

lish suburbs, where they meet again later among their families and understand that their attraction was to Greece more than to one another. It is well written, and there were moments under the blue sky and fiery sun that made me think of (and wish for) D. H. Lawrence.

Seeking the Isles of the Blessed: In the wake of all the current scholarly disputation over who really did discover America comes Anya Seton with a work of pure entertainment. While *Avalon* (Houghton Mifflin, \$5.95) takes us to the Norse settlements in Iceland and Greenland, and to a "Culdee" colony in the New World, and gives glimpses of Eric the Red and his son Leif, the story is chiefly concerned with Rumon and Merewyn and the love, which, though constantly thwarted by fate and bad timing, persists throughout their lives.

Rumon, descendant of Charlemagne and Alfred the Great, is a Provençal prince of mystical bent, torn between a longing for the religious life, the cravings of the flesh, and a secret dream of going in search of Avalon, the legendary "Isles of the Blessed" where King Arthur was supposed to have been borne upon his death. Rumon has also taken a vow of nonviolence, a difficult oath to keep in the tenth century, when violence was a part of everyday life and was apt to be direct and personal instead of com-

fortably vicarious. On a trip to England to visit his cousin, King Edgar, he encounters Merewyn, a Cornish girl who believes herself to be descended from Arthur but is actually the offspring of a Viking raider who raped her mother and killed her supposed father. Charged by Merewyn's dying mother to keep the secret of the girl's birth and to take her to her aunt, an abbess at Bath, Rumon agrees grudgingly. At Edgar's coronation the beautiful but unscrupulous Queen Alfrida takes a fancy to Merewyn and makes her a lady in waiting, while Rumon, infatuated with Alfrida, rejects Merewyn's love because of her origins.

How Merewyn is found by her Norse father and taken by him to Iceland; how Rumon, discovering Alfrida's true nature, has a change of heart toward Merewyn and sets out in pursuit of her, only to have his ship blown off course to "Great Ireland and the country of the Merrimacs"; how eventually he reaches Merewyn only to be rejected in his turn, form the burden of the second half of this long and episodic novel.

A number of the historical premises are still subject to controversy, but it is doubtful if this will trouble many of Miss Seton's readers. She lacks the power displayed in, for example, Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* and Mary Renault's *The Last of the Wine* to make the past almost tangible; but then, the Greeks

of the Peloponnesian Wars and the Romans under the Caesars are in many ways closer to us than the Saxons and Norsemen of the late 900s.

—RUTH L. BROWN.

Closing a Family Wound: Anne Tyler was born in 1941. At twenty-two she published her first—and well-received—novel, *If Morning Ever Comes*. And now here she is again, still much too young, with *The Tin Can Tree* (Knopf, \$4.95). Certainly, it is unfair to harp on the lady's age but difficult to ignore it. You read and you wonder. On page after page she offers proof of a maturity, a compassion and understanding one would expect to find only in a more seasoned heart than hers could possibly be.

The scrubby, little tin can tree of the title grows back of the three-family house shared by the Pikes in the Southern tobacco town of Larksville. The tin cans occasionally rattling in the wind are the last earthly token of six-year-old Janie Rose Pike's existence. Janie Rose, who decorated the tree with them during her "religious period," was killed in a tractor accident. Opening with the child's funeral, Anne Tyler's novel focuses, during the days immediately thereafter, on her family and their closest friends and especially on ten-year-old Simon Pike, Janie Rose's brother. This is a novel rich in incident that details the closing of a family wound and the resumption of life among people stunned by the proof of mortality. As one of the characters puts it: "Bravest thing about people, Miss Joan, is how they go on loving mortal beings after finding out there's such a thing as dying."

Not only because she is describing a family death and in part a child's reaction to it, but also because of her ability to evoke the feel of summer in a small Southern town, does Anne Tyler's *The Tin Can Tree* call to mind James Agee's memorable *A Death in the Family*. She is too fine a stylist, too sure a craftsman to have her novel weighed against Mr. Agee's. However, the Agee novel does offer a clue to why one only respects *The Tin Can Tree* without being deeply moved by it. Mr. Agee gave us time to meet the father before death was allowed to remove him so that we could grieve for him with his family. Miss Tyler introduces us to the Pikes after Janie Rose's passing. We have never known her alive so cannot mourn her dead. We can observe and sympathize but we are still outsiders during the period of adjustment. As a result, what lingers longest in the mind when the last page of *The Tin Can Tree* has been turned is the savor of an author's talent rather than a novel's content.

