

Novels of 1946

By Mary-Carter Roberts

The Star's Book Critic



HALLDOR LAXNESS.
Author of "Independent People."

There are four novels which, for literary excellence, deserve to be remembered out of 1946's fiction harvest. They are Halldor Laxness' "Independent People," Evelyn Waugh's "Brideshead Revisited," Carson McCullers' "The Member of the Wedding" and Raoul Faure's "The Spear in the Sand." Only one of the four, however, attains the universal quality which makes a masterpiece. That is the first-named—"Independent People."

In it, superb writing is matched with a theme of major importance. It is, essentially, an epic of the human spirit pitted against the gods, or fate—if you prefer. Consequently it belongs in the great ancient tradition, of which it is quite worthy.

The Year's Great Novel

It is the story of one man's determination to triumph over the environment to which he has been born. Mr. Laxness is an Icelander; he writes about Icelanders. His hero is a peasant of the share-cropping class. He undertakes to become a landed proprietor—an independent man. For 30 years he pays for a farm, penny by penny. At the end of that time, he loses his stake because fate is too strong for him.



Eric Remarque.

With social mindedness the present rage, there will be, of course, an inclination to view this novel in terms of the social questions involved, the oppression of the poor by the rich. The book is far more than that. You have only to compare it to works which are specifically limited to the social question to see its superiority. John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," for instance, shows as a piece of schoolboy sentimentality beside it. It is the great novel of the year.

"Brideshead Revisited" has extraordinary beauty. It is a memorable performance. It is cut off from universality, however, by its theme. That deals with the specific issues of a specific group and time—it shows us a family of English aristocrats collapsing into decadence in the careers of the interwar generation. Within that limitation, the work is close to perfect, a long piece of melancholia in which the autumn mood is never false.

The same thing can be said for "The Member of the Wedding." It, too, uses splendid literary quality on a limited theme. It deals with adolescence, deals with it as the raw, crude, green desperation which it is, without any Mansfieldian delicacy. But through the nobility of its prose it lifts that treatment to the beauty of tragedy. The novel becomes a sort of solemn hymn on the pain of leaving childhood behind.

"The Spear in the Sand" is a book which has received very little notice but which still stands as a work of striking originality. It is a first novel and such a one as makes a reader impatient for more of its author's output. It is a fantasy, a purely imaginative work. In it, a young man is shipwrecked on an island where he has neither the need nor the chance to exert himself in any way and where his surroundings are those of dreamlike beauty. He spends the rest of a long life in this lovely passive solitude. The novel is the study of what happens to a human being in an eventless environment. It is beautiful writing.

Except for "Brideshead Revisited," none of these works went on the best-seller list. There were, however, some creditable novels which did win that distinction.

"The Hucksters" by Frederic Wakeman is one of the group which has attracted wide attention. Plain journalistic writing, it attacks the fashions of current radio advertising with pleasant vigor. As a study of the entertainment habits of our day, it may well be read in decades to come as a serviceable text. As a novel, however, it suffers from a silly and inharmonious love story, obviously tacked on to give the requisite "heart appeal."

"Animal Farm" by George Orwell is an excellent little satire on political revolu-

tion, its futility. "We Happy Few" by Helen Howe is an acid study of intellectual immaturity and social snobbishness of the present-day academicians, particularly of those who pride themselves on being liberal. Both books are worth reading.

Out of Hecate County

"Memoirs of Hecate County" by Edmund Wilson achieved best sellerdom by the nearly infallible means of being suppressed for indecency. It deserved the suppression, though, apart from the obscenities, there was good material in it. I make my unkind observation because I find Mr. Wilson's obscenity genuinely obscene—that is, I quarrel not with the matter—for anything which can happen can be told—but with the manner, which is extraneous. There is no essential relation between the objectionable passages and the remainder of the tales in which they appear. One concludes therefore that they were written for their own sake, and that is unforgivable. That, in short, is smut, if you want a definition of it.

"Britannia Mews" by Margery Sharp became a best seller but did little to add to Miss Sharp's reputation. It is long and confused and suffers from repeated shifts of emphasis. This is surprising, for Miss Sharp has distinguished herself in the past precisely by the economy and clarity of her writing method.

Veteran Authors Reappear

Earlier in the year several veterans returned to the lists with works which promptly became popular. One of these was Eric Maria Remarque, with "Arch of Triumph," another was W. Somerset Maugham with "Then and Now" and another was Daphne Du Maurier with "The King's General." All three of the novels were the deft works of experienced craftsmen.

Two novels on Biblical themes have attained best-selling status in 1946, attesting the perennial popularity of this kind of fiction. One was Gladys Schmitt's "David the King" and the other was Robert Graves' "King Jesus." Both have an unorthodox approach to their subjects. Miss Schmitt shows the Old Testament hero as a modern neurotic; Mr. Graves portrays Jesus as a mortal man who, by the greatness of his spirit, did overcome death. Both books are immensely interesting.

Of Jewish Life in America

The first novel by Charles Jackson "The Fall of Valor," since his epoch-making "The Lost Week End" came out in the past year and, like its predecessor, has promptly gone on the best-seller lists. It is another study of a neurosis in a mature man. It is delicately done but lacking in life.



Frederic Wakeman.

