

The Reeves and The Grotches

THE THURBER CARNIVAL—James Thurber—Harper (\$2.75).

Since his birth in Columbus, Ohio on "a night of wild portent and high wind in 1894," James Thurber has seemed to live in a world where the edges of reality are fuzzy, the edges of fantasy insanely sharp. The principal forces at work in this world are confusion, frustration, madness and doom, the final crack of which all Thurber characters seem constantly—and justifiably—to be expecting.

The focal character of most Thurber prose and drawings is a reticent, befuddled, thwarted little man who tries sadly to preserve himself and his reason against a practically worldwide onslaught. Grim psychiatrists, gadgets that "whir and whiz," erratic servants, domineering women, unfriendly dogs, ghosts, foreigners—all are in league to crush the Thurber Male. This harried biped, like Joyce's Leopold Bloom or Mann's Hans Castorp, represents 20th-Century Man. To Thurber's devotees, who rate him the greatest U.S. humorist since Mark Twain, his blankly exaggerated reports of their own qualms and misadventures are recognizable and (since nobody considers himself quite as badly off as a Thurber character) reassuring.

Flight from Reality. *The Thurber Carnival* is a well-edited selection of Thurber's

stuff (he selected it himself). Most of it appeared originally in the *New Yorker*. The anthology includes stories from *My World and Welcome to It*, *My Life and Hard Times* (his best book, reprinted complete), *The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze*, and drawings from *Fables for Our Time*, *The Owl in the Attic*, *Men, Women and Dogs*, and *The War Between Men and Women*.

Occasionally, a Thurber Male copes with dreadful reality by fleeing from it. Walter Mitty (*The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*) is, in his escape, the dauntless Commander Mitty ("Throw on the power lights! Rev her up to 8,500! We're going through!"). He is also the world-famed Dr. Mitty, taking over the crucial operation when other specialists are baffled, and the Defendant Mitty who is afraid of nobody.

The servants in Thurber's world are never servants one can deal with reasonably. They are agents of the devil, users of abracadabra, alarming in their slightest gesture. "They are here with the reeves," said Della, his colored maid. "The lawn is full of fletchers," she announced on another occasion. Barney Haller, the Thurber handy man, had "thunder following him like a dog." His language, like Della's, was from the nether world. "Dis morning bime by I go hunt grotches in de woods."

The Existence of Evil. Thurber is as sensitively aware of the existence of evil

—i.e., of stupidity and cowardice and self-love—as any American writer of his time. The knowledge pervades his lightest work; and in one small corner of his world, in such stories as *The Cane in the Corridor* and *The Breaking Up of the Winship*, evil unmasks itself in grim tragedy.

The goings on in Thurber's deceptively casual cartoons range from the neuroathenic to the pathological. But, like a psychic distorting mirror, they reflect reality—well-locked in the subconscious though it may be. Little boys bite little girls; men hear seals barking in the middle of the night; shapeless women spring into rooms crying, "I come from haunts of coot and hern." Doctors abandon restraint ("You're not my patient, you're my meat, Mrs. Quist!").

The Author supplies readers of his *Carnival* with an illuminating biographical sketch, *My Fifty Years with James Thurber* (he is 49, "but the publishers felt that 'fifty' would sound more effective"). "Not a great deal," says the autobiographer, "is known about his earliest years, beyond the fact that he could walk when he was four." After several years of newspaper work, he turned up on the *New Yorker* in the late '20s—starting out, according to *New Yorker* custom, as managing editor. He edited so unmanageably and wrote so well that he was soon made writer of the "Talk of the Town."

He left the staff some years ago to become a free-lance contributor. Because of his dim sight (one eye was ruined when, in boyhood, his brother accidentally shot an arrow into it) he has written comparatively little in the last two or three years. He is forced to draw on huge sheets of paper, wearing special glasses (*see cut*). His last big writing job was a play, *The Male Animal*, done in 1940 with Elliot Nugent. From time to time, he shows up at the *New Yorker* offices, to stand in the corridors and shout "Nuts!" He still tells friends that he is "being followed softly by little men padding along in single file, about a foot and a half high, large-eyed, and whiskered."

Writes Thurber: "Thurber goes on as he always has, walking now a little more slowly, answering fewer letters, jumping at slighter sounds. . . . He [moves] restlessly from one Connecticut town to another, hunting for the Great Good Place. There he plans to spend his days reading *Huckleberry Finn*. . . ."

Universal Cult

BHAGAVAD-GITA, *The Song of God*—translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood—Marcel Rodd Co. (\$1.50).

Ten years ago Christopher Isherwood was one of the most promising of younger English novelists, and a member of the radical, pacifist literary set sometimes known as "the Auden circle." Now, thinking seriously of becoming a swami (religious teacher), he is studying in a Hindu temple in Hollywood, Calif.

