

The Most in Shorts

"Prize Stories 1955: The O. Henry Awards," selected and edited by Paul Engle and Hansford Martin (Doubleday, 313 pp. \$3.95), the thirty-fifth in an annual series, offers eighteen magazine short stories that struck its editors as the best published between August 1953 and July 1954.

By James Kelly

ACCORDING to Paul Engle and Hansford Martin, now completing a second term as selectors of the O. Henry Memorial Award series (in its thirty-fifth year), the eighteen magazine stories in "Prize Stories 1955" are the best published by American authors between August 1953 and July 1954. Applying the same yardstick used by previous series editors, they have combed mass-circulation journals, college publications, and forums for literary *flaneurs*. And, with that job done, they have chosen five stories from *The New Yorker*, three from *Harper's Magazine*, two from *Accent*, two from *Esquire*, and one each from three campus literary reviews and three general magazines.

Despite the mechanically safe and sound quality of their book, the editors begin with a morose little essay on the low state of the short story in this country. This they blame on increased emphasis upon non-fiction, absence of a real national literary magazine, and editorial boards too timid to handle daring fictional subjects. The reader is therefore asked to believe that the present collection's notable lack of poetry, experimental writing, and avant-garde entries results from shortage of suitable material rather than from constricted editorial tastes. So be it; the aim is good and the performance professional.

Offering few thrills but considerable insight, the lucky eighteen writers dwell upon the greater reality of childhood, moments of adult revelation, sentimental journeys through cherished landscapes; they roam from San Francisco to Paris and back again to Brooklyn and Princeton University. They go about their business in thoroughly competent style, and none more so than John Cheever in "The Five-Forty-Eight," a solar-plexus suspense story of a heel from the suburbs who shares a train seat with the wronged girl and her gun; or Frederick Buechner in "The Tiger" (third prize winner), a wonderful, nostalgic tale of an alumnus who spends a dreamy half-man, half-animal fall afternoon inside the tiger skin at a

Princeton football game; or Mary Dewees Fowler in "Man of Distinction," a good, penetrating still-life of a querulous old man who refuses to be put on the shelf.

For this observer the best entry in the book is "A Christmas Carillon," by Hortense Calisher, which really pins down the playboy husband who can enjoy his freedom only when there's a domestic scene to rebel against. Take away home-base, especially during a sentimental holiday, and this type of wandering male heads stableward—perhaps to graceful middle-age and maturity. But the official first prize winner is Jean Stafford, a lady who has written more controlled and deserving stories than "In the Zoo," and now receives a kind of cumulative recognition like that which recently befell a bearded resident of Cuba. For this Stafford entry, following the flashbacked childhood cruelties endured by two spinster sisters, rambles knowingly but joylessly through a dog-poisoning incident and might better have preserved the unities of time and action. The second prize goes to "A Circle in the Fire," by Flannery O'Connor, which provides ominous but rather pointless suspense in the story of three renegade boys who come to harry a couple of farm women. There's mood, expertly reported guerilla warfare, and some ingenious byplay, but not much more.

Ira Wolfert's entry from *Esquire* seems to have been lifted almost bodily from a section in his novel "Married Men," the part which presents some honestly electrifying reportage of cockfighting and some fairly maudlin moralizing in the mind of the hero, Wes Olmstead. There's a tight, acutely felt scene between a frantic father and his desperately ill son, by Wallace Stegner; a raffish, slapstick narrative of three beer-guzzling grass widowers who manage to get even with a woman whose voice annoys them, by Henry Shultz; and a fine naturalistic piece called "Joshua," by Shirley Ann Grau, which takes the reader to the Gulf Coast swamp country for a look at a small boy's stark fear.

Without seeming to cavil, it would be easier to think of these stories as good if one weren't expected to think of them as "best." Dogmatic superlatives are pretty silly, especially when backed only by the declared editorial judgment of two men, and they shouldn't be allowed to get in the way of the considerable reading pleasure that's here for the taking.



Eros in a Wimple

"The Cornerstone," by Zoé Oldenbourg (translated by Edward Hyams. Pantheon Books, 482 pp. \$4.50), continues the chronicle of the Linnières family, begun in "The World Is Not Enough," when Ansieu, the old Crusader, makes a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to visit a son's grave, while another son remains home to pursue an evil life.

By Robert Pick

PERHAPS the most rewarding feature of Zoé Oldenbourg's brilliant novel "The Cornerstone" is its recreation of chivalrous love. Here, for the first time, a modern novelist has brought to life medieval erotic thought with all its casuist conceptions, its subtle sense of beauty and color, and its naïvely blasphemous proximity to religious emotions. "She gave him a long kiss on the mouth, and for him it was as though he were receiving Communion." Thus the author describes the first physical contact between Haguennier de Linnières, a knight of twenty married to a rich woman nearly twice his age, and his "lady," Marie, wife of the lord of Mongenast. Such is the author's skill, such the curiously matter-of-fact magic of her writing, that the reader accepts that bizarre early-thirteenth-century idea, oblivious of his own mid-twentieth-century notions about sex (whose bizarreness only a coming age will discover). The evocation of such feelings in the reader is, of course, the only *raison d'être* of historical fiction. Zoé Oldenbourg is one of its rare masters.

