



Books

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LITERARY HORIZONS

Growing Up to a Tree House

GROVE PRESS has won considerable fame, not to say notoriety, as the publisher of Henry Miller, Jean Genet, William Burroughs, and other authors who work with words and situations that day before yesterday were taboo. If the publication of books by such authors called for considerable courage, it has turned out, one gathers, to yield something of a profit. At any rate Grove Press is stuck with a reputation, and when it publishes a book that, so far as vocabulary is concerned, might be required reading in a nineteenth-century Sunday school, that is news.

The book is a first novel by Mack Thomas, *Gumbo* (Grove, \$3.50). Thomas, according to the jacket, has been around: "After a stint in the Air Force and two years in Austin College, he tried his hand in rapid succession at a variety of jobs: pitching professional baseball for a season, blowing tenor sax with a jazz group in a Texas hotel, modeling suits and coats in Kansas City, inventing and manufacturing a chromium-plated bug deflector for automobiles, dance instructing at Arthur Murray's, running a diaper service, doing a disc jockey show on radio, etc."

Although Thomas has lived a full life, he has chosen to write about boyhood in Texas some thirty years ago. His hero, Toby Siler, is two or three at the beginning of *Gumbo* and twelve at the end. The book, which is only by courtesy a novel, is made up of a series of episodes, showing Toby with his parents and siblings, at school, at a church revival, at a Christmas party, and so on. Some of these episodes have been published in the *Saturday Evening Post* and other periodicals.

With a few exceptions the stories are told from Toby's point of view, and in the early chapters Thomas tries, by the use of special language, to take us inside the mind of a small child. "When the rain gentled to the first sign of friendli-

ness, Toby threw the blanket aside and ran from the porch to wade in the six-inch thrill of river in the ditch. That was when he had to make his feet remember the broken glittery that bit his toes and heels and made them leak hurt." The time is the Depression, and Toby's father is only intermittently employed: "Papa came home in the bright one day and sat at the table with Mamma so they could pass a new sad back and forth with their eyes." Fortunately there isn't much of this kind of writing, which is perhaps a worthy experiment but can become tiresome.

At his best Thomas gives us a sense of Toby's world:

By seven-thirty all the Cottonmill Christians and some that weren't were gathered. The place was filled with Shepherds and snaggle-toothed Angels; Shepherds with Red Goose shoes and rolled-up overalls under their flowing, bed-sheet robes, Shepherds with handles from brooms and handles from mops to make-believe were things you could sit on and twist on and throw and play swords with and poke with and ride like a witch until it was time for them to be Shepherds' stiffs. All the Angels had were wings and halos, and the wings felt funny and itched, and the halos slipped. One of the Angels was cross-eyed, another had freckles and a sty on his eye. Another had one wing torn loose from its harness and another had a fat split lip. One Angel nicked a Shepherd's nose with his halo and screamed and cried at the top of his four-year-old lungs when the Shepherd poked him with a staff.

Thomas draws pleasant portraits of Toby's mother and father without making them too good to be true, and he has a nice feeling for family life. The events of the story stay well within the bounds of probability. The Christmas party is amusing without being grotesque, and the account of Toby's conversion is moving without being

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melodramatic or sentimental. In the background is always the mill in which Toby's father and mother are employed when work is available and of which Toby comes to be frightened. He has other troubles, too—a case of the mumps, the death of his grandfather—but most of the time he is happy and he is growing in mind as well as body. The climactic event is his building of a tree house all by himself, and we understand very well the importance of this achievement to a boy of twelve.

There are flaws in the book. Thomas loses track of Toby's age: he is eleven on page 121 but just turning ten on page 138. More serious is an uncertainty in the handling of point of view. Most of the time, as I have said, we are looking at events through Toby's eyes, but every once in a while, quite unnecessarily, Thomas goes inside the mind of some other character, and incidents are described—for instance,

the arrival of the grandparents—that Toby did not witness. Since the effect of the book depends on the author's success in making us see and feel as Toby sees and feels, such lapses are regrettable.

I also have doubts about the style, apart from the doubts already expressed about the opening chapters. Toby has a bad dream, and his screams rouse the household. "But Celia and Jenny jeweled the bedroom door with long flannel nightgowns and sleep-tangled hair falling in bands down their faces as they stared with startled mouths and wondering eyes." Where does that "jeweled" come from? One cannot imagine that it expresses Toby's perception. Sometimes there is a kind of pseudo-poeticism: "A thought and a doze and a wondering later he wondered how it would be to have a whole apple all to himself. Something about it wouldn't let him wonder about it for long, and sailed his mind to a glass jar of light at the core of a whole, dark, pungent apple of sleep." "At the railroad track the rail he walked was cold with chill conspired in the night." Why "conspired"?

