

A Separation of Sex and State

The Young Visitors, by John Wain (Viking, 214 pp. \$4.50), chronicles a "cultural exchange" that ends in a shambles. Nicholas Samstag will publish two books this year: "Bamboozled" and "Come and See My Shining Palace."

By NICHOLAS SAMSTAG

TOO MANY novels that are too slight, too loosely plotted, too shallowly felt, and peopled by characters too inadequately motivated seem to be hiding these days behind the word "spoof." There are spoofs on the angry young man and the advertising man, on the West Coast beatniks and the East Coast wheeler-dealers—and some are witty, some are wise and some are merely spoofs on the reader, and shabby ones, at that.

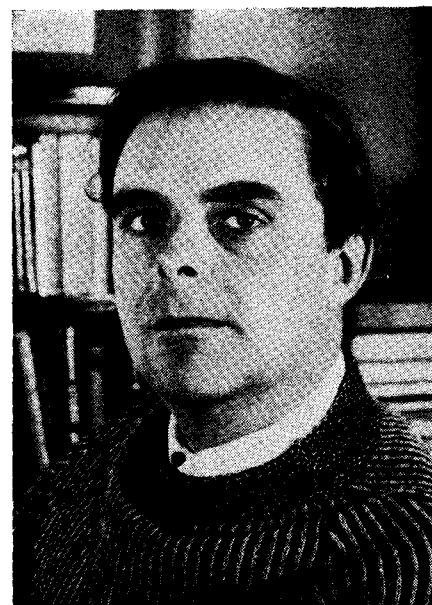
Dangerously close to the last category is John Wain's *The Young Visitors*. "A biting gentle spoof," says the dust-jacket, "of present-day efforts to thaw the cold war through [the] 'cultural exchange,'" it tells how a group of six Komsomol students is sent to England to observe the administration of local government. This clump of young sprigs (three each, male and female) is under the gelid wing of an older woman, a relict of the Stalin period. Despite her rigid supervision she loses one of her three chicks to Western decadence, and another goes home under a cloud to be tried and almost surely condemned to forced labor, leaving behind her a large portion of her self-respect which, with her body, she has given in the lowlands of Soho to an improbably black black-guard named Jack Spade. The decimated sexsome, its minds poisoned by capitalist depravity, is flown back to Moscow under guard.

Now that man, Spade—there's a fellow! To get himself into favor with the Kremlin, he sends them a book he has written called *Leprosy*, which purports to present the sordid adventures of Nancy, a young English girl in Britain's P.S.C. (Physical Satisfaction Corps), a service organized by the state to slake the appetites of the capitalists and their slaves. It is printed with Communist money and circulated in a score of languages to Communists everywhere, bringing the author a steady stream of pretty pennies. With these, he opens a night spot called The Rebellion Coffee-

House, in which he preaches Marx, claiming he sleeps there on the floor and contributes his profits to the Party. Actually, the rogue has most luxurious digs nearby, where he lives in wall-to-wall-carpeted splendor like a prototype Playboy, his sole interest being sex, sex, sex—and there are some lurid lines to prove it.

For instance, in thinking of Elena, the seductive Komsomol moll who falls for him and then gets up again, he ruminates as follows: "All right, you little bitch. You're coming back here and you'll get such a pounding that you'll be satisfied for life and so will I, I'll get enough of you and get free of you, whatever it costs me!" As you can see, Elena breaks away from the deck long enough to get real close to the Jack of Spades, but then she finds out the truth about him and plots to reveal his villainy to Moscow and the world. And, in the most unlikely change of character since Jekyll and Hyde, Spade becomes all heart and counts his world well lost for love of Elena. It's as if the Marquis de Sade turned into Sir Launcelot—from fleshpot to heart throb in far too few pages.

Oh, well. The whole thing is so shoddily done that even this is not a true



Camera Press (Pix).

John Wain—metamorphosis from fleshpot to heart throb.

surprise. When one considers writing that includes sentences ending, "people like him would be encouraged to flower, not exploited and dragged down," we can expect structure and motivation of similar quality. The spoof, *per se*, is, of course, a grand literary institution. Who am I to sweep away the world of Baron Munchausen and Jonathan Swift and Patrick Dennis? But, like anything else that pretends to look down its nose, it had better keep the nose clean.

Chief Assistant to the Conjuror

Lost Empires, by J. B. Priestley (Atlantic-Little, Brown, 364 pp. \$5.95), the story of a conjuror and his assistant, recreates the English variety circuit as it was just before the First World War. Edward Hickman Brown, a frequent contributor to *Saturday Review*, is a free-lance writer and critic.

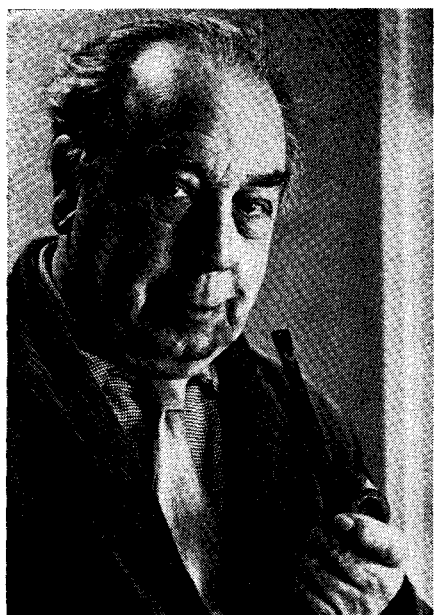
By EDWARD HICKMAN BROWN

WHEN I opened this book and happened to glance at the page listing J. B. Priestley's previous works, I was somewhat awed—filled as it is with the names of his twenty-three novels, thirty-seven plays, numerous collections of essays, and volumes of autobiography, criticism, and miscellanea that includes such titles as *The English Comic Characters*, *British Women Go to War*, *The Olympians*, an opera libretto, and *Rus-*

sian Journey. I wondered just what it is that would provoke an author—now in his seventies—whose last work was an erudite examination of the complex interrelationship between Man and Time to tackle a large novel at this stage of his career.

