

THE EDITOR RECOMMENDS—

Four American Realists

FINDING no novel red hot from the presses that demands a reading, I turn to four slightly cooled. These four, in a measure, justify themselves, though only one seems to me a fine literary performance and only one other even approaches the standards of a good novel. The four are "West of the Water Tower", "Family", "Through the Wheat", and "Within These Walls". "Through the Wheat" (Scribner) by Thomas Boyd is the best of the lot, though it is by no means a novel. As a picture of the war it is far better than Dos Passos's "Three Soldiers", and far more terrible because it is well rounded. Here is the simple report of a simple soul and those like him around him. He fights, he drinks, he reads letters from home. His officers are now brutal, now remarkably tender human beings. The war to him is a vast, curious dream, pierced by "damn's" and the itch of vermin. If someone could have given Willa Cather Boyd's army hero William Hicks, for the last half of "One of Ours", we should have had a great American novel. Thomas Boyd writes competently. Occasionally he indulges in a passage that has a wistful poetical quality which stands out effectively from the drab colors of his report. The book is just that: a highly commendable report. It might all be true—perhaps it is. It is less a novel than "Three Soldiers" because it lacks the passionate drive and purpose of that onesided picture; it lacks the incident and color. Yet there is superb characterization in

"Through the Wheat", and there is beauty because there is such noble truth. Willa Cather's hero discovers his soul in the war, Thomas Boyd's hero finds his soul mummified, yet somehow transfigured. There is much difference between Mr. Dos Passos and Mr. Boyd—the difference between a sensitive propagandist and a gallant hearted reporter. There is all the difference in the world between Thomas Boyd and Willa Cather—the difference between a man who knows and a woman who doesn't. But since the large public that has read "One of Ours" finds in it what that large public chooses to believe of war, I suspect that "Through the Wheat" will pass by it unnoticed.

The anonymous "West of the Water Tower" (Harper) which has been hailed by various critics as one of the finest novels of recent publication, is a mediocre piece of realistic writing, a commonplace and sentimental story. Apparently any author can achieve a *succès d'estime* these days if he will say: "Little Johnny's father didn't tell him anything about sex, therefore thus and so. . . ." Compare "West of the Water Tower" with Walpole's "The Cathedral". They are curiously alike. If the author of the former had been faithful to his idea of an evangelical preacher brought low by his own self-righteousness, he might have prospered greatly. As it is, the characterization of the preacher, Adrian Plummer, is the best thing in the book. As for the style, it is that curiously dry and unilluminated method of reporting that passes for fine writing under the name of

modern realism. There is no memorable line. There is no face raised to beauty. There is no great description because there is no penetration beneath the surface of things. As for the question of sex matters handled frankly, I for one do not mind such allusions if they add to the story or are made beautiful because of their significance. Neither of these excuses do I find for the treatment of sex in "West of the Water Tower".

"Family" (Stokes) by Wayland Wells Williams seems to me to be an excellent novel, though a trifle too long for its theme. The picture of the grande dame of a Connecticut town ruling her rebellious brood is finely drawn. The young people are real, the events interesting. There is excellent dialogue, there is good suspense. This is certainly one of the best written books by a young American that we have had recently. Perhaps the reason may be found in the following paragraphs, which point Williams's own artistic creed.

"You like romance, don't you?" said Nathan.

"I do not. That is, I do, but I don't demand it. I like both romance and realism, but not just photography."

Nathan briefly wanted to ask why, then, she had a lifesize photograph of the Roman Forum over the dining room sideboard. He said that the trouble with romance was that it was improbable, and with realism that it was boring.

"Yes," said Fortune drearily, "but then life is like that too. It's both realistic and romantic — improbable and boring. Oh, I can understand what makes people want romance! A little tin toy world, with every thing happening as it ought to!"

Nathan at this point became conscious of a change in her. It was deep and subtle, and puzzled him. "I should say that your life did go pretty much that way, Fortune."

"But of course it doesn't."

"I mean, it seems as though you *made* it that way. . . ."

There is just one thing that annoys.

It seems too bad to quarrel with such a good book but, occasionally, I feel that the author gets in the way of his own thesis, the thesis that "Family" cannot, in the long run, rule life. There is an innate snobbishness in the following paragraph that no author should attribute to his hero. Besides, one does not talk to one's coachman this way, does one?

Miss Hale stood on the curb, her hand on the front door of the car. "Would you care to come back and eat some of the steak with us?" she said. "We'd like to have you. I know Father'll be delighted to talk motors with you." . . .

"And who may that young lady be?" said Tim as they drove home for Nathan to change.

"A prominent member of the middle classes. The ruling, or capitalistic classes, Tim. Your rulers, as well as mine."

"I wouldn't mind takin' the pay of such," said Tim. "Gorry, and maybe I'll be after doin' it, one o' these days!" he finished with a nudge and fearful ogle.

For Rupert Hughes's power of holding interest I have the greatest respect. His stories rush. They are filled with color and passion. They are vivid and clear. They are expert in the handling of incident and character. Yet "Within These Walls" (Harper) seems to me both hasty and unpleasant. It was intended to be unpleasant, so much so that it has been praised by no less a person than Mr. Ben Hecht of Chicago. The theme is the same as that of Mr. Williams's "Family" — the effort of a proud man to conceal the realities of his household from the world. In this case there is a real skeleton — in the chimney instead of the closet. Murder and rape do not terrify Mr. Hughes. They fit into his scheme with great ease. His historical facts of old New York are well marshaled. There is a good deal of charm in the background of this story, as there is a good deal that

is not charming in its characters. Isn't it dangerous to handle so grim a theme with so dazzling and swift a touch? I think so. In some ways Mr. Hughes has written the skeleton of a great book. As it is, he has written a readable story, but an unpleasant and not a memorable one.

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