

Books in Brief

Current Books in Short Compass

AN AMERICAN VERDICT
by Michael J. Arlen
Doubleday
216 pp., \$6.95

In 1969 Black Panther Fred Hampton was shot in a raid by the Chicago police. In the months that followed, two special grand juries were convened to look into charges that the shoot-out, which the Chicago police claimed had occurred between themselves and the Panthers, had been one-sided, that the police had, in short, killed an unresisting opponent. The man held responsible for the shooting was State Attorney Edward Hanrahan, whose men had executed the raid. Hanrahan gave out the press releases and the explanations and was in all matters relating to the raid the spokesman for the police side. In the end, the grand jury failed to indict him (though in the next election, he lost the state attorney job for Cook County to a Republican). The failure to indict Hanrahan, against what Mr. Arlen clearly considers to be the incontrovertible evidence of his guilt, is presented, with understandable delicacy, as "an American verdict." In an era when no jury could be found in America that would convict a black militant of anything, it could not have been easy for Mr. Arlen to make a serious to-do about the American nature of the injustice here. Still, he gives it a try. This is a book about Chicago politics, too—about the Democratic machine, about the lower-middle-class Irish and Poles who are a part of that machine—and, in

its supercilious way, about Chicago itself. The Chicago police and their wives and the cops who attend Policemen's Recognition Night are rendered with what Mr. Arlen means, no doubt, to be restraint. But the very grain of this work is moral superiority, and very few are the details that escape that grain. That tone aside, the problem with Mr. Arlen's book is his devotion to a glancing impressionism, which swoops down to offer a word about politics here, about style there; almost always, Mr. Arlen has a word to say about style. One reads more than once that Judge Romiti (who failed to indict Mr. Hanrahan) wore an orange shirt under his robes; Mr. Arlen has a fastidious eye for the small vulgarities to which the unjust are prone. One has the feeling one has seen this sort of writing before, and one has, of course; it is a remarkably callow book, the sort that gives proof, if any is needed, that moral superiority is an insufficient reason to take up writing.

PENTIMENTO: A BOOK OF PORTRAITS
by Lillian Hellman
Little, Brown and Company
234 pp., \$7.95

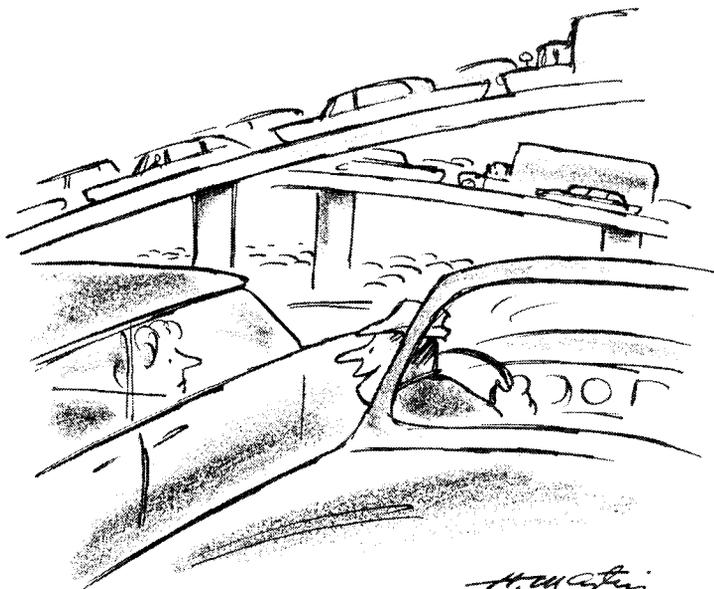
Pentimento is a painter's term to describe what happens when the paint on canvas ages, becomes transparent, and shows the original lines of conception that were not meant to be seen in the finished work. Thus, the old conception is, after time, seen in another way, and that is the name of the artistic principle

Miss Hellman has affixed to her book of portraits. It is an illuminating touch, but it could not have mattered much had no name been given to that which orders the imagination here, for past and present are equal in the overpowering reality the characters have. What was once vested in a great uncle, a richly mad friend, a turtle, is not less now, and is perhaps more. It is the force of original vision that keeps the portraits true, their drama tense and present. Indeed, it is one of Miss Hellman's virtues that she yields very little to the passage of time; it is as though the very clarity of old relationships that is set down here were proof against the altered vision. The portraits of Julia and Arthur W.A. Cowan are small masterpieces, each in its own darkly moving way. At the heart of these, and of all the portraits, there is a somberness that lives, side by side, with a most profound wit. The portraits are of friends, relatives, lovers, and of other times. But in the end, of course, it is Miss Hellman's sensibility that has the best sustained character, with the nose always quivering after the drama that will, after all, be found in the meanest of lives, after the joke that will be found in the soberest time. There are not many sensibilities about that give pleasure in the peculiarly sharp way that hers does, in proof of which contention there is this book of portraits.

IN THE MIDDLE OF A LIFE
by Richard B. Wright
Farrar, Straus & Giroux
320 pp., \$7.95

An unemployed salesman for a greeting-card firm in Toronto is confronted with the fact that he has little to show for himself, at forty-two, but the remnants of family life and of a minor literary ambition. There are flying visits from a vacuously appealing teenage daughter and a former wife of wintry disposition. Still, Mr. Wright's protagonist has his hopes for a good life and has, in his dolorous way, managed to hang on. Mr. Wright was determined to make his character an essentially positive sort, and that determination shows, with a certain monotony, throughout the novel. Nonetheless, he is an appealing figure, and he appeals from a novel that works. Mr. Wright has a canny ear for dialogue and for the rhythms of speech, and better still, he has a sense of the detail that is necessary to confer on one's characters if they are to be of any interest. It is a contemporary novel; that is, it deals—and deals handily—with what passes for contemporary ideas. If it is not a profound novel, it is nevertheless a literate and an absorbing one.

