



Books

LITERARY HORIZONS

Mothers, Sons, and Lovers

A MAN of thirty-five takes his second wife and her eleven-year-old son to visit his widowed mother on her farm in Pennsylvania, arriving late one Friday afternoon in summer and leaving the following Sunday. During the interval nothing dramatic happens except that the mother has a seizure—what she calls a “spell”—after church on Sunday. The four characters talk, and as they talk, the reader becomes aware of the complicated relationships that exist between mother and son, man and wife, wife and mother-in-law, stepfather and stepson, and so on in all possible combinations. Certain characters not on the scene are also important, particularly the deceased husband and father and the divorced wife with her three children. When the book ends, conflicts have been clarified but not resolved.

This, I think, is a fair outline of John Updike's short novel, *Of the Farm* (Knopf, \$3.95). The farm is located on the outskirts of Olinger, a city that appears in much of Updike's fiction. The deceased father was a schoolteacher, as was the father in *The Centaur* (SR, Feb. 2, 1963) and in various of Updike's short stories. Both the country and the characters will seem familiar to Updike's regular readers, and the writing is as felicitous as usual.

“To produce a mighty book,” Herman Melville wrote, “you must choose a mighty theme.” This is a hard saying. Would the themes of *Hamlet*, *Anna Karenina*, or *Madame Bovary*, if stated in summary form, sound like mighty themes? We can know for sure that a theme is mighty only when a great writer shows us what can be made of it.

Besides, is mightiness the sovereign literary virtue? For some time now a few critics have been clamoring for Updike to do something “big.” There is an American tendency—encouraged, I am afraid, by both Hemingway and Faulkner—to believe that a literary career is like a series of world's championship battles,

that the great writer goes on slaying one giant after another until he is himself slain. Wright Morris discussed this tendency in *The Territory Ahead*. “Just the other day,” he wrote, “William Faulkner, in one of his now-frequent interviews, referred to Thomas Wolfe as the greatest American of them all. Why? Because he tried to do the impossible. The romantic agony could hardly be better phrased, nor failure made so credible and flattering. To fail, that is, is the true hallmark of success.”

In *Of the Farm* Updike was obviously not trying to do the impossible. He chose a small, manageable theme, one that might have seemed rather slight even to Henry James, and tried to see what he could do with it. His problem might be stated this way: if you bring four persons together for forty-eight not particularly eventful hours, how much can you show the reader about them? He complicated his problem as a novelist by having the story told by one of the participants, so that he was unable to enter the mind of any of the others.

The narrator is Joey Robinson, vaguely engaged in some sort of business enterprise, though his mother had hoped he would be a poet. He doesn't tell us much about himself, but, as we see him in relation to the others, we have an impression of his good points and bad. His mother is the central character, the one of whom Updike wants us to be most aware. Always a puzzle to Joey, she baffles him again and again as the two days pass by, and the reader is surprised and amused as the contradictions in her character reveal themselves. Although she lives in a myth she has created, she can be realistic and tough-minded enough when it serves her purpose, and, for all her years and her bad health, she remains a strong woman, not particularly lovable, perhaps not even admirable, but a force to be reckoned with.

Joey's affection for his mother is

28 SR's Check List of the Week's New Books

41 *Of the Farm*, by John Updike

42 Letters to the Book Review Editor

43 European Literary Scene, by Robert J. Clements

45 Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters 1874-1897, edited by Dan H. Laurence

46 Dr. Johnson: His Life in Letters, edited by David Littlejohn

47 The Unloved Germans, by Hermann Eich; Germany: Yesterday and Tomorrow, by Peter H. Merkl

48 Russia and Germany: A Century of Conflict, by Walter Laqueur

49 Canada: The Uneasy Neighbor, by Gerald Clark

51 Autumn Books for Young People, by Alice Dalgliesh

63 Benjamin Franklin: Philosopher and Man, by Alfred Owen Aldridge; Poor Richard's Politics: Benjamin Franklin and His New American Order, by Paul W. Conner

64 The Painted Bird, by Jerzy Kosinski. The Hawk Alone, by Jack Bennett

65 Aura, by Carlos Fuentes

65 Tentacles of Power: The Story of Jimmy Hoffa, by Clark R. Mollenhoff; Hoffa and the Teamsters: A Study of Union Power, by Ralph and Estelle Dinerstein James

69 The Fashionable Savages, by John Fairchild

104 The Job Hunter, by Allen R. Dodd

104 The Mistress and Other Stories, by Gina Berriault

105 The Beggar, by F. M. Esfandiary

more than merely dutiful; nevertheless there is a long-standing antagonism between them, growing out of the years when he took his father's side against her. Try as he will to be gentle, his resentments break out. “You poisoned one marriage for me,” he says the first night after his wife has gone to bed, “and I want you to leave this one alone.” When he joins his wife, he lets himself go: “I'm thirty-five and I've been through hell and I don't see why that old lady has to have such a hold over me. It's ridiculous. It's degrading.”

The mother, as Joey realizes, is a pathetic figure—old and ill and alone and by no means ready to die. (“My mother was skittish in cars; it was grotesque, how much she loved her life.”) But if she is pathetic, she is still capable

of defiant gestures. On the second evening she explodes. "In the kitchen, my mother smashed a plate. To abolish any doubt that it had been deliberate, she smashed another, after a bleached space of amazed silence; the explosion was somewhat muddier than the first, as if the plate had struck the floor diagonally." Later Joey explains to his stepson: "I think the reason my mother smashed the dishes was to remind us that she was *there*. She's afraid we'll forget her. It's a fear people have when they're her age." But this is a woman who is not likely to be forgotten.

