



Owen Johnson—"In splendid contrast to 'Three Soldiers' stands out 'The Wasted Generation.'"

viroment—much as Selma White, in Robert Grant's "Unleavened Bread," dreamed and revolted twenty years ago and ruthlessly won her goal in Washington. Of course Main Street itself is what most readers remember; but that is because most readers do not care primarily for feminine psychology. What Mr. Lewis has really given us, whether he is precisely aware of it or not, is what Main Street meant to Carol Milford and how she reacted to it. That there were many other ways of seeing Main Street is hinted with true artistry—hinted but not insisted on; Bea Sorenson's way, for instance; electric lights, a movie show and four whole blocks of stores! "It was worth while working for nothing, to be allowed to stay."

VII.

Scott Fitzgerald seems quite naturally to claim attention next, partly because of the complete antithesis he affords in standing for a radical break with traditional methods, but more especially because of all the younger group he has perhaps the largest share of promising raw material that is still woefully in need of discipline. His books are a conspicuous example of the new tendency, probably an unconscious one, to follow the technique of the moving picture, to seek primarily the appeal to the eye; flamboyant colors, dazzling lights, a thousand and one distracting details of environment. Then follows a brief "close-up" of some young couple, a few cryptic utterances flash before us and we are left with a baffled wonderment as to just what those two young people were really thinking. The art of the moving picture gives us on the screen the three elements essential to story telling: first, the action, doubly convincing because we see it; secondly, the dialogue, flashed on in homeopathic doses; thirdly, the thoughts, read more or less clearly through mobile faces and expressive gestures. But in the new fiction we have the picture, we have the dialogue, but much of the time we do not get the thoughts, for the printed page cannot show us the play of the features—and the tempo of the novel is too fast to leave time for analyzing emotions.

VIII.

"This Side of Paradise" is a study of adolescence; the gropings, the blunders, the disillusiones of an American youth who is exceptionally unlucky in starting life with more than an average share of false ideals and misfit ambitions. Many novels both better and worse have been built around this theme; stripped to the bare framework, that is the theme of "Pendennis." Fitzgerald's pages swarm with incidents straight out of life, so vivid that the reader wonders how many were personal experiences. Moreover, they are young, naively so, and narrated with such a cheerful assumption that they are new discoveries that in reading them one is almost tempted to believe that Mr. Fitzgerald's hero is the first young man who ever suffered from the morning after or found something rather bittersweet in the savor of a first kiss. The book as a whole is rather amorphous. The author might readily have shuffled his whole deck of episodes and dealt them in a different order. They would have led up to the same old cry of disillusioned youth, "All gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken." That is how Amory Blaine feels because he has lost his Rosalind. Wasn't it somewhat the way Pendennis felt after he lost his Emily? And the difference is that one remembers poor Pendennis with an indulgent sympathy—for after all, the Fotheringay was a personality. But we forget Rosalind overnight; in fact, we never really got to know her.

"The Beautiful and Damned" is a better book. The author still lets his background, his stage setting

take too prominent a place and get somewhat in the way of his real story, and, while his characters talk more, we seldom know quite clearly what they think. As a picture of the social speed limit in these hectic days of the Eighteenth Amendment, it is, doubtless, true enough. But, artistically, it is overdone. The revelry, the ubiquitous cocktails, the maudlin discussions and silly quarrels, the insistent, endlessly reiterated note of drunken depravity fills so large a portion of the pages that its effect becomes dulled. Now, the main issue of the story turns upon the theme, "Has a young man in these democratic days the right to insist upon remaining one of the idle rich?" On this point the hero and his uncle—a strait-laced reformer, with as many prejudices as he has millions, sharply take issue. It is a foregone conclusion that if that uncle should ever see just one of those endless cocktail parties he would promptly make a new will. We see the uncle just once or twice, in the early chapters, and then we more or less forget about him through some two hundred pages of tinkling glasses and befuddled wit. And then at last, when the old man does happen in at an unfortunate hour and does make a new will, the net effect is surprisingly undramatic. We had almost forgotten about the uncle, we were satiated with the nephew and the whole episode was something of an anti-climax. The new will, to be sure, is broken later—but we learn of all this at second hand; we never get even a peep inside the court room. Mr. Fitzgerald tries to compensate us with a sardonic picture of his hero's mental collapse, the price exacted by outraged nature.

