, the prize has inevitably been administered to bring man back to his senses.

Although the accolades in science seem to be awarded irrespective of national behavior or misbehavior (Germany leads in chemistry), such is not the case with those of literature and peace. Just as the Swedish Academy has avoided giving the prize to belligerents in the past, it would seem from this lesson of history that European disapproval of our military action in Vietnam will deprive us of Nobel prizes in literature and peace until we shake off the image the United States has abroad of aggressor.

The Computer Critic's Christmas

By BEN LUCIEN BURMAN, *author of the satirical novel "The Sign of the Praying Tiger," to be published by New American Library next April.*

LATELY I have become a cook. My culinary creations spring like Arctic birds from the icy depths of frozen food compartments in supermarkets. Tonight I decided to have a gourmet's repast of frozen creamed chicken. I opened the package and carefully read the label on the rainbow-colored wrapper: "Ingredients: cream, chicken, chicken fat, flour, pepper, sugar, flavoring, preservative, salt."

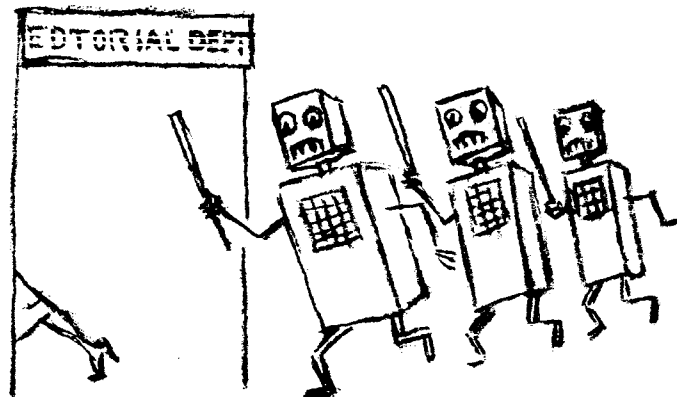
At that instant I was struck by one of those heaven-sent inspirations such as comes to the ecstatic author when he sees revealed like holy tablets on a mountain the glowing outline of his new novel. I rushed to the drug cabinet and took down what the long-suffering British, always half-poisoned by English cooking, call so sadly a digestive. It had only recently acquired a place on the shelf; probably it was made necessary by my newly-learned cooking. Like the creamed chicken it bore a label meticulous in its description of the contents. "Each tablet," it read, "contains sinethecane 25 milligrams. Also magnesium carbonate." Next it was an exotic-colored tin bearing the maker's lordly crest: "Active ingredients phenylephrine hydrochloride 0.5%, celypyridium chloride 0.02%, thermosol 0.001%." Both were marked in bold letters: "Keep away from children."

My inspiration blossomed like a magic flower into rich maturity. One of the major tragedies at holiday time is also one of the commonest: unnumbered thousands of those joyful celebrants opening packages around the Christmas

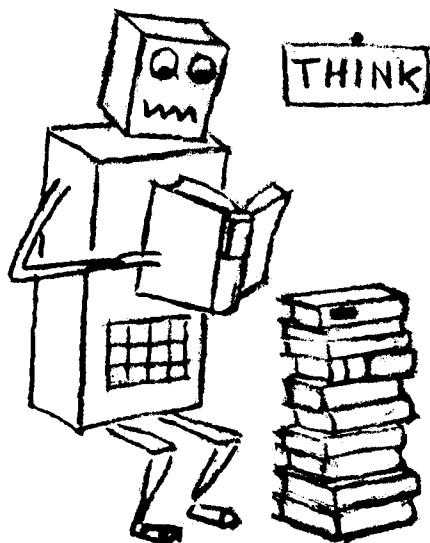
tree find they have received books they hate. The disaster may have a double origin. Perhaps an inexperienced bookseller, unlike a good shoe salesman, has not sold his wares to those they fit. He has handed down a pair of long thin shoes to a man with short fat feet. Or perhaps the book-buyer, acting on his own and misled by the jacket or the wiles of Madison Avenue, was not aware of the offending volume's true character.

My revolutionary discovery would make such tragedies impossible in the future. If it is advisable to label in exact detail the contents of food and drugs as provided in the Food and Drug Act, I reasoned, why is it not equally wise to label our novels? Why cannot the latest fictional creation clamoring for the public's eye and pocketbook have attached an expert chemical analysis with percentages of its active ingredients to the last decimal, exactly like fluoride toothpaste or frozen roast beef hash? Thus even the giddy teen-ager hired by the desperate bookseller to help out over the holidays or the new literature chairman of the Black Springs Woman's Club could make no mistake.

