

FICTION

ing, breathing human beings, John D. Weaver's novel never achieves such compelling personal appeal. He is an angry man telling of a mass injustice, but in spite of the fact that he focuses sharply on certain individuals, they are individuals who are part of a crowd, and individuals whom you never really come to have a feeling for except in the crowd. They are part of that crowd when you meet

them and they are still in its midst when you leave them. You become acquainted with them and learn of the bitter events which brought them there. You are outraged, but it remains an intellectual resentment of man's inhumanity to man. You are never moved and touched as you are when something happens to people you already know and in whose fortunes you are deeply interested.

ence. There are intense appreciations of the glory and freshness of summer mornings, such as, one suspects, were bittersweet to the young pilots climbing into their planes. There are the Spitfires "taxiing towards the end of the runway, picking their ways gingerly over the ground, bumping and swaying like clumsy birds walking upon sore feet." And, particularly, there is the description of London under the atomic blitz. Hersey's account of Hiroshima seems to have blended with personal recollections of London in the winter of 1940 and the whole presented with an imaginative suggestion of actuality that is far more terrifying than all the Gremlins that ever chortled.

The fantasy of the book invites comparison,—with Wells, Butler, Huxley, and Swift—from which Mr. Dahl must suffer. The non-fantasy parts can stand securely on their own high merits.

Bergen Evans, professor English at Northwestern University, is the author of that delightful attack on popular superstitions, "The Natural History of Nonsense."

Survivors of World War IV

SOME TIME NEVER. A Fable for Supermen. By Roald Dahl. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1948. 244 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by BERGEN EVANS

SOCRATES, surveying the calamities of the Peloponnesian War and speaking for an unfortunate generation that had paid its tribute to misery, called on the leaders of Athens to establish a lasting peace. Mere bartering treaties, he cried, are not enough: "We stand in need of some more durable plan which will forever put an end to our hostilities and unite us by the ties of mutual affection and fidelity."

The cry for peace has increased through the centuries until now it includes the whole world. But the cry for war has always been stronger. Hope deferred has sickened every sensitive heart and at the moment when world peace is a possibility world war is again a probability. World War II was explained away as the result of a sort of mechanical failure in the League, something perhaps unavoidable in our first attempt at world order. But the speed with which the

clouds of World War III have come over the horizon has brought dismay and despair. Maybe there is no hope. Maybe men, like gamecocks or terriers, are naturally pugnacious and wars inevitable. If so, their increasing destructiveness makes the end not only of civilization but of the human race itself inevitable — and perhaps within the span of our own lifetimes.

Mr. Dahl imaginatively explores this possibility for us, and his picture of World War III and the preparations for World War IV are grim and effective. The final catastrophe is too dreadful to be faced and is presented through subterranean concussions and a glimpse of the desolation in its wake.

The survivors, who enjoy the glimpse, are the Gremlins, tiny monsters, something like gnomes, who are assumed to have been on earth before mankind evolved and to have gone into hiding during the few millennia of our bloody regency. They first emerged into human awareness during the Battle of Britain when, for a moment, it looked as if the powers of destruction were going to triumph. Sensing their opportunity these obscene homunculi then swarmed from their burrows and attempted to destroy the Royal Air Force, that being the last, slight bulwark between mankind and chaos.

The weakness of Mr. Dahl's book lies in the cumbrousness of this supernatural machinery—with its Gremlins, Ffinellas, Widgets, Spandules, Dingbats, Snogs, Bogglers, Sunts, and so on—creatures whose very names (and their dreadful habit of "chortling") betray the forced unreality of their conception. They simply aren't in any way convincing. Gremlins, at least in the United States, were a labored creation of journalistic whimsy to which even the talent of Artzybasheff (upon whose drawings Mr. Dahl seems to have drawn) failed to give the faintest verisimilitude.

The best part of the book lies in the unquaint realism of little descriptive touches. There is a very fine glimpse of Air Marshals in confer-

Amber-ous Revolution

EAGLE IN THE SKY. By F. van Wyck Mason. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co. 1948. 500 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by ALEXANDER LAING

MR. MASON'S new story is jockeying, as this is written, for top place on the best-seller lists. Since the panoramic historical novel has come again to dominate the big-business aspects of publishing, and because this one has an uncommonly respectable idea, serious analysis may be in order. As structure, the book uses the related fortunes of three young surgeons during the last two years of the American Revolution: one in a privateer, another with the Army, the third serving a small town. The author thus is able to cover most aspects of the medical profession at a critical period for it and for our country. His plot, far-fetched in some aspects, is little more so than that of a near forerunner in time and subject: "Roderick Random." All three doctors are gifted and brave, but one through passionate ambition injures the others, who flee from mistaken justice and from hoodwinked true love. The three are reunited at the siege of Yorktown. Having gone over to the enemy, the villain gets his appropriate professional deserts: death by disease. The heroes are reunited with their ladies.

Open Sesame

By Lloyd Frankenberg

ALL IS held
in a crystal ball:

past and future
recalled, foretold

on the converging
lens of the present;

falling through
future and past:

grass and blue
and brick wall.

A burst world
returns to itself.

