

such readers must be simply but quietly dismissed. They are in large measure those who do not understand the profound difference between a mystery and a puzzle. They are those who keep expecting with each new book to find the reduction of life's mysteries to mere puzzles—and puzzles are always capable of solution. Yet these same potential readers are the young inheritors of this earth. If for no other reason, let us hope that they may pause to contemplate the vital message of this excellent book.

**William D. Stahlman**

*William D. Stahlman, who teaches the history of science at the University of Wisconsin, is at present preparing a three-volume study of the works of Claudius Ptolemy.*

### **TO WILL & TO DO: An Ethical Research for Christians**

**by Jacques Ellul, translated from the French by C. Edward Hopkin**  
*Pilgrim Press, 310 pp., \$10*

IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT to find a book more wildly inconsistent than *To Will & To Do*, one less clear about what its author wills to do and at the same time more willful in its opinions.

The subject Jacques Ellul has chosen to expatiate upon is ethics, as seen from the perspective of a fixated Barthianism. His argument is divided into three parts: first, an ostensibly theological demonstration that the only good is the will of God, so construed as to mean that all human attempts to know and to do the good in general (*i.e.*, moral) terms are vain and sinful; second, a description of various philosophical and social moralities (the term is used as synonymous with ethics), all of which are shown to be inadequate and to compound human sinfulness; third, a self-contradictory argument that a Christian ethic is as bad as any other (hence, "impossible") and also that the development of a Christian ethic is an urgent necessity.

Here the book stops. The reader wishes the author had begun where he ends and had thus devoted himself to a constructive task.

That all moral systems betray inconsistencies, that their philosophical bases are often shaky, that they tend to alienate man from himself—all this is not easy to demonstrate, and has been stated many times. Likewise, it is not news to the Christian (be he theologian or layman) that moral codes are the very sign of broken rapport between God and man and that they tend to become substitutes for the devotion of the whole self to God.

The problem, however, as M. Ellul gets around to admitting in his final chapter, is that "It is not enough to have a good theology. The latter must also lead to good action, and that does not take place automatically."

What needs examining here is the assumption that "good theology" does not, on its own terms, take up a constructive approach to ethics. That assumption, on which most of the book is predicated, is Protestant "justification by faith" with a vengeance. At this late date it should not require me, a Protestant, nor some Catholic or Jewish thinker to point out that the doctrine is altogether too transcendental to be relevant to social or even personal ethics. But the problem of how we are to think ethically is real, and it hardly seems useful to write a book that spends 244 pages disposing of it and twenty-three restoring it to the position it was assumed to have had at the start.

In point of fact, the author's theology is woefully inadequate, as is that of others who have fallen in love with the earlier portions of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. Such theology begins by scorning philosophy and ends unable to cope with the very problems its own analyses uncover.

It is hard to know for whom *To Will & To Do* is intended. The subtitle calls it "An Ethical Research for Christians." The author's introduction says it is not intended for Christians at all, and that the author expects "all its value to come from a confrontation." I imagine that the intended audience is none other than M. Ellul, that he is slowly convincing himself of something he prefers not to acknowledge—that theology of the sort he has espoused is of little or no help for constructive social thinking. This theology, which in America has been called Neo-Orthodox, was useful in resisting Nazism. It is inadequate whenever the task is to build rather than to fight.

M. Ellul, who was once a member of the French Resistance, cites Reinhold Niebuhr often, yet he has hardly an ounce of Niebuhr's worldly wisdom. I find this surprising, since M. Ellul is not an ivory-tower theologian but a professor of history and sociology at the Faculty of Law at Bordeaux. He is a convert to Christianity in its French Protestant form, and it appears that his zeal is not yet sufficiently informed by sweet reason. I hope he will soon talk himself into a more rational, less purely assertive mode of Christian thinking.

**Tom. F. Driver**

*Tom F. Driver is professor of theology and literature at Union Theological Seminary in New York.*

### Fiction

### **THE GUILTY HEAD: Genghis Cohn Is Alive and Dancing in Tahiti**

**by Romain Gary**

*World, 255 pp., \$5.95*

ROMAIN GARY'S GENGHIS COHN is still doing his thing, this time in Tahiti, where he now and again wags his guilty head and wonders what kind of face he had "before the world was made." He will never find out, though, and neither will anyone else; it is far too late, far past the point of return, as Gary sees it in his latest novel, *The Guilty Head*, a satiric sequel to *The Dance of Genghis Cohn*.

Cast this time as a Polynesian picaro, Cohn is magnificent in the sand and sex sequences, ably assisted by his *vahine*, Meeva. He is equally superb as the conscientious rebel, the nonconformist with a cause. Introduced as the apotheosis of the anti-hero, almost as an anti-Christ, Cohn acquires and abandons identities as if they were so many pairs of socks. Sometimes he is a spiritual successor to Paul Gauguin, demonstrating against the "misuse of our intellectual powers." Sometimes he is the new Adam, demonstrating



against the "overinflated conscience" of the idiot world. On occasion he is an enemy alien, a double agent pursued by the Russians, the Chinese, and, alas, the CIA. But always and forever he is the spastic conscience of mankind, the unsuccessful instrument of moral survival.

During the crazy course of the novel Cohn manages to drive to bewilderment the establishmentarian savants who would, for whatever reasons, capture him, kill him, enshrine him as the father of the bomb, or simply damn him categorically as a sinner, a spy, a dedicatee to the proposition that the "megaloguilt" of man is reason enough for the revenge he takes against society and himself—against his own guilty head.

