

Widowers and Wanderers

At the Crossroads, by Evan S. Connell, Jr. (Simon & Schuster. 256 pp. \$5.50), comprises a second collection of short stories by the author of "Mrs. Bridge." Warren Bower is director of the Writing Center at N.Y.U.

By WARREN BOWER

BOOKS of short stories play various roles in the strategy of building a career in writing. Occasionally, especially in recent years when several collections of brief fiction have won National Book Awards, they may effectively launch writers upon the national scene. But the most traditional role of the short story is that of journeyman work, since the form is easily accessible to beginners, its technique is now markedly flexible, and it does not require a great commitment of time before competence can be established, as does the novel. Happily, during some thirty years in American publishing there have been enough magazines, little or big, printing quality stories to help fledgling writers make reputations, among editors at least if not among a large body of readers.

One author who may now properly be called established and who began his visible literary career with a book of short stories is Evan S. Connell, Jr. In 1957 he published *The Anatomy Lesson*, a genuinely distinguished volume of stories, mature in themes and writing. It was followed by a successful novel, *Mrs. Bridge*. Then came the novel *The Patriot*, less successful both in significance and in sales. Connell next published a work not easy to describe, which his present publishers choose to call a "prose poem," under the title *Notes from a Bottle Found on the Beach at Carmel*.

The first thing to be said about *At the Crossroads* is that there is good work in it, but that the stories included are less consistently effective than those in *The Anatomy Lesson*. It would seem to be a gathering of stories written since 1957, three of them a group built around a character named Muhlbach, who also appeared in the story "Arcturus" in the first book. These could have been a trial run for a novel, just as a number of the oddly brief "chapters" in *Mrs. Bridge* appeared in *The Anatomy Lesson* as a short story, "The Beau Monde of Mrs. Bridge." The first piece in the Muhlbach group, "St. Augustine's Pigeon," is a moving account of a widower seeking female

companionship, being humiliated and cheated, and suffering a climactic indignity from a pigeon. Wholly successful in achieving a vivid sense of the pathos and pitiability of loneliness, it is easily the most rewarding and fully realized story in the book.

The third piece in the Muhlbach group, "Otto and the Magi," is discontinuous, a mixed-up narrative in which Connell falls victim to his own facility with words and ideas and scenes. He seems to have set down what may well have actually happened, plus his comments upon the people involved, their motives, intentions, meanings; but it is all out of control, self-indulgent, without apparent concern for the reader. To be sure, Connell is no deviser of neat plots; his best stories flow in a rhythm of their own, with a high correspondence to what transpires within a subtle mind. His worst are without structure, and flow turgidly because of the heavy burden of private comment and extraneous detail carried by the stream of the narrative. A gross example is the description of the drink requested by one of the characters in this story: "... bourbon mixed with a commercial preparation whose taste is as noxious to the tongue as its name is to the ear, a magenta-colored syrup symbolic of the esthetics of America."

The last stories in the volume comprise another triptych of tales under the general title of "Leon and Bébert." In each of these two garrulous young men comment interminably upon whatever comes into their heads. There is no narrative interest; the talk goes on and on with no relevance to anything. What is



Evan S. Connell—an interesting and resourceful experimenter.

accomplished is merely a fulsome demonstration of two shallow, chattering gossips. In a transparent effort to supply a reason for finding these dull sketches important, a blurb-writer in the publisher's office has applied the term "surrealism"—as if a label that sounds impressive and esoteric could by itself furnish what is lacking in the sketches themselves.

Between these two groups of related stories appear six brief sketches. "The Corset" is much the most successful of the lot, a bright bit of fun with the idea of making sex in the home rather more like what it has become in modern fiction. The title story, "At the Crossroads," is a piece of undoubted surrealism, the scene "the intersection of two empty highways in the desert."

Mr. Connell is an interesting and resourceful experimenter with freer forms in the short story. In this volume he has widened his range, developed his freedom to bend form and structure to his own purposes. If there seems to be less return from these experiments than one could wish, it may well be that in more considerable works to follow the results of the present trials and occasional errors may reward writer and reader alike.

