

Balancing the Books

A Master and a Mess

By Father John S. Kennedy

Francois Mauriac, who recently died, wrote one of his finest novels in his final months. It is "Maltaverne" (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, \$5.95), and has been translated from the French by Jean Stewart.

The narrator is Alain Gajac, who is 17 when he begins the journal which constitutes the book. Alain is one of two sons of a couple who have inherited much property. The father has died, and his estate has been willed to his offspring, but is managed by their mother. Now the elder son, Laurent, dies, and Alain becomes the sole heir of Maltaverne.

Left alone with his mother, he is engaged in battle with her. Her passion, as he sees it, is the steady enlargement of land holdings and the passing on of these holdings undiminished generation after generation. She is planning and seeking to control his life with this objective in view, and has decreed that he is one day to marry Jeannette Seris, considerably younger, whom he finds detestable.

Alain is also engaged in a struggle between belief and unbelief, spirit and flesh. He abominates his mother's religiosity and her version of the Church. The bourgeois Christian of 60 years ago is once again Mauriac's target.

Repulsed by this grotesque "goodness," Alain still yearns for God, still goes to Mass and the sacraments, has even thought of being a priest—an idea quickly quashed by his mother, to whom social responsibility means maintaining one's property and ordering the lives of one's tenants.

As has often been the case with Mauriac's characters, Alain is tormented by the apparent contradiction in human nature: "the close association of a soul, capable of knowing God, with an animal body, opened an abyss before one's mind." His mother has conveyed to him her view of sex as evil and disgusting. Yet its stirrings in him fascinate him.

While a student in Bordeaux, he becomes involved with a woman of 28. Does he love this Marie who has a somber history? At least he sees in her a means of escape from his mother and from the ordained marriage with the disagreeable Jeannette.

His mother learns of the affair, and brings to bear on him all her formidable battery of tricks. But he is unmoved until, after his mother has managed to see and talk with Marie, she reports to him that the young woman intends, once she is married to Alain, to improve the management of Alain's property. He flares up in resentment of this presumption: the land, after all, is his.

Still agonizing over this development, he has a part in an episode which results in the brutal death of Jeannette Seris.

just after he has discovered some attraction to her. The shock leads to his seeing his mother in a more favorable light. He breaks his ties to his native region. The novel ends with his prowling about Paris on voyages of discovery.

This novel is brief but complex, illuminating but troubling. Mauriac's mastery has never been better demonstrated. The oppressive feel of the Bazas region, with its fierce, pine-scented heat, its blazing days and breathless nights, seizes the reader. The gloomy houses close in about one. The tension never slackens. Yet all this is done with such simplicity, such dispatch. The action is fast and immediate, but the spiritual dimension predominates. It is not easy to believe that a man in the ninth decade of his life produced this marvel.

On the other hand, and very much on the other hand, we have Dodie Smith's "A Tale of Two Families" (Walker and Co. \$5.95), which some profess to find delightful. It is both silly and abhorrent.

It tells of two English married couples in their 40s: two sisters, May and June, who are the wives respectively of two brothers, George and Robert Clare. The George Clares are prosperous, the Robert Clares are unprosperous (and why not, since Robert is a book reviewer?). The well-off Clares rent a country house which has a cottage on its acres, and invite the Robert Clares to live in the cottage rent free.

The goings-on of these people are intended to be amusing, but they are actually distasteful. This is because, while supposedly civilized and nice, the characters are chillingly materialistic and heartless. They are frivolous, superficial, and smug. And they go on and on about food until fasting exerts an irresistible attraction.



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Movie Scheduled On Communism


Members of the Adult Education Committee of Our Lady of Mercy Church, Denise Road, Greece, will present a movie on Communism at 8 p.m., Thursday, Sept. 24, in the parish hall.

The movie, "Can We Afford Peace at Any Price?", has been obtained from the Cardinal Mindzenty Foundation, and local members of that organization will lead a discussion following it.

Renewal Group To Hear Priest

Father Francis MacNutt, a well-known contributor to national religious periodicals, will address persons interested in the "charismatic renewal" movement, Sunday, Sept. 27 at 7:15 p.m. in St. John the Evangelist Church, Humboldt Street, Rochester.

