

Books in Brief

How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories

by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala

Harper & Row, 224 pp., \$8.95

IN HER new collection of short stories, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala continues to add fine shading to the cumulative portrait of India etched in her eleven previous works of fiction. As always, hers is an India full of mingled contraries: an ancient prostitute moves effortlessly between thoughts of God and meddling in her daughter's love life; a gruff woman hermit entertains the worldly relatives who stop off at her hut on their way to a fashionable resort; a coarse and selfish singer of genius browbeats his lonely wife and

then entrances her with his passionately rendered songs of women's sufferings. With an irony that is no less biting for being affectionate, Jhabvala writes of a world in which individual wishes only rarely prevail against the crushing but seductive conformity demanded by a still traditional and family-centered society. All too often, to prevail is also to be cut off, like Pritam, the hermit, or like Sadie, the Englishwoman leaving India after thirty years of a marriage that became ever more traditionally Indian.

Jhabvala has been compared to Jane Austen, and on the surface the comparison would seem to be rather far-fetched: it's a long way from New Delhi to the rectory at Steventon. Like Jane Austen (and unlike most contemporary writers in English), she treats satirically and intimately a world in which conventions are precisely defined and widely accepted, even by those who are most

harmled by them. This fascination with manners and social mores is perhaps why Jhabvala, although a European, seems to understand her characters most profoundly when they are being most Indian. Interestingly, the stories about Westerners in India, including the wonderfully titled lead story, are the weakest in the collection. The dizzy English girls in ashrams and the iron-willed colonial ladies seem pale and flat by contrast with the richly emotional and sensual Indians. This is a fine book from a consistently wise and sharp eyed writer. —KATHA POLLITT

Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas

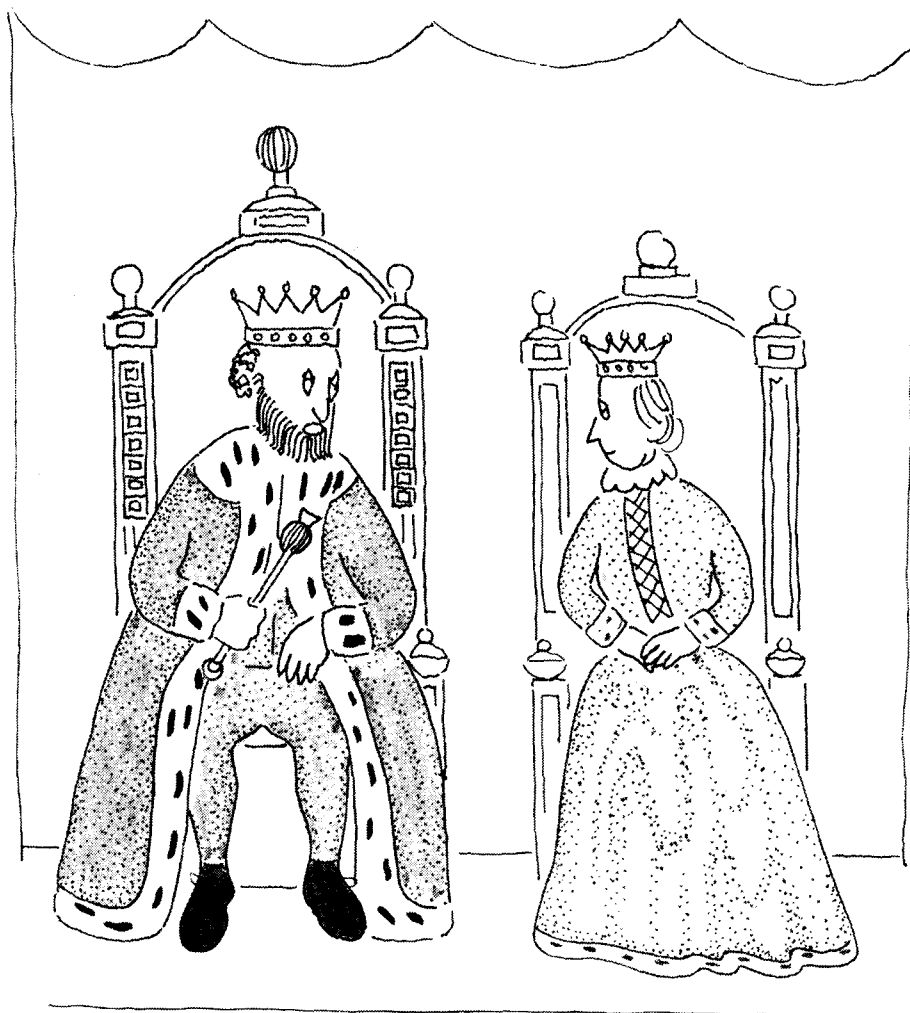
by Maya Angelou

Random House, 269 pp., \$8.95

MAYA ANGELOU is a self-conceived picaresque heroine. She lives her life as though it were a story, which is one reason why it transcribes so naturally to the printed page. I prefer the surging rhythm of her first volume, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, though I find the very professional, even-toned third and latest quite engaging. *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* plots the genesis of a performer. Marguerite Anne Johnson, of Stamps, Ark., and Rite Sugar, and Rita—pseudonyms for prior personae—fall away as she comfortably inhabits her new name, Maya Angelou. In the course of *Singin'*, she marries a Greek sailor named Angelos; divorces him; out of desperation, takes a job shaking dancing in a San Francisco joint called the Garden of Allah; debuts at the counterculture's Purple Onion; and travel through Europe and Africa with the touring company of *Porgy and Bess*.

Angelou lives for the journey, not for the arrival; for sheer experience rather than promise of a Pyrrhic denouement. Canny and shrewd, full of the joy of life, in touch with the fact and the true value of pain, she navigates between drama and realism. If, in the psychological sense, she is not an integrated personality that is because she is constantly growing open to change, too alive to reduce herself to the polemical dilemma of a black career-woman-feminist-wife-mother. Her apparent unwillingness to make a paradigm of her identity keeps her singin' and swingin' while her style, grace, self-reliance, and *joie de vivre* make her glow in all her psychic dispartateness.

—LINDA KUEH



"I've got nothing against anarchy, just as long as I am the anarchy."

**A Wind to Shake the World:
The Story of the 1938 Hurricane**

by Everett S. Allen

Little, Brown, 370 pp., \$10

THE most vivid memory of my childhood is the hurricane of 1938. I didn't know it was a hurricane because in those days there was virtually no advance warning. That's why so many people—about 700—died. All I knew as I struggled home after school was that it was a terrible storm. The sky was a peculiar yellow, and the wind blew so hard that I had to cling to telephone poles as I inched my way along Broad Street in Providence. As I passed Calvary Baptist Church, roof slates were sailing through the air like lethal Frisbees, and enormous old elms were being torn out by the roots.

From that day to this, I had never had a full picture of the enormity of the storm. Then I read this splendid book. Allen has captured the tempest's awful majesty as it smashed its way along Long Island and into southern New England, the first hurricane to hit the Northeast in living memory. He tells hundreds of individual stories of tragedy and horror and heroism. Houses were lifted by surging waves and deposited well inland. Thousands of other buildings were smashed to bits. Waves rapped people who simply could not believe what was happening. Tides were so high that boats collided with a Boston-bound train in Connecticut; winds were so strong—in some places gusts topped 75 mph—that roofs were ripped right off buildings. It seemed sheer chance determined who would survive and who would perish. It's an extraordinary story, and Allen—a fledgling reporter at the time—tells superbly what happened on a day that hundreds of thousands will never forget.

—RICHARD J. WALTON

Midnight Baby

by Dory Previn

Macmillan, 224 pp., \$8.95

So it's all true. Those haunting little ricky-ticky numbers that Dory Previn has been singing in that wistful way of hers are not just figments of her vivid imagination but also fragments of pure autobiography. This lonely lady of the Hollywood Hills tells her story in *Midnight Baby*, a 200-odd-page gloss on those horror-show lyrics that have chilled her rather special following into a loyal cult.

