

Mr. Hatcher on American Fiction

CREATING THE MODERN AMERICAN NOVEL. By Harlan Hatcher. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1935. \$3.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

MR. HATCHER tells us that "very little American fiction of the last century has any life left in it," that "by the end of the third decade of this century, the American novel had emerged as a body of serious literature," and that his book intends to "show how the American novel was lifted from its lowly place in the nation of a generation ago into a respected position in the literature of the modern world." The contemporary novel certainly deserves a discriminating study, but Mr. Hatcher has not written it. His book has the air of having been delivered as a series of lectures before the Thanatopsis Club of Main Street.

In the first place, his style has all the distressing inaccuracy of the popular literary lecturer. For example, a generation ago the American novel was being illuminated by the fine theorizing of Howells and James, not to mention many lesser men; it was everywhere being discussed as a serious contribution to American letters; and its position was probably more "respected," whatever that may mean, than it is today. It is not, however, in misapprehension of historic truth alone that Mr. Hatcher errs. His sentences have all the fuzzy indefiniteness of bad writing. "She came," he writes, "from an easier background than many of our realists." "Ben Hecht was a very self-conscious young cynic, bred by the dehumanized life that passed through Chicago's streets across the desks of a metropolitan news-



HARLAN HATCHER

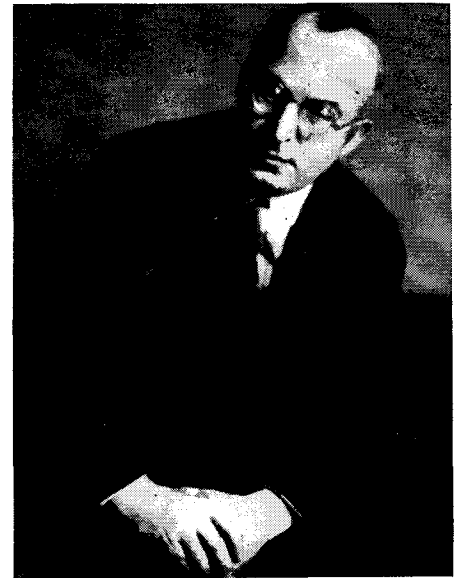
paper." "She has comforted the hearts of millions who revered her because she had written a realism which could be read in schools and women's clubs where Theodore Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson would have caused a panic." These are representative sentences selected almost at random. When freshmen write this way, their instructors require them to reconstruct their sentences.

In the next place, Mr. Hatcher tells us that "the invigorating tonic of the realistic movement" (which with characteristic inaccuracy is "applied to the American scene") is the central force in the creation of the modern fictional movement. But he nowhere tells us what he means by realism; and when we find that Theodore Dreiser (who "never wrote a caricature"), Sherwood Anderson, Ellen Glasgow, Josephine Johnson, John Dos Passos, and Willa Cather are all "realists," that James Branch Cabell "is by all odds the most important and most distinguished of American novelists in a realistic age deliberately to cultivate romance," that "poetic realism continues to attract young American writers," that William Faulkner's work is characterized by "the realism of exposure," the suspicion will not dawn that Mr. Hatcher does not know what he means by realism, or if he does, that he has failed to inform the reader.

And in the third place, Mr. Hatcher's book is absolutely lacking in critical standards. He tells us that "the greatest accomplishments yet made by an American in the psychological novel are those of Conrad Aiken," Henry James being dismissed in a paragraph; that "Upton Sinclair . . . is in a class by himself, only a little below Sinclair Lewis in literary art," that Waldo Frank and Sherwood Anderson had "the honor of pioneering [sic] a new type of American fiction," that the technique of "This Side of Paradise" is "ultra-modern . . . utilizing the impressionistic style then in its first flower through the success" of James Joyce, that Willa Cather is "the most talented of our escapists" (this is on p. 71; on pp. 191-201 this doubtful honor seems to be claimed for the "keen and graceful mind" of James Branch Cabell), that "An American Tragedy" is "by any standard . . . the greatest and most powerful novel yet written by any American," etc., etc. Perhaps as characteristic a judgment as any other is this: ". . . Howells has a high place of honor in the creation of the American novel, for better or for worse [pray, what does this mean?], and it is a part of his memorial [sic] that he properly praised Stephen Crane when all others cried the boy down and said nasty things about his forthright books."

Mr. Hatcher has tried to say something about almost every novelist of any importance who has written in the last forty years. It is, I suppose, inevitable that his book should be shallow.

Howard Mumford Jones is professor of English in the University of Michigan.



ARNOLD ZWEIG

People Are People

PLAYTHINGS OF TIME. By Arnold Zweig. New York: The Viking Press. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by SAMUEL NOCK

SOME of the short stories in this collection were written a number of years ago; some are of quite recent date. All, however, deal with the affairs of those whom the Germans call "little people" — ordinary small shopkeepers, workmen, poor people endeavoring somehow or other to get along, in war time or in the years after the war.

Although several of the stories lack what we are accustomed to seek in short stories, plot, all of them show the reaction of character to circumstance; and the circumstance is almost invariably in one way or another a result of the upheaval of values and opportunities brought about by war. Some of the stories are amusing, others are tragic; but throughout runs a vein of implied comment on the utter folly of war and what war does to those who might well go on about their little businesses, leading their little lives in contentment and happiness.

Nor is veiled comment on present-day conditions in Germany lacking. The situation of the Jews is touched upon, but only to the extent of suggesting that Jews are very much like people who are not Jews. In fact, Zweig lets a number of his characters perceive that people are very much people after all, whether in Germany or elsewhere.

