

A Reader's Farrago

by Doris Grumbach

I'VE BEEN READING an interesting farrago of books this fortnight: an absorbing historical novel, a scholarly study of the idea behind the Crusades, a "censored" piece of Lewis Carrollana, and, most appropriately, a book of long short stories published to be read at the end of this cold season.

An Army of Children, by Evan H. Rhodes (Dial, \$9.95), is a very long, well-crafted, fictionalized account of the early thirteenth-century children's crusade that ended in tragedy. Rhodes has apparently done much careful research on the subject—even walked the route that the army of 20,000 children took over the Alps and through the Sinai toward Jerusalem.

He has created an engaging group of children as his heroes and heroine: the English boy Roger, the Jewish refugee Jonathan, and Laurelle, the girl they both love. The villain, Frizio, is as evil as a proper villain should be: Supposedly taking the children to Jerusalem on his ship, Frizio rapes Laurelle and then sells all the children he has on board into slavery. Only Jonathan of all the children we see in the book comes unscathed to Jerusalem, having saved the blinded Roger and helped to destroy Frizio. Jonathan, relying always on himself rather than on the promises made to the children by self-proclaimed witnesses to God's word, comes home at last to the "scarred-out immutable monument of the Wailing Wall."

One of the delights for me of reading historical fiction is that if the story goes on long enough and is detailed enough, I feel as though I am living in its pages. I found just such pleasure in *An Army of Children*. There is a long residence in its pages, during the wearisome march and then on the sail toward the Holy Land with the children who believe God has told them to free Jerusalem from the Moslems. We are with them, battling and bleeding, starving and suffering at their sides. We endure with the 200 children who reach Jerusalem (the others starve, die violently, turn back, or are captured into slavery). When Laurelle dies we find ourselves crying with Roger and

Jonathan for their dream: "They cried for all the things that heaven had not allowed, and when they thought there were no more tears left, they cried for the cruel cheat that was life itself."

A novel such as *An Army of Children* arouses one's curiosity about crusades in general. Fortunately, *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade*, Carl Erdmann's classic work, which first appeared in 1935, has recently been published by Princeton University Press (\$28.50) in a new and well-translated edition. It is an example of fine scholarship. His theory is that the Crusades were not another form of pilgrimage, as some scholars believe, but the result of a complex interplay of the idea of Christian knighthood, papal encouragement of the idea of a holy war against the Moslems, and other sociological conditions in England and western Europe in the eleventh century. I do this beautiful piece of historical and cultural research an injustice by summarizing it so insufficiently. But if you find Rhodes's novel intriguing, you might want to know more about how the phenomenon of crusade started.

A few weeks ago [SR, February 4], I mentioned in this column a good small press in New York City, the Angelica Press. I have just seen its latest book, a beautifully produced volume that will interest any lover of Lewis Carroll's work. *The Wasp in a Wig* (\$10) was published for the Lewis Carroll Society of North America in a limited edition of 750 copies. It contains an episode from *Through the Looking Glass* that had long been lost. When Carroll sent a portion of chapter eight to his illustrator, John Tenniel, Tenniel wrote back saying, "I can't see my way to a picture" of the elderly wasp in a wig, and Carroll decided to exclude that episode from the chapter. *The Wasp in a Wig* contains a facsimile of this letter as well as the suppressed galleys, corrected in Carroll's handwriting. I agree with Martin Gardner, who writes in the preface that the episode is better than Tenniel thought. And his theory that *The Wasp* may be a parody of Carroll as he would appear 40 years later is an interesting one.

Gardner writes, "It seems to me Carroll could not have written this episode without being acutely aware of the fact that the chasm of age between Alice and the Wasp resembled the chasm that separated Alice Liddell from the middle-aged teller of the story."

A charming "found" piece, *The Wasp* is embedded in a finely made book.

In 1955, Macmillan of London started a brave publishing venture—an annual volume of long short stories (then as now considered an unfashionable idea) called *Winter's Tales*—on the theory, presumably, that the long winter season was suitable for such entertainment. Tactfully arranged in alphabetical order, the 12 stories in the first volume were by such notable English writers as Kingsley Amis, Pamela Hansford Johnson, Frank O'Connor, V. S. Pritchett, and Osbert Sitwell. Each story was illustrated by a different artist.

As early as 1959, St. Martin's Press began to publish the readable collections in this country. Laudably, that press is still at it: I have just read through (in one winter's evening) *Winter's Tales 23*, edited by Peter Collenette (the regular editor for many years has been Alan Maclean).