It is a wild, bawdy, rambunctious book. On one level Gary barrels merrily along the sure road to censorship, and on another he carefully dissects the diseased society that permits it. He deplores the manic absurdity that dissembles as civilization and, through Cohn, asks an extremely important question: "...since when does a man need a reason to feel afraid?"

There is no real answer; but it is certainly time to be afraid when we begin to wonder whether we could save a little tax money if "the great Powers got together each year and agreed on the names and the number of scientists each of the Powers would undertake to rub off among their own nationals, so as to keep the balance of terror in perfect equilibrium." It is time to be afraid when man tries to "become a cur" since there might be "peace and innocence in being a cur." And then, it just might scare the daylights out of all of us if we could—just once—take a look at that face of innocence we had "before the world was made."

**William C. Hamlin**

*William C. Hamlin is professor of English at the University of Missouri, St. Louis.*

## **BARNETT FRUMMER IS AN UNBLOOMED FLOWER**

**by Calvin Trillin**

*Viking, 98 pp., \$4.50*

So BARNETT FRUMMER is an unbloomed flower, according to his friend and mentor Roland Magruder—and friends and mentors like Roland Magruder, who always do everything right, who needs? If your every scheme to get close to Rosalie Mondle—she who is always *avant* of the *avant garde*, the girl with "the only natural-blond Afro haircut on East Seventy-fourth Street"—was nipped in the bud, you'd be an unbloomed flower, too.

To me, however, Barnett Frummer is a blooming joy, and so are Rosalie Mondle, Roland Magruder, and their friends, all of whom populate these ten short stories that mesh to create a hilarious, satiric swipe at what passes for life among the social and socially conscious, ever *au courant* of the middle class on the Manhattan-to-East Hampton run. These are the people who are always with it, always in, who always know where it's at—the con artists of self. They are people like Elliott and Myrna Nardling, who got "their six-year-old daughter accepted at a fashionable and over-applied progressive school by formally declaring her a Negro," and whose dinner parties are in honor of the person whose book has the front-page review in *next Sunday's New York Times*; or else they are people such

as Rosalie Mondle, who one-ups the Nardlings by skipping their party in order "to help Roland Magruder sew some insignia on his Army Reserve uniforms."

The big bleeding heart who ties it all together is Barnett Frummer, scion of a family awning business. Can he hope to catch up or keep up with a lady whose typical escorts for one evening's nightclubbing are "a United States senator, a fabulously successful sixteen-year-old designer of African earrings for men, and a pretender to the Serbian throne"?

Poor Barnett is always a country mile behind Rosalie. By the time he had heard about an insurance company's plans to create jobs for blacks outside of Harlem, Rosalie was saying that the answer lay in providing investment capital inside. Naturally, Barnett joined with a group of white businessmen in backing a Negro designer and a Harlem dress store. "How does it feel to be a neocolonialist?" Rosalie asked."

My favorite adventure has nothing to do with Barnett and Rosalie. It concerns Lester Drentluss's attempt to identify with his Jewish roots, no mean feat for a boy whose family boasts only of their five generations in Baltimore, Maryland, and who once spanked Lester "for doing an imitation of Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer*." It's not that Lester cares about his heritage, it's just that he's a guy who can spot a trend. When Yiddish expressions crop up in the speech of his firm's top editor, Douglas Drake, a Methodist minister's son from Eau Claire, Wisconsin, it's time for Lester to get with it.

Did I tell you this is a very funny, biting book, and that Calvin Trillin

has an eye and an ear that can nail a phony to the wall (don't give me from mixed metaphor when I'm happy!) before you can say, "Please, Mr. Bookseller, I'd like a clean copy of *Barnett Frummer Is an Unbloomed Flower*"?

**Haskel Frankel**

*Haskel Frankel is a free-lance critic who frequently contributes to SR.*

## **HOUSE ON FIRE**

**by Arch Oboler**

*Bartholomew House, 249 pp., \$5.95*

ARCH OBOLER'S FIRST NOVEL opens with the winning of a \$5,000 "National Science Scholarship" by a Los Angeles boy genius, aged twelve. Radio-TV reporters descend on him and his family. But something is wrong: Robin Shepherd, a girl magazine writer, feels a weird, unpleasant warmth in the presence of the boy and his seemingly angelic younger sister.

Eventually this adorable pair bring about the murder of a businessman uncle, a spinster aunt, a drunken uncle, and finally, in one glorious holocaust, their parents and all the other occupants of a supermodern California luxury apartment building thirty stories high.

Were the children possessed by the still-active spirit of their dead grandmother? Or were the older members of the Elias family ungrateful offspring of the grandmother? Lacking filial love, did they destroy themselves? Or were the two children so diabolically clever as to be capable without spirit intervention of pre-recording their grandmother's voice and razing the building by a high-frequency flame?

There are also some sideline outrages—the photographing of a drugged Robin for commercial pornography; a revolting painting the sight of which makes her faint.

If Mr. Oboler had filled in the interstices between these events with deeper portrayals and new ideas on the existence of ghosts, he might have produced a novel to rival Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. As it is, all of the characters are amusing types limned with some individual features.

*House on Fire* might make an excellent movie. Indeed, it is easy to see in the rather thin characterizations Oboler's previous dependence on live actors to flesh out his scripts.

**Peter Rowley**

*Peter Rowley has written for many English and American periodicals, and is currently working on a novel.*



## **LITERARY I. Q. ANSWERS**

1. Eddy. 2. Ray. 3. Billy. 4. Dolly. 5. Les. 6. Dot. 7. Jimmy. 8. Sue. 9. Nell. 10. Jack. 11. Jess. 12. Harry. 13. Sally. 14. Lena. 15. Bob. 16. Kitty. 17. Bea. 18. Will. 19. Nick. 20. Sandy.