Much-traveled Author Isherwood's early novel, *The Last of Mr. Norris*



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JAMES THURBER

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(TIME, May 20, 1935), was a grisly, eye-witness account of British pro-Nazis in Berlin. His *Journey to a War* (with verse commentary by W. H. Auden) was a stark, unromanticized look at embattled China. Now this rebellious son of a British lieutenant colonel lives monastically with three other men and eight women in a small house adjoining the alabaster temple of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. He shares his income and the housework with his fellow students, and daily ponders the teachings of his master, Swami Prabhavananda.

"Peace, Peace, Peace!" Three times each day Isherwood repairs to the temple, sits cross-legged between grey-green walls on which are hung pictures of Krishna, Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, other great religious teachers. The swami enters bare-headed, wearing a long, bright yellow robe that sweeps the floor. He too sits cross-legged, pulls a shawl around him, and for ten minutes meditates in silence. Then in a ringing bass he chants a Sanskrit invocation, repeats it in English, ending with the words, "Peace, Peace, Peace!"

This dispassionate ceremony is the ritual of a mystical order of which slight, agreeable, cigaret-smoking Swami Prabhavananda is the Los Angeles leader. It is an outgrowth of a small monastic community founded in India late last century in the name of Sri Ramakrishna, one of the great teachers of Indian Vedanta, the underlying philosophy of Indian religion.

Mystical Movement. Of late, Prabhavananda's teaching has attracted enough expatriate English literary men to create a minor but noteworthy literary movement. Novelist Aldous Huxley, ultra-sophisticate of the 1920s, studied privately with the swami. His latest novel, *Time Must Have a Stop*, bears the marks of his study. Erudite Philosopher Gerald Heard (*Pain, Sex and Time; The Ascent of Humanity*), son of an Anglican churchman and a professed agnostic since youth, was another private pupil. Like slick Manhattan Dramatist John van Druten, (*Voice of the Turtle, I Remember Mama*), both contribute to the society's magazine *Vedanta and the West*, now co-edited by Isherwood. Larry, the dissatisfied young hero of Somerset Maugham's current best-selling novel, *The Razor's Edge*, whose search for faith ended in Vedanta, is said to be modeled on Isherwood.

Vedanta (less correctly but more frequently called Hinduism) is the philosophy derived from the oldest religious writings in the world: the collection of ancient Indian scriptures called the *Vedas*. The common basis of India's many religious sects, it teaches the fundamental sameness of all religion. Its basic tenets are: 1) that man's inner nature is divine; 2) that his purpose on earth is to manifest this eternally hidden divinity; 3) that truth is universal.

Hindu New Testament. The *Bhagavad-Gita*, often called the Hindu New Testament, is a majestic poem, expounding the teachings of Vedanta in an epic dialogue between Sri Krishna (a manifestation of

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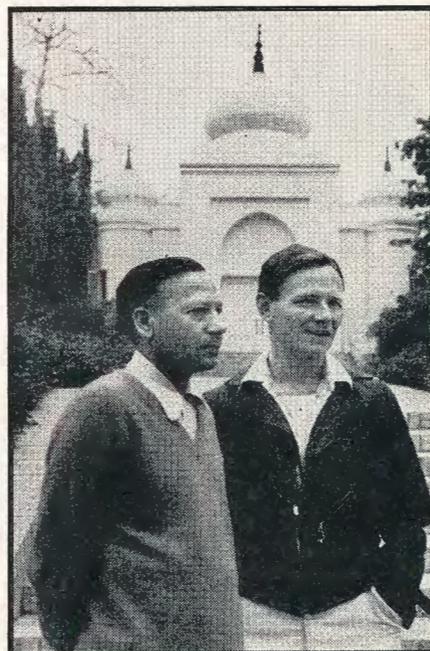
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God) and an Indian prince called Arjuna (TIME, July 3). "It is," says Isherwood, "one of the world's greatest religious documents. In simple, timeless words, which belong to no one language, race or epoch, incarnate God speaks to man, His friend. He tells him of his own divine nature, of pardon and mercy, of strength and knowledge and love."

To preserve the everlasting simplicity of the *Gita's* words, Novice (*Brahmachari*) Isherwood (who knows no Sanskrit) and his teacher have collaborated on this latest translation, designed to bring its message closer to "the ordinary, perplexed men and women of today." The result is a distinguished literary work.