VIII.

By a timely coincidence Mr. Hergesheimer, one of the very few writers of to-day with a real sense of proportion, has shown in "Cutherea" how the seductive tinkle of ice in the forbidden glass may be used throughout a book, like a recurrent leitmotif, insistent yet subdued, so that its effect does not pall. Mr. Hergesheimer is too big to waste his uncommon powers on relatively cheap themes. It seems almost a pity that the same hand that produced "The Three Black Pennys" and "Java Head" should descend to the sordid commonplaceness of the present day divorce habit. Yet he largely disarms criticism by his odd symbolism and new angle of approach. Of course the doll, which his hero names Cythera, and sets up as a bizarre little idol to worship in secret, is simply a symbol of the dream-woman who sums up all the attributes that are missing from the prosaic domesticity of the average man. The real art in "Cutherea" lies in taking an apparently happy couple after years of married life, showing us the wife, Fannie, as a model of domestic virtue, patient, uncomplaining, living solely to meet her husband's whims, and all the while seeing him slowly slipping from her, tiring of her, restlessly seeking elsewhere, simply because he is a male and wants the unattainable—and all the while, even while verbally insisting that the woman is in the right and the man utterly in the wrong, Mr. Hergesheimer miraculously wins all our sympathy for the husband and leaves not an atom for the wife. It must be admitted that the book drops sadly midway. When the man meets the living replica of his Cythera in the person of the emotionally starved wife of a New York millionaire, and when this neurotic lady finds herself alone with him and voices her long repressed primitive desires with an outspokenness which it would be indecorous to reprint here, the author becomes, for at least once in his life, unconsciously grotesque. But later he retrieves himself with a climax worthy of a better book; and the scene of the woman's death in the squalid rural hostelry in Cuba, where the truant couple seek asylum—the hideous din of native revelry, the endless night, the almost palpable heat, the strange illusion of pallid blue light invading the room and spreading over the stricken woman effacing the flush of life—is one of those rare, haunting pictures that read like a page out of a new "Inferno."

IX.

There seems to be an epidemic of what Mr. Floyd Dell calls the "Novel of Young Marriage." It is one of the leading themes in the "Beautiful and Damned," already discussed. It is the whole subject, treated from many angles, in "Brass," by Charles G. Norris, who is frankly pessimistic, and it is handled with a mature seriousness by Mr. Dell himself in the "Briary Bush," in which he comes

out frankly and strongly in favor of the close old-fashioned marriage bond as against the dangerous looseness of modern theories. There are elements of real bigness in the "Briary Bush." It studies with unabashed frankness, the trouble that Felix Fay and his girl-wife, Rose-Ann, gratuitously make for themselves by vowing mutually to leave each other free. If ever either finds love wanting or fancy straying elsewhere, they are free to be off with the old love and on with the new. The time comes when the man does wander and accepts his freedom; but what sounded so logical in theory is disastrous in practice. Felix Fay's new freedom turns to ashes; while Rose-Ann's generosity is the mask of a heart-break that leaves her long implacable. It is only after a thorny pilgrimage and much penance that they realize that their foundation mistake lay in "playing at marriage."

In "Brass" the theme is not merely the rather hasty and ill-advised marriage of Philip Baldwin and Marjorie Jones, but of Marjorie's sister, and Marjorie's friends, of Philip's partner and various business connections—and one and all of these marriages turn out disastrously. Sometimes it is the fault of the wife, sometimes of the husband, and again of both, with the mother-in-law aiding and abetting. From sheer surfeit of incompatibility and infidelity the net impression is one of weariness and distaste. Mr. Norris would be much more convincing if he had not so woefully overdone it. Like so many of the younger group, he mistakes a sweeping pessimism for mature wisdom. His title strikes the keynote: Marriage vainly shines like gold—"but it's no more than brass, raw-cut and ugly, cheap and tawdry, hard-edged and bitter-tasting—a sorry substitute that gangrenes the minute it ceases to be new." Such is the incessant note pounded out through 452 pages. It defeats itself by sheer exaggeration.

X.