It becomes patently clear within thirty pages that there is no reason other than the simple and obvious one: Mr. Priestley is a writer. He is as much an illusionist as the Indian-robed uncle of his protagonist in this tale of the British variety circuit during the year preceding the outbreak of the First World War. And I should guess that he is equally painstaking a perfectionist, even if his ability to divert the reader and waft him along with his story does seem such an easy and natural one.

The Empires of the title are a theater chain, stretching across the length and breadth of England. Dick Herncastle, a handsome Yorkshire lad who aspires to be a painter, becomes the chief assistant



—Horst Toppe (Pix).

J. B. Priestley—an illusionist par excellence himself.

to Ganga Dun, a conjurer par excellence and something of a tyrant on the stage, strong-willed and refreshingly antisocial off it. Dick is soon absorbed into the itinerant life of the group. Six of the acts are block-booked, and their bill thus remains basically the same as they travel about the country.

The story is related through Horncastle's account of the ten months he spent on the music hall stage, and Mr. Priestley succeeds in the difficult task of convincing us that we are, indeed, being addressed by a youth who is undergoing a strikingly new and different experience. This is no mean feat, particularly as the young man is surrounded by a variety of attractive women and, what with the unaccustomed opportunity and freedom and his own hot blood, is fairly preoccupied with sex in the normal and healthy manner of twenty-year-olds in any era. Not only has Mr. Priestley assembled an interesting and credible, if variegated, cast of characters; he has also captured the lives of the performers—three parts drudgery and boredom to one of glamour—as well as the atmosphere of the period.

And if the story itself—spiced with a dash of nymphomania, a genteel touch of voyeurism, a murder, and a successful essay at defeating the (unjust) ends of justice—works out predictably, and finally appears to be of less importance than its establishment of the continuing certainty and vigor of its author's writing, it nonetheless soon grips one within its spell and makes thoroughly enjoyable reading.

The appearance of Mr. Priestley's next book will not surprise me, nor will those that will certainly follow it. I shall be profoundly surprised, however, if any should prove unworthy of attention.

Camp on the Ku-Damm: Ever since Christopher Isherwood discovered Berlin in the Twenties, writers have been fascinated by the Prussian capital's peculiar brand of sophistication. Frederic Morton's new novel, *The Schatten Affair* (Atheneum, \$5), is set in present-day Berlin, but it evokes sinister memories of the city's more recent past. Under the surface gaiety promoted by the advertising industry, Mr. Morton's hero, a \$50,000-a-year public relations ace for an international hotel chain, chances upon the ghosts of another era: ex-Nazis in aristocratic seclusion and a lone Jew dreaming of an Old Testament Community in Israel.

But Berlin belongs to the living. Schatten Castle is the hub of the breezy action that unfolds like a well-plotted mystery story and ends with a bang. Jet-set types, efficient officials, and the elusive lord of the manor all have their share in the preparations for the grand opening of the Berlin Hilton's newest competition. No matter that the shindig does not come off as planned; the fun is in the effort. The busy rich keep up a frantic pace in the elegant restaurants along the "Ku-Damm" and those camp bars that seem to be Berlin's special attraction. (It is, after all, the only German city where people of the same sex may dance without police interference.)

Mr. Morton renders the actuality of West Berlin with an eye for the offbeat and a feeling for the contrast between Prussian propriety and Prussian depravity. His dialogues are witty, and his characters, especially the women, vivid and vigorous. The love affair between the PR-man from New York, who occasionally remembers that he is a Jewish refugee from Hitler, and Irene, the Teutonic beauty with a past, is passionate enough to deserve full movie treatment. Instead of waiting for the film, read *The Schatten Affair* now. It is wickedly entertaining.

—J. P. BAUKE.

Susanna and the Swami: If there is a dominant tone in recent American fiction (extending perhaps even into the

fiction of our lives), it is a kind of exuberant despair, a shrill, jazzed-up, evil-tempered playfulness; the wise guy, the romantic-turned-cynic, is the new prophet of our discontent. And underlying it all—the brittle unconcern, the rapid-fire gags, the pratfalls and pranks—is a Jake Barnes crying by himself in the dark, with a nostalgia so desperate and piteous that it makes *Little Women* by comparison seem like *Fanny Hill*.

Now we have *Cassio and the Life Divine* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$4.95), David Rubin's second novel, a serio-comic picaresque about a whimsical academic drifter in India. The story opens with the hero being thrown out of his friend Douglas Bunner's house "for the imaginary impropriety of making love to Hjordis Bunner, his wife. An imaginary impropriety not because I hadn't but because Doug's sense of propriety was no better than his imagination, they may even have been the same thing if they existed at all." The tone defines the attitude: the wives of insensitive friends are fair game to witty, rakish guys like our narrator, Peter Cassio.

But first impressions aren't everything. Cassio is good-natured and decent and, in his erratic way, in quest of salvation or at least of some redemptive possibility. He chronicles his "three months in

(Continued on page 60)

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