The plot, then, would not handicap a richly imagined novel nor help a tawdry one—and this one is tawdry. Mr. Mason has worked hard at his period research, but has not adequately respected his findings. While loading his characters with tediously particularized tricorne or kersey, he too seldom makes the details meaningful in terms of the personality of the wearer. A Danish lady starts him on a learned recital of the kinds of craft to be seen in Danish waters. His people use a stilted period jargon, which might presently become unobtrusive if the illusion were not broken by anachronisms, such as "How come?" and "Lady Luck." Historical conversation can be successful in an idiom contemporary either to the characters or to the author. But the combination of both, as in "A Connecticut Yankee," is reserved for humorists.

What then is wrong? Chiefly, it is the author's willingness to subordinate his serious topic to a sort of dualistic, cheap concept of the requirements of romance. Ignoring the middle ground of sensibility, Mr. Mason buffets the reader at one extreme with bully-boy violence, and at the other lards him with insipid idylls. His one substantial character, Hilde Mention, typifies this treatment. She is introduced as a starved, reluctant whore, seeking between brutal episodes the elusive memory of her own origins. Absent through most of the book, she bobs up at last as the angelic and adored mistress of a gallant French officer, who is kept from marrying her only because she lacks noble blood. And it turns out—what do you suppose?—that she has got noble blood. But poor Hilde, however unwillingly, has sinned her way from Nova Scotia to Virginia. She too must be disposed of by the convenience of fever, in the last pages.

Mr. Mason has used the appropriate nautical source books with some care, although the armchair mariner will be disturbed by such matters as a seeming uncertainty about the location of a sailing vessel's "tops," and a master's worry that a brig "headed dead into the wind's eye" might "be taken aback." On the other hand, he surely will not wonder why, every two or three dozen pages, he comes upon a thoughtfully described young female with no clothes on. It is not so easy to decide why the author, in such an ostentatious period piece, calls his privateer the *Grand Turk III*, since that vessel was sufficiently famous in her actual service in the War of 1812. And why does he name a weak-willed character Nat Fanning, at about the time when the genuine Nat Fanning was serving spectacularly under John Paul Jones?

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The author uses his medical researches to better effect. Indeed, his 500 pages could be whittled down to a rather respectable 300 devoted more largely to his chief announced business. He does a little Monday morning quarterbacking on the subject of asepsis by heat and by ardent spirits, but generally he sticks to the facts of practice in 1780. At another point, shallow characterization ruins the meaning of an episode when one of the young surgeons discovers on his wedding night that his bride is syphilitic. A scene of possible profundity becomes an unbelievable, if unintended, burlesque.

It is apparent that Mr. Mason has stirred together two books which, for him, will not mix. One of them, the plight of the medical man in 1778, he could have handled respectably if he had approached the task with more integrity of purpose. The other, a costume romance, would have been handled badly anyhow by one who can let his hero muse, "How little was understood, back in staid old Connecticut, about the magnificent splendor of love in its various facets."

Exotic Friendships

THE PEACOCK COUNTRY. By P. Alston Waring. New York: The John Day Co. 1948. 100 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by PAMELA TAYLOR

IN NEW ENGLAND this small volume would be said to be "choice," and I can find no country-wide equivalent for that adjective to convey the rare and delicate beauty of "The Peacock Country." Mr. Waring, the author of these Indian tales, remarks in his brief introduction that he has sought a way in which to communicate some of what he saw and felt and heard in India to his family and friends at home. Indians, he found, had a unique relationship with animals, both domestic and wild. Not only was this true of the thousands of farmers and dwellers in small villages on the edge of the jungles, but of the Maharajahs, the great people of the courts as well, for "in India there is a lack of pretense, a kind of simplicity among the rich as well as among the poor." He is quite right in hazarding a guess that these fragile tales of the interweaving of animal and human lives create a picture of Indian life which no facts and figures on history and economic life could suggest.

In these twenty-one stories, some of them not more than two pages in length, we meet all classes of people, and many animals; the poor farmer



My Current Reading

In answer to *SRL's* letter requesting a list of his current reading, General Carl Spaatz, Chief of Staff, United States Air Force, sent us the following reply which we are sure will interest our readers:

Thank you very much for your letter and your interest in my current reading.

The more I have thought about your letter, the less I feel able to give you an answer which would interest your readers. Of necessity the bulk of my reading does not consist of published works. With your permission I will withhold any such list as you have requested until I am able, at some future date, to readjust my life for the necessary leisure time in which to become aware of the world in which *The Saturday Review* is such an authoritative voice.

and the cobra who lived under his one tree; the miraculous fawn which came from the jungle at the full moon to dance with the women of the Shantal villages; Dev Raj, the great, state elephant of the Maharajah, whose friend was a tiny mouse; the leopards who sprang to kill and the monkeys who stole; Dubendra, the tiny naked baby playing outside his mother's hut, who made images in the dust and gravely explained them to the great snake who watched him. We read of the lamenting cranes, mourning a king lost in a battle with a python, and of how a tiger hunt brought tragedy to the romantic and beautiful Maharani.

They are simple tales, tenuous, fragmentary, but as each is turned over and examined in the mind, as one might turn and regard a tiny Persian miniature or a jewel of Indian workmanship, bits of color from the life of India are struck off—the look and sound of a village at twilight, the sunset light on the Naga houses, set high above the Assam rice fields, the recollected beauty of a nobly-born woman, the blinding light of a clearing in the jungle, where an elephant has gone to die.

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