The process of arriving at the analysis would be child's play in these feverish days when computers send men to claim the moon. From the ranks of all our literary citizenry a Committee of One Hundred would be chosen, including publishers, editors, booksellers, librarians, authors, and critics. The selectees would read each book before it appears—or afterward if already published—, assay it for its various properties as an assay office assays suspected gold-bearing quartz, and then put down on magnetic tape their individual opinions. These tapes would then be fed into the latest, most complicated computer; after



—Drawings by Alice Cudde.



appropriate spinnings and wheezings the machine would finally disgorge a label giving the composite verdict. This label would be sacred as the Great Seal of the United States; extreme penalties would be levied for any tampering with the machine or any alteration.

The possibilities are endless, the potentialities dazzling. The avant-garde no-novel, which so delights devotees of the cult of the obscure, would emerge from the troubled maw of the computer critic with a large letter L on the label, for Limited Audience. The L might be further printed in red like "Poison" on lethal drugs. Beneath this would appear the computer critic's analysis: "plot zero, clarity zero, characterization zero, sex 30%, style Joyce-Stein 70%." Under this heading with slight variation might also be listed the stream-of-consciousness novel, the psychoanalytic novel, and the mystic novel of symbols.

For a historical novel of the usual turbulent mistress leaping in and out of far-flung beds like a nymphomaniac flea the label would read: "history zero, characterization zero, style zero, plot 10%, sex 90%." For the historical soap opera in novel form so beloved by certain lady writers: "history zero, style zero, plot 30%, sentiment 70%." For the pornographic, homosexual novel, zero for all categories except sex, 100%. The bathroom novels and the "black" novels which rank all humanity far below the hyena would have a somewhat similar rating. Like other drugs, these would be marked, "Keep away from children," and, like certain drugs, "Do not allow to stay uncovered in open air. It will spoil." These latter varieties would have a tranquilizer pill attached to alleviate the unpleasant effects following the reading. Books scheduled to become best-sellers only through expert promotion, like perishable drugs which must be used before a certain expiration date, would have the label, "Warning. Must be bought within three months of publi-

cation. After that will no longer be read."

The Western novel and similar sagas of hairy-chested heroes hacking their way through deadly jungles or crossing hurricane-swept seas would be quickly disposed of by the computer critic. A single turn of the wheel would suffice: "characterization zero, style zero, plot 100%." For the super-novel thousands of pages long, which periodically leaps into prominence, the computer critic could add a new specification—weight. So often, like a Turkish wife, the size and avoirdupois seem the quality the most important. He might also revive the custom once current in a now interred magazine of the Twenties. Before each chapter there would be a statement, "Reading Time: 22 minutes," followed by the number of light years needed to read the entire book. If the computer critic felt it warranted, the machine might also affix an envelope of Wake Up tablets to keep the reader from falling asleep.

The well-balanced novel would present more difficulty; the label might read: "theme or plot 15%, mood and characterization 65%, style 20%." These latter figures would vary greatly, depending on the book and the literary assayers.

The creation of this anonymous computer critic holds many obvious advantages. It would at one stroke eliminate all critical feuds and arguments, all wars between reviewer and author. As in the case of a condemned spy facing seven men only one of whose rifles bears an actual bullet, nobody knows afterward who fired the fatal shot. Unfortunately, however, computers, unlike marriages, are not manufactured in heaven; they often make mistakes. It is dreadful to contemplate the chaos if the computer got its labels mixed. A label intended for *Dinner at Antoine's*, by Frances Parkinson Keyes, might be glued to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. A label meant for Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* might find itself on *Peyton Place*.

Yet by and large, when December 25th comes near the mysterious Aunt Emma who turns up on every Christmas list would not receive the volume of Hindu love rituals intended for the effete young cousin gone abroad to study in a Paris café, and Uncle Charley, who likes his Bourbon straight, would not receive a novel about girlish school days in a convent. And booksellers and publishers and even authors for once in their harried lives would be happy.

Only one chilling prospect arises to cloud the bright horizon. The gloomy Jeremiahs of science fiction declare that as the computers advance in complexity and intellect the hour is not far off when they will take over completely. The time will come when the computer critic will



no longer wait for the verdicts of the august Committee of One Hundred, but will read and analyze the book himself.

And then one dreadful day, emboldened by his new-found power, he will organize his fellow computers into a gleaming chromium army. Sternly he will lead them on to the plush citadels of literature where the sleek editors and Schiaparelli-clad editresses sit enthroned in their overstuffed chairs and, driving them mercilessly into the streets, silently take their places.

And there will be not a single human critic left; only a row of shining machines whirring into eternity.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT No. 1165

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1165 will be found in the next issue.

D ODQ ODK EP D RSSN DQM

QSC IQSX GC — EBC QSC GR

VP GW ODZZGPM.

V. N. OPQFIPQ

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1164

Men are more apt to believe what they least understand.

—MONTAIGNE.