

Children's Children

"Sex and the Nature of Things," by N. J. Berrill (Dodd, Mead, 256 pp. \$3.50), the work of a biologist with a literary flair, shows how the reproductive urge keeps cropping up in all forms of life, from brown algae to modern man. Carroll Lane Fenton, who reviews it here, is the author of *"Our Living World"* and other volumes.

By Carroll Lane Fenton

ALMOST everyone talks about sex, but only biologists seem able to say much that is new. They, being research workers, often restrict their remarks to such subjects as the gonads of fish, the hormones of rabbits, and the breeding habits of deer or salamanders.

There is nothing inherently wrong in this; research reports are bound to deal with the creatures investigated. But those of us who do not read such reports (and that includes everyone not a specialist in the field of each one) need an up-to-date synthesis if we are to keep abreast of the times and avoid faulty generalizations based on fragments of information. Since the subject is more serious than sensational, we also ask that the synthesis be written by a qualified author.

This need has been met in *"Sex and*



N. J. Berrill—*"embryologist with ideas."*

the Nature of Things" by N. J. Berrill, an embryologist with ideas who also is an able writer. Beginning with ancient misconceptions and modern brown algae, he traces the development of sexual reproduction.

The story is one of ever-increasing specialization in which the business of making new animals and plants has been subordinated to variation, while interrelations have multiplied. Professor Berrill reminds us that reproduction goes on very well without sex cells, and that sperms and eggs do not demand that living things be divided into males and females. But the former limits variation, while absence of sexes is inconsistent with varied ways of life under what often are very difficult conditions. These disadvantages are overcome by sex, but creatures adopting it have been forced to provide complex controls within their bodies and have made delicate adjustments to the world in which they live. The former are accomplished by nervous reactions as well as hormones, whose orderly action is one of the marvels of physiology. The latter are illustrated by birds that come from a third of the earth to nest on small islands, where they arrive at the same time and in proper condition for mating.

Even man, the most wilful of animals, has been compelled to adapt his ways and balance his hormones to a type of sexual reproduction that normally brings forth one slowly developing child at a time. His family life is the outgrowth of a pituitary secretion, and some of his laws attempt to overcome the effect of upright posture on the mechanism of mating. Sex is an all-pervasive factor, and creatures that combine manual dexterity with erect bodies and substantial brain power also have multiplied the adjustments needed to make sex work.

Why Spiders?

"The Web of Life," by John H. Storer (Devin-Adair, 144 pp. \$3), offers in brief compass an introduction to ecology, that science concerned with the relationships of living organisms and their environment. Below it is reviewed by Edwin Way Teale, author of *"The Circle of the Seasons"* and other works on nature.

By Edwin Way Teale

WILL ROGERS once observed that we are all ignorant; we are just ignorant about different things. It is a curious fact that one of the things the world at large is most ignorant about is the web of life of which every man is a part. Whether he realizes it or not, his welfare is linked with a host of things remote and dimly understood. It is linked with the water supply of grazing lands a thousand miles away, for as much as 5,000 pounds of water go into making grass sufficient to produce one pound of beef. It is linked with the swift erosion of fields, for nature takes something like 500 years to create one inch of fertile top soil. It is linked even with the welfare of bacteria, for a single acre of good soil may contain 5,600 pounds of bacteria important to the health of the land.

John H. Storer, previously known primarily through his wild-life moving pictures and his studies of birds in flight, has produced in *"The Web of Life"* a concise and lucid introduction to ecology. Its pages underscore the complexity of all the interdependences and interrelationships that create what we commonly call the balance of nature.

Many men have dreamed of remolding the world nearer to the heart's desire by eliminating this or that thread of nature's web. Ralph Waldo Emerson envisioned his perfect world as devoid of spiders. Others have wished for a world without mosquitoes, without mice, without snakes, without bacteria, without a hundred other strands in the complex life about which Mr. Storer writes. But, as check or aid, each element of the whole plays its part. The rabbits that thin and prune the forest; the gophers that plow and loosen the prairie soil; the rye grass that may thrust out an amazing total of three miles of roots in a single day; the humus-rich soil that can hold more than one-third its bulk in water; the brown thrasher that scratches in the fallen leaves, and the warbler that combs the tree-top

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Prayer of the Young Stoic

(Rome, Second Century A.D.)

By Stephen P. Dunn

BODILESS, nameless God,
Forgive me my mankind—
That I am not a clod
Or dust upon the wind.

