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Book Review

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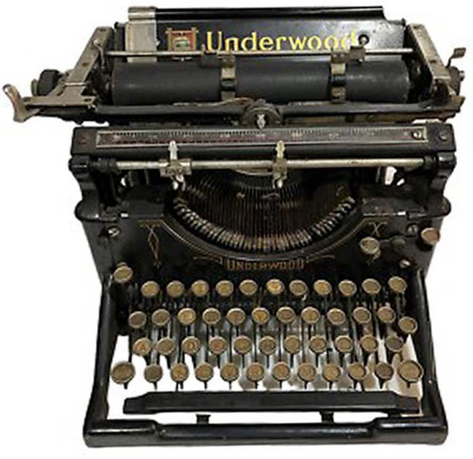
Paris, the Literary Capital of the United States

French Atmosphere For American Writing



By MERLE SCHUSTER

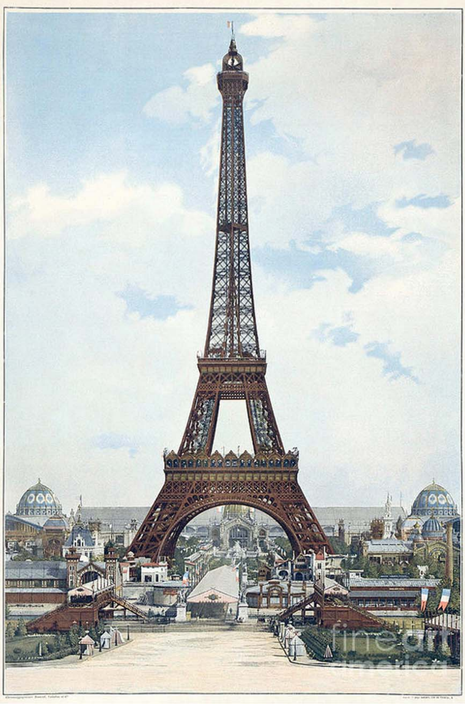
PARIS.

CUSTOMS inspectors at the Gare Saint Lazare have been puzzled by the troupe of little black boxes that seems to arrive with every boatload of Americans. The mysterious little case is carried gently, almost ceremoniously, into the douane. Its owner guards it more than half a dozen trunks of full-fashioned silk stockings. Too heavy for an overnight bag, too small for a valise, is it possible that this is a new variety of kodak? Is there perhaps some recent standardization of hand baggage in those United States? For these little black cases are noticeably uniform in size, weight and color.

The fact is, the little black cases are portable typewriters, brought to Paris by the literary insurgents of America. Each one represents, potentially, the great American novel. Chicago must surrender its leadership as the literary capital of America to Paris.

In Paris the American author seems to get the right perspective of his native land. Three thousand miles away, he finds himself better able to interpret or criticize the land of the free. Permeated by the French atmosphere, he suddenly develops a huge interest in America, and this interest, in turn, expresses itself usually in the form of a full-sized novel. More important novels by American authors have been written in Europe during the last twelve months than in any city in the United States.

Take, for example, "Babbitt," than which there is no more characteristic American novel. Sinclair Lewis wrote it abroad. The contrast of the foreign business man inspired him, perhaps, to write a more biting



satire on the American business man than if he had chosen to write about Babbitt in the midst of Babbitts.

Frederick O'Brien comes to Paris to write his South Sea stories. He is here now, working on a new book when he is not watching the world go by his table on the terrasse of Vetzel's Café, opposite the Opéra. Not very long ago he was the centre of an American group at the Café de Dome, on the Boulevard de Montparnasse. In the opposite corner of the same café Sinclair Lewis was having a Cressonère with another group of Americans. The spectacle of two of the most successful American writers in the same small café, neither recognizing the other, was by no means unusual.

Willa Cather's latest novel, "The Lost Lady," was written last year in Paris. She came here to escape the social whirl of New York's literary circle. Tourists come here to enjoy a round of gayety such as they can find only in Paris. But Willa Cather sought quiet here, and she found it. Certainly there is no city in the world like Paris; one finds here whatever one looks for.

