

*Jane's Fighting Ships*," and Mrs. Torgressa, whose talent for mourning makes her a must at all funerals. For the more sentimental there is even a love story of sorts between Kid Sally's sour sister, Angela, and Mario, a six-day bike rider who supports himself by pretending to be a priest while studying to become an art forger.

Not all the wild shots are fired by the rival gangs. Mr. Breslin, as he free-wheels through his story as narrator-commentator, also takes a few pot shots. Mr. J. Edgar Hoover and an unnamed Protestant mayor of New York City are among the wounded.

If I have a carp, it is a minor one. Mr. Breslin tends to get a bit too cute at times with his material. This occurs not when he is involved with his story, but when he steps out of it to play guide to his reader along the darker byways of Brooklyn. A faint aroma of amused condescension creeps into the pages, and there is the feeling of an all-knowing Breslin treating his readers as square tourists in a world they couldn't possibly know. But when he stops trying to entertain as a tough-jaded Brooklyn boulevardier and lets his brainchildren take over, *The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight* is great fun. It has more corpses and at least as many laughs as *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

**Haskel Frankel**

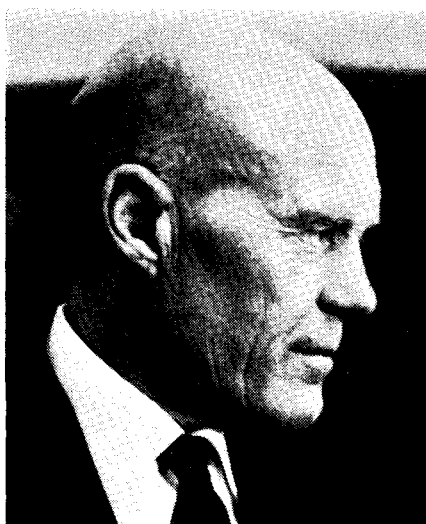
*Haskel Frankel is a free-lance writer and critic.*

## THE BIRDS

by Tarjei Vesaas, translated from the Norwegian by Torbjorn Stoverud and Michael Barnes  
*Morrow, 224 pp., \$5*

WHOEVER HAS DEVELOPED A TASTE for the special style of Tarjei Vesaas must have looked forward to seeing his masterpiece *Foglane (The Birds)* in English. Some Americans, with a deplorable aversion to the British brogue, may not welcome this translation, but it reads very smoothly, in some respects even more so than the original. Perhaps because of the urban quality and greater flexibility of English, some of the glaring spots in Vesaas's rugged *Nynorsk* have been toned down.

The plot, as always with Vesaas, is rudimentary. Mattis, the village simpleton, lives in a small house near a lake, together with his sister Hege, who earns a modest living knitting sweaters. From time to time she encourages her retarded brother to get work and help her cover the household expenses, but all Mattis's attempts



**Tarjei Vesaas — "the dreams and frustrations of the outsider."**

come to nothing. When finally he sets himself up as a ferryman, the only passenger he manages to bring across the lake is a lumberjack who becomes his sister's sweetheart. Mattis cannot adjust himself to this new situation.

If it is true, as Wittgenstein holds, that there are certain things which cannot be said but can be shown, then such things—taking the shape of symbols—are likely to exist particularly in the minds of people whose imagination is stronger than their power of rational discourse—children, the mentally retarded, and certain artists. In his "superiors" Mattis admires nothing so much as clear thinking and the mastery of language. To him, intellectuality is symbolized by lightning, something sharp and illuminating. He himself is unable to concentrate his efforts into one single thrust (such as carrying out a day's work), yet life seems to offer him compensations. To his primitive mind things inanimate and animate alike communicate: the tiny tracks of the woodcocks' feet stand for friendship, their flight over his house signifies security, beauty, and promise of great things (usually erotic) to come. Not all of nature's manifestations are so reassuring: death is ever-present, and stares at him from the dark lake or the deep eyes of a dead woodcock. Some of its truths are unpleasant to face: in the stunted growth of some young pine trees Mattis sees a picture of his own reduced manhood.

What we have in the last resort is not so much a picture of the mentally retarded as a portrait of the artist. Mattis gazing at his own reflection in the mirror, or sucking hard candy, or reveling in faintly disguised sexual dreams, is the poet watching his own self-indulgence with almost embarrassing honesty. In our masculine society the artist is no longer a full man; he

is more like a child, whom only women can endure. They long to mother the helpless, and they have an inborn capacity for accepting a child's gambols.

Among *The Birds*'s many accomplishments perhaps the most charming is the interaction of Mattis and his ladies. Vesaas has drawn them with great love, and Mattis is naturally attracted to them. They are not repulsed by him, but find his eyes beautiful beyond description. Perhaps this is so because his eyes reflect the dreams and frustrations of the outsider, sentiments shared by many women.

*The Birds* has much in common with Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, from the central symbol to the sacrificial act that concludes the book. Mattis's heroic decision as described by Vesaas is deeply moving and deserves comparison with Hedvig's fate. In Ibsen the doctor warns the parents: "You can please yourself how much you want to muck up your own personal affairs . . . But one thing I know: that the child is also part of the marriage. And you should leave the child in peace." Vesaas reminds his readers that however much our times need intelligence, responsibility, and purposeful action, poetry and play can never be dispensed with by a society that wishes to remain human and humane.