Forgive me that I weep
For what you may not save,
Or strive to overleap
The black gap of the grave.

My shivering spirit shrinks
From cold, demanding glory
And, stooping earthward, drinks
From warm old wells of story.

Oh Universe, forgive
My folly, fear, and pain;
With thee I cannot live,
And turn from thee—in vain.

The Saturday Review



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The Reviewer's Function

THIRTY years ago Virginia Woolf in an essay on criticism wrote that two critics in complete agreement about Milton and Keats will inevitably come to blows when they discuss the work of contemporary writers. Is there no guidance, she asks, for a reader who yields to none in reverence for the dead, but is tormented by the suspicion that reverence for the dead is vitally connected with understanding of the living. Though she was certainly one of the most sensitive critics of her time, she was modest enough to assert, "Reviewers, yes; but we have no critics; a million competent and incorruptible policemen but no judge."

In the years that have passed since Mrs. Woolf wrote "How It Strikes a Contemporary" American creative writing has passed through its renaissance of the Twenties and early Thirties and is still mildly intoxicated with its after-effects. During the process of dehydration resulting from the Depression and the Second World War contemporary poetry in any popular sense of the word has become almost a lost art, lost at least to the public, which cannot understand what the younger poets are writing about. There are innumerable novelists who are writing as if the world was about to come to an end, failing to recall that every generation has had its fears of imminent catastrophe. Readers have become used to, and even bored with, novels which are not founded on a set of recognizable human beings but on a series of increasingly violent or erotic events. In the majority of these

novels they may not be able to recall after a few days the names of the characters or remember them with any affection; but they are not apt to forget the lynching, the murder, the rape, the perverse act, and the neuroticism and terror which may pervade the entire volume.

A great critic is certainly more difficult to find in the present time than in a generation or two ago. It is the business of the critic to evaluate and create some order and sense out of the literature of his own generation. It is also his function to restore or bring to life neglected and misunderstood writers. Melville's "Moby Dick" was recognized as a work of genius by American critics many years after his death, and then only after English critics had set up a hue and cry about that forgotten man. William Faulkner had better luck. While our own book reviewers and the public were hesitating about the value of his work, to such an extent that in 1947 only three or four of his novels were in print, French and Scandinavian critics were calling him our most creative and most significant writer.

Should a great critic miraculously appear "how," to quote Mrs. Woolf again, "should we maintain him, on what should we feed him?" Failing to find one with the temerity to survey the daily battle of books, contemporary writers must put up with book reviewers and editors who weed out the dull and the mediocre and attempt at the close of every year to turn chaos into some kind of order. If the reviewer of *The New Yorker* should stick a stiletto into the breast

of a new writer the *New York Herald Tribune*, *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, or *The Saturday Review* might heal the wound and reestablish the writer's confidence.

THE multiplicity of reviews serves as a public-opinion poll on which authors and publishers must depend. The reviewer's words of praise or enthusiastic approval form the basis of the structure erected by the author, the publisher, and the reviewer, for the author must be supported in his lonely and hazardous task by the publisher, and both must have the encouragement of the reviewer, whose final function it is to send the public into the bookstores. In the book-reviewing profession today there seems to be no room for rancor or bad temper. There has appeared no contemporary substitute for the often vituperative H. L. Mencken during the years when he was editing *American Mercury*. Nevertheless, the pressure of concerted opinion has a formidable effect on the fortunes of writers and publishers. When the public has read three or four enthusiastic reviews it is apt to murmur those golden words "I must buy that book."

The constant reviewer must, if he takes his task seriously, look for a trend in changing tides of literature. If the present absorption in violence and psychiatry is turning toward a more wholesome attitude toward life he will manage to make his opinions known in his reviews. If the majority of sound reviewers are with him he can in some measure be instrumental in changing the course of creative writing. He can be both a guide and a mentor, though he is apt to become insufferably dull if he takes himself too seriously. No one likes to be lectured by an anonymous book reviewer, who would doubtless write a worse novel than the one he is reviewing even if he had the talent to do so. It is perhaps admirable that no single reviewer today has the ability to dominate contemporary criticism, for the final arbiter is the public, which has the power to change its opinions.

But the reviewer's function most satisfactory to himself and to author and publisher alike is the discovery of a new writer who shows a rare talent for creation or a new conception or manner of revealing human lives or the world that lies around us. It happens two or three times a year; and when it does it is an occasion for rejoicing and a justification of all the writers who are toiling to express themselves and who find in this miraculous event a meaning for their lives.

—H. S.