The book has received high praise, which the publishers, naturally enough, quote with enthusiasm. They may, however, live to regret their lack of discretion. To compare *Gumbo* with *Huckleberry Finn* can only obscure the fact that Thomas's book has real though modest merits. It is, for the most part, an honest book about childhood, and that is saying quite a lot. It is loosely put together, and there is a fair amount of bad writing, but there are many pages in which Toby lives. Obviously Thomas is writing about his own boyhood, and the openness of his nostalgia is rather charming. And, whatever else may be true, the book can be guaranteed to shock no one.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

**FRAZER YOUNG'S
LITERARY CRYPT No. 1125**

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1125 will be found in the next issue.

KDVMVO DGNOP ZGMV RVFNG-
DP, CLF FTV KDVMVOVPF RUY'F.

NYUYABULP

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1124

Those who come first are the heirs of fame; the others get only a younger brother's allowance. —GRACIAN.

ON THE FRINGE

Young Man with His Own Horn

JAMES DROUGHT strode into my living room carrying a large, gray, canvas overnight bag. He set it down on the floor, shucked off a car coat, and lowered his 6'3", 200-pound frame into a canvas sling chair. He ripped open a package of little cigars and lighted one. Then he opened the canvas bag. In a matter of minutes there were seven hardbacked books in a row across the carpet with seven paperback editions of the same books in a second row. My lap was flooded with newspaper clippings, magazines, and publicity releases, all pertaining to James Drought, his books, or his publishing house, Skylight Press.

When the flood showed signs of abating I made a start at an interview. Mr. Drought cut me off. "First, let me give you the general picture, and then you can ask all the questions you want." He began the unique story of James Drought's assault on the publishing world, the story of a man who couldn't get his novels accepted by any publishing house and so started his own. Within one year Drought put seven of his books into print, both hard- and soft-cover editions, and started building his reputation by placing copies in college bookstores, where they are selling steadily.

Twenty minutes went by before I could interrupt him. "Look, this is no good. Let me go at my interview my way. There are questions I want to ask." Drought nodded and agreed to finish up quickly what he wanted to say. He finished exactly one hour after he entered my apartment.

While waiting for the cutoff I made a few miserably unimportant notes to myself. James Drought looks like a burly Pat Boone. Blue eyes. Brown hair boyishly parted on one side. Tan corduroy trousers, maroon wool sweater with silver buttons the size of twenty-five-cent pieces down the front.

Still listening, I studied again the two pieces of paper that had been presented to me twenty-four hours before by my editor at this magazine and which had led to my calling Norwalk, Connecticut, to invite Mr. Drought to New York for an interview. Prior to that I had never heard of him. The first piece of paper was a telegram dated November 23, 1964, sent to the Book Editor at SR. It read:

REGARDING DECEMBER 1 PUBLICATION BY SKYLIGHT OF

JAMES DROUGHT'S SEVENTH BOOK THE ENEMY WE ARE PROUD TO ANNOUNCE THAT THE PULITZER PRIZE COMMITTEE HAS NOTIFIED US THAT IT IS CONSIDERING ALL SEVEN DROUGHT TITLES PUBLISHED THIS YEAR FOR A PRIZE IN A SPECIAL CATEGORY IN THIS YEAR'S JUDGING FOR ACHIEVEMENT IN AMERICAN LETTERS. AS YOU KNOW SKYLIGHT PRESS WAS FORMED A LITTLE OVER ONE YEAR AGO BY DROUGHT HIMSELF TO MAKE HIS WORK AVAILABLE TO THE AMERICAN PUBLIC. L B CARLSON GENL MGR SKYLIGHT PRESS

The second paper was a full-page advertisement from the *New York Times Book Review* of Sunday, January 31, 1965, which began—in the boldest of type—with the announcement, "JAMES DROUGHT SELECTED FOR LISTING IN WHO'S WHO IN AMERICA." Beneath that, in slightly smaller type—a size suitable for announcing major wars in minor countries—were statements of praise by three book editors and one columnist, all associated with New York City newspapers. The remainder of the page split into seven columns, each devoted to a Drought novel and each crammed with hosannahs for the book.

While Mr. Drought continued talking, I made a note to myself to call the Pulitzer office. Did they really give out hints in advance of the award announcements? Decided also to call one or two of the editors quoted in the ads.

And then Mr. Drought stopped. I showed him the ad. "This sort of thing costs a fortune, doesn't it?" James Drought nodded soberly. "We are also running it in *Book Week*, the *Chicago Tribune's Books Today*, and two different issues of *The New York Review of Books*. It comes to around \$7,500. That's a lot for us but nothing much compared to what's spent on a book like *Herzog*, and that's only one book. Our \$7,500 is being spent on fourteen books."

I asked about his *Who's Who* announcement and pointed out that people don't usually go around shouting in headlines when they are so honored. Mr. Drought nodded again. "I think others should take assurance from it. It shows that individual effort will be recognized."

I showed him the telegram. "L. B.

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