

Herald and News Book Reviews

Literary Highlights

HOUSE OF LIES. By Francoise Mallet - Joris. Translated from French by Herma Briffault. Farrar, Straus and Cudahy. \$3.75.

BEAU CLOWN. By Berthe Grimault. Translated from French by Diana Athill. Rinehart. \$3.

In the Mallet-Joris novel, a dying brewer, lord over his employes and family and taking every advantage of it, plays a cat-and-mouse game with relatives, legitimate and illegitimate. For the sake of his money they curry favor with him, a temperamental old rascal most of them have occasion to fear.

Out of a whim he fires his clerk, he badgers his nephews Roger and Philippe, he shows off his wealth childishly, he insists on subservience. As the climax of his tyranny he determines to make Alberte, his daughter by the mad alcoholic Elsa, his legal heir, and she dares challenge this ultimate autocratic gesture.

Berthe Grimault eerily writes about a family headed by an alcoholic father and visited by American Negro soldiers, escaped lunatics—including the fellow who gives the story its title—prostitutes and a white bull.

The books have in common a continental provincial setting, a youthful author—Mallet-Joris is 25 and Berthe is only 14—a cast of somewhat unlikely characters, and an incomplete success. Young Berthe's fantastic work seems to suffer from the insensitive pedantic guidance of some older person. Miss Mallet-Joris is a full-fledged and purposeful novelist but a bit heavy-handed, more the architect and designer of a story than the warm-blooded creator of troubled humans. One book is too free-wheeling, the other not enough so.

THE LIVING NOVEL: A Symposium. Edited by Granville Hicks. Macmillan. \$4.50.

Ten practicing novelists, summoned to defend their calling, deny in various vigorous and convincing terms the vague general notion which this book is intended to combat:

That the novel is dying. Obviously the novel does not dominate as it used to; best-seller lists once contained nothing but fiction. At the moment we are not overwhelmed with masterpieces, either, perhaps in part, as one contributor says, because though it may be easier now than ever to write a novel, yet "writing a good novel has never been harder."

But one and all—Saul Bellow, Paul Darcy Boles, John Brooks, Ralph Ellison, Herbert Gold, Mark Harris, Wright Morris, Flannery O'Connor, Harvey Swados and Jessamyn West—insist that the novel has something essential to say, that the novelist will continue to be read. Particularly to be recommended are the observations of Ellison, Morris and Swados.

Being often sound critics themselves—singling out for praise for instance Wiseman, Malamud, Serge and Gaddis—they are a little too quick to find fault with professional critics, but that is of course an occupational ailment. And anyway, Hicks correctly dismisses individuals as the enemies of this art form and concludes that "the predicament of the novel rises out of a complex cultural situation."

Next to reading good novels, what could be better than reading good novelists? These 10 rank high.

ICE MELTERS

Microscopic forms of sea life coat the underside of bay and ocean ice in a dark-brown layer like peanut butter during Antarctica's summer. The heat of sunlight filtering through from above is soaked up by this plankton layer, melting the ice faster from the bottom than on top.



BERTHE GRIMAULT AT HOME: Before the Cinderella experiment, her bathtub was a muddy farm pond.

Colin Wilson Writes Again

By W. G. ROGERS
RELIGION AND THE REBEL.
By Colin Wilson. Houghton Mifflin. \$4.

Once again this young Englishman, who seemed to me so arrogant in his first book, the widely read and popular "The Outsider," tells what's wrong with us, with our creative spirits and with the world we live in.

This is, he says in effect, what he intended to write the first time, but this is more explicit and this is better. And he's right; this is better.

To begin with he is autobiographical; we read of his feeling of the futility of life, his search for an intensification of it, his moment of revelation, or burning brush, his fleeting urge to commit suicide—and his decision, more or less instead, to write a book.

Then he investigates, less superficially than before, the nature of some writers: Fitzgerald, Shaw, Rilke, Rimbaud, Spengler, Tynbee, Pascal, Swedenborg, Kirkegaard, Whitehead. The world is too much with us, he complains, we should not be the victims of our society, we let routine get us down, we quash the unique individuals—it almost happened to him—contained potentially in ourselves.

All this I accept. But his escape from this dull, infertile conformity is no escape at all. His warning and his exhortation boil down to a sort of Coueism for intellectuals. He warns against something against which, if we are intellectuals, we need no warning, and urges a course which, again if we are intellectuals, we wouldn't dream of following.

Harvard Professor And Artist Publishes Series Of Lectures

By W. G. ROGERS
THE SHAPE OF CONTENT. By Ben Shahn. Harvard. \$4.

As Charles Elton Norton, Professor at Harvard, artist Shahn gave last year a series of six lectures, printed here, on "Artists in Colleges"—not too good a place for them; "The Biography of a Painting"—or what is the meaning of a particular work to me, to the observer; "The Shape of Content"—what is behind the looks of a work; "On Nonconformity"—the value of not keeping any company at all; "Modern Evaluations"—or where does the truth lie; and "The Education of an Artist"—nothing human is alien to him.

In my experience, lectures don't make the best books, artists don't make the best lecturers. Here is the exception. Of significance to the professional and also the layman, Shahn with eloquence and insight exalts at the rich, full and intense life which the artist, before most other men, is privileged to lead.

You may also read about Shahn, and see more than 100 illustrations of his work, in "Ben Shahn: His Graphic Art" (George Braziller), with an uncommonly informative and revealing introduction by James Thrall Soby.