The second wife, Peggy, is not portrayed at any depth, presumably because Joey's knowledge of her is not of the deepest. He sees her as extraordinarily desirable, but he does not romanticize either her appearance or her mind, as a young lover might do. What their domestic life may be we can only surmise, but, as the old lady suggests, it is probably not altogether harmonious. As for her son Richard, his amusing combination of sophistication and inexperience underlines the ironies of the situation.

There is no denying that it is a slight book, not calculated to quicken many pulses. But one should not underestimate it: the portrait of the mother is subtle and profound; most of the scenes are skillfully constructed so as to achieve the greatest possible revelation of character; the dialogue is lively. It's a sound novel, and we should be grateful for it.

Beyond that there is room for speculation. What would happen if Updike found himself engaged with a theme that drew upon all his experience, stretched his imagination, made the highest demands on his skills? No one knows. I prefer Updike's modest success to the messes some of his more ambitious colleagues have made. But if he did find a mighty theme and mastered it, I should rejoice.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT No. 1162

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1162 will be found in the next issue.

XOP GPELPX MD QPCVS XCLPG-

MUP CG XM XPBB PHPLZXOCVS.

HMBXFCLP

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1161

Distance is a great promoter of admiration.
—DENIS DIDEROT.

LETTERS TO THE Book Review Editor



Coercive Prices

PARTICULARLY during the pre-holiday period, perusal of "SR's Check List of the Week's New Books" reveals that the longer one procrastinates in making his purchase the higher the ultimate cost. A volume currently pegged at \$10, we are frequently reminded, will after Christmas be tagged at \$12.50. . . .

Conceivably tactics of this kind stimulate the intending gift buyer not to put off his contemplated visit to the bookshop. I can't help suspecting, though, that a resentment may also be engendered against a procedure distinctly resembling coercion as publishers. . . . erect artificial barriers.

THOMAS G. MORGANSEN.

Jackson Heights, N.Y.

Finds of Clandestine Diggers

WITHOUT OFFERING any opinion about Cecil Roth's thesis of a connection between the Qumran and Masadah, it should be noted that some of his statements [SR, Letters to Book Review Editor, Oct. 23] need modification. He has emphasized "that among the recent finds in the Qumran caves there have been legal documents actually drawn up at Masadah," referring to documents 19 and 72 in *Discoveries in the Judean Desert*, Vol. II.

The provenance of the two documents is not absolutely certain, since they were found by clandestine Arab diggers and were not discovered *in situ*. They are, however, usually believed to have come from caves in the Murabba'at area, near the western coast of the Dead Sea about one-third of the way from Qumran to Masadah. (The title of Vol. II of *Discoveries in the Judean Desert* is *Les Grottes de Murabba'at*.) So far as I know there is no evidence of a connection between the Qumran sect and the various occupations of the Murabba'at caves. Document 19 is indeed a legal document (a bill of divorce) drawn up at Masadah. However, document 72 is an ostrakon in such a fragmentary state that the editors were uncertain of its nature. In any case it mentions Masadah, but does not indicate it was written there.

The opinions expressed in this letter are of course purely personal; my title and address at Columbia University are given solely for purposes of identification.

HERBERT GOLDSTEIN,
Professor, Nuclear Science
and Engineering.

New York, N.Y.

The Isolated Artist

AS A TEACHER of English literature, I am astonished at the tone of your review of May Sarton's novel, *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* [SR, Oct. 23]. How can your reviewer, Ruth L. Brown, be so

unaware of the conditions under which fiction and poetry are written that she can take such a patronizing attitude toward one of our best modern writers? There has been ample evidence, from at least as early as the eighteenth century of Alexander Pope, that the literary artist is not "just like other people." The belief that an artist like Mrs. Stevens is making a great fuss about nothing seems to me arrant Philistinism. . . . Can your reviewer name more than one or two writers of the past who have not felt isolated and exiled from the society they live in? One thinks not only of Pope but of Keats, Woolf, Mann (whose *Tonio Kröger* makes much the same point that is made in Miss Sarton's novel), and many others who have suffered, not from crude egotism but from greater awareness of life that inevitably sets the artist apart from his contemporaries.

It is evident, alas, that a reviewer who does not really understand what Wordsworth meant by "emotion recollected in tranquillity" will not appreciate the amazing originality and subtlety of *Mrs. Stevens*; and it is a pity that this novel, which seems to me the best of all that Miss Sarton has written, should receive such superficial treatment in a national review. . . .

AGNES SIBLEY,
Professor of English,
Lindenwood College.

St. Charles, Mo.

No Aliens

REFERRING to F. M. Esfandiary's review of Alec Waugh's *The Mule on the Minaret* [SR, Oct. 23], it seems peculiar that he should find particularly shrewd or illuminating the statement "Europe and the USA had had no more right to create a Jewish State in the Middle East than in Cornwall." One would expect him to have a little more sophistication, or learning, to know that the stake to that land was made a couple of thousands of years ago, as documented in the Bible, that the land was inhabited by the ancestors of the Jewish people more than a millennium, and therefore it is rather crude to say that it was handed to an alien race. As the Arabs know, it is the *return* of the Jews to the land of their forefathers. The Arabs were not deceived. The Arabs fought a war and *lost* the territory. Furthermore, that section of land has a history which goes back much further than the Arabs of today. The occupation of the region goes back to the early Paleolithic period—and since then was settled by many, many different civilizations and cultures. The period when the Jews lived in Palestine gave rise to what is commonly known as the cradle of Western civilization. . . .

ANNE UNGAR.

New York, N.Y.