Robert Service makes his home in Paris. He takes frequent trips to New York to arrange to have his books published there, but he writes his poetry here. He came to this city ten years ago to collect his verse into a volume; he married a Frenchwoman and found the atmosphere of Paris so conductive to his best work that he has been working here ever since.

Then, of course, there is the case of probably our most distinguished woman novelist. For ten years Edith Wharton has been doing her work in Paris. She came here during the war to do Red Cross work, and she has chosen to remain in Paris. Her novels are well known in France as well as in America, partly because she also writes in French and is a regular contributor to the best French magazines. Her name is not infrequently to be found in the table of contents of La Revue des Deux Mondes.

Like Edith Wharton, Dorothy Canfield Fisher came to Paris during the war to work for the blind. She, too, has been writing her novels here ever since. In fact, the French influence is dominant in at least her

fluence is dominant in at least her best-selling novel, "Rough-Hewn," and can be traced in her latest book, "Raw Material."

To follow the work of these important writers who have been doing their best work in Paris is interesting enough, but it is perhaps more interesting to note that more and more of the younger generation in literature are finding Paris a haven for attacks on American customs and culture. The fever for writing a book in Paris seems to have infected almost every "young intellectual in America." It is amazing to count the number of American books that were born or are being born in Paris in 1923.

Donald Ogden Stewart wrote a letter to Deems Taylor that describes the fever in his unique style. It read: "Deems, dear, I'm going to have a novel. Break it gently to Mary; tell her about the birds and flowers first, you know what to say. And Deems, I am going to Paris to have it. . . " Then followed all the symptoms—over-eating, circles under the eyes, irritability, &c., &c., until a woman friend said when she read it, "I've had three children myself, but Don seems to know more about it than I do!" The sad truth is that Stewart never did succeed in giving birth to his novel; it turned out to be just another parody, christened "Aunt Polly's History of Mankind."

Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote a novel called "Hardigut" in Paris last year. Her publisher bought the book before he saw it. "Hardigut" was advertised in the advance catalogues of Boni & Liveright as the forthcoming first novel of the woman, sometimes called the greatest poetess since Sapho. Every one expected "Hardigut," a medieval allegorical romance, to be the sensation of the 1923 publishing year. When Miss Millay returned to America with the completed manuscript "Hardigut" suddenly died. It wasn't published. No one knew what had happened to the book. Rumor has it that the publishers asked Miss Millay to call at their offices to discuss certain publishing details. When she got there she asked to see her manuscript for a moment, and then with a gesture that befits only a woman genius tore it up and scattered the fragments. Her admirers whisper something about "literary conscience." The cynics add something about her Nancy Boyd prose style endangering her reputation as a poet.

Gilbert Seldes recently returned to New York. He had left his duties as editor of The Dial to go to Paris last Summer to join the little group of serious writers. In a tiny little court apartment on the Ile Saint Louis, where not even the incessant honking of the Paris taxi horns could disturb, he completed his book on "The Seven Modern Arts." He lived at the time with Louis Galantière, Paris literary correspondent of The New York Tribune, who when not in the throes of translating Jean Cocteau's "Le Grand Ecart" for an American publisher, is deciding which of the two titles shall grace the cover of his first novel soon to be finished. Galantière's work is so

well thought of here that those in the know will not be surprised if he is awarded the prize last year given to Raymond Radiguet for "Le Diable Au Corps." Radiguet's book is now being translated for American publication. Galantiere is an American citizen of French extraction.

Harold Stearns, of course, does all his writing in Paris. "The Young Intellectual in America" was accomplished somewhere between the Boulevarde Montparnasse and the Delmabre Maison de Bains. At present, when he is not writing his Paris Letter for "Town and Country" or drinking an Amer Picon at American headquarters in Paris—The Dome—he is working on a new tome, probably another attack on civilization in the United States. In that atmosphere he finds himself best able to collect his resentments against America and Americans.

