

Capitalist Villains

DESERT TOWN. By Ramona Stewart. art. New York: William Morrow & Co. 1946. 248 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by NANCY GROBERG

TO a story whose theme is "as old as Eve," as Miss Stewart's admittedly is, the artist may justly be expected to bring new insight, even as he brings a new setting, new characters, and a competent, individual method. In this case, the theme is the emotional crisis of a young girl coping with problems which mark her transition to womanhood, as she bucks, among other things, the domineering mother who controls the desert town in which they live. It is because of her theme, and in spite of the inadequacy of her scope and style, that Miss Stewart's book is reasonably successful.

Miss Stewart's heroine, strong-willed daughter of a strong-willed mother, has no illusions about that woman's peculiar hold on the town of Chuckawalla; as the prosperous owner of a saloon and two bordellos, Fritz Haller has obviously exerted her influence and hard-shelled charm on every man in the desert town. Weaving nicely through the story of Fritz's opposition to her daughter's love for a gangster named Eddie Benedict are the stories of Eddie's sidekick, the strong and peculiarly devoted Johnny Ryan, and of the love of the sheriff, Pat Johnson, for a brutal deputy, ex-rodeo hero Tom Hansen.

The sentimentalizing which weakens this story and renders it meat for a grade B motion picture manifests itself particularly in Paula's conclusive wrestle with disillusionment. "I'm in love with him still—terribly," she says of the lover whom she has just left, and in that admission Miss Stewart deals a death blow to the more mature and realistic account of the dethronement of Eddie Benedict. The story of Eddie and his right-hand man has been an absorbing and revealing one; but the final sentimentalization of it shatters its effects. Fritz Haller is another case in point. Fritz is a stereotype—the tough, corrupt, but somehow appealing mother who wishes to spare her daughter the shame and uneasiness of the sort of life into which her mother's career might naturally push her. We have met this woman thousands of times, and this new encounter neither enhances her value nor offers further justification for the affection which her numerous creators have, for some reason, seen fit to shower upon her. It is characters like

the gentle and idealistic Luke Sheldon, the vulnerable Pat Johnson, and the devoted gangster, Ryan, who, together, balance one painful, sentimentalized stereotype like Fritz Haller.

If the theme assures a certain amount of interest, and the strange relationships which weave in and out of it enhance that interest, Miss



Stewart's style comes dangerously near to distracting even the most absorbed and willing reader. She lacks facility; there is something peculiarly clumsy and verbose about the way she tells her story. Words frequently do not seem to belong together at all, more often are entirely superfluous and forced. For every flash of good writing, there is a paragraph which lovingly fondles the cliché. For every simple and effective phrase, there is one which gropes self-consciously for the proper adverb or adjective and emerges, panting, with the wrong one. Her writing smacks strongly of the average magazine story, a most unfortunate liability for a comparatively sensitive author who chooses to deal with vital human problems.

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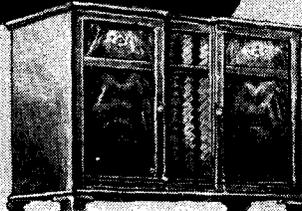
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BOOKS · FOR · YOUNG · PEOPLE

Happy Birthdays

WE find ourselves, as spring draws nearer, looking with especial care at the illustrations in the new children's books. For, in this particular month of March, we are celebrating two centenaries that have great importance in the picture-book world. Just one hundred years ago this month two babies were born in England who were to become artists whose work was chiefly for children. One, a boy, first saw the light of day in the old city of Chester on the River Dee, where lived the famous Miller of the song. The other, a girl, arrived at No. 1 Cavendish Square, Hoxton, and her father was an artist—an engraver. The boy was Randolph Caldecott, the girl Kate Greenaway.

Looking at their drawings today, one marvels at the clarity and beauty of execution and reproduction. In both cases the pictures were reproduced by wood-blocks, and their engraver, Edmund Evans, should be as well remembered as the artists themselves. Year after year, through wars and revolutions, their publisher, Frederick Warne, has printed them and sent them out to a demanding public in both England and America. When the Second World War came, one of the first questions to be asked by public libraries here in the United States was: "How many copies of the Caldecott and Kate Greenaway books are there on this side of the Atlantic?" Fortunately there were quite a few. Fortunately, too, the printed stock in England and the wood-blocks were not destroyed by the bombing of London and the great fires that followed. Today, fourteen out of the sixteen Caldecott picture books are available. Most of Kate Greenaway's are or soon will be, with the exception of the little almanacs, which have been out of print for years. Those who seek the books in celebration of the birthdays will find them in public libraries or in bookshops that

have the vision and good taste to stock them.

How can anyone, young or old, with eyes to see resist them? How can anyone look without a stirring of delight and laughter at Caldecott's dancing pigs and grinning dogs and galloping huntsmen? How can any lady of any age fail to admire Kate Greenaway's demure little girls in their green coats trimmed with fur and their adorable bonnets, the mother in muslin dress with pale pink and blue sashes tied around a slender waist?

Her Pied Piper of Hamelin is, as everyone knows who has read it to the children, an outstanding example of true creative illustration. Read the words of Browning's poem once and then leave the book with the children. Even the ones who cannot read can follow the story through the pictures. They can see the expression on the faces of the mothers as they watch the boys and girls of Hamelin Town listen to the Piper's music. They can see the eager faces turned to catch those first faint sweet notes that lead them, willy-nilly, through the streets of Hamelin—page after page of the children following the Piper while the mothers look on helpless. They can study the quaint, sad figure of the little lame boy who could not keep up with the others and so was left to play alone. "It is dull in our town since my playmates left," he is saying.

As for Randolph Caldecott, the delightful things that he could do with a line of verse, often familiar verse, are too many to enumerate here. Every poem, every nursery rhyme that he illustrated bears witness to his imagination, his humor, his genius for characterization and background.

Compare these drawings of the last century with the flood of superficial illustration that is pouring from our presses today. Quantity production and a wider distribution, you say.

We agree. Picture books should be a part of the inheritance of every child. But could not the original drawing frequently have more to offer the children—more humor, more imagination, more freshness and beauty of design? Could not the machines for reproduction follow more closely the human hands that carved woodblocks more than one hundred years ago?

But, after all, why worry about it? It is the children who will decide. They know the difference between a flat realism and the depths of hidden meaning—the small, exciting details that went into the drawings of the two artists whose birthday we celebrate. In their final judgment, we rest our case.

In the children's rooms of public libraries all over the United States this month, the Caldecott and Kate Greenaway picture books will be placed within easy reach of eager hands. Yellow daffodils and golden primroses, pussy willow and little marigolds, will set the scene for the birthday of "Marigold Garden" and "Come, Lasses and Lads." Both books record for all time the beauty of spring in England. After a long and destructive war, this is England's first spring of peace. May this birthday be the happiest of all the hundred years.

MARY GOULD DAVIS.

The Illustrated Junior Library

ANDERSEN'S FAIRY TALES. *Translated by Mrs. E. V. Lucas and Mrs. H. B. Paull. Illustrated by Arthur Szyk. New York: Grosset & Dunlap. 1945. 327 pp. \$1, \$1.50 and \$2.50.*

GRIMMS' FAIRY TALES. *Translated by Mrs. E. V. Lucas, Lucy Crane and Marion Edwards. Illustrated by Fritz Kredel. 363 pp. The same.*