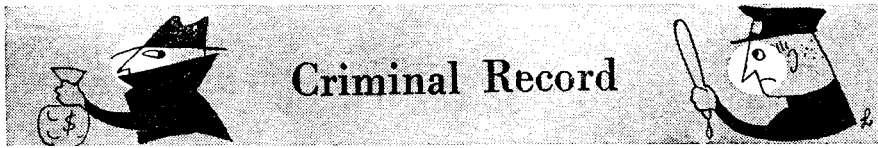
Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich and David M. Glixon

WORD CHAINS

One word-pair (the words may be joined or separate) can be linked with another when the second word of one pair is the same as the first word of the next (e.g., *horseshoe, shoehorn*). Several such links make a chain. Milton Van Dyke of Stanford, California, asks you to construct ten *closed* chains, each to contain one of the word-pairs listed below. (Example: BACKLASH: *lash out, outcome, comeback, BACKLASH*.) There's a roundup of the chain gang on page 38.

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| 1. POLECAT | 6. WATCH CHARM |
| 2. WORD CHAIN | 7. RAT RACE |
| 3. ROAD HOG | 8. BOOKWORM |
| 4. BRUSH FIRE | 9. CHAIN GANG |
| 5. LOCKJAW | 10. GAME FISH |



The Life and Death of Colonel Albert Jennings Fountain. By A. M. Gibson. University of Oklahoma Press. \$5.95. Colonel Fountain, a special U.S. district attorney prosecuting land-fraud cases, and his eight-year-old son were murdered in 1896 near Luna's Well, New Mexico; Fountain's arch-enemy in the territory was Albert B. Fall, later of Teapot Dome infamy, and the only American Cabinet member ever to do time; three men charged with the killings were acquitted. A well-documented, vivid account of a crime that is still a hardy conversation-piece in the West.

Special Agent: A Quarter Century with the Treasury Department and the Secret Service. By Frank J. Wilson and Beth Day. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. \$4.95. The retired chief of the government agency whose job it is to protect the President and the dollar reminisces entertainingly, and makes several suggestions for reducing the hazards confronting a Chief Executive that are well worth taking to heart.

Red Spies in the UN. By Pierre J. Huss and George Carpozi. Coward-McCann. \$5.50. This wrap-up of memorable cases from Valentin Gubitchev (deported 1949) to John William Butenko and Igor A. Ivanov (sentenced 1964—appeals pending) is detailed and comprehensive.

Mystery in the Channel and Crime at Guildford. By Freeman Wills Crofts. Penguin, Paperback, 75¢ each. Publication of these two titles, originally issued

in 1931 and 1935, restores to print an author whose great creation, Inspector French of New Scotland Yard, delighted devotees of the authentic detective story for more than a generation. *The Sea Mystery* and *The Cheyne Mystery* will soon follow. Bravo!

Number One: A Story of Landru. By René Marson. Translated from the French by Gillian Tindall. Doubleday. \$5.95. This fictionalized account of the career of France's twentieth-century Bluebeard (a career which ended at the guillotine) does not spare the harrowing details.

Homicide Blonde. By Maurice Proctor. Harper & Row. \$3.95. Strangulation of five young females has cops of English metropolitan area grinding teeth; Chief Inspector Martineau carries the main load. Professional as usual, but not quite up to *Two Men in Twenty*.

The Day the Call Came. By Thomas Hinde. Vanguard. \$4.50. English gentleman-farmer (narrator) awaits instructions from "them" that will send him forth to accomplish his mission; attitude of numerous neighbors (human and canine) is important. The reader is quickly chained to a compulsion paralleling that faced by the protagonist.

The Lure of the Bush. By Arthur W. Upfield. Crime Club. \$3.95. This book brings to an American audience for the first time an account of Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte's first case, originally

issued in Australia in the 1920s. A publishing event, naturally, and a fine tale.