DOROTHY RABINOWITZ



"Hi there. All the world's a freeway, and we spend our lovely hours staring at one another and then are no more."

Booked Ahead

Notes on Forthcoming Books

With an eye to finding out what's booked ahead this fall, I hied myself to Los Angeles—for the first time—to the Seventy-third American Booksellers Association Convention. I've been to some fifteen earlier such clambakes, but this was the first one so far from home—usually it's in Washington, sometimes in Boston.

All I can say about Los Angeles is that everything they say about Los Angeles is true. Everything, good and bad: a city of parking lots; a city of angels. A sprawl: I phoned from the Biltmore Hotel, in the city center (if there is such a thing), to a friend whose mailing address is in Los Angeles, and I had to do it through long distance!

Seven thousand booksellers, wholesalers, publishers, authors, and representatives of the press, about a thousand of whom I think I've seen before, were there. But can I connect faces and names? Nix. So I started a list in my notebook of faces and names frequently forgotten. I must nail some of them down for the next time around. The center of activity, and the main sore-feet maker, was the hangarlike Convention Hall, filled with aisle after aisle of display booths. Most of them featured upcoming books, but here and there were to be found a newspaper or magazine looking for advertising, a poster house drumming up business, somebody pushing globes and maps, and the displays of remainder houses who take the mistakes that the publishers make.

The purpose of the convention is not so much to write up orders from the booksellers as to soften them up for the eventual visit of a salesman. There were

giveaways all over the place; you could almost say that the publishers were selling books through buttons and badges. I made a badge-and-novelty-collection tour (with two small boys in mind) and here's what I have spread out before me: a package of alfalfa for sprouting at home (*The Beansprout Book*); a maple leaf lapel pin (Canadian publishers); a balsa-wood unassembled airplane (*The Green Air*) over which one wag exclaimed, "Ah, tongue depressors!"; three blank note pads with suitable advertising covers; a plastic container of candy pills (*The American Connection*, about the "ethical" drug industry); a pencil; a ball-point pen; a live plant (fading fast); some balloons; a package of trading cards with bubble gum; a package of trading cards without bubble gum; postcards pushing Sesame Street by-products; matches pushing Fred Astaire; fudge, gum, chocolates; a Japanese fan with the legend I Am a Tuttle Book Fan; and two guides on how to keep healthy at a convention. And badges, badges, badges. Twenty-five, to be exact. One reads Pepys Is The One, another bears a photo of Frank Costello and the legend Uncle Frank Is Coming. Another has the mysterious message How's Your Avocado (Your *California* Avocado). Paper or plastic shopping bags were urged on you from all sides. Time-Life Books stole a march by handing out cloth book bags bearing the legend, in some foreign language, *Temporis/Vitae/Libri*, and some greedies were seen to have gone back for two or three.

All very well, but what's happening? The trends, the big books? Trend seemed to be non-fiction, particularly spectator-

sports books. In fiction a lot of spy-thriller stuff. Not many really big-name authors. The two biggest (non?) books were Norman Mailer's lavish *Marilyn* and one about the greatest bad-taste maker of all time, *The Art of Walt Disney*. Graham Greene's new novel, *The Honorary Consul*, looked big, and there should be some fun with Ken Kesey's *Garage Sale*. The big "doctor" book was *Ward 402* by Ronald Glasser. And there were dozens of books on needlecraft, on movie nostalgia, on astrology (somebody stole the Pisces pamphlet from a display rack of astrological guides, and the publisher inserted a handmade sign reading Pisces Are Thieves). A couple of funnies were around—like *The Profit* by "Kehlog Albran"—and some crazies like *A Coloring Book of the Iliad and the Odyssey* and a book on how to decorate your blue jeans.

WHAT KIND of thing do you overhear? A salesman going over his list with a buyer: "We're printing 10,000; we're gonna get behind this book. Try one and see what happens." A lady wearing the badge of a health food store: "I've lost six pounds since Sunday; there isn't anything to eat!" One bookseller to another: "They wouldn't think of buying a hard-back. Oh, no, anything more than a dollar-and-a-quarter is out." Same again, "Well, I understand you Coloradians don't want Californians comin' in there." Editor to editor: "We think that's part of the name of the game. . . . Having a dialogue is important."

There were all sorts of ancillary goings-on. Symposia on bookstore management, press conferences with such luminaries as Henry Miller, Christopher Isherwood, Linda Lovelace . . . and parties. Masses of us were bussed to the Universal Studios lot and a barbecue complete with a stunt-men shoot-out to introduce Time-Life's series on the Old West, and to another barbecue at the Beverley Wilshire for the aforementioned *Marilyn*. And, of course, stars were everywhere: Jack Lemmon, Jim Backus, Cesar Romero, and most important, an old hero of mine, Jack Oakie, who kindly sang the lyrics of "The Klopstockian Love Song" from the great *Million-Dollar Legs* to a small circle of admirers.

But enough. In summary, a wintry summary, it will not be an exciting publishing season. There are some pleasing novelties but mostly a lot of non-books and con-books, and hardly any literature. Emphasis will be on the book you buy for a gift rather than the book you buy to read: Thirty-eight thousand four hundred titles a year, but not much to read. Please, this can't be the wave of the future?

WILLIAM COLE



"I like you, Harry. My parents like you. My sister and brother like you. But my guru thinks you're inscrutable."