



# Books

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## LITERARY HORIZONS

### No Limit on Literary License

**I**N DEFIANCE of the theory that writers ought not to write about writers, Pamela Hansford Johnson has composed a trilogy of novels about various aspects, for the most part discreditable, of the literary life. The third volume, *Cork Street, Next to the Hatter's* (Scribners, \$4.95), is largely concerned with the problem of fashionable indecency, although other contemporary foibles are touched upon. The scene is London, chiefly a bookstore whose address gives the novel its title.

The central character is Tom Hariot, "lecturer in structural linguistics at King's College, London." Taken to see an advance guard play about the antics of "three psychopathic siblings," Tom is seized with his great idea. "Do you think," he asks a friend, "it would be possible to write a play so nauseating that it could not, in any circumstances, be allowed on any stage?" The friend is doubtful, but Tom has become a crusader. The line must be drawn somewhere, he believes, and he wants people to think about where to draw it, instead of talking a lot of nonsense about the dangers of censorship. So he goes to work.

Tom is a new character for Miss Johnson, but surrounding him are various persons we have met in earlier volumes of the trilogy. In *The Unspeakable Skipton* (SR, Jan. 24, 1959), whose title character is egotistical in the extreme, arrogant, malicious, and untrustworthy, but nevertheless a writer of some distinction, we are introduced to Dorothy Merlin, a poet of large pretensions, and to Cosmo Hines, her husband, who profitably operates the bookstore on Cork Street. With them in Bruges, where Skipton exists in proud penury, are a dilettante named Matthew Pryar and a lecherous photographer named Duncan Moss. Pryar reappears in *Night and Silence Who Is Here?* (SR, July 20, 1963) as the beneficiary of an American fellowship, and since his subject is the poetry of Dorothy Merlin, she also figures in that volume. In the present book Pryar and

his rich American wife turn up in London in time to take part in the affair of Tom's play.

There is a minor but amusing secondary plot. Pringle Milton, eighteen-year-old author of a novel called *The Sick Ones*, comes to Cosmo Hines's bookstore, looking, of course, to see if he stocks her book, and there meets Duncan Moss. She is a homely girl but has remarkable eyes, and Moss immediately sees possibilities for her. To her distress she becomes famous as a model, not as a novelist, and, in the meantime, falls hopelessly in love with Tom Hariot.

Finishing his play, Tom shows it to a friend, who says, "It is quite filthy and quite unactable. Not even a San Francisco fringe theater would touch this one." But Dorothy Merlin, speaking, as she hopes, for the advance guard, asks, "Can none of you see that it is entirely, unequivocally, a *masterpiece*?" Dorothy's feeling for the fashionably phony is reliable. An up-and-coming director of an experimental theater club tells Tom, "We can have a riot with this play. It's not only talented, it's bloody magnificent." And when Tom, determined to prove his thesis, refuses to allow a word to be changed, the director gives in. "I have made my bed," Tom says to Pringle, "and I must lie on it, verminous though it may be."

**T**HE account of the first night, though discreet, is hilarious. Needless to say, if there is a limit to what public opinion will stand, as Tom has argued, he has not found it. He cries out to the audience, "I have put into this stuff, quite deliberately, every form of indecency, cruelty, blasphemy and plain inanity that I could devise." But it is to no avail. All he has managed to accomplish is to get himself into trouble with the administration of his college.

In so far as Miss Johnson is making fun of a certain sort of faddist, she is amusing. Literary fashion is no more admirable than any other sort of fashion, and the self-appointed leaders of the ad-

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vance guard are often both snobs and ignoramuses. At the moment, as Miss Johnson points out, dirt is in style, and all sorts of vapid, dull, lifeless works are written in its name. But the issue, as she does not seem to recognize, is literary, not moral. If a play should not be regarded as good just because it is dirty, neither is dirtiness a reason for calling it bad. Poor Tom's attempt to discover a kind of absolute zero, a point on the scale below which the theater cannot descend, is futile on the face of it. Standards vary from time to time and from place to place, and are determined by a multitude of factors. In drama, even more than in the novel, we are passing through a prolonged reaction to an even more prolonged period of repression. All sorts of absurdities occur, and it is well that these should be held up to ridicule. At a performance this summer of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* I was made miserable by

a chorus of not youthful women behind me who broke into howls of laughter every time Big Daddy said, "God damn." I should have taken pleasure in throttling them, but I think their offensiveness was attributable to naïveté and perhaps an unaccustomed cocktail or two, not to moral depravity.

Of the three novels, the first, *The Admirable Skipton*, is much the best, not because it raises any profound moral or literary issue but because Skipton is such a magnificent character. By comparison the other two are diffuse and a little pallid. They have their entertaining episodes, but they make no such impression as *Skipton*.