**Harald S. Naess**

*Harald S. Naess is professor of Scandinavian studies at the University of Wisconsin.*

*(Fiction reviews continued on page 34)*

## FRASER YOUNG LITERARY CRYPT No. 1377

*A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1377 will be found in the next issue.*

E ASK PIEGDIW E CSX BMAIH-  
MPX, LINWIRINEJGI, EJA PS  
PZNJ ENSZJA PDNII PMQIW  
CIBSNI HXMJK ASYJ.

—NSCINP CIJGDHIX

**Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1376**

*When a man diets, he eats oatmeal in addition to everything else he usually eats.*

—E. W. HOWE.



## PICK OF THE PAPERBACKS

Mention all the names you want—Andy Warhol, Viva, the Rolling Stones, Roman Polanski, Claes Oldenbourg, anybody—Tom Wolfe is still the Pop of the Superpop—journalist, hyped-up super-star reporter, refiner and inventor of words when need be.

He's easy to recognize. Here it is winter and he's wearing a white suit, white vest, white shoes, a blue and green plaid shirt, a flowered pocket handkerchief. His blond hair is straight and Beatle-length. He's a superb dandy in the Wildean tradition—and it's all camp and a Wolfe put-on. "Actually, I discovered clothes are a harmless form of aggression," he says. "I once had a white suit made for summer, but it was too hot so I wore it one winter day. It annoyed people and they stopped me to tell me about it. After all, it was only a suit. 'Gee,' I thought, 'this is nice.'" For Wolfe it opened a whole world, a way of being at once aggressive and harmless.

"My tailor is a Hungarian and a painter. He can sew any fantasy I happen to think up."

But Wolfe is not merely a sartorial gadfly. He likes it when his books and articles produce abrasions. In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (Bantam, \$1.25), a piece of brilliantly explosive reportage on novelist Ken Kesey and the whole mad psychedelic world of California's Merry Pranksters, Wolfe's own feelings about the drug-happy hippie scene never intrude for a moment. The articles in *The Pump House Gang* (Bantam, 95¢) soar like butterflies and sting like bees, whether he's writing on Hugh Hefner, Marshall McLuhan, or Carol (the Silicone Girl) Doda. "I hate easy emotional appeal. I like it if I can inspire equal and passionate reactions." His Hefner piece aroused a variety of responses. Says Wolfe: "I heard Hefner himself liked it, while others told me, 'Boy, you really got him.'" As in most of Wolfe's pieces, the subject is treated as a representative of a certain life style; here it's the quintessential dropout. "I'm always happy if people can't figure out my attitude," Wolfe declares. "I'm much more interested in making the reader understand what Caligula is doing than to make him hate him."

Those Wolfe tries to make us understand range from surfers, motorcyclists, and hippies to advertising men and political activists. "So many people today lead extraordinary lives. They have more money and more free time so that they can carve out their own life styles. The New Left, for instance. I think it's at least 70 per cent life style with its own semi-military dress, hair styles, vocabulary—and only 30 per cent political passion."

Until he was out of his teens Wolfe, who grew up in Richmond, Virginia, wanted passionately to be a baseball pitcher. He was even scouted by the N.Y. Giants. "I showed him sliders, screwballs, curves. The scout said, 'All you really need is the high hard one.'" So Wolfe went to Washington and Lee University, and then took a Ph.D. in American Studies at Yale.

What Wolfe does is to break down barriers between fact and fiction. "If you do enough reporting, you can get the accents, the scenes, the dialogue, like fiction. Part of my technique I call the 'controlled trance.' I close my eyes and try to put myself into the situation that I'm writing about. If I'm really into it things start happening, phrases and thoughts begin to spin off.

"Lots of people have asked if I use drugs when I write. Of course I don't. That would alter your ability for self-criticism. Sometimes, like after I wrote *Kool-Aid*, I end up in a strange mental state, really drained."

Maybe even Pop-eyed.

Rollene W. Saal

### Fiction

Like William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* and Hannah Green's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, William Butler's *The Butterfly Revolution* (Ballantine, 95¢), is one of those "subterranean" novels that have acquired a large and enthusiastic youthful audience. The thirteen-year-old hero, Winston Weyn, endures a summer at camp that even Allen Sherman could not have survived. Power and cruelty join forces to create an atmosphere of evil in which the weak are crushed. Wilfrid Sheed takes an even more macabre look at adolescence in *The Blacking Factory and Pennsylvania Gothic* (Ballantine, 95¢). His youngsters exist amid a curious blend of Social Register Catholicism and isolation from any kind of human response.

Another dimension to the macabre is supplied by Muriel Spark in her excellent, skillfully written *Robinson* (Avon, \$1.25), a novel about three survivors of a plane crash. *The Public Image* (Ballantine, 95¢), though, is disappointing. It's customarily and consummately literate, but, like its characters—a vain movie queen and her parasitic husband—it's shallow and, worse, cold. Maybe that's how life is in a celebrity-conscious atmosphere, but the author has different obligations to the reader.

In his second (1906) novel, *Beneath the Wheel* (Noonday, \$1.95), published here for the first time in paperback, Hermann Hesse's philosophical interests are still subservient to the traditional need to tell a story. It is about two young men who rebel against the academic establishment; each finds his own destiny, one as a victim of heavy-footed authority, the other as a survivor and victor.

*Victoria* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$1.95), newly translated from the Norwegian by Oliver Stallybrass, is among Knut Hamsun's most poetic novels. This sparsely written tale evokes the romantic world of first love—between