

## Books in Brief

### The Ringmaster

by Darryl Ponicsan

Delacorte, 307 pp., \$8.95

Darryl Ponicsan's novels are well-tempered mosaics inlaid with fragmented dreams and with dreamers whose hungry pursuit of providence ultimately leads them to Rhode Island. Such are his protagonists: military police who willingly aid their prisoner in his escape (*The Last Detail*), a lovesick seaman who loses his heart to a prostitute (*Cinderella Liberty*)—perennial clunks who court storm clouds when the rainbow is within arm's reach.

The ringmaster of the title of Ponicsan's fourth novel is Captain Rex Starback, a similar victim and former lion tamer whose inexpedient retirement from the Sullivan Brothers Circus is facilitated by a big cat's removal of a portion of Starback's posterior. Ten years later, he rejoins the circus and finds that little has changed. The dilapidated caravan of also-rans still scours the same backwater hamlets; it is a hand-to-mouth existence supported only by blind luck and the ever-fluctuating equilibrium of the human spirit. But the circus is where Starback has left flesh and blood—literally—and before long, he again succumbs to its necromantic charms.

Ponicsan's sketch of the microcosm is both suffocating and enticing, a three-ring melee that launches subplots as rapidly as a machine turns out popcorn. Unfortunately, they are stale kernels that never satiate one's interest. Though the performers' argot may be as intoxicating as the calliope's lure, the performers themselves flex inchoate emotions that become flaccid exercises in futility.

—ROBERT STEPHEN SPITZ

### Commissioner: A View from the Top of American Law Enforcement

by Patrick V. Murphy and Thomas Plate  
Simon & Schuster, 270 pp., \$9.95

Anyone who thinks that the citizen has been getting his tax dollars' worth in crime protection over the past few decades or that the FBI has been selecting the toughest cases to crack is in for a jolt if he reads *Commissioner: A View from the Top of American Law Enforcement*. Happily, this withering analysis of what's wrong with the American police system is complemented by some eminently sensible suggestions

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about how the system can be improved.

The most dramatic of these pages cover Murphy's experiences as New York City's police commissioner (1970–1973). He came to the job at a time of crisis—crime on the upsurge, police morale and public confidence shaken by the revelations of police corruption made by Serpico and the Knapp Commission—but, undaunted, he implemented a thoroughgoing reform program whose success was predicated on his ability to establish his independence from City Hall (where Mayor John Lindsay's "dense ambiguity" constituted a problem all its own). With the aid of anecdote, the authors graphically describe how Murphy handled people, problems, and sudden crises (of which the theft from police custody of a vast quantity of heroin was the most sensational).

Murphy's discussion, however, like his career as a top law enforcer, ranges across the nation. He reserves his heaviest fire for incompetent and/or corrupt police chiefs and especially for Hoover's FBI, which in Murphy's view is an obstacle to good law enforcement. On the positive side, he advocates regional police consolidation, strict senior officer accountability, neighborhood policing, and not more cops but better managed ones. Significantly, he lays greater stress on reducing police corruption than on catching the dons of organized crime.

The authors' prose gives the reader a bumpy ride at times, but it hardly matters—the book is engrossing.

—PETER GARDNER

### **The Second Ring of Power**

by Carlos Castaneda

Simon & Schuster, 316 pp., \$9.95

Reading this fifth book of Carlos Castaneda's, I felt like the man going to St. Ives. Don Juan has gone by, leaving a band of apprentice sorceresses and their magical cats and kits to multiply his teachings. The dusty magus, now only remembered, gave earlier Castaneda books a personality and an interest absent here. In *The Second Ring of Power* we have only the residue of myth, odds and ends of folklore that suggest Castaneda has finally run out of material.

The first half is assault. With crones being transformed into maidens, the mesa is crowded with sorceresses. The dumb *americano* Castaneda makes himself has to fight off alien forces—a preternatural dog, a whorled floor, bad winds—and dangerous seductions. But these events are no

separate reality, not even metaphor—just the scary stuff of Mexican Gothic. The rest is recitation. Castaneda learns about the allies; the luminous egg (man); the "nagual" (or double); and applied dreaming, which is the second ring of power. A method of perception becomes eschatology when he finds that sorcerers never die.

As journalism, *The Second Ring of Power* is mind-mush. It is anecdotal anthropology and monochromatic drug vision. As religious teaching, it is repetitive and banal. As fiction—which is how I've come to read Castaneda—it is mute.

—THOMAS LECLAIR

### **Letters from the Field 1925–1975**

by Margaret Mead

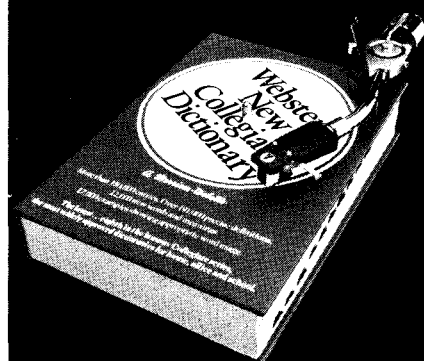
Harper & Row, 343 pp., \$12.95

If letters should informally disclose their author's life and thought, Margaret Mead's letters from the field should be prized. For they do this and more: They chart the growth of anthropology, the shifting relationships between undeveloped and advanced societies, and the waning of tribal life. Her first letters, written from Samoa, in 1925, convey wide-eyed curiosity in a lucid language of sights and sounds and even measure the distinctive strangeness of the place with a discovery about the senses: Samoans, unlike modern Americans, depend more on taste and smell than on seeing and hearing. This spirit of novelty and keen responsiveness to cultural detail never leaves Mead's letters; nor does the transparent, descriptive prose that lets the reader see what Mead sees; nor does her affection for the tribal cultures.

But Margaret Mead does change, along with the cultures she studies. Like anthropology itself, her observations grow more comprehensive and analytic as she learns to look beyond the sights and sounds of rituals, manners, and emotional incidents to the social structures and psychological patterns they signify; and she smiles at the naïveté of her early work. Then, with new methods of study and with the passing of years, the letters reflect the gradual transformation of primitive societies as they come under Western influence: Custom and superstition yield to education, rationality, and worldly worry. And, as she steps herself in the evidence and meaning of these changes, Mead assumes the character we all know: less the scientist than the sage—alive with ideas, facts, and feelings about how to remedy the modern world's discontents.

—JAMES SLOAN ALLEN

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