

# American Classics

The Library of America (various titles)  
 Viking Press, \$25-\$30/volume in bookstores  
 Time-Life Books, \$19.95/volume by subscription  
 Reviewed by Robert R. Harris

"IT IS ABSURD," Edmund Wilson wrote in the early 1960s, "that our most read and studied writers should not be available in their entirety in any convenient form." What Wilson wanted was something that "would follow the example of the Editions of la Pléiade, which have included so many of the French classics, ancient and modern, in beautifully produced and admirably printed thin-paper volumes, ranging from 800 to 1500 pages." Now that the Library of America has issued its first shelf full of books, I am overjoyed to report that American readers finally are getting what Wilson ordered.

It took a long time. Wilson and some friends tried to get the project off the ground during the 1960s, but were stymied when the newly formed National Endowment for the Humanities chose to back instead the Modern Language Association's plan for editions of American authors to be produced at various universities throughout the country. This decision led to a legendary brouhaha between Wilson and the MLA. Wilson realized that the scholars would get bogged down in textual complexities and that decades would pass before "authorized" texts would be issued. After Wilson's death his fight went on, led, most notably, by Random House editor Jason Epstein. In 1979, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Ford Foundation came up with the grants that launched the Library of America.

The Library issued its first four volumes last spring and now has a dozen available. Each volume contains several of an author's major works in their entirety. Published so far are two of the planned four volumes of both Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, the first

of six volumes of Mark Twain, the first of four volumes of William Dean Howells, two volumes of Jack London, and one volume each of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Walt Whitman. This July, the Library will publish a two-volume edition of Francis Parkman's *France and England in North America*. So, in a little more than a year, superb editions of such American classics as *Moby-Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Call of the Wild*, and *Leaves of Grass* have become available.

The volumes in the Library are magnificently produced. Each is approximately five by eight inches and between 1,000 and 1,500 thin pages; no book is fatter than two inches. The pages are sewn rather than glued. The paper is acid-free and opaque. All of this makes the books light, easy to handle, flexible, and durable—believe it or not, they will last 500 years. In an age in which the shoddiness of manufactured goods, including most books, seems to be the norm, the Library of America editions are an anomaly.

The scholarly accoutrements are kept to a minimum. Each volume contains only a chronology of the author's life, a brief note on the text and, in some cases, a few pages of explanatory notes. The Library has received universal praise from both critics and readers, and the volumes are selling well, often creating a need for a doubling of print-runs.

Indeed, I have difficulty finding fault with this series of classics. Personally, I could have lived without the Harriet Beecher Stowe volume, and one of Jack London would have sated me. Although I'm glad William Dean Howells is included in the Library's plans, I must confess that I

doubt I'll reread him; he wrote thirty-five novels, and the Library plans to publish four volumes. I'll take the romanticism of Melville's *Typee* or *Omoo* over Howells' dreary realism any day. But I'm not complaining. The Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman, and Twain volumes are wonderful to savor. It's just that I want to have all the other volumes *now*.

In the fall the Library will publish the collected works of Thomas Jefferson, the first of four volumes of both Henry Adams and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the first of eight of Henry James, and the second of Mark Twain. Next spring will bring Stephen Crane and Edgar Allan Poe. In the fall of 1984, we will get James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, and—the ones I can't wait to get my hands on—two volumes of Henry James' criticism. To follow that the Library promises Emily Dickinson, Henry David Thoreau, Theodore Dreiser, and William Faulkner.

As the Library moves ahead chronologically, one can only hope that the problem of copyright will not be unsolvable and that copyright-holders will see the wisdom of licensing works for inclusion in the Library. Yet it may get sticky. The works of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, for example, sell well in paperback editions. Will the publishers of those books allow their inclusion in the Library of America? Perhaps the Library will be successful enough financially to pay royalties on works that are protected by copyright.

For now, though, we are fortunate to be able to enjoy the rich heritage already issued by the Library. The publication of Francis Parkman's monumental *France and England in North America* is surely this summer's "literary event." The two-volume Library of America edition contains, in Volume I, *Pioneers of France in the New World* (1865, revised 1885), *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century* (1867), *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West* (the 1879 revised version of *The Discovery of the Great West*, 1869), and *The Old Regime in Canada* (1874, revised 1893). Volume II has *Count Frontenac and New France under Louis XIV* (1877), *A Half-Century of Conflict* (two

volumes, 1892), and *Montcalm and Wolfe* (two volumes, 1894). These works have been available sporadically in expensive reprint editions, but the Library version is the first new edition since 1897-98.

Parkman (1823-93), a descendant of John Cotton, is probably best known for *The Oregon Trail*. But the massive *France and England in North America* (the Library volumes run to more than 3,000 pages) is surely his masterwork. Parkman's achievement appears even more spectacular when we realize that he worked for forty years on this history, all the while suffering from a severe nervous disorder that affected his vision and, at times, limited him to writing only a few lines a day. He relied on others to read to him and to take dictation, and he invented a wire-framed device that enabled him to write without having to look at his manuscript.