Sherwood Anderson has been taken with a seriousness out of all proportion to his achievements. That he can achieve the results he aims at and leave behind him the memory of a bad dream must be granted him. At best he has the grimness of Poe or Baudelaire, without their breadth of human understanding. His characters, one and all, belong to the psychopathic ward. They are neurotics, religious fanatics, erotomaniacs, victims of some fixed idea. In short, Mr. Anderson is a craftsman of verbal gargoyles, but, unlike the gargoyles of French Gothic architecture, they do not even serve the practical function of drain pipes; the stories remain malodorous.

John Dos Passos comes near to being the most significant figure among latest arrivals. "Three Soldiers" is a bigger book than has generally been conceded. Many of the reviewers have been more concerned with the question of its truth as an indictment of American army methods and conditions than in its quality as a work of art. From the latter point it makes little difference whether the incidents, singly or collectively, ever actually happened. It is enough that they very well might have happened—and whatever the author intended, his actual showing of attendant circumstances leaves the conviction that whatever degree of abuse and discipline his three heroes received was merited; they were looking for trouble, and they got it. It is impossible in a few brief lines to touch in detail upon the epic quality of "Three Soldiers." It has the kind of frankness and of self-restraint that we associate with the Latin rather than the Anglo-Saxon novel. The book is Zolaesque in its ambitious scope, its crowded, tumultuous detail, its sense of multitudes of herded, driven humanity. It is equally true to type in its episodic brutality. In the coarse, ribald jests, the sudden outflung obscenity that make one wince from the sheer ugly truth of the picture. But after all it is Zola with one essential factor missing: namely, a close knit, convincing, inevitable human story. The big general theme is spread before us: War as a force of Destiny, exalting and destroying, promising the rewards of a deathless glory, and leaving in its wake a harvest of broken and crippled spirits. Each of the three soldiers selected to fill title roles is left with crushed ambitions and a warped soul; and every separate episode in the process rings true. But taken together they lack that reciprocal relation of cause and effect which alone makes memorable drama. Andrews, for instance, was his own worst enemy; eventually he was bound to wreck himself.

Yet repeatedly one feels that the author unfairly shoved him onward to disaster by accident, coincidences, sheer bits of bad luck quite independent of his own thoughts or actions. For all its brilliant promise the book leaves something akin to the disappointment of a game decided, not by skill but by a succession of false moves.

At most what Mr. Dos Passos had to say about the world war was in the nature of destructive criticism. That is why "The Wasted Generation," by Owen Johnson, stands out in such splendid contrast. For he had something worth while to say constructively; and in this book he said it with a soul satisfying force and emphasis. Mr. Johnson saw with clear eyes the selfishness, the indifference, the half-hearted patriotism against which America had to fight at home while she fought the enemy abroad; and he voiced his criticisms through the medium of his appealing French heroine, who found excuse for us in our long immunity from devastation and death. It is only a country, she points out, such as France, where not a family high or low but can point to some father or uncle, some long line of forbears, who have given their lives in battle, that knows to the full limit of sacrifice the meaning of patriotism. Mr. Johnson's novel is perhaps open to criticism in its plot structure. He has handled a daringly cruel theme with rare delicacy. If his sermon at times elbows his plot out of the way, his earnestness is his best excuse. So far as this is an artistic flaw it is in his case a pardonable one.

XI.

Of the remaining books that in recent months have been hailed with more or less rash enthusiasm the criticisms already made in other cases seem to apply with equal force. There is, for instance, "Zell," by Henry G. Aikman, which, as appears from the wrapper of the latest edition, has been held as superior to "Moon Calf," "Main Street" and "Miss Lulu Bett," while its hero has been called "the most significant character of the year's fiction." Parenthetically, it is a deplorable tendency of the day to measure new books and writers by their contemporary next of kin and not by the more vigorous products of other generations or races. It is a sort of literary breeding in-and-in, disastrous to the virility of criticism. To be fair, the author of "Zell" gives enough initial promise to make him worth watching. But the book itself contains nothing really significant which has not been said a number of times already. Amory Zell, fighting his inward battle between an artist and a good citizen, is common enough both in literature and life. It is told in the same bald, harried fashion that suits the impatience of the present generation, and is as annoying to leisurely readers as a moving picture when the operator finds himself behind schedule and speeds up. What one remembers of "Zell" is not Amory's waverings between his uninteresting wife, Ruby, and her equally uninteresting rival, Inez Copeland. No, it is the early part covering Amory's boyhood; his coarse mouthed father's anger at being caught in an amorous adventure, and the vile message he sends to the boy's mother: "Git out-a here, you little brat! An' tell that hell cat who sent you, if I ever catch you papa-ing me again, she'll get you back in a hearse!"

