

THE ROAD OF THE GODS by Isabel Paterson (LIVERIGHT. \$2.50)

THOSE who have followed Mrs. Isabel Paterson's literary commentaries in the New York *Herald-Tribune* would have been astonished had she written the ordinary type of historical novel. Her attitude of mind is so utterly of today that it is difficult to picture her as delving into the past. Yet her evocation of the atmosphere of the northern forests of the time of Octavius, her feeling for and knowledge of the religion of the Barbarians, and also (as shown in the two figures of Artemidorus and Metellus) her understanding of the Greek and Roman, prove her an author who, had she wished to, might have turned to strictly historical writing and produced work of an exceedingly powerful and vivid quality. In its externals, its choice of background, its action, *The Road of the Gods* is then an historical novel, and yet after we have read but a few pages we realize that it is something much more than that; indeed that in its informing spirit it is totally of today. In every chapter we meet Mrs. Paterson's subtly ironic disillusion, a disillusion which is vocal only in the character of the Greek Artemidorus and more delicately so in the heroine Greda.

One thing at least Mrs. Paterson has which is utterly lacking in most contemporary writing—a sense of form. Also she can write graceful and musical prose. Perhaps she would destroy, but she follows Hedda Gabler's injunction to destroy beautifully. If she is a believer in the futility of faith in religion she has at least faith in the necessity of form and the necessity of style.

PENDING HEAVEN by William Gerhardt (HARPER'S. \$2.50)

MR. WILLIAM GERHARDT is very clever, so clever indeed that he is becoming a bore. His latest novel is all cleverness, and precious little else. It tells the story of a writer beloved

by three women with whom he lives a pasha-like existence, and who comes to his downfall through his love for a fourth. If *Pending Heaven* is a satire of the literary life and loves it simply doesn't come off, and if it is a farce it isn't funny. For the former it lacks incisiveness, and for the latter that simple directness of meaning which is the essence of successful farce. Mr. Gerhardt has evidently read Aldous Huxley, but it is only Huxley's trimmings which he has utilized. And all this is a pity, for in *Futility* and *The Polyglots* Gerhardt promised things which some day would count, but instead of allowing his talent to flower naturally he is at present apparently trying to force it in the hothouse of the exotic. In *Pending Heaven* his straining to be original is often painful, and it is in this sense of strain which wearies the reader before he has read fifty pages. There are unexpected words and clever phrases, but nearly three hundred pages of these makes one almost wish for a world of idiots.

GRENVILLE VERNON

THE FIERY DIVE by Martin Armstrong (HARCOURT, BRACE. \$2.50)

MOST of the stories in this book have the almost fatal disadvantage of being faintly reminiscent. Put down the "Portrait of the Misses Harlow", for example, and think how much better Katherine Mansfield did that sort of thing. And what a pity Conrad did not write "Sombbrero"; he knew so well how to convey that peculiar admixture of human and geographical primitive brutality. All of which is undoubtedly unfair to Martin Armstrong, against whom no charge could be brought either of plagiarism or of "playing the sedulous ape".

Three of these tales are historical fiction, relying, however, on their intrinsic human interest for their value and not on any antique trappings. The rest are of our own day, and of these the best is that which gives the book its title. The theme of "The Fiery

"Dive" might be described as a sexual version of "lady or tiger", the alternatives in this case being perfect companion or selfish prostitute. Mr. Armstrong leaves his question as open as did Mr. Stockton, and each reader will probably have to decide for himself whether the dénouement is satisfactory.

Mr. Armstrong is a good craftsman. There is a clear, unembellished directness about both his plots and their presentation which makes his characters, his scenes and his intentions readily recognizable at a glance. They are interesting to contemplate, too, and even pleasantly subtle, but he fails to make them significant either emotionally or intellectually. If the emotional reaction that one gets from a work of art in any medium is the real test of its value, then Mr. Armstrong is not an artist in the most exalted sense. But perhaps the mere fact that he provokes comparison with the best is the proof of his own worth.

NORAH MEADE

ANITA AGREES by *Theodora Benson*
(HARPERS. \$2.50)

THIS book is a comedy of manners written in satiric vein and set both in London and in the English countryside among blue hills and secret woodland ways. The story centers about Anita Franklin, afflicted with a combination of beauty and piety, in search of a platonic friendship. Suffering under a hypnosis induced by the religion of her forefathers, she is so utterly guided by secondary motives as to defeat her desire to deal fairly with herself and others. Making herself believe that she is seeking to do good, she does harm instead. The author deals with her heroine humorously and yet ruthlessly. Though she leaves the reader in no doubt as to the real Anita beneath the artificiality, she has succeeded also in portraying a wholly lovable character exemplifying the eternal feminine that has neither best nor worst.

The other characters are on the chess-board merely to afford plays for Anita. Gervase

Holt, who the reader knows at the outset will eventually win Anita, is not a person but a type of hustling young business man who can be found in London, New York, or Richmond. The other actors appear as shadows of ordinary people. The novel is saved, however, by charm of style, by humorous auctorial interpolations, and by that lightness of touch which characterizes good satire.

EUDORA RAMSAY RICHARDSON

PAY DAY by *Nathan Asch* (BREWER & WARREN. \$2.50)

JIM draws his clerk's wages and we follow him home in the subway, and then through all the variety of a weekly blow-out: meeting a waitress in Times Square, taking her to a movie he doesn't understand, losing her in the drunken excitement of a speakeasy, picking up another girl and then "passing out" to wander home again in the early hours of a summer morning. To spend one night with Jim is enough to grasp his routine existence of physical facts and pleasures, to uncover the empty sentimentality of his conscience, to understand his ignorant outlook on life. Mr. Asch has tried to make him, though typical, more than a mere type; to give us not only his thoughts on sex and money and his place in life but also his musings on trivialities and matters of moment. But it is only the type in him which rings true; Jim's more personal thoughts and actions miss fire, and do not bring him to life. It requires a miracle to make a study like this rise above its own level from document to art; and Mr. Asch cannot bring the miracle off.

The real merit of the book is incidental; it does not derive from the picture as a whole, or from the ironic counterpoint of the Sacco-Vanzetti execution, which is taking place as Jim goes about his evening. It lies in Mr. Asch's sense of atmosphere and manners—in his downtown New York at night, which captures all five of our senses; in his speakeasy scenes, breathing and dynamic; in his drink-