

A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

VARIETY versus INTENSITY

By Blanche Colton Williams

IF he wills to use his brain for filtering and decanting, the analyst of short stories may find a double reward. His may be the pleasure of the observer who notes the colorful fluctuation of the current; his, too, the acquisitions for his mental shelves. The pleasure becomes doubtful at times, and the stock questionably fills space

some of which might be better occupied. But the possession can never be wholly worthless; it may be priceless.

The ninth of Edward J. O'Brien's annual volumes transmits a polychrome current. It flows turbidly realistic in Ernest Hemingway's jockey story, "My Old Man"; bubbles darkly in Irvin Cobb's Harlem drama, "The Chocolate Hyena"; twinkles in the folktale of Margaret Prescott Montague, "The Today, Tomorrow". The stream glows

with the gipsy red of Konrad Berco-vici's "Seed", foams with the sea green of Bill Adams's "Way for a Sailor", passes to the silver mist of Dana Burnet's "Beyond the Cross", shines lambent in Fannie Hurst's "Seven Candles", flames scarlet in Jean Toomer's "Blood-Burning Moon". These colors are distinct; the result is a *pousse café*.

And the filtrate is as it should be for the year 1923. Writers of the short story in America can reflect no national homogeneity—as, for example, the writers of England reflect it in the same editor's "The Best British Stories of 1923"—but must reveal a heterogeneity of race, interests, and background. Roumanian, Russian, Englishman, American Negro, American White—all these contribute to one of the most diversified and therefore most representative of yearbooks.

Fifteen of the twenty stories concern themselves with subjects other than sex; and whereas I wish the compiler had found an even greater proportion, it is a significantly encouraging sign. Though it will be observed that the fifth annual volume of "O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories" reprints no story here reprinted, it lists among the best a number in common with "The Best Short Stories of 1923". Conceivably, two or three volumes of equal excellence might be added to these collections.

John T. Frederick's book is almost wholly of the middle west. Five of the thirteen authors included were born in Iowa; three others studied at the state university; three others hail from the same region. This summary explains the continuity and the intensity of effect, the emphasis of tone and color—sombre and grey—relieved by only two stories. If one truism persists after reading this volume in

connection with that of Edward J. O'Brien, it is that writers belong to their epochs and their localities. The first proclaims a multi-peopled America; the second illustrates the stamp of a particular section.

These tales unroll the vastness of the west, its rivers and leagues of land. They are of life in the rough, in an era succeeding that of conquest. Brave adventures of the pioneer have given place to drudgery of the farm, to existence dull and sordid, without beauty or room for beauty. The authors are successors to Hamlin Garland; they are near relations of Russian pessimists. If Henry Goodman's Thomas captures the spirit of the rebel river, he is beaten by brutalized humanity. "The Prairie", according to Walter J. Muilenberg, is a demon waste which reduces to clods the man and woman circled by its too distant horizon. The hero of "The Mixing", by Don Harrison, pays for his glimpse of a fusion of work and beauty, with his life. Mary Arbuckle's story bitterly presents a tragedy of waste; Ruth Suckow's "Uprooted" ends the epic of an aged pair, their conflict with the land and the years.

To be sure, there is hope. The resilience of youth, in the companion piece to "The Prairie", the simple fellowship in Miss Suckow's "A Rural Community", the escape of Raymond Knister's Len, and the human quality in "Knowing Dad" counteract, to a degree, the drabness and the despair. Moreover, the consciousness of need points the way to alleviation. And there is a gush of humor in Raymond Weeks's "Arkansas". I have read of only one pet so amusing as a pig which flies like the wind and eventually bears off her master. The fun in this story, like that in Miss Montague's "The Today, Tomorrow"—of the O'Brien vol-

ume — induces speculation over the possibilities of a new folk literature.

But in spite of the humorous closing flash and the hopeful undertone, the reader carries away a final impression of a setting that dominates implacably its people.

The Best Short Stories of 1923 and The
Yearbook of the American Short Story.
Edited by Edward J. O'Brien. Small,
Maynard and Co.
Stories from "The Midland". Edited by
John T. Frederick. Alfred A. Knopf.