

Fiction. *It would be hard to find at the very beginning of any year more promising and readable novels than the four reviewed this week. Anthony West's "The Vintage" is an absorbing and thoughtful fantasy, based on the voyage into the hereafter of a prosecutor for the Crown at the Nuremberg Trials, who had committed suicide after he had sent a German general to the gallows. The first novel of Frederick Buechner, a twenty-three-year-old American, is certain to be widely discussed. "A Long Day's Dying" reveals his gifts for pathos, humor, and irony, in an elaborately embroidered story of a group of self-conscious moderns. Gore Vidal's "A Search for a King" is a finely written novel of the presumably romantic world of medieval wars and troubadours with twentieth-century overtones. It is assured of popular success, as is Richard Llewellyn's novel of the aftermath of the war in Italy, "A Few Flowers for Shiner."*

Enlarged Conscience in Purgatory

THE VINTAGE. By Anthony West. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 310 pp. \$3.

By HOLLIS ALPERT

NO WEAKNESS, do not forget you have been a man!" These were the only words of support that Colonel J. M. Wallis, prosecutor for the Crown at the Nuremberg war trials, was able to take with him after he placed the oily barrel of a .45 in his mouth and blew out his brain. He found himself embadked shortly after on a nightmarish journey through purgatory, one in which he was able to glimpse the hells that awaited him if he allowed himself ever to forget the message. And it was all he had to help him resist the clever blandishments and reasonings of a rather charming devil, who could make the descents seem like most attractive paradises in which to spend one's eternity. The purgatory is a contemporary one, and Wallis's pilgrimage through it, and simultaneously through his past, amounts to a kind of parable on twentieth-century existence. Thus, Anthony West's first novel must unavoidably take up some weighty matters and it is to his credit that he does not shirk the task. Quite the contrary, in fact, for there is a certain eagerness in the way he battles with the problems of guilt, justice, right and wrong, good and evil. His hero is essentially a human conscience, and there is some mighty wrestling that goes on within it.

This book comes from England fully heralded. It has won the latest Houghton Mifflin Fellowship award, along with a similar award offered by a British publishing firm. There is not

much doubt that the writer has some remarkable gifts; and there is also not much doubt that he has attempted to make a lavish display of them, as though in anticipation of an auspicious emergence.

It is a lushly convoluted novel that Mr. West has written, one with facets: sometimes they sparkle, sometimes

they emit only the murkiest of light. Within the total frame of fantasy there are some solidly dramatic moments, some mature and ironic comments, passages that can surprise with an icy chill, others that can suddenly transform the mood from the idyllic to solemn horror. All this bodes well for the author's future. But you can also get the feeling that it's as though he has decided to play his first composition on a cathedral organ, pulling out all the stops rashly every now and then and not always getting pure sound. The attempt is certainly valiant, but the sheer strain keeps showing through.

And I think one has to keep straining to discover what the nature of the disease was that caused Colonel Wallis to take his own life. There are some premises to accept before the motivation for the act can be accepted. One, that the perception of one's emptiness can have such drastic results; two, that abstract concepts can lead to the perception. Wallis had prosecuted General Kenelm, a German war criminal, and after the hanging came to see the true blindness of the female figure of justice, as she weighed one bowl of feathery snow against the other.

And, after the reverberation of the

THE AUTHOR: "The Vintage" is Anthony West's first novel, although he has been a recognized arbiter of fiction in England since 1937, when, twenty-two years old, he became a critic for the *New Statesman and Nation*—an achievement some might excusably consider remarkable for one who admits, "At school I was a rather unsuccessful student. . . . I never went to a university and have never acquired any sort of certificate or diploma." However, as the son of Rebecca West and H. G. Wells, Mr. West possesses certain eugenic properties that manifested themselves as early as age nine, when he evolved for 800 lead soldiers a complex culture personally documented with newspapers, manifestoes, poetry, and plays. And, whereas West credits his paternal parent with having "enormously influenced me," Wells took inspiration from the boy's precocious sociologizing for his "The Bulpington of Blup." Notwithstanding that circa 1932 West began four years' vagabondage about the world, he decries bohemian and abnormal areas of conduct as injurious for the young writer. "Take your sensitivity and vision through the normal working world and don't begin writing too soon." In 1936 he married and three years later at Government request adopted an essential wartime occupation—dairy farming. Then BBC hired him for two years as a news writer, which he quit in 1946, when, he says, "I began to itch with the novel. It was clear to me that the emotional stresses had been replaced by an even greater ordeal—clear that Europe had simply knocked its guts out to exchange one bullying tyrant for another. . . . Why was it worth going on? What was it all for? I had a feeling that I knew the answer, but I couldn't give it form. One day I had lunch with Graham Greene, and he more or less challenged my inchoate liberalism from his Catholic fortress. A few days later I read Robert Graves's poem 'Instruction to the Orphic Adept.' My mind began to tick with the book. . . ." It is now ticking on a work of considerable advance interest—a biography of his famous father—R.G.



shot, he had to take Kenelm along with him in the realm he now entered. One could not proceed without the other in the purgatory, a vaguely familiar one containing trains and automobiles, concentration camps and pleasure resorts, and much the same sort of flora and fauna the real world had possessed. It was a timeless realm and yet weighted, everywhere they went, with a sense of their pasts. Wallis, with his enlarged conscience did not get along in it as well as Kenelm did, and he needed the services of a guide and teacher. This was Ransome, and at first Wallis did not know that this dapper chap was an emissary of the devil, since he wasn't so obvious as to carry a pronged stick. The revelation only came to him when he could no longer stomach the syrupy hedonistic ways of spending eternity that Ransome offered him. He made, or thought he made, his escape, with Kenelm still tagging along—but soon enough Ransome appeared again, as smilingly in control as ever. Something was required of Wallis before he could free himself, and this was the comprehension of the meaning of the message that had been given to him. "The heart of being a man was remembering." It was very terrible for him to remember, remember everything, and Ransome almost won out.

