

IN BRIEF

THE SEVEN SLEEPERS AND OTHER POEMS. By Mark Van Doren. Henry Holt and Company. \$2.50.

Written in the Emersonian transcendental tradition, these poems have as their main theme the search for changeless universal law, the attributes of which emerge in meditations concerning such subjects as eternity, authority, nature, and man. "Consult the shown, / Believe in the unknown." The trouble with most of the 104 poems in this collection is that the ideas are superimposed on the poems. Theme and language therefore lack logical and imaginative interconnection. The metaphors are often forced or so drawn out that they neutralize each other; and series of subordinate clauses and repetitious constructions, earmarks of hasty composition, blunt and obscure the meaning. With a few notable exceptions—April, 1942, or Down World, for instance—Mr. Van Doren is at his best when he writes about details of intimate experience, as in some half-dozen poems in the section called *The Double Life*. They are charming, affecting, and lucid.

YEARS OF THIS LAND: A GEOGRAPHICAL HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES. By Hermann R. Muelder and David M. DeLo. D. Appleton-Century Company. \$2.50.

What were the natural forces that in combination produced the mountains, valleys, plains, waterways, mineral deposits, and forests of the section of the earth that became the United States, and how did they influence the settlement and development of the country by European immigrants? And what in turn have Americans done to the land in their rapid exploitation of its resources? A historian and a geologist, both professors at a Midwestern college, have cooperated in answering these questions, and this notably stimulating little volume is the result. The Committee on American History may disapprove of it because it is short on dates, but alert teachers of the social sciences will seize on it as lively and profitable reading for their students. The maps and illustrations are excellent.

GERMANS IN THE CONQUEST OF AMERICA. By Germán Arciniegas. The Macmillan Company. \$2.50.

This is a good introduction to history as Latin Americans like it: lively, stimu-

lating, very personal, and perhaps a little overweighted for the sake of the argument. The story of the expeditions to the New World financed by the German banking houses of Fugger and Welser makes interesting reading, and the simpler imperialism of the sixteenth century is not uninteresting. Whether it demonstrates, as the author implies, that Spaniards are essentially tougher and more splendid than Germans, and vagabonds more apt to found an empire than bankers, the reader can decide for himself. The intimation of a parallel with twentieth-century Nazi penetration in South America is more questionable; that is the sort of simplification of history which prevents real understanding of either the past or the present.

FILMS

TARDILY, I arch my back and purr deep-throated approval of "The Curse of the Cat People," which I caught by pure chance, one evening, on a reviewer's holiday. Masquerading as a routine case of Grade B horrors—and it does very well at that job—the picture is in fact a brave, sensitive, and admirable little psychological melodrama about a lonely six-year-old girl, her inadequate parents, a pair of recluses in a neighboring house, and the child's dead, insane mother, who becomes the friend and playmate of her imagination. Since you have probably heard about it already from other reviewers, and since it is the sort of picture anyhow which deserves to give one the pleasure of personal discovery, I will not do more than say that dozens of the details are as excellent as the whole intention. Certain confusions in the plot—especially one scene in which the imaginary playmate, by pinning a gift to her gown, momentarily seems to categorize herself as a mere studio wraith—suggests that the people who made the film worked out two versions, one with conventional supernatural trimmings, the other, the far from conventional story they got away with. I was rather pleased than not, incidentally, by the trick, or accident, or both, which kept me and the audience uncertain, clear to the end, whether the ghost was a "real" ghost or the far more real fantasy of the child. In the same way I liked the ambiguous melodrama about the daft old actress and her tortured daughter, in the sinister house; though here I would have liked even better the much purer, quieter realism

which they would have achieved if they had taken their key from the wonderfully chosen house itself. I wish that the makers of the film, and RKO, might be given some special award for the whole conception and performance of the family servant, who is one of the most unpretentiously sympathetic, intelligent, anti-traditional, and individualized Negro characters I have ever seen presented on the screen. And I hope that the producer, Val Lewton, and the rest of his crew may be left more and more to their own devices; they have a lot of taste and talent, and they are carrying films a long way out of Hollywood.

Even so, they have things to learn. This had every right to be a really first-rate movie; but good as it is, it is full of dead streaks—notably the writing, directing, and playing of the parts of the parents and the kindergarten teacher—and there are quite a few failures of imagination and of taste. The people with whom I saw the film—a regular Times Square horror audience—were sharply on to its faults and virtues. When the Ideal Playmate (Simone Simon) first appeared to the imagination of the infant in a dress and a lascivious lighting which made her façade look like

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a relief map from *What Every Young Husband Should Know*, they laughed their heads off. They laughed again, with tender and perceptive spontaneity, when, confronted by snobbery, the little girl caught her shoulders into a bewildered, instinctively pure shrug of distaste. And when the picture ended and it was clear beyond further suspense that anyone who had come to see a story about curses and were-cats should have stayed away, they clearly did not feel sold out, for an hour they had been captivated by the poetry and danger of childhood, and they showed it in their thorough applause.