The stories, however, do not preach: they are simply stories of the little adventures of unexciting people which are, thanks to the narrative talent of the author, interesting despite their cosmic unimportance.

Samuel Nock returned to America last Fall from a residence of several years in Germany.

Courtier and Poet

AT THE COURT OF QUEEN ELIZABETH. THE LIFE AND LYRICS OF SIR EDWARD DYER. By *Ralph M. Sargent*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1935. \$3.

Reviewed by CHARLES DAVID ABBOTT

EDWARD DYER was one of the lesser ornaments of Elizabeth's reign. Courtier, diplomat, poet, he had neither the ebullience of Raleigh nor the capacity of Sidney, but he was Sidney's friend, the companion of poets, and, at various times, a minor favorite of Elizabeth. His name has always been familiar and his character respected, but it is somewhat difficult to discover upon what achievements his reputation was built.

He was sent on several diplomatic errands of no great importance, and these he accomplished satisfactorily. His exploits, however, were not physical. They were confined to the sphere of alchemical experiment, in which his faith was even more unflinching than was that of Elizabeth and Burghley. The most romantic episode of his life was his highly dangerous association with the notorious Edward Kelley, whom, as the self-acknowledged transmutor of base metals into gold, he tried to lure away from the Emperor's court at Prague for the enrichment of England. At this time Burghley naively hoped that Kelley's ministrations might cover the cost of the defences against the Armada. Dyer returned unscathed to London, but it was not Kelley's gold that repelled the Spanish ships. Officially, he received from Elizabeth only one tangible recognition for his many years of unflinching courtliness; in 1596 he was made Chancellor of the Order of the Garter, a post that brought with it considerably more honor than power or financial profit. When he died in 1607 the extensive Somerset lands, which he had inherited from

his father, were barely sufficient to pay his debts.

To the majority of his contemporaries he was mainly a courtier and a gentleman. Poets and critics knew and admired in him also a refined poetic talent. Gabriel Harvey maintained that his "written devices farr excell most of the sonets, and cantos in print," Puttenham praised him "for elegie moste sweete, solempne and of high conceit." He was, however, too much the gentleman ever to have gathered into a volume his poetic compositions; they survive only in manuscript and in the miscellanies of the period. Some are certainly lost; others, if they still exist, are perhaps attributed to other men. But when his courtliness, his diplomacy, even his alchemy, were forgotten, his name still bore with it the true ring of the poet, and to hundreds of readers, especially after the frequent reprintings of Palgrave, he is known as the author of at least one great lyric, "My mind to me a kingdom is."

The court of Elizabeth is perhaps too frequently gauged through its giants. It could not, of course, have been entirely compound of Raleighs, Sidneys, Cecils, and Devereuxs. To see it afresh in its relations to a man of lesser stature like Dyer is both salutary and instructive. Mr. Sargent has done a commendable service to history and to letters in bringing together probably all that can ever be known about a man who was genuinely typical of his age without himself being great. Thorough scholarship, a humane understanding of the small man's difficulties, and a sense of dignity that prevents the specialist's enthusiasm for his subject from warping his judgments, all help to give to Mr. Sargent's book a quiet but distinctive importance. Moreover, it contains an authoritative text of all those poems which can unquestionably be attributed to Dyer.

Charles David Abbott is librarian of Buffalo University.

A Russian Childhood during the Revolution

THE LAND OF SHVAMBRANIA. By *Leo Kassil*. New York: The Viking Press. 1935. \$2.

Reviewed by VARVARA N. YAKOUNCHIKOFF

IN spite of its fantastic title, this is a novel about real life and real people. The author tells the story of his childhood in a small, out of the way town in Russia. But his purpose is not autobiography. The five or six years during which the story takes place are the most eventful in modern Russian history. The World War and the Revolution immediately following completely changed the physiognomy of the country not only politically and economically, but also psychologically. These most complicated and intricate psychological processes are what the author undertakes to describe.

By superimposing the states of mind in different social groups during the war and the "Kerensky Revolution," he succeeds in giving a fairly good idea of class contradictions at that particular time. When finally the Bolshevik Revolution comes, it is clear where and why the differentiation between reactionary and sympathetic elements takes place.

But it is not so much the class angle which interests the author. Rather, it is the psychological leap and sudden change of perspective in the minds of selfish, unconcerned residents of a provincial town who are transformed by the Revolution into people with an almost superhuman strength and courage that carries them through the years of horror, starvation, and death with an invincible faith in a new and better life. The revolutionary characters, like the commissar Chubarkov and Stepka Gavria, under other circumstances would have been ordinary people, but the sweeping force of the Revolution impels them into heroic action. For the reader who wishes to know "more" about Russia, this book can be helpful, particularly for its delving into the psychology of the tremendous, pushing force which sustained the Russians during the Civil War and which still persists though in a different form.

If the "Land of Shvambrania" cannot be classified as a great novel, it is certainly among the best in Soviet literature. The simple and unaffected manner of the writer, the humorous style, and the clarity of structure make this book easy and decidedly interesting reading.

As far as the translation is concerned, it is for the most part satisfactory, particularly considering the difficulties the translators encountered in the idiomatic and local vernacular.

Varvara N. Yakouchikoff, a sister-in-law of the late Arthur Ruhl, is a musician who got her training in Soviet Russia and came to the United States two years ago.



QUEEN ELIZABETH KNIGHTING DRAKE ON THE GOLDEN HIND (1581)
From a drawing by Sir John Gilbert