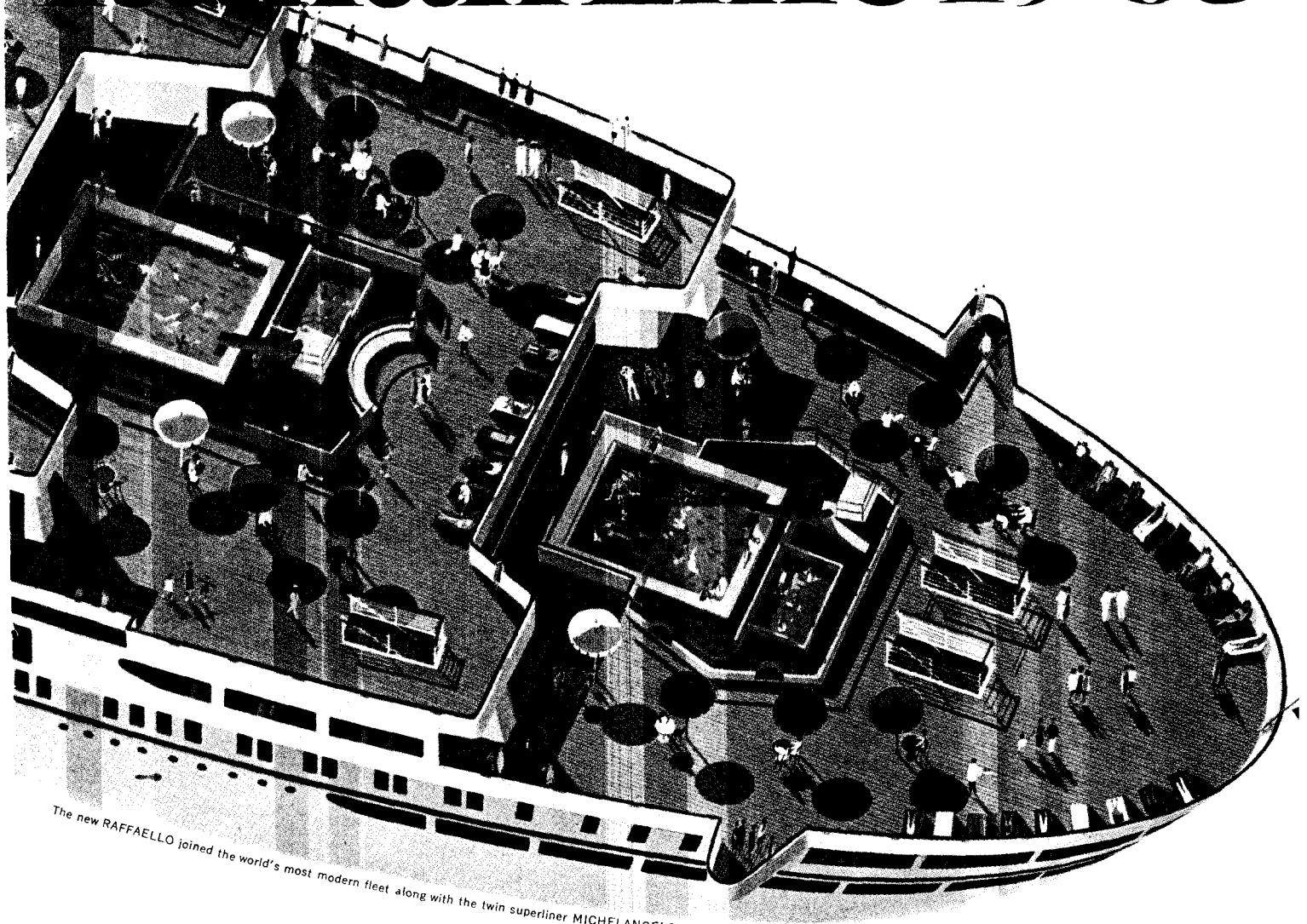
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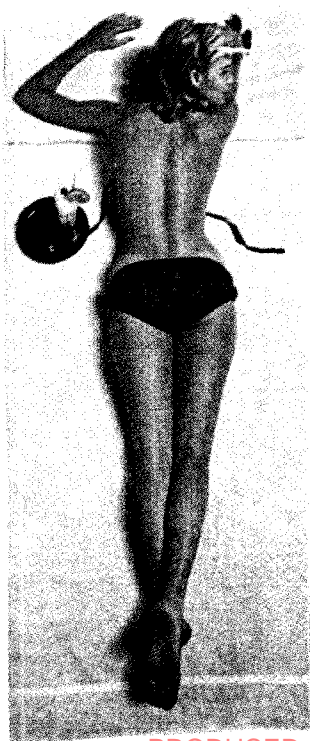
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