Side by side with the writers of the last generation who have chosen to do all their work in Paris, such as Alvan Sanborn, Ezra Pound and F. Berkeley Smith, all of whom have married into French families and are completely Francophile, we find such strange mushrooms in the literary field as Gertrude Stein. In her atelier here, she evolved "Geography and Plays" that opens with the incomparable lines:

Sweet tea, sweet tea,
Sweet, sweet, sweet, sweet tea.

* * *

Accompanied by several trunks of household effects, from dishpans to dusters, Anzia Yeszierska breezed into Paris last Summer to get atmosphere for the last story in her forthcoming book of short stories. Knowing only the one French word "oû," which she thrust into the face of a taxi driver with the address of her destination on a slip of paper, "they say" she managed to get quite an unusual atmosphere.

John Willard, author of "The Cat and the Canary" has just taken an apartment in Paris for the express purpose of completing his new play, "The Green Beetle." He says it will undoubtedly out-mystery his other mystery success. Mr. Willard was calling for his mail one morning at the American Express Company office when he met Solita Salano who used to act in the same company with him. It developed that Miss Solano, too, had come to Paris to write. At a banquet in New York she recently met Mr. George Putnam and casually mentioned to him that she was working on her first novel. Mr. Putnam asked to see what she had so far written. Having read the half of the manuscript that was finished, he immediately offered to publish the book. Miss Solano is now completing the manuscript and G. P. Putnam's Sons will bring it out under their stamp in August.

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Miss Solano has just found an apartment which she will share with three other American girls, Janet Flanner, Leda Bauerberg and Margaret Lee, each of whom is writing her first novel. Curiously enough, these embryonic authoresses subleased the apartment from an American writer, Walter Adolphe Roberts, author of 'Pierrot Wounded and Other Poems." Mr. Roberts has just completed his first novel "Austin Bride" and is on his way to New York now to have it published. The spectacle of an author moving out, with a manuscript under one arm and a portable typewriter under the other, and four writers moving in, each carrying her own little black typewriter case, was characteristic. The number of American writers in Paris seems to be increasing in just that proportion * * * four to one.

In addition to all these writers who come to do serious work in Paris and who really spend at least six hours a day (every day) at their work there is always to be found day or night a group of "young ineffectuals" at the well-known Café de Dome. These are the literateurs who spend their time worrying about when they will start their books. While they worry, of course, the saucers under their liqueurs pile up with amazing speed and the hours flit by on wings.

There is, for instance, "one" Dunning. He has spent most of his twenty years in Paris at this café. They say he is a poet, but none of his poetry has ever been published. No one ever sees his poems, but he is always pointed out as Dunning the poet. He has already attained his reputation, why bother about the poetry? The story goes that he once saved up 1,200 francs to pay for having a volume published. But the sousçoups tempted him to spend that small fortune and he has never since been able to save enough to pay a printer.

Joseph Gollomb has just returned to the Café de Dome. Until last year his chief reason for fame was the fact that he was Zoe Beckley's husband. This Fall, however, his first book, a mystery story, "The Girl in the Fog," written in Paris, was published and favorably accepted by the critics. He is back here writing another novel. One may see him often at the Dome, playing chess or drinking beer with Henry Altimus or Art and Helen Moss.

No one can tell how many other American writers there are in Paris who are working away quietly and unostentatiously. There is the instance of Louise Gebhard Cann, frequent contributor to The International Studio. Miss Cann may be seen at the Bibliothèque Nationale every day working on a "Life of Monticelli" that promises to be the most important opus ever written about that artist. Having been accepted for publication upon completion by an English as well as an American house, there is already talk of a French translation.

Carl Van Vechten wrote "Peter Whiffle" in Paris. It is whispered in Dial circles that Scofield Thayer wrote a book on the theatre during the year he spent abroad. Sherwood Anderson completed several new short stories while he was in Paris last year. John Peale Bishop of Vanity Fair and "An Undertaker's Garland" did some writing here, as did also Don Marquis. Even Olga

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Petrová did some work on a new play last Summer in Paris when she was not at Jean Patou's or Lanvin's ordering new gowns.