Vote X for Treason. By Brian Cleeve. Random House. \$3.95. Irish politico, doing life in Dublin clink, is released to British Intelligence on mission to infiltrate "New Party" having Fascist leanings. Picks up pace nicely.

The Jealous One. By Celia Fremlin. Lippincott. \$3.50. It's woman vs. woman in this emotion-packed example of the green-eyed monster in action in provincial English district.

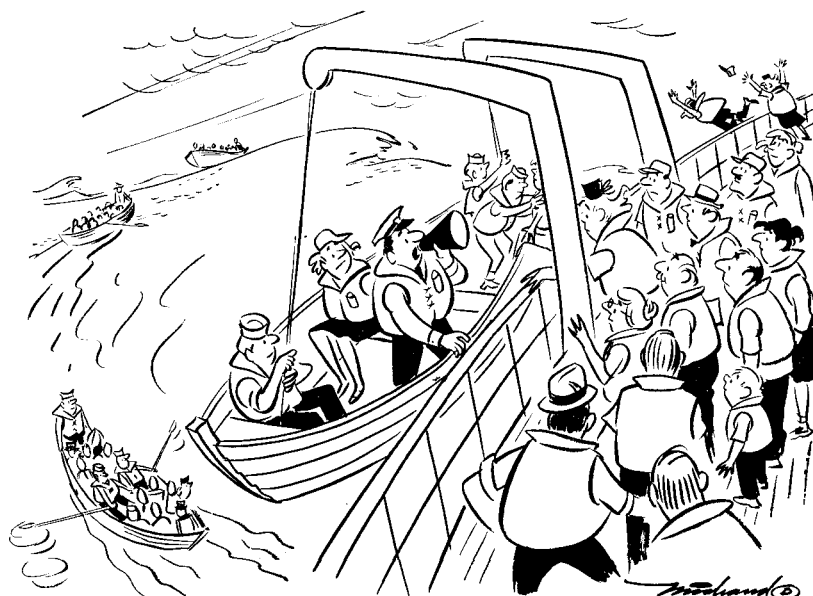
The Belting Inheritance. By Julian Symons. Harper & Row. \$3.95. Acknowledged heirs tizzy when missing-in-action "son" appears as fresh claimant to English estate; there are murders old and new. OK if you want a Victorian throwback.

Death of a Delft Blue. By Gladys Mitchell. London House & Maxwell. \$3.95. Amiable multifamily yarn (there's a tree) involves considerable travel, with stress on Amsterdam; there's also a murder. Note to the unhorticultural: A Delft blue is a hyacinth, not a teacup.

The Man in the Mirror. By Frederick Ayer, Jr. Regnery. \$4.50. Ex-Nazi colonel, tucked snugly away under alias in Argentina, is seized by Commies for delicate substitution chore in heart of U.S.; portrait of Washington, D.C., is unflattering. Bang-bang action from start to finish.

Thicker than Water. By Medeleine Polland. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. \$3.50 Visit to childhood home in Ireland gives English professor's wife anxious moments as question of identity arises; tension mounts steadily in this heads-up, well-written performance.

The Lonely Breeze. By Van Siller. Crime Club. \$3.50. Successful New York novelist and her secretary (who is narrator) motor to Florida's West coast to get warm and find things hotter than they had anticipated; two murders, plus solution of an old one. Smooth and well-handled baffler. —SERGEANT CUFF.



"Women, children, and those on the Pay Later Plan first."

LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

Here are the suggested missing links for constructing each chain, but you may be able to construct shorter or longer ones: 1. fish, pole (*polecat*, *catfish*, *fish-pole*, *polecat*). 2. saw, horse, play, house, key, word. 3. back, road. 4. house, paint, brush. 5. bone, head, lock. 6. school, house, dog, watch. 7. horse, back, pack, rat. 8. wood, pile, up, stage, hand, book. 9. war, chest, nut, tree, house, key, chain. 10. ball, game.