The present book, a sequel to her first novel, "The World Is Not Enough," continues the chronicle of the Linnières family. Ansieu, the old Crusader, has turned over the fief to the one legitimate son left him and sets out on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land once more to visit the grave of his first-born; on the road south he runs into the sanguinary turmoil of one of the Albigenian "crusades," and later becomes blind; but he does get to the Holy Land and there—this is a stunning turn—gains an inkling of the superiority of the infidels' ethics to the Christian morals of his time.

There is no crime his son Herbert, back home, does not commit, no offense to decency this ruthless man, ridden by lechery, pride, and greed, shies away from. Christian beliefs, to say nothing of Christian mercy, are

a mockery in his mouth—or so it may seem to us. For, in truth, the very contradictions within his nature make that figure something like a symbol of the Middle Ages—when, to quote J. Huizinga, “all experiences . . . had the directness and absoluteness of . . . child-life.”

Haguennier, Herbert's son—and, in the end, the man who in a fight kills him—already belongs to another age. His manliness, wrenched from a tender and dreamy disposition, seems already touched by the dawn of humanism. That sense of time's passing which Mme. Oldenbourg conveys in her treatment of three generations is another of her remarkable achievements.

“The Cornerstone” cannot boast all the dramatic sweep of her first offering; it contains no counterpart to the dazzling canvas painted there of the Third Crusade (passages still vivid in at least one reader's mind)—although, on another plane, the scenes involving Eglantine, Herbert's half-sister, and his maltreated mistress, offer drama enough. But this is a novel deeper than the first one, and rises higher above its author's learning. Vast pleasure is in store for both the readers who want a grand story and those who read for the pleasure of reading.

Broken Apollos and Blasted Dreams

“*One Arm and Other Stories*,” by Tennessee Williams (*New Directions*, 211 pp. \$4.50), is a collection of eleven stories, one of which was revised for the present volume, originally published in 1948 in a limited and now extremely rare edition.

By William Peden

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S “One Arm and Other Stories” contains some stories which have greatness in them; of some of the others, however, John Randolph's irreverent comment about Henry Clay seems appropriate: how like a dead mackerel in the moonlight [are they], that shines and stinks, and stinks and shines.

Characteristic is “Desire and the Black Masseur,” the story of Anthony Burns, a little man with “an instinct for being included in things that swallowed him up” who is even-

tually devoured—literally, figuratively, and symbolically—by his Nemesis, a gigantic masseur. Here we are transported from the world of accustomed responses to one which is uniquely Mr. Williams's special province, a dimension compounded of fantasy, surrealism, allegory, and Gothic sensationalism. With a pen that smokes and burns, Mr. Williams has created some horribly memorable chapters in the history of what one of his characters calls the “mad pilgrimage of the flesh.”

Mr. Williams, fortunately, does not always write with the almost sub-human detachment of “Desire and the Black Masseur.” In his title story he has created an equally disturbing but much more memorable figure. Oliver Winemiller had been light heavyweight champion of the Pacific fleet before he lost his arm in an auto accident. With his arm went the center of his moral being, and Oliver becomes, successively, a bum, a male hustler, and a murderer. In jail, awaiting execution, he feels finally the desire and passion he had for so many years aroused in others. But it is too late, and he goes to the chair incomplete, unfulfilled, “with all his debts unpaid.” Oliver exists both as individual and as emblem; as such he remains in this reader's consciousness.

Perhaps the most moving of Tennessee Williams's characterizations is found in “Portrait of a Girl in Glass,” the story of the family he was later to make famous in “The Glass Menagerie.” In creating the girl “who made no positive motion toward the world but stood at the edge of the water, so to speak, with feet that anticipated too much cold to move,” Mr. Williams displays the understanding of betrayed and bewildered individuals which is the source of much of his power. If such a story makes us remember that Tennessee Williams was to become a major dramatist, “The Field of Blue Flowers” reminds us also that he began as a poet; and perhaps it is as the poet of the blasted, the doomed, and the defeated that he will be remembered.

At his best, as he is in at least two or three of these stories, Tennessee Williams is in a class by himself. Even at his worst he creates magical, terrifying, and unforgettable effects; his only limitations appear to be self-imposed. These stories make



—From “Life's Picture History of Western Man.”

The king granting charters to “deserving” barons—“subtle sense of beauty and color.”