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 crash 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 desperately to preserve himself and his reason against a practically worldwide onslaught. Grim psychiatrists, gadgets that “whir and whine and whizz,” 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 of his kind, he is, in his escape, the dauntless Commander Mitty (“Throw on the power lights! Rev up to 8,500! We’re going through!”). He is also the world-tamed 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 “tiptoeing, 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—as 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 going on in Thurber’s deceptively casual cartoons range from the neurasphonic 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 rowdy singing. “I come here hants of coot and horn.” 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 ’30s—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 paddling along in single file about a foot and a half high, large-eyed, and whiskered.”

Writers Thurber: “Thurber goes on as he always has, walking now a little more slowly, answering fewer letters, jumping at slightest 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


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

JAMES THURBER

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THE MEDAL SCOTCH OF THE WORLD

(TIME, May 20, 1935), was a grisly, eyewitness account of British pre-Nazi’s 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, cigarette-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 (Pairs, Sex and Time: The Ascent of Humanity), son of an Anglican churchman and a professed agnostic since youth, was another private pupil. Like sick Manhattan Dramatist John van Druten, (Voice of the Turtle, I Remember Mama), both contributed 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 eternal 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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PRABHAVANANDA & ISHERWOOD
In their world, tranquility.

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-Prabhananda transla-
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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 alkaliized when “they knew 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 groved horns and was hairer over.” Their gun battles were called corps 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.

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.

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