THE character who appears in all three books, Dorothy Merlin, is a real horror. If Skipton is anything but admirable, at least he has a touch of genius, while Dorothy is pure, unqualified, unpardonable fake. Even her husband, who has borne so much, eventually cannot put up with her. "It was a long time since he had felt impelled to put the finishing touches to the ruin of the writer Skipton, simply because Skipton had insulted Dorothy in the high style, the grand manner. If Skipton were alive today and having a go at Dorothy, Cosmo would have leaned happily back in the dress circle, fingers tip to tip, completely non-partisan." When, at the end of the book, he receives word of his wife's fatal illness, he has no difficulty in remaining calm. Dorothy is so outrageous that she almost spoils the satiric effect of the trilogy; she becomes an example not of literary silliness but of an ego grown as destructive as a cancer.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

#### FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT NO. 1157

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1157 will be found in the next issue.

OJP BHCP VPOUPPC TKHOH-  
THMA XCR HCRQTPAPCOM OE  
JXOP HM CEO XBUXZM TBPXK  
XCR CPXO.

AEKKHM B. PKCMO

#### Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1156

Reverence:—The spiritual attitude of a man to a God and a dog to a man.  
—AMBROSE BIERCE.

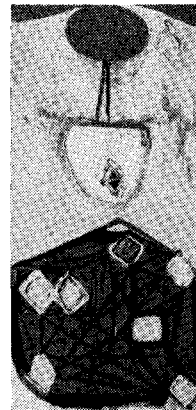
## LETTERS TO THE Book Review Editor



### Topsy-turvy

I APPRECIATE the honor of your reproduction of my *The Red Skirt* (Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC) in SR, Sept. 11, but I do wish the reproduction had been right-side up. Since there is a tendency to repeat published errors, would you be kind enough to print a reproduction right-side up?

ROBERT  
MOTHERWELL.  
New York, N.Y.



EDITOR'S NOTE: SR is embarrassed not to have known which end was up.

### Masadah and Qumran

MY OLD FRIEND Theodor Gaster, in his review of my book on the Dead Sea Scrolls [SR, Sept. 4], has of course adhered to his old views: but it is somewhat unfair of him to support them by the old exploded arguments. That Qumran and Masadah were inaccessible the one from the other has been utterly disproved by the fact that legal documents written at Masadah have now been found in the Qumran deposits. (Water communication by the way was not impossible.) I do not suggest that all the Scrolls were written within a space of a few years, but only that a certain scroll unmistakably referring to the period 66-73 was written at that time. The basic fact is that the only liturgical fragment found at Masadah follows the preposterous Qumran liturgy, and in default of evidence to the contrary it must be accepted that the denizens of Masadah and those of Qumran belonged to the same religious sect—i.e., were Zealots.

CECIL ROTH.

Jerusalem, Israel

### Cowardly

YOUR REVIEWS of the books *A Gift of Prophecy* and *Croiset the Clairvoyant* read as though they were written by a committee. They are bland and inoffensive. The reviews would have been a lot more dashing if they had stated either that the books were contrary to common sense and to modern science, and that anyone who allowed himself to be influenced by them was ignorant and soft in the head, or else that the books were so well documented that anyone who was not completely convinced was denying proven fact and was a hopeless victim of an obsolete, materialistic outlook.

I, for one, am not afraid to take a defi-

nite stand, namely that SR is a coward.  
HARRIS H. BALL.

Ann Arbor, Mich.

### Attack on Church Steps

NANCY PLUMMER FAXON [Letters to Book Review Editor, SR, Sept. 18] apparently considers it hypocritical to attempt to integrate a church unless you, personally, care to worship within. The best answer to this pronouncement is to be found in the words of a high-school student, Miss Wilma Jones, who discussed this objection in an essay in *The Activist*, a publication of the Tuskegee Institute Advancement League. "I agree with the way one encyclopedia defines a church. 'A Church is a public place of worship or belonging to the Lord and Master.' Whenever a door is locked to me because I am a Negro, then I am considered a sub-human being and not worthy of entering. I will not accept this because I consider myself equal to any human being." I happen to agree with Miss Jones, and if the Negro community attempts to integrate a church, and if they ask for help, I am with them.

Might I add that Miss Jones and other members of TIAL have displayed a great deal of courage in putting their beliefs into action, a courage a good number of Northern country-club Christians might well emulate. I was with this group on July 18th when eighteen of them were attacked on the steps of a Methodist church by a gang of thirty assorted thugs armed with guns, hatchets, ball bats, open knives, and bottles. Three of the TIAL group were injured; but Miss Jones and the rest of the group behaved with dignity and decency. The church motto for the week, by the way, posted outside the house of worship, was: "God holds us responsible for the use of our leisure time."

CHARLES SHAPIRO.

Briarcliff Manor, N.Y.

### Misfits

AFTER MY FIFTH REREADING of Granville Hicks's *LITERARY HORIZONS* [SR, Aug. 21], I find I must take issue with his contention that the misfits of today's fiction are admirable because modern culture isn't worth adjusting to. Mr. Hicks, if adjustment is so disgraceful, why aren't you out on a beach making whoopee instead of writing for *Saturday Review*? Adjustment to our culture implies acceptance of its mandate that one take a responsible position in our society, as you are doing in that small village where your autobiography says you're working wonders. The only other serious choice one has is to abandon altogether the values of our society and to drift.

Surely withdrawing from our culture is not a course you recommend? Is failure to be touted as the modern goal? The protagonists of several new novels I have read