In the old days, Macmillan inserted a postcard in the book, asking readers to let the publisher know which story they liked best. The winner would be announced in a subsequent volume's preface—a custom, I gather, that has been abandoned. But were I asked, I would say that this, alas, is not a vintage year: None of the eight stories collected this year, including Fay Weldon's mildly humorous "Alopecia," seems distinguished. But no matter: There's always next year, when *Winter's Tales 24* will be upon us with the promise of more and, hopefully, better stories—like Patrick White's excellent novella "A Woman's Hand" (in the 1955 volume) and Muriel Spark's "Bang-Bang You're Dead" (in the 1958 volume). ●

Answer to Middleton Double-Crostic No. 143

Sidney Lens:

(The) Day Before Doomsday

Early in the Cold War... Senator
... Vandenberg expressed the opinion that
if the United States was not to be diverted
from preparedness, it was necessary "to
scare the hell out of the country." The
intelligentsia identified with the arms race
do just that.

Trade Winds

by William Cole

Short, Strong, and Bitter

Every once in a while a startling new poet inexplicably appears. That's how it is in poetry, and that's just what happened when thirty-year-old Lauren Shakely, heretofore published in only a few literary magazines, copped the desirable 1977 Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets given each year for a first book. The poems in *Guilty Bystander* (Random House, \$8.95 cloth, \$4.95 paper) were referred to by the competition's judge, Diane Wakoski, who chose the book from among 1,600 submissions, as "not pleasant or easy or always even attractive. But they give you a poet who refuses to accept the truth from any source but her own probing perceptions." The poems are short, strong, and bitter. "Against Life" is a good example:

From the first moment,
struggling along the dark canal,
a ring of muscles presses you
rhythmically on.
"Leave me alone," you want to scream.
Nevertheless you
break the surface,
a swimmer forced by biology
to take the air.

My friends at the beach
submerge into wave after wave,
yell to me alone on shore
about the joy of it.
But I hate water.
I know what it leads to.

And there is nothing in this life
that could compel me
to be born into it again.

They Still Love Him

As a knee jerk liberal, I am of two minds about Cuba: I applaud the accomplishments of Castro's revolution but am uneasy about the absence of civil liberties. It was a gorgeously romantic revolution, in which Castro, to quote one of his aides, showed "audacity, style, imagination"—qualities that are still on view, according to photo-journalist Fred Ward's *Inside Cuba Today* (Crown, \$10). Castro brought nine-and-a-half-million people who had been under a corrupt dictatorship to full employment and provided new housing, new industry, and a strong educational system. Nobody's poor, but then again, nobody's rich. No gambling, no prostitution, and very little black marketeering. When Cubans complain, it's usually about shortages: meat, clothing, cosmetics, modern appliances. Even, to take a trivial example:

Toilet seats are among the most elusive items in the country. Upon leaving a major hotel, the visitor is unlikely to see one until he reaches another hotel. It seems Cubans have stood on them for years and broken the old ones, and since toilets were originally from the United States and the embargo prohibits any trade, no replacements ever came. Similarly, toilet paper and napkins are usually seen only in good hotels and restaurants. Sometimes supermarkets are without toilet tissue for months. No one can ever explain its absence.

The incessant propaganda is certainly unpleasant, but it hasn't turned the people off their government. They still love Fidel. This seems to me a fair-minded picture (and the photos are fine) of a country where, in domestic affairs at least, the good far overshadows the bad.

Postwar Paris

You wouldn't think that a book about researching Proust's letters would be much fun, but *Other People's Letters: A Memoir*, by Mina Curtiss (Houghton Mifflin, \$9.95), certainly is. Curtiss, now in her eighties, went to Paris in 1947 to gather material about Proust from his faithful housekeeper and surviving friends, most of whom were aristocrats. Curtiss's most amusing encounter was with the lecherous Rumanian prince Antoine Bibesco: "For a man who must have lied fairly consistently for nearly twenty years (by profession he used to be a diplomat), he does it with such admirably transparent charm." A large part of the book draws on Curtiss's own letters and journals of that time, to which she has added "Afterthoughts" from 1977. There are many passages like this:

Saturday is a wonderful day to lunch out alone in Paris because almost all the other lunchers are people in love. Last week at the place I went they were all middle-aged businessmen with their *midinette* mistresses barely able to get through their lunch in their eagerness for bed.

A civilized, delightful woman, Mina Curtiss. As is her book.

Know Anything Remarkable?

Author John Train is still sifting through the 500 submissions of remarkable names that were drawn by my item "Ycleptomaniac" [*SR*, December 10, 1977], and a report on the wildest ones will soon appear in this column. In the meanwhile, Train is embarking on another book, *Remarkable Occurrences* (to be published by Potter/Crown), and will eventually send a free, autographed copy of that book to any reader who sends in a usable occurrence—meaning a strange coincidence, a weird statistic, or a bizarre situation. For instance: An English airman blown out of his bomber without a parachute at 18,000 feet fell into 18 inches of snow and was unharmed. Or the fact that in 1895 there were only two cars in Ohio. They collided. Or the story of an eighty-two-year-old Long Island man who was sentenced to jail for strangling his seventy-six-year-old wife, whom he accused of adultery. True stuff, from news stories, historical accounts, or reliable word of mouth. Don't make 'em up. Send 'em in. ●

