

# BOOKS and OTHER THINGS

=By ISABEL PATERSON=

Most probably Theodore Dreiser never read the "Confessions" of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. So much the better, if he did not. A model might have got between him and the facts of his own experience. As it is, he has duplicated Rousseau's feat of candor by holding the same objective in view—the whole truth.

Though it has enormous faults, of taste and technique, this record of Mr Dreiser's childhood and youth is likely to become an American classic of autobiography. He calls it "Dawn, (Liveright). It may become a sort of buried classic, like that curious chapter of Hazlitt's life, "Liber Amoris." But it will be there, built into the foundations of the American literary consciousness.

## The Ragged Edge

The faults are in scale, for the book is enormous, unorganized, a chaos out of which a world slowly creates itself. Here is not only Dreiser himself, and his large, strangely assorted family, but the unexplored anarchic fringe of American social life as it existed during two decades.

Flattering or not, this is a purely American chronicle. Even the German origin of Theodore Dreiser's father is representative; he was one among millions of immigrants in process of assimilation. The elder Dreiser may be said to have been destroyed by the process. Born in Germany, of decent bourgeois stock, the man had both the virtues and the defects of his class. He was a weaver by trade and an expert wool buyer. Fortune escaped him by a narrow margin. He had got a good start, owned a woollen mill; it was burned, a total loss, leaving him heavily in debt. His strict honesty made him feel obliged to pay off the money at any cost. And he had not the courage, or the understanding of the new industrial system in which he was involved, to start again on borrowed capital, doubly in debt. He went back to wage working. Of course he had condemned himself to a hopeless undertaking.

## A Paternal Anachronism

This bondage, imposed by both his integrity and his narrow views, naturally embittered him. Religion was his refuge. He was a devout Catholic, and became bigoted through misfortune. It preyed on his mind to see his children escaping from authority, in the ferment of the New World. He was an anachronism, and his family learned to disregard him.

The mother, a Pennsylvania girl of the Dunkard or Mennonite connection, was exactly opposite in temperament. A good woman in every sense of the word, sweet-tempered, generous, hard-working, she gave her children an inexhaustible affection. Nothing could estrange her love or wear out her patience. Evidently life had so confused her with its manifest inconsistencies between accepted moral platitudes and the way of the world, that she ceased to judge anything or anybody, while still exacting from herself the utmost self-sacrifice.

This is the background of Theodore Dreiser's writing, an honest bewilderment from which he has been unable to find any philosophical escape. When he comes to the conclusion that the universe contains no moral principle there is still the fact of his mother's pure goodness unaccounted for. A world of violence and greed, and of vast impersonal forces, which includes among its phenomena the beauty of flowers and the tenderness of maternal love—what is the meaning of it? Mr. Dreiser does not pretend to know. All he could do was to write down what he saw as he saw it.

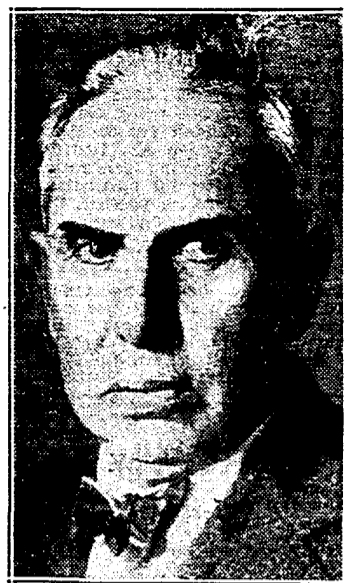
## But They Were Good Company

The family would defy a geneticist to classify. Submerged in poverty, they wandered about from place to place, making forlorn and sporadic efforts to better themselves. Thirteen children were born. Ten survived to maturity. They varied extraordinarily. One of the boys was thoroughly worthless, vicious; he "drank himself into failure, if not death." One was Paul Dreiser, successful composer of incredibly sentimental songs. "The girls, all of them, married, but by what devious routes! One, at thirty-seven, was killed by a train; another at forty died of cancer." One had an illegitimate child; several of them were "wayward." One at least married prosperously. None of them came to the conventional bad end predicted for bad girls.

Respectability is a precarious affair with the honest poor. They cannot escape at least the knowledge of looser ways. In his growing years Theodore Dreiser saw all the "sociological problems" exemplified among his neighbors. What he saw didn't give him any help in charting his own course.

Needless to say, he devotes much space to his adolescent difficulties with sex. And here he is painfully truthful. Not offensively or shockingly so, but painfully. The picture he draws of himself, gawky, tongue-tied, snooping, egotistical hobbledohoy, is embarrassing and repellent. Apparently he had only one thought in his head: girls. And only one thought about the girls. It must be mentioned that he was no youthful Casanova. In his lack

## Theodore Dreiser



Herald Tribune photo—Acme  
Author of "Dawn"

of enterprise and of success he was remarkably like Rousseau.

A chance year in college advanced him very little intellectually. When he went to work, at any odd job he could pick up, he seems to have been distinctly incompetent. The narrative closes before he got his first job as a reporter. If the book had been written in the second person, and offered as fiction, young Theodore would seem ludicrously improbable as a candidate for fame.

## A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs

All of Mr. Dreiser's notoriously ineptitudes of style are so fully displayed in this book that they seem intentionally comic.

"She has a sensual, meaty attractiveness," he writes gravely; and it isn't a misprint, for there are other meaty maidens in other chapters. "Eleanor's husband was soi-disant and not particularly eager to stay in our home." Soi-disant? Maybe he meant ci-devant or peau-de-sole or sansculotte. They are all very elegant words, too, and would do just as well in the context. "And finally word from Trina, who was also intrigued, that a freight car was being chartered for the furniture." An intrigue with a freight car staggers the imagination. "There was some mulch of chemistry that transmuted walls of yellow brick, and streets of cedar block and horses and men into amethyst and gold, and silver and pegas, and archangels of flaming light." We can't help it—pegas is what he wrote. Transmuted by a mulch.

Mr. Dreiser's public school teacher once told him: "But, Theodore, dear, you write good English. Your longest sentences and paragraphs are correct and orderly." We don't know what she'd say now, unless what the Scotch mother told her son: "You were aye a pretty baby, but you're mickly altered the noo."

Nevertheless, warts and all, here is a portrait of a man.

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The "Scribner's Magazine" prize novelette, "Many Thousands Gone" (Scribner), by John Peale Bishop, is published today in book form. We hope to give it further notice later, along with Rene-Fulop Miller's "Tolstoy" (Dial) and Stephen Leacock's "Wet Wit and Dry Humor" (Dodd, Mead.).