Previn grew up plain Dorothy Langan in Woodbridge, N.J.—Irish Catholic and poor, a singer and dancer for nickels and dimes in local talent shows, pushed on in order to realize the failed dreams of her parents. Her mother, Flo, was an alcoholic who had the good sense and self-control to keep the stuff out of reach—most of the time. Her father, Mike, a walking basket case if there ever was one, came out of World War I mentally ill (“shell-shocked,” according to the old terminology), personally convinced he could have no children. Well, he had children. The first was Dory, who was the image of him, although he kept denying (even to her face) that he was her father. When Dory's sister was born, Mike became so obsessed by his imagined injury that he boarded up the three of them—mother and two daughters—in the dining room and wouldn't let them out, refusing to acknowledge for four and a half months that they even existed.

Family is fate. The messes we are were made of us before we ever had a say in the matter. Not all of us are smart enough

to realize it—Dory Previn won that knowledge after a breakdown of her own—nor talented enough to shape art from it, as she has in her songs. She got at least that from it—but at the price she paid, it was no bargain. —BRUCE COOK

Fraser Young

Literary Crypt No. 70

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer on page 62.

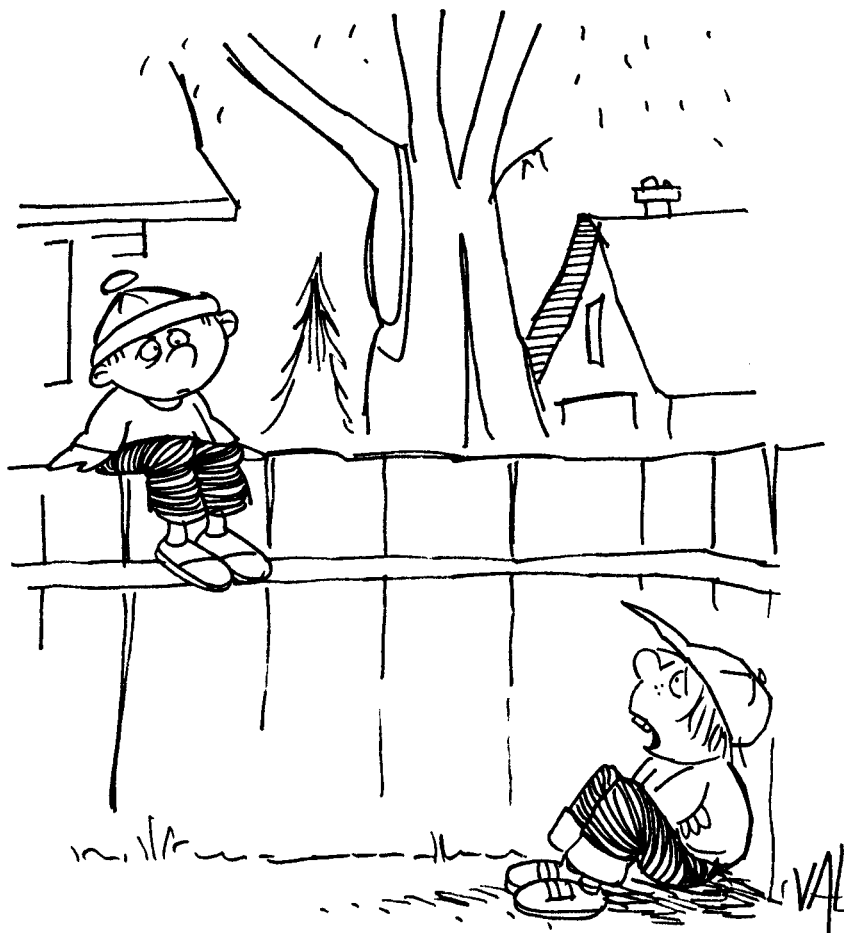
YW YD UAWWAO WF

SDG DFBA FZ WIA MNAD-

WYFVD WISV WF GVFC

SXX WIA SVDCAOD.

-WINOUAO



*“Have you noticed kids are out of fashion?
They’ve got us down to zero population.”*