That is, I grant, a specialized audience, unobstreperous, poor, metropolitan, and deeply experienced. The West Times Square audience is probably, for that matter, the finest movie audience in the country (certainly, over and over, it has proved its infinite superiority to the run of the "art-theater" devotees—not to mention, on paper which must brave the mails, the quality and conduct of Museum of Modern Art film audiences). As long as such an audience exists, no one in Hollywood has a right to use the stupidity of the public for an alibi; and I suspect that a few more films as decent and human as this one would indicate that there is a very large and widely distributed audience indeed for good films.

JAMES AGEE

RECORDS

THE Budapest Quartet's performance of Beethoven's Opus 132 in Columbia's new set (545; \$5.50) is a superb statement of the work; but its recorded sound, though spacious and clear and bright, is cold and hard in moderate sonorities, brash and harsh as it gets louder, strident in fortissimo, and left my ears aching at the end. Also, poor balance destroys the effect of one of the great moments that I described last week—the moment, in the middle of the second movement, where the melody of the first violin, at a great height and as though at a great distance, conveys a vision of a celestial joy, as recorded, that melody is blanketed by the figuration of the second violin. And some of the breaks between record-sides are so placed in the music as to be unusually disturbing. On the other hand the surfaces of my copy are quieter than surfaces have been in a long time.

Columbia also offers Brahms's

"Schicksalslied" ("Song of Fate"), sung in English, for no good reason, by the Westminster Choir with the New York Philharmonic-Symphony under Bruno Walter (Set X-223, \$2.50). The music is only for the fanatical Brahms-lover that I was once but am no longer; the performance seems to have been good, but while the recorded sound of the orchestra is natural and agreeable, that of the chorus is distorted and shureky. What I said about the surfaces of the Beethoven set hold for this one.

For its record classic drawn from its catalogue Columbia has chosen Stravinsky's own performance of his "Sacre du printemps" with the New York Philharmonic-Symphony (set 417, \$4.50). It is a magnificent performance of this powerful work, and the cold, hard clarity of the recorded sound—the best that Columbia has achieved with the New York Philharmonic—happens to be appropriate to the character of the music. The surfaces of the new pressing are not as quiet as those of the original pressing, but are markedly quieter than surfaces have been.

Tchaikovsky, who loved Mozart's music above all other, wrote once in his diary. "Of course, in loving all of Mozart, I shall not begin insisting that each unimportant piece of his music is a *chef-d'oeuvre*. No! I know, for example, that not one of his sonatas is a great composition. Nevertheless, I love every one of his sonatas because it is his, because his sacred breath was breathed into it." This is the attitude one can feel for a great many works of Mozart that are the uninteresting products of a skilful craftsman trying to earn a living—among them the Divertimento K.563 for violin, viola, and cello that Heifetz, Primrose, and Feuermann recorded for Victor (Set 959; \$4.50). For the most part—except for the charming minuet movement—it goes through the motions of musical activity without anything really happening; but we are aware that these motions—the characteristic turns of phrase and cadences and so on—are the motions of Mozart's mind, even if this mind is not deeply engaged in them; and once in a while we hear something like the passage at the beginning of the development in the first movement (middle of the first record-side) where the modulations are as bold and the effect as powerful as they are at the same point in the great Piano Concerto K.595. There was a Columbia set of an exquisite ensemble performance by the Pasquier Trio; the Victor set gives us a good performance

by three solo virtuosos restraining their usual tendencies to command the stage. In the lively movements Heifetz plays with the simplicity of phrasing that has been evident in previous recorded performances in which he has appeared to be influenced by the impeccable musicianship of Feuermann; but in the slow movements there are the fussy swells and the archnesses of the normal Heifetz style. The recorded sound is excellent, except for a slight tipping of the balance toward the bass, and a few buzzes and rattles, and most of the surfaces are quieter than surfaces have been.

Victor also has issued a set (961; \$3.50) of a Sonata for organ on the 94th Psalm by Julius Reubke, a pupil of Liszt, who died in 1858 at the age of twenty-four. It is performed by E. Power Biggs, who contends that "like the poet Gray with his immortal 'Elegy,' Reubke with this one musical creation is assured of a place among the greatest of the romantic composers, and becomes a worthy successor to Bach himself in the developing stream of organ literature." Mr. Biggs exaggerates; and whereas I can value in an inferior work of Mozart the impress of the mind that gave us his great works, I cannot value in this sonata the impress of the mind of Liszt that I don't like even in Liszt's own pretentious works. Again I must wonder at the original decision to record the work when so many greater things were still unrecorded, and even more at the decision now to devote to it the materials, plant, and labor that are insufficient for the great things already in the catalogue. The performance seems good and is well recorded.

On a single disc (11-8566; \$1) Victor has issued the superb Slavonic Dances Nos 1 and 3 of Dvorák in buoyant and brilliant performances by the St. Louis Symphony under Golschmann that are recorded with richness and spaciousness. On another (11-8568; \$1) are two songs of no great consequence—Duparc's "Chanson triste" and Matter's "Non è ver"—which are agreeable to listen to as sung by John Charles Thomas. And on still another (11-8567; \$1) is an Etude of Liapunov, a Caucasian dance entitled "Lesghinka," of which Brailovsky plays the brilliant fast parts without brilliance and the quieter middle part in an excessively mannered style.

As for the set of Frederick Stock's orchestral version of Bach's Prelude and Fugue in E flat for organ—that requires extended comment, which it will get next time.

B. H. HAGGIN

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