Simpler and freer than other English translations (three of which have been published in the past year), the translation compresses the long passages of epic poetry into a 15-page introduction, the

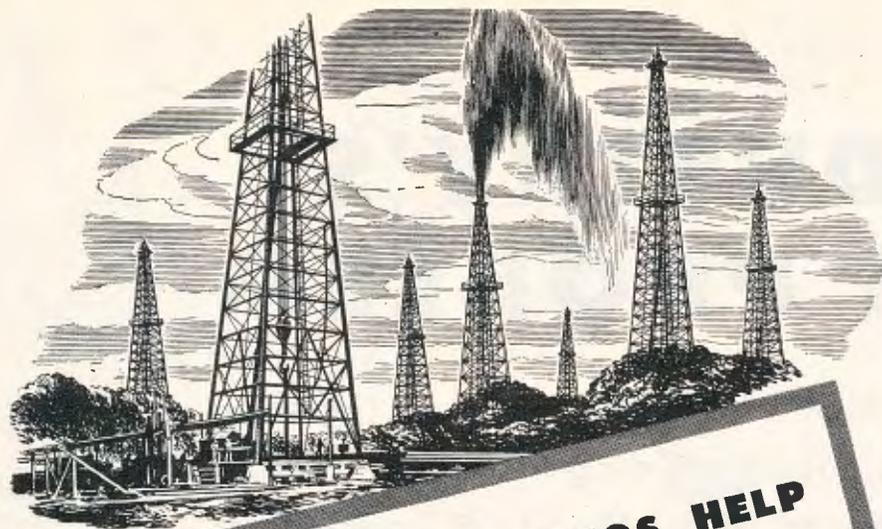


PRABHAVANANDA & ISHERWOOD
In their world, tranquillity.

recondite arguments of Vedantic mythology into a brief appendix. Between the two, the translators have presented a version of the great dialogue that does some violence to the original flavor of the poem, but makes it easily understandable to the common reader.

Sanskrit without Pain. In descriptions of Yoga techniques and Hindu cosmology, where there are no adequate English equivalents for many of the terms, the Sanskrit words are left in the text. This device makes for both obscurity and bad poetry. But Isherwood's lucid prose, in passages of the *Gita* that offer calm, unhurried advice, compensates for such lapses: "Poise your mind in tranquillity. . . . Desire for the fruits of work must never be your motive in working. . . . Work done with anxiety about results is far inferior to work done without such anxiety, in the calm of self-surrender."

The Isherwood-Prabhavananda transla-



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tion is one which, as Aldous Huxley remarks in a preface, "can be read not merely without that dull, aesthetic pain inflicted by all too many English translations from the Sanskrit, but positively with enjoyment." It may help U.S. readers to understand not only the *Gita* itself, but also its influence on American letters through one of its greatest U.S. admirers, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

In the Old West

WESTERN WORDS—Ramon F. Adams—*University of Oklahoma Press* (\$3).

When an oldtime cowboy wanted to tell how drunk he had been, he said he was so drunk he couldn't hit the ground with his hat in three throws. The cowboy liked his coffee strong. If a horseshoe would sink in it, he said, it wasn't ready. He called all coffee Arbuckle, after the brand commonly used on the range.

Western Words is a dictionary of 3,000 expressions, many still current, "of the range, cowcamp and trail." It begins with *ace in the hole*, meaning either a shoulder holster or a hideout, and it ends with *zorrillas*, cattle of the early longhorn breed. One of the liveliest and most informal dictionaries since Dr. Johnson's, it is also one of the easiest to read. It gives a vivid characterization of cowboys and their life.

The oldtime cowboy was extremely ceremonious and intensely democratic. In the presence of ladies, he referred to a bull as an animal. He referred contemptuously to fistfights as *dogfights*. Oldtimers in the cattle country were said to be *alkalied* when "they knowed all the lizards by their first names, except the younger set." A young fellow, or a small man, was said to be *fryin' size*. When the cowboy got drunk he liked to have everyone know it—he said he *cut his wolf loose*. Once four young cowpunchers rode their horses into a New Mexico saloon where an Eastern drummer was having a drink. When the drummer complained to the bartender that the horses jostled him, the bartender snorted, "What the hell y'u doin' in here afoot, anyhow?"

When two friendly riders met on the trail, they stopped and sooner or later swung off their horses, squatted on their bootheels, began scratching in the dirt with broomweed stalks. "A cowhand kin jes' talk better when he's a-scratchin' in the sand like a hen in a dung heap." This was known as *cow geography*, from the pictures they drew on the ground.

Westerners carried *five beans in the wheel*—five cartridges in their guns. Some—mighty unpopular—"were so tough they'd growed horns and was haired over." Their gun battles were called *corpse and cartridge occasions*; the aftermath "looked like beef day at an Injun agency." A bad man was a *curly wolf*, a *bandido*, *cat-eyed*, or just a plain killer. Sometimes a curly wolf could stay *on the dodge*, among the willows, or *lookin' over his shoulder* for quite a spell. But once caught, his fate was sealed. With a rope around his neck he was *hung up to dry*, or *exalted*.