

For Sustenance: Hope

No One Writes to the Colonel and Other Stories, by Gabriel García Márquez, translated from the Spanish by J. S. Bernstein (Harper & Row, 170 pp. \$5.95), introduces to English-speaking readers a Colombian author who portrays a vanished way of life. Robert G. Mead, Jr., edited "Hispania" and teaches Spanish American literature at the University of Connecticut.

By ROBERT G. MEAD, JR.

IN THE OCTOBER 1968 *Atlantic Monthly* Professor Lionel Trilling of Columbia University is reported to have said, in response to student David Shapiro's request for the teaching of Latin American and African literature, "Well, Mr. Shapiro, I've read this Latin American literature. It has, I think one might say, an anthropological interest." Shapiro, exasperated, flashed back, "This is a kind of Promethean contempt and irrelevance."

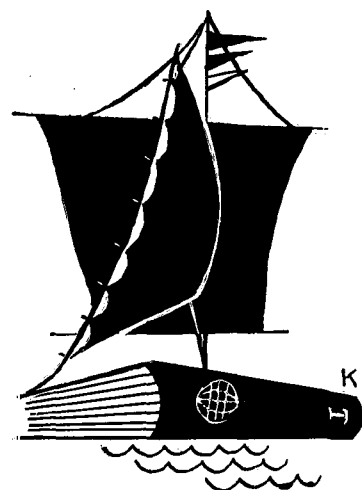
One can keep his cool while reading this exchange, and yet, if he knows something about the vast corpus of New World writing in Spanish and Portuguese and the minute portion of it available in English, he cannot help sympathizing with Mr. Shapiro. Really, until much more of it is available in translation, American critics ought to avoid sweeping generalizations about Latin American literature, especially if their remarks can be construed as irrelevant and contemptuous.

I am happy to report, in view of the above, that even jaundiced readers and critics of Latin American writers are likely to find this collection of nine stor-

ies by the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, originally published in 1961-1962, to be of more than "anthropological interest." The appearance of this book, his first available in English, and the publication next year of his novel *100 Years of Solitude*, will secure a place for García Márquez among the growing constellation of Latin American authors who are familiar to U.S. readers. He is already well known in Spanish-speaking countries and increasingly successful in Europe.

THE book introduces the reader to the microcosmic world of Macondo, ostensibly a sleepy, hot, coastal town in which nothing ever happens, a perfect habitat for what one of the minor characters describes as the European stereotype of the South American: "a man with a moustache, a guitar, and a gun." But in truth Macondo exists only in the fantasy of the author, a town which he himself admits is born of his nostalgia for the life he lived as a young boy more than thirty years ago in a vanished Colombia, under the tutelage of his grandfather, clearly the prototype of the Colonel in the title story.

"No One Writes to the Colonel" is a tale of dignity in old age. The Colonel, slowly starving to death at seventy-five, is borne up through every adversity by his innate belief in human worth, by his hope of receiving a long-overdue military pension, and by his dream of an imminent victory to be won by the fighting cock he owns. As he says regarding hope: "You can't eat it, but it sustains you." However, he is never maudlin, and García Márquez weaves many glints of humor into the small, simple tapestry of a life that is rich in human values.



Readers will not soon forget the Colonel or his wife, a bedrock realist who understands her man.

The key to the meaning of the book, which is to say García Márquez's image of Colombian life as viewed from Macondo, is found in "Big Mama's Funeral," the last piece in the collection. Big Mama, whose family has dominated the region for two centuries, dies a virgin at ninety-two, and the whole town, the President of Colombia, and even the Pope attend her funeral. An era has closed. The event entails more pomp than any other happening in Macondo's history except for the traditional celebration of Big Mama's birthday during her seven decades of supremacy.

IN other stories we glimpse a thief who is jailed for a theft he didn't commit, a dentist who avenges himself upon a patient, Macondo's mayor and his political enemy, and a mother who braves the town's hostility as she walks through the streets carrying flowers for the grave of her son who has been executed as a criminal. All the stories communicate incidents in the lives of humble (and a few rich) townspeople, all of whom have been deeply affected by the long and bloody political strife between the liberals and the conservatives in Colombia. But politics are merely a background for García Márquez, who is concerned mainly with the mysterious inner lives of his characters, lives we intuit briefly through their laconic utterances, their actions, and their emotions.

The author's style, unusual for a contemporary Latin American writer, is well suited to his purpose. It has serenity, understatement, and compassion, and is flecked with wry humor. García Márquez possesses a special felicity for deft, succinct characterization and evocative description. His short book will have a more lasting effect on many readers than numerous longer ones.

Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by David M. Glixon

PATCHWORK

We present a little ditty entitled "Nemesis," the lines of which were allegedly stolen by Mabel-Ruth Jackson of Tucson, Arizona, from the dozen poets listed below. If you can't guess whose is which, feel free to turn to page 44.

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| () I've taken my fun where I found it, | 1. Bridges |
| () And in my humorous way | 2. Burns |
| () (Only this and nothing more) | 3. Gay |
| () Every night would kiss and play. | 4. Holmes |
| () Nobody seemed one penny the worse: | 5. Ingoldsby |
| () A sigh too much or a kiss too long, | 6. Kipling |
| () A little while, a little love— | 7. MacDonald |
| () Oh, this is the gist of my gypsy song! | 8. Moore |
| () But I can tell—let truth be told— | 9. Nash |
| () Inspiring bold John Barleycorn | 10. Poe |
| () Has been my heart's undoing, | 11. Rossetti |
| () And served me right as the preachers warn. | 12. Thomas |

The Fallen Sons

Phineas, by John Knowles (Random House, 147 pp. \$4.95), contains short stories revolving around lonely, confused young men. Peter Wolfe teaches English at the University of Missouri in St. Louis.

By PETER WOLFE

MORPHOLOGICALLY, JOHN KNOWLES's first book of short stories fits in well with his earlier work. The recurrence in *Phineas* of ideas, settings, and character types from his three novels gives Knowles's work a discernible shape and thrust. He builds his fictional world around lonely, confused young men. What he says of Lawrence Stewart in "A Turn with the Sun," the first story in this book, applies to his other protagonists: "He . . . inhabited the nether world of the unregarded, where no one bothered him or bothered about him."

Central figures in other stories include a disinherited son, a put-upon younger brother who has just lost his room to his baby sister, and a machinist of twenty-four who becomes a Peeping Tom because his energetic father and infant son leave him no freedom for natural growth. And, as in each of Knowles's novels, in three of the stories a major character falls ill and never fully regains his health. This concentration on people who have either fallen or lost their way, and an abiding interest in social morality, find an apt stylistic form in Knowles's balanced, even-flowing cadences. He silvers his sentences with a gray glow that recalls the clean lyricism of E. M. Forster. Also like Forster, whom he admires, Knowles refuses to shout at the reader: the key passages of his fiction gain force by virtue of their quiet authority.

If the main features of the Knowles territory are easily picked out, it is much less easy to say how often we want to visit it or how long we want to stay. The fine opening story in this collection, like Knowles's brilliant first novel, *A Separate Peace*, takes place at Devon School in New Hampshire. The rich colors and scents, together with the intimate portrayal of the prep school turn of mind on subjects like sex, sports, and the Ivy League, support the argument that Knowles's true subject is New England prep school life. "A Turn with the Sun" even outdoes *A Separate Peace* in its analysis of the bifold question of power and reputation in academic circles.

"Summer Street," the next story, rises to no such heights. Set in Knowles's native West Virginia, it is so badly constructed that it presses into service a far-fetched coincidence at the end, and shows that the author does not really

(Continued on page 41)

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