

night the motion picture theatres bloom with pictures meant to stir the risibilities; whatever one's own reaction may be, they accomplish their desired purpose for any number of people. Almost every magazine contains at least one short story meant to make life happier, so why is it that such a long procession of novels stalk by without a smile?

It is not because we have not the humorists. We are known as a nation of humorists; our funny men are numbered by the hundreds. Scores of newspapers have their own official funny man who is hired to harp on human frailty. In fact there is an official organization of American newspaper humorists so large and flourishing that it has its annual convention at which members from all over the United States convene and talk over, no doubt, the style of spring humor as the dressmakers do that of their own particular line. The country flourishes with newspaper and magazine humorists who, given a few hours, can turn out a comparatively acceptable concoction on almost any assigned topic. There are literally hundreds of scenario writers attached to the staffs of motion picture producing companies busily conceiving humor for the movies; there are scores of paragraphers turning the day's news into tidbits; there are hundreds turning thistle-down into short stories; but season after season goes by without a notable humorous novel. Surveying the field of sustained narration from a distance, it is as barren as Gobi. Six novels a day are published in this country and yet year after year goes by without a humorous novel worthy of the name appearing among the phantom caravan. Why?

Humorous books appear and when they do they are generously pro-

## PUTTING HUMOR INTO A NOVEL

By Homer Croy

EACH season sees any number of plays produced on Broadway that are comedies; they may vary in the amount of mirth they inspire, but all in all they are comedies. And each

claimed. But they are not novels. A "The Young Visitors" appears from time to time to become a sensation on both sides of the Atlantic, to stir to immediate action Opal Whiteley and a host of lesser prodigies; but the appearance of a humorous novel is still an event.

It is not because there is "no money in it" — usually the closing retort to a mooted question. There is nothing that pays better. One humorous novel will make its author independent. It is not because of the competition of the movies, for immediately the appearance of a successful novel is a torch in the night to the motion picture people. Often the telephone rings before the first review appears, so closely do the readers for the film company check up on current fiction. It is not because there is no demand for the humorous novel; it is not because this type is not financially a triumph. The reason goes deeper.

It digs down to psychology. Suppose a person is seized with a humorous idea; suppose he is seized with the most humorous idea in the world. Just the bare telling of it, without any of the graces of literary maturity, throws his hearers into wild and uncontrollable paroxysms of laughter. The author secludes himself, expecting to come out a Figure. In a fine frenzy he begins converting the idea to paper. At the end of his fine fever he comes out, but he has only a short story — not a novel. An incident, no matter how humorous, can hold over only a chapter or two. After the incident has completed itself — what then? Even the most ingenious of authors cannot expand a short story to thirty chapters. Ellis Parker Butler knew better than to introduce a secondary plot and a youthful love affair into "Pigs Is Pigs" and try to get two dollars

for it. He kept it as it belonged — a short story.

The explanation is that a humorous idea is merely the beginning of a humorous novel. A funny short story may deal with a humorous situation, but a humorous novel is based on a humorous character. The situation grows out of the character; the character takes the lead; the situations come second.

"Huckleberry Finn" is the greatest humorous novel this country has ever produced — immeasurably superior to "Tom Sawyer", which after the first two fifths drops down into pure melodrama. All of the scenes of distinction come before the murder. After that it is pretty cheap writing. "Tom Sawyer" lives from its first early episodes and from the fact that it is a companion piece to "Huckleberry Finn". In "Huckleberry Finn" there is more than an amusing introductory; the story teems with humorous situation after humorous situation — all strung together on a line of piercing philosophy. The humorous situations are but backgrounds to show up the foibles and shortcomings of human nature.

The plot for a humorous story may be told to any competent literary craftsman and be made into an acceptable product, but the plot of a humorous novel means nothing except to the one person who gives it his philosophy and his soul. Short story writers are constantly accused of stealing each other's plots and go to lengths to guard their ideas. But the author of a humorous novel can publish the scenario of his story in the daily papers and then go contentedly to his study with never a fear that it will be filched from him. The story will live only when it bears his interpretation of character and breathes his personality. If the

author hasn't something more than the situations, he has no book. The person who starts out to write a humorous novel has sawed the limb off before he begins. The humor of a novel is the seasoning; it is never the bill of fare.

All of the outstanding American humorous novels are primarily those of character: Huckleberry Finn, David Harum, Mrs. Wiggs, and Willie Baxter in "Seventeen". It is difficult to recall the plots in these novels, but the characters are as real as many we have known in a less fanciful world. In humorous short stories, such as O. Henry's, the plot is all in all. Personally, I consider "Huckleberry Finn", "Seventeen", and "The Real Diary of a Real Boy" the three most humorous books written in America — and "Seventeen" is a novel only by a narrow squeak, while the latter is not a novel in any sense.

It is strange that among so many of our novelists — and eminently successful ones — little or no humor exists. Never in my reading of Zane Grey have I come across anything that I couldn't read in a club car without arousing the distrust of my fellow passengers; and never but once in reading Theodore Dreiser have I laughed — and that at his study of Muldoon in one of his essays. It is a pity that such men, with their distinct character portrayal and their command of situation, should never be able to put tongue in cheek.

With all our wealth of humorists it would seem that a dependable number of humorous novels ought to come each season, but it is not so. Of Ring W. Lardner, Don Marquis, Irvin S. Cobb, Edgar A. Guest, Oliver Herford, Franklin P. Adams, H. C. Witwer, Stephen Leacock, Gelett Burgess, George Ade, Wallace Irwin, Heywood Broun, Thomas L. Masson, and Ellis

Parker Butler, not one has written a humorous novel.

The only writers who can be counted on to turn out a humorous novel of parts are Harry Leon Wilson, Joe Lincoln, and Booth Tarkington.