Also on the list of the fortunate were two studies of Jewish life in America—Sholem Asch's "East River" and Jo Sinclair's "Wasteland," which latter work won the distinguished Harper Novel Prize. The Asch book is concerned with New York Jews and is, in sum, an eloquent plea for the various immigrant groups which make up so large a part of New York's population to lay aside their Old World prejudices and learn the meaning of America. Mr. Asch blames much of the misery of New York's slums on the retention by the immigrants



CARSON McCULLERS.
Author of "The Member of the Wedding."

of their European hates. He is as powerful a pleader in this as he has been in other causes. Miss Sinclair's novel is a study of neurosis born of race shame. It has a great thrust of emotion in it but, one feels, its author is a trifle optimistic in her view of what wonders psychoanalysts can achieve in remaking the attitudes of mature human beings.

To Read and Weep

One of the pleasantest of the popular works of the year is, oddly enough, a sort of juvenile, a story of a little girl's discovery of a colony of Lilliputians living on a country estate in England. It is a thoroughly delightful tale which a sophisticated adult ought to find worth his time. Its title is "Mistress Masham's Repose" and its author, T. H. White.

"The Miracle of the Bells" is a recent comer to best-selling glory but bids fair to hold its place a long time. It is hard to describe—you could call it a six-ring circus in which the acts are just about all the sure-fire stock situations of sentimental fiction. There is in it no erring daughter driven out into the storm with a guilty little bundle in her arms, but there is just about everything else comparable. For any one who likes to read and wipe the tears away, it is simply made to order.

Finally, the ranks of popularity have been ornamented by Taylor Caldwell's "This Side of Innocence." Obviously a lot of people like it.

You Can Count on These

Here I shall name a group of good solid novels which you can read without any risk of wasting your time.

"The House Above the River" by Michael Foster. A fine study of the aristocratic spirit, personified in a young Southerner of distinguished family, pitted against the standardless mob which is current society. The tale is marred somewhat in its ending.

"Letty Fox, Her Luck," by Christina Stead. A savage dissection of the type of modern girl who has it ground into her from her infancy that her duty is to "get a man." It is long and repetitious but its force carries it along.

"All the King's Men," by Robert Penn Warren. Another study of that Southern State Governor who had it in him to become a dictator and died by an assassin's bullet. I found it the best on the subject so far.

"For One Sweet Grape," by Kate O'Brien. A historical novel of the reign of Philip II of Spain. It is a genuine romance, especially fine in characterization.

"Road to Calvary," by Alexei Tolstoy—a huge solid thing on the Russian revolution and the years immediately afterward. It gives you a vivid picture of the anarchy of the postrevolution period.

"Lost Heaven," by Kylie Tennant. Another of the gifted Miss Tennant's Australian tales. It is the picture of a village entirely composed of violent individualists and is salty and original.

"Foretaste of Glory," by Jesse Stuart. Delicious comedy about a Kentucky village which mistook the aurora borealis for the end of the world and vigorously and publicly repented. It is Mr. Stuart at his excellent best.

"The Devil Is a Lonely Man," by Morris-



RAOUL C. FAURE.
Author of "The Spear in the Sand."



EVELYN WAUGH.
Author of "Brideshead Revisited."

son Wood. A study of the lust for war and power. The book has an unfinished quality, but its power is arresting. The author was a soldier in the Philippines and died in a Japanese prison camp, sending his manuscript home by one of the last transports to leave the beleaguered islands. It is a first novel and shows unquestioned talent.

Some Other Names

It should be mentioned, I suppose, that Theodore Dreiser was represented during the year by a posthumous work called "The Bulwark." It might just as well have been left unpublished. It was savorless ponderosity. But it was also, of course, Theodore Dreiser.

Then, too, there was one more of Upton Sinclair's perpetual Lanny Budd series—"A World to Win." It was extremely silly.

The same thing may be said of William Saroyan's contribution to the year's literature, "The Adventures of Wesley Jackson." Even for the author of "Human Comedy" this was a poor performance.

James Farrel brought out a new novel during the year, "Bernard Clare," a study



W. Somerset Maugham.

of an ill-educated young man trying to become a writer and turning into an advertising salesman. It was technically good and humanly dreary. Like Edmund Wilson's opus, it won the distinction of being suppressed, but without the same justice.

There they are—what I liked, and some of what lies between.

Late Novels of the Year

Since the above was written, some other interesting novels have come into the office. For me, Arthur Koestler has done an illuminating book on the much-discussed Palestine situation. It is obviously a problem novel, as they used to be called, but it is vivid and one reads it with a sensation of getting a quite unbiased account of Palestinian conditions. Mr. Koestler makes no bones about it that the Jews are in the process of invading and taking over that country; they mean to own it and control it, he says. His point of view is that, whatever you may feel about Arab rights, such invasions have seldom been halted in history. Backward peoples give way before progressive ones. The Arabs are to be pitied, in Mr. Koestler's view, but England has no possible defense for her deviousness toward the Jews to whom she guaranteed the Arabs' land.

A curious novel, quite unlike anything else which is now being written is "Tifus Groan," by Mervyn Peake. It is a tale of fantastic and often horrifying doings in a vast castle in an unnamed country and an unspecified period of history. The characters are grotesque but not of any conventional variety of grotesquerie. The thing which makes the work commendable—apart from the wild richness of its imaginative quality—is the circumstances that its author has a puckish kind of humor. He cannot resist putting a touch of the ridiculous on even the most horrifying situations. The result is a book which appeals to the intelligence as well as to the imagination.

Marquand fans have quickly put the latest novel of their favorite author on the best-seller lists but I for one found "B. F.'s Daughter" written more from a standpoint of mass appeal than of literary excellency. It is a wartime story with a good many scenes in Washington and those are well done—Washingtonians will recognize their merit. In the main, however, the story is lifeless and the leading character, the daughter of a famous capitalist who is supposed to inherit her father's realistic intelligence, is far from convincing. But I daresay that, to the fans, these objections will mean nothing at all.