But, aside from Wallis's individual life pattern, sketched out in a series of skilful backflashes (and backflashes within backflashes), there is another level of narrative that slowly emerges—a symbolic one. Mr. West is drawing a mordant parallel between this Englishman's purgatory and the broad facts of twentieth-century existence. Abstracted, but all too recognizable, are the paths which for him appear to lead to living hells—and one can understand his need to sermonize the answers to Wallis's questionings.

The sound of the organ does grow very loud at the end. The answers are thoughtful—the beast seems thrown, but is he really thrown? For a kind of fashionable religiousness of tone enters that, unfortunately, obscures rather than clarifies. It is a first-rate virtuoso performance he has given us, nevertheless, a little flashy, it is true, but abundantly capable. Mr. West shows clear signs, with this first exercise, that he is a notable heir to the gifts of his illustrious literary parents.

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A Eunuch, His Monkey and Friends

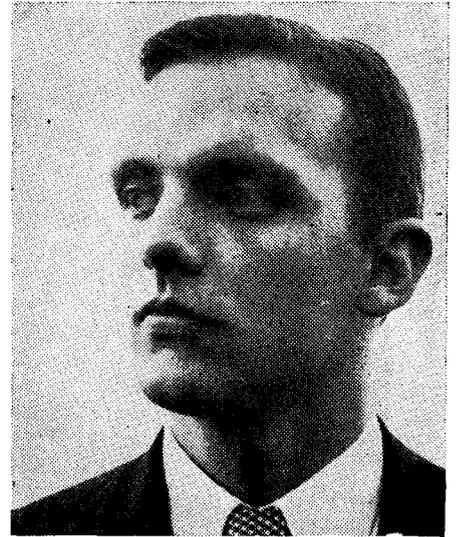
A LONG DAY'S DYING. By Frederick Buechner. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 267 pp. \$3.

By RICHARD McLAUGHLIN

WHEN a first novel arrives that is as elaborately embroidered as this one is, our initial impulse is to rip off all the decorative trimmings to see what framework is actually concealed underneath. Strip Mr Buechner's novel of its prose fineries and, I am afraid, there is not very much left except a somewhat unpleasant tale about one week in the lives of an introspective, shallow group of New Yorkers involved in what Tristram Bone, the fat protagonist of the story, confesses to be "trivial intrigue." But then again, divest any novel of its padding or ornamentation today and we are fortunate if we find it has a framework at all.

Unlike some of our recent novels by petulant writers in their early twenties, Mr. Buechner's book does have a theme, no matter how vague or abstract it may be. He is exploring the modern scene with its frustrations and growing discontent through the complicated behavior of men and women living on the surface of an urbane social world. Because Mr. Buechner is as precocious as he is perceptive with the horrific and the wildly humorous (a bit on the vulgar side) he reveals mainly a decadent society to us, in which the individuals are either desiccated, crabbed, or grotesquely made.

The hero or dominant figure in this baroque novel is an obese, pathetic, but wealthy middle-aged eunuch. Tristram Bone is somehow magnificent in spite of his massiveness and the grotesqueness and merciless irony of his plight; for Tristram loves Elizabeth Poor, a handsome widow with a twenty-year-old son. This fat man is, perhaps, the most human character of the lot unless it could be either Simon, Tristram's pet monkey, or Emma, his German housekeeper, who finds her domestic tyranny overshadowed by the monkey's presence. It is George Motley, however, a cruel caricature of a perennial juvenile and successful New York novelist whose petty malice threatens to cast dishonor and disenchantment on the intimate circle which is completed by Elizabeth's son, Leander, and his friend Steitler, a young instructor at the university that he is attending. And finally it is the grandmother, Maroo, who intervenes, emerging from that gentle, tranquilly wise world to which these people will never have access. Sensing danger and willing



—Elliott Erwitt.

Frederick Buechner—"the horrific and the wildly humorous a bit on the vulgar side."

to risk indignity, she is the only one prepared to make the sacrifice to avert disaster.

"Mirror, Mirror on the wall, Am I not the fairest of them all?" might be the invocation, at one time or another, of nearly every character in this book. Mr. Buechner is not above using words like mirror, proscenium, stage manager, or actor, to get over his desired dramatic effects. Mr. Buechner is in good company when he suggests that the world may be a stage and all the people in it are players. But where he has failed is in not recognizing how illimitable that stage is, as certainly Thackeray and Dickens did and some of our more serious novelists manage to do today. Mr. Buechner makes us too frequently aware that his people are merely competent actors.

Still, when we consider what Mr. Buechner is trying to do here, and how difficult it is to execute such a theme, we then have to appreciate what a remarkable job he has done on the whole. There is not only bitter irony but genuine pathos underlying this artistic effort to portray a collection of self-conscious individuals posturing before flattering backdrops, seeking in their private mirrors reflections of what they would like to be.

It is likely that this unusual novel, mannered to the extent of almost being labeled mandarin, despite its flaws or youthful pretensions, will arouse a great deal of interest in the coming months. For our part, we can only express wonderment and gratitude that the new year has at least started off with a novel with such a high degree of literary refinement from a writer of twenty-three.