

Getting On In The World

THESE BOOK CLUBS

Publishers are in business to make money—for themselves and their authors. They must sell books, and they try like all get out to sell as many as possible. One selling device that is to them as good as to cigarettes is the book-of-the-month club idea.

Through it, they manage to get the public's hard earned money for their products. Through it, more importantly, they manage their writers manage to influence people as much if not more than the movies, to orientate their thoughts, and form opinions.

Now modern books are many. Hundreds are published every day.

They are written by men and women who wish to make a living at it, and who wish to make as good a living as possible. So they put into their books the kind of stuff that will sell by shocking readers, by surprising them, by overwhelming them with odd information, by pleasing their vanity or tickling their fancy. The result is not conducive to learning, to developing sound national intelligence, to making people think.

The harm is not always in the books themselves. It lies in the lack of a background of knowledge, whereby a reader can judge with some measure of fairness to himself and the author the latter's thought or lack of it.

Historical facts must be dug up and it's hard work, too hard, frequently, for the money-making author. Philosophical truths must be learned the hard way. They are

too difficult to be popularized. The truths of science, art, politics, economics, of all the humanities likewise.

Now all these things have been written about through the years by men whose sole motive was not to make a living, but to learn the truth and tell it. Their books live on, just as the Bible is imperishable. To read their writings, to know their thoughts, to learn of them seems the better course for the avid reading populace of today. They don't make headlines, best-sellers or book-of-the-month ratings, but they do make sense. They are money well spent.

Today the general opinion of rubber experts is that Buna-S is from 15 to 25 per cent better than natural rubber for average uses. William S. Parish, president, Standard Oil Company (N.J.)

Rev. Dr. Owen B. McGuire The Song of Bernadette

Every place I have gone for the past three months — and I have gone places — I was asked what I thought of Franz Werfel's "Song of Bernadette." Fortunately I was able to say: "I have not yet read the book."

I have now read it, but at present I do not intend to give an estimate of the book nor to explain after a first reading, the impression it has made on this one insignificant person. To do that one needs a period of reflection and a second reading to see if his first impressions were correct. Judging from the press notices I have read of it from Catholics, Protestants

and Unbelievers — I have not seen any estimate of it from the Jewish point of view — the book seems to have given general satisfaction. It has been praised especially as a great work of art.

It is that, certainly. I am not an artist, nor an art critic, nor do I pretend to be either. But when a person stands before Raphael's "St. John the Baptist," or before Murillo's "Immaculate Conception," he does not need to be a painter, or a competent critic of painting, to realize that he is in the presence of a great work of art.

COGENT REASON

"The Song of Bernadette" is a novel. Franz Werfel is also a poet; but he gives a very cogent reason why he put his work in the form of a novel. "In our epoch an epic poem can take no form but that of a novel." We can well assume that in the form of a poem the work could not have become a best-seller, nor at this date have reached a sale of over 400,000 copies. It is interesting to see that he still considers it to be "an epic poem." For that reason presumably, he has called it a "Song."

"The Song of Bernadette" is a great novel. My idea — which may be personal or peculiar — of a great novel is that of one which interests me intensely and grips my attention and holds it from the first page to the last. Some novels of Dickens I have in my youth read a third time, and could not lay one of them aside until I had read the last page. I took two full days to read "The Song of Bernadette" (I am a slow reader), going to bed each day at 1:00 A. M. instead of at 10:00 P. M. as I should and intended to do.

Quite different was my experience when I read another highly praised best-seller — "The Keys of the Kingdom." It bored me. I will certainly not read it a second time. I read it through because I thought it a duty, a form of penance. When I had finished "The Song of Bernadette," I was sorry it was not longer a thousand pages instead of 576, and my impulse was to begin a second reading right away. It is a great novel if these criteria are correct.

MAKES NO CHANGES

"The Song of Bernadette" is a historical novel. The author writes in his preface: "The Song of Bernadette" is a novel but not a fictive work. In face of the events here delineated, the sceptic reader will ask with better right than in the case of most historical epic narratives: "What is true? What is invented?" My answer is: All the memorable happenings which constitute the substance of this book took place in the world of reality. Since their beginning dates back no longer than eighty years, there beats upon them the bright light of modern history, and their truth has been confirmed by friend and foe and by cool observers through faithful testimonies. My story makes no changes in this body of truth."

As an historical novel it has a weakness which is inherent to all such works: however great they may be as works of art. This weakness is that unless the reader has a correct, namely an historically authenticated knowledge of the events delineated, he can never be quite sure of where he must draw the line between fact and fiction, where history ends and imagination begins, or to use the author's own words: "What is true? What is invented?" Franz Werfel has seen and noted this difficulty. He writes in his own defense: "I have exercised my right of creative freedom only where the work, as a work of art, demanded certain chronological condensations or where there was need of striking the spark of life from the hardened substance."

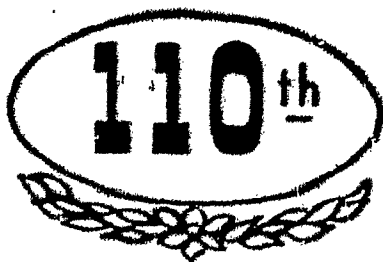
SUPERB DRAMATIST

That is well said. No one can justly find fault with his "right of creative freedom," and undoubtedly the success of his book is due principally to his splendid use of it. He has shown himself a superb dramatist in "striking the spark of life from the hardened substance" of the merely his-narrative. The many and very divergent characters he portrays are alive, men and women of flesh and blood, "people" as we meet them in everyday life, moved by passion, by self-interest, but also by self-denial, self-sacrifice, (as in the Nuns of Havers) by the love of God and their neighbors.

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