XII.

"The Blood of the Conquerors," by Harvey Fergusson, is a pleasant contrast to the majority of much vaunted recent performances. It is a remarkable achievement by a young American, for it has much of the instinctive artistry, the self-restraint and sense of proportion of the Latin school, and more especially of the Spanish realists. One is reminded more than once of the early work of Valdes, Ramon Delcasar, representing the last upward leap of the expiring flame of noble Spanish blood, is a picturesque figure when seen in the sun parched hills of his native New Mexico. There is small wonder that he catches the fancy of a sadly bored New York girl dragged away from the height of a New York season, in the wake of a domineering mother and a tubercular brother. The hectic courtship is a fine piece of riotous color and flaming passion. The fault of the book is that the flames are smothered prematurely by family intervention and the girl whisked away to New York and married to the man of her mother's choosing. And here the author spoils his whole picture by making Ramon respond to



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the young wife's indiscreet letter by following her to the Great White Way and enjoying two weeks of illicit passion in obscure foreign hotels and suburban roadhouses.

XIII.

Because "Miss Lulu Bett" is used by to-day's critics and columnists as a convenient standard of measurement, it seems to need a passing word. To the readers who found a rare and delicate literary fragrance in Miss Zona Gale's inimitable "Friendship Village" stories there has always been something disconcertingly incongruous in a book like "Miss Lulu Bett" coming from the same pen. For this book is not inimitable; in spite of its clever craftsmanship it is in tune with the times that have begotten it; it is unpleasant enough to find favor with people who like such diverse unpleasantness as the books of Theodore Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson, and it was not near enough to the inmost heart of the author herself to make her averse to changing its ending at popular demand. But one knows without being told that she would not have changed the ending of any "Friendship Village" story.

Lastly, there are two insistent notes running throughout the work of all the young writers—an inherent pessimism and a calculated salaciousness. In "Brass" we leave Philip Baldwin bemoaning that youth and love are dead and that he is old and disillusioned; in "This Side of Paradise" our last glimpse of Amory Blaine finds him with "no God in his heart" and nothing but the pain of memory and the doubt whether life was worth while; in the "Blood of the Conquerors" our last glimpse of Ramon shows him sitting on his heels in the sunshine "trying ineptly to discover what had been the matter; more acutely than ever he felt the cruel guerdon of youth—the contrast between the promise of life and its fulfillment." This attitude of disillusion, of the uselessness of young ambition, the Dead Sea fruit of attainment, is the closing text of nine out of ten of the current books.

XIV.

When you listen, however, to the discussion and comment going on all around you it is not this note of discouragement that you hear emphasized. It is the hidden morsel of impropriety, the daring wantonness of action, the audacious freedom of speech that is remembered and repeated. "Oh, no," some young woman will tell you, "I have not read the 'Briary Bush,' but I know all about the snow bath!" Readers forget many things in the "Beautiful and Damned," but they do not forget the honeymoon scene, where he fatuously murmurs, "My wife!" and she counters with, "Don't call me by that stupid, commonplace name; call me your permanent mistress!" And then, of course, there is the scene already mentioned in "Cutherea," where the heroine so surprisingly cries aloud to the man who is almost a stranger, "I want to be outraged!" For generations, an opprobrium has been attached to the French novel because of certain frank episodes in "Madame Bovary," in "Bei-Ami," in the "Rougon-Macquart" series. But the French masters of fiction used their frankness as a surgeon uses his knife, where the diagnosis demanded it. Their sordid, ugly facts were structural: remove them and you spoil the fabric of the plot. But our own younger group insert here and there the salacious touches as gratuitous *bonne bouches*—any one of them could be extirpated without leaving a scar. Perhaps those that get into print are merely a residue of many others. Books that strip bare sin and corruption may have tragic dignity; but books that assume a meretricious leer are stooping to an unworthy conquest.