

theme her peculiar, and hardly crowd-pleasing, gifts are well suited.

—ANNE FADIMAN

The Anarchists' Convention

by John Sayles

Atlantic-Little, Brown, 324 pp., \$9.95

UNION DUES FIRMLY established John Sayles's gift for translating acute psychological insights into viable fiction, and this collection of his stories indicates no lessening of that gift. Still, the author displays a disturbing tendency to dance at the brink of sentimentality, perhaps because he is so intent upon capturing lower-middle-class verities. In the soap-opera climax of "The 7-10 Split," for example, death, old age, and the burden of having a retarded child are overcome, for the moment, by a near-impossible roll of a bowling ball, and in the conclusion of "Children of the Silver Screen," a nostalgic movie manager makes a small gesture of defiance before he surrenders to the debased dreams of gangster-like pornographers.

Sayles's strongest virtues—his efficient plain style, his formal intelligence, his obvious compassion for his victimized characters—always prevent total aesthetic collapse, and several of the stories attain a perfect blend of manner and means. "I-80 Nebraska, m. 490—m. 205" maintains a fierce narrative pace that is almost surrealistic in its leaps from voice to voice along crackling CB waves as a rebel trucker, high on drugs and existential disgust with his culture, achieves mythic stature in his drive to destruction, while "Schiffman's Ape" parallels human and ape behavior in an effort to limn the disintegration of a marriage based on something less than love. Despite an unabashedly romantic finale, the title story also defies the laws of literary gravity through its adoption of an ironic, self-mocking consciousness that will yield neither to the failure of the flesh nor the death of an ideal.

The Anarchists' Convention reaffirms Schopenhauer's vision of man as a creature in quest of a metaphysical reality, a reality that Sayles and his kind keep alive for us in this age of brute fact.

—EDWARD BUTSCHER

The Pardoner's Tale

by John Wain

Viking, 314 pp., \$10.95

AT THE START of his biography of Samuel Johnson, John Wain explained his affinity for Grub Street, that yeasty tradition of writers who, being indentured to their publishers, have inclined to get on with the story and let art take care of itself. Unlikely as it seems, by the evidence, this formula has succeeded to such a degree that it is impossible to

separate the fate of English prose from the genius of its great hacks. The best of English novels, for example, are sprawling, untidy affairs, punctuated by unlikely events, and unwieldy of interpretation—which is what makes them seem "real." It should not surprise us then that Wain's new novel owes its fascination to just this roughness of texture.

Like the Canterbury tale whose name it borrows, *The Pardoner's Tale* is two stories in one. Dowdy and middle-aged Gus Howkins, hero of the initial chapter, turns out in the second to be only a character in a novel by d. and m.-a. Giles Hermitage. Yet no sooner has Giles invented a mysterious young lover for his alter ego than a parallel mystery woman appears to similarly complicate his own life—and by corollary, the still evolving "life" of Gus Howkins. The play between the two continually redoubles, ultimately leading to two endings per story—one hopeful, the other miserable. You pay your money and you choose your point of view.

Devious as these details are, they are altogether incidental to the pleasures of the telling; in fact, even Gus and Giles are incidental. It is John Wain who shines as the hero of his own novel. He has beaten the clock—enticed us into the game, and held us so captivated by his voice of a man desperate for a second chance at life that it becomes, word by word, our own.

—CAROLE COOK

The Last Voyage: Captain Cook's Lost Diary

by Hammond Innes

Knopf, 256 pp., \$8.95



Innes—His book is for the armchair salt.

HIMSELF A SAILOR as well as a novelist, Hammond Innes has invented the private journal that Captain James Cook might have kept on the luckless voyage which ended in his death 200 years ago in the Hawaiian Islands. On the whole, the simulation of the great English navigator's rather spare 18th-century language and spirit is convincing: The record could have belonged to the practi-

cal, intelligent man who refused to be daunted by the task he was set. The captain was sent to find a sea passage connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans across the top of North America or Siberia; but there was, of course, no such navigable passage. Having brought his ship *Resolution* up through the Bering Strait, he was blocked by a wall of ice. Gamely, he planned to try again the following summer and retreated meanwhile to Hawaii to wait out the harsh winter. Cook died there in a skirmish with the islanders over a stolen boat; he had, it seems, overestimated the awe in which he was held.

Although the author is unable to give such a methodical, pragmatic man a richly nuanced inner life, Innes packs the exterior circumstances with incident enough. This record of Cook's third long voyage over uncharted seas makes clear the magnitude of the problems the captain faced, whether keeping his men free from scurvy and thoughts of mutiny, the inhabitants of sheltering islands friendly, or his ship off dangerous rocks. An account to be prized by the armchair salt who likes to hear the winds moan and the timbers creak—but only as the logs in the fireplace spit.

—RALPH TYLER

The Pendulum and the Toxic Cloud: The Course of Dioxin Contamination

by Thomas Whiteside

Yale University Press

224 pp., \$15.00 cloth, \$4.95 paper

IN JULY OF 1976 a chemical plant explosion sent a pungent-smelling cloud wafting over the northern Italian town of Seveso. The cloud contained an estimated two to 11 pounds of the chemical dioxin, enough to make small animals sicken and die and to leave over 180 residents, mostly children, with cases of chloracne, a condition characterized by severe skin lesions, and possible damage to the internal organs and nervous system. Two years after the accident Thomas Whiteside visited Seveso and his report here is in some ways more chilling than the accident itself.

Incredibly, there has been no coordinated epidemiological study of the Seveso population, and decontamination efforts may simply have resulted in spreading the poisons over a wider area. In the meantime, children climbed fences to play in the sealed-off sector and homeowners smuggled out contaminated furniture, while other victims failed to report serious health problems because they were "ashamed." No doubt the range of personal reactions, including the guilt of some residents who had accepted bounties from the factory owners for keeping quiet about previous incidents, would make a fascinating study in disaster psychology. Whiteside,