Although Parkman thought of his history as one work, each of the volumes stands alone. In fact, the reader can pick up these two Library editions and begin at just about any chapter. It does not take long to get hooked. Parkman combined a romantic outlook with the tools of scholarship, and the result is history as literature. Historians have judged him accurate, but above all he was a marvelous writer whose depictions of nature and of fierce battles are vivid and dramatic. Parkman saw the struggle for dominance in North America as the defeat of a reactionary force, France, by the force of progress, England. In the introduction to the first volume he sets forth his thesis: "Liberty and Absolutism, New England and New France. The one was the offspring of a triumphant government; the other, of an oppressed and fugitive people; the one, an unflinching champion of the Roman Catholic reaction; the other, a vanguard of the Reform. Each followed its natural laws of growth, and each came to its natural result." His bias notwithstanding, Parkman detailed that course of events from the early voyages of discovery up through the French and Indian Wars, which concluded on the Plains of Abraham, when the English under Gen. James Wolfe defeated the French under Gen. Louis Joseph

Montcalm and captured Quebec.

The effort and skill that have gone into the making of the Library of America are impressive. Almost assuredly it is the most significant literary project to be undertaken in our lifetime. ■

Robert R. Harris is an SR contributing editor.

## BOOK BRIEFS

### **Fisher's Hornpipe**

by Todd McEwen

Harper & Row, 256 pp., \$12.95

McEWEN LEAVES YOU breathless. *Fisher's Hornpipe* is a fast-paced and pitilessly funny first novel, flawed but sparkling. His hero, William Fisher, is no hero at all. He's an Ordinary Guy, a young American male who's fed up with his work life, his sex life, and the bad dream that life in America has become. Fisher models himself on Thoreau: "Simplify!" he shouts, as he throws his furniture out the window of his Boston apartment. Walking on the ice of Walden Pond as the novel opens, Fisher slips and strikes his head. He wakes up, nurses his wound, and determines to win his revenge against the world.

Bostonians and their decaying patrician habitat are the chief targets of Fisher's ire. He goes on a hilarious drunken spree at the Harvard Club with Crosbee McWilliams III, a rich young Brahmin with a "hueless flabelliform body" and "molelike hair." He sets fire to a library book to gain the attentions of Miss Alison Mapes, a slow-witted beauty who seems to have been lifted directly from the pages of *The Preppie Handbook*. Then he runs into his savior, Fred-from-Oregon, a good-natured, drunken drifter who speaks more sense than anyone Fisher has ever met. The novel climaxes when Fisher reads Fred-from-Oregon's populist "manifesto" before an assembled crowd of bums at Boston's chic Quincy Market, provoking a riot.

McEwen is a social satirist, with a constitutional dislike for trendiness and a deadly ear for cant. I have trouble remembering another first novel that made me giggle as often. If the narrative structure is a bit in-

promptu, if moral complexity is too often sacrificed for an easy laugh, *Fisher's Hornpipe* is nevertheless a most promising debut.

—ADAM GUSSOW

### **Defects of the Heart**

by Barbara Gordon

Harper & Row, 324 pp., \$14.95

BARBARA GORDON, an award-winning documentary filmmaker who described her bout with Valium addiction in her autobiography, *I'm Dancing as Fast as I Can*, has written a novel about another award-winning documentary filmmaker obsessed with a drug. The fictional drug, Styralon, which has been developed to prevent miscarriages, has been approved by the FDA despite proof that it causes fetal deformities, including "defects of the heart." Jessica Lenhart, a renowned crusader for the rights of the underprivileged, teams up with a reformed corporate lawyer to expose the underhanded tactics of the conglomerate that makes Styralon. As she invades people's lives to capture their pain on film, Jessica's focus shifts from the victims of Styralon to the defect of her own heart, her incapacity to love. She realizes also the exploitative nature of her business, which thrives on the very suffering it attempts to allay and manipulates emotions just as the drug company distorts laboratory reports.

Ironically, while this story condemns the slickness of television and its lack of conscience, it exhibits the same major flaws. Jessica is no more complex than the heroine in an average TV drama: the efficient, capable career woman afraid of the disorder of love. We are seldom allowed into Jessica's mind, but must depend on facile visual clues, such as a mysterious smile or a dark cloud overhead, to gauge her moods. The dialogue often reads like a television advertisement—sometimes clever, sometimes serious, but always calculated for effect. After seeing Jessica's film, the born-again public interest lawyer is "moved, outraged, and finally overwhelmed by the humanity, the feeling, of the film." Gordon tries too obviously to evoke this reaction in us, and succeeds only in excising the heart of this book.

—CAROL VERDERESE