From the same publisher comes a work by one of the artists Shahn praised in his Harvard lectures: Alexander Calder, the man who makes mobiles. The book is a welcome reissue: Jean de La Fontaine's "Selected Fables," translated by Eunice Clark and with a brisk running commentary consisting of Calder's inimitable line drawings. The book was first published in 1948.

Author Of The Week



BEN SHAHN, who writes one book: "The Shape of Content," and is written about in another: "Ben Shahn: His Graphic Art," is a native of Lithuania. Brought here in 1906, when he was 8, he lived in Brooklyn, studied and worked at lithography, and had his first one-man show in 1930. His work is in many public buildings and museums as well as private collections here and abroad.

Cinderella Process Given Young Writer

By TOM A. CULLEN
NEA Staff Correspondent

KENT, England (NEA) — I expected to meet a teen-age monster, a dead-eyed fugitive from a girls' reform school who read Proust while she fed the pigs on her father's farm.

But the girl who was ushered in looked as though she couldn't have been much more than 12. She was less than five feet tall, wore her hair cut urchin fashion, and her figure bulged in all the wrong places beneath her blue cardigan.

She was Berthe Grimault, a primitive French peasant girl, who has written two novels that are shockers. The first of these, "Beau Clown," was written when Berthe was 14, and just published in the U.S.

"Beau Clown" is a story of poverty, lust, murder and lunacy set on a farm that is the mirror image of Berthe's own farm in central France. "Nothing more grotesque has appeared in years," is the Paris critics' verdict.

However, the place where Berthe and I met was neither a pig-sty, nor a reformatory. It was in the drawing-room of one of Britain's most exclusive finishing schools, The Grove, near Sevenoaks, Kent (for girls from ages 17 to 21, tuition fees, \$1,100).

For Berthe, who is now 17, is the subject of a Cinderella experiment that is probably unique of its kind.

The experiment is to see whether an English boarding-school can turn a backward French pig-girl into a polished and poised young woman. And it isn't costing Berthe a cent, thanks to the generosity of Mrs. Muriel Orr-Ewing, the school proprietress, who five months ago invited Berthe to spend a year at The Grove as a free guest.

Berthe's companions these days are the sub-deb daughters of the rich and titled. She now has the run of a 300-year-old stately home in Kent, whose windows give onto lawns with ornamental lily ponds, tennis courts and a golf course nearby.

The room which she shares with one other girl is centrally-heated and has its own private bath. On the farm Berthe's family of 11 share three beds; and when she bathed, it was in a muddy cattle pool.

The question is: How much of this has rubbed off after five months?

Berthe struck me as a French version of the little girl next door who climbs trees and behaves like a tomboy. She is just a nice, wholesome kid, I decided. And what was she doing here posing as the dead-end kid of French literature?

"Berthe put on 14 pounds the first six weeks she was here," Mrs. Orr-Ewing informed me. "She got horribly fat, and none of the clothes I made her fit. But now she has learned how to control her diet and has slimmed down."

The subject of these remarks smiled a smile of total incomprehension.

"Her table manners were quite atrocious when she first came," Mrs. Orr-Ewing continued, "but now they are quite presentable. She still doesn't walk and sit as well as I would like her to, but it's coming," she added hopefully.

Berthe squirmed and looked as though she would like to bolt out the door.

After five months Berthe speaks almost no English, and even her French is bad, being a sort of patois.

The only time during the interview she showed real animation was in talking of the paintings she had seen in London's National

Gallery. "Wonderful—I like very much," she exclaimed, breaking into English.

Was there any particular painting she favored? "Tous," she cried, spreading her arms as though to embrace the whole of art. Then she subsided.

Berthe seems totally unaware that she is a literary celebrity, or, for that matter, that her novel has even been published. Nor is she working on a new novel ("I had difficulty in persuading her to keep a diary," says Mrs. Orr-Ewing).

Which raises the question of Berthe's literary talent.

M. Elzavier Fournier, the postman in the village of Jassny (pop. 100), claims that he spotted her talent for spinning fantastic yarns and persuaded her to put them down on paper.

Berthe's hard-drinking father had spent some time in a mental home, and when he came home cured he described the antics of the asylum inmates to his family.

Soon she was weaving tales around lunatics.

How much of Berthe's writing is her own, and how much Fournier's? Her British publishers put it this way. "M. Fournier helped her to put her story into shape, teaching her to write as they went along," but Fournier is bolder. "With my advice and under my control she produced a new version of her novel," he says.

Whatever Berthe's share in the authorship, very little of the royalties have come her way. Most of the money has gone to pay off her father's debts, while the postman gets his share. A new bicycle is about all the Berthe has had from her books so far.

The events Berthe describes have left no trace of viciousness in the girl. "She's like a child who has been locked up in a coal cellar all her life," Mrs. Orr-Ewing observed.

"I thought at first it was a question of genius handicapped by poverty, and of helping that genius to mature," she sighed. "But now I see that it's a case of an ordinary human being who isn't fully awakened."

As we talked in the elegant drawing-room I found myself looking for a glass slipper on Berthe's plump foot. But no, her painted toes peeped through an ordinary sandal.

"The Lady Behind Thanksgiving"

by Jack Ryan



Thanksgiving is a day marking one of our oldest traditions. It goes all the way back to the Pilgrims. But does it? Thanksgiving actually didn't become a national holiday until a determined woman badgered the country's leaders into making it one.

**TODAY'S
Family
Weekly**

Another Outstanding Feature
of the SUNDAY

Herald & News