Father MacNutt is a recognized authority on "charismatic renewal" (Roman Catholic Pentecostalism) as well as the editor of "Preaching," a magazine for priests, and is executive secretary of the Catholic Homiletic Society.



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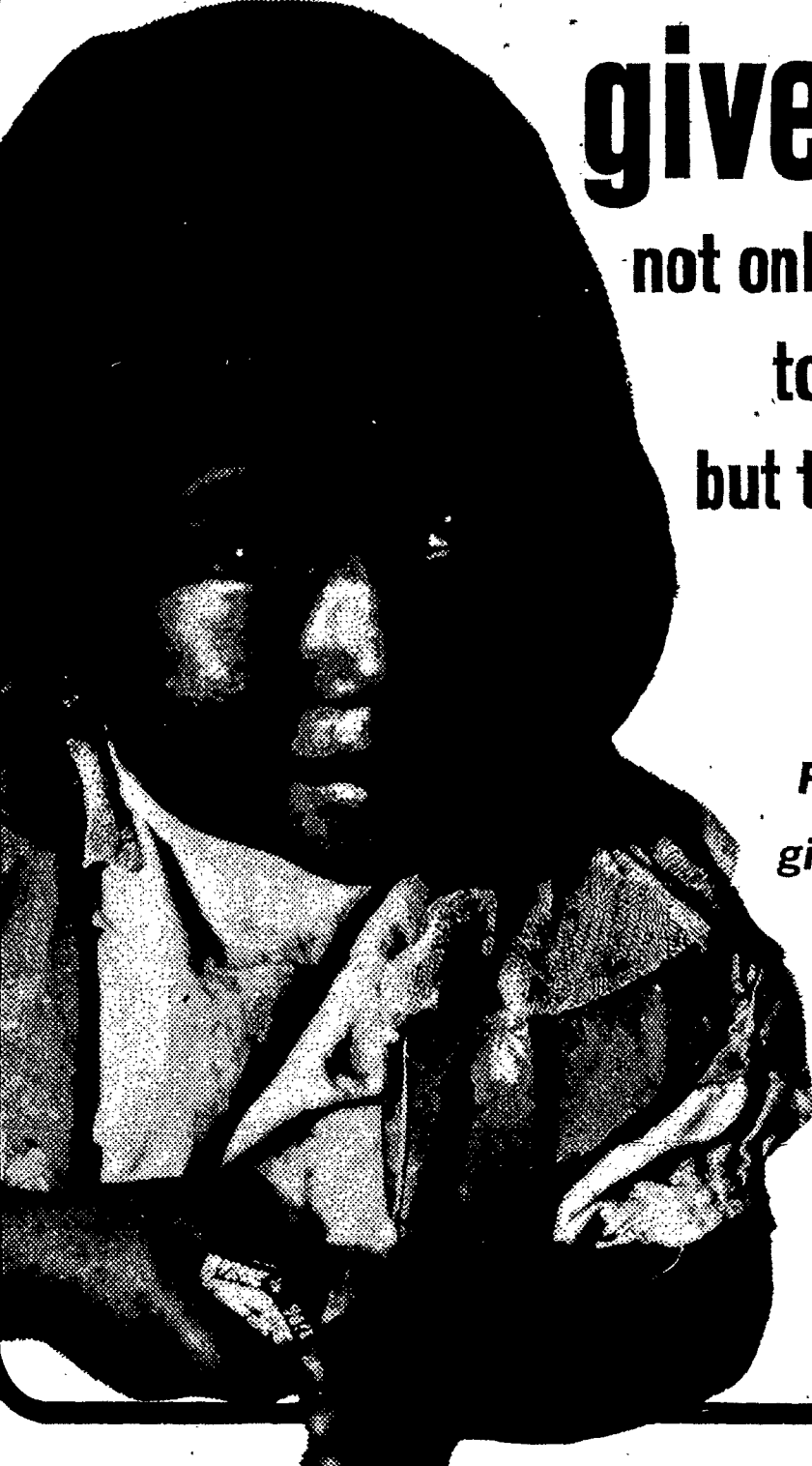
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