

BOOK RECORD

Conducted by ANTAR

WHY "BEST SELLERS" SELL

Reader Puts Reviewer A Shrewd But Awkward Question On The Problem Of Literary Fashions

A FEW weeks ago a regular reader of "The Book Record" wrote to me with—to speak very metaphorically—a bouquet in one hand and a bludgeon in the other.

Since bouquets are rare in a reviewer's life I preserved the letter very carefully—so carefully that I cannot now find it to re-examine the exact nature of the bludgeon! However if I remember rightly, my reader asked—quoting several titles—why it was that best sellers sold.

Theoretically it is a very proper question to put to a writing fellow who presumes to judge the less ephemeral works of others—but in practice it is, as they put it in the days of the Regency, demnably awkward!

Why is it that some book, apparently little more worthy than hundreds of others churned out of the publishers' mills, suddenly catches the imagination of a brace of continents and sells in hundreds of thousands?

Usually Good

UNLIKE many professional writers and reviewers, I hold the view that a "best seller" is usually a good book. One of little literary merit is a rarity. I would go further and say that fully 90 per cent. of "best sellers" are books of high quality. They seldom, however, are of high enough quality to endure in the public memory more than two or three years.

YOU may ask how—if all a book needs to sell it is merit in one or more branches of literary craft—does it happen that so many excellent books have only moderate sale?

Frankly, I pass the buck on to the reading public. If publishers' figures stand for anything, the reading public is extraordinarily like a school of fish. At one moment, for no observable reason, they are swimming industriously in one direction and then—still for no observable reason—they all turn like a flash and swim in the other direction. Seldom does even one fish fail to obey the impulse that guides that unpredictable change of direction!

IN the case of the reading public, however, it is possible to obtain some clue at least to the influence that causes a change of taste. Look back at post-war popular fiction. Is it not possible to hazard a shrewd guess why "Simon Called Peter" sold so amazingly well just after the war? The comfor-

ters of the "poor boys at the front" had discarded the last shred of Edwardian decorum, taken life between their bare knees and brought about a revolution in conventional morality that was destined to leave a generation bewildered.

"Simon"—though pale meat that would fail to bring the faintest blush to the cheek of Miss 1938—was an expurgated naughtiness exactly suited to the tastes of reading spinsters in the early Jazz Age.

Satisfied A Craving

"If Winter Comes" rode to the half-million highwater mark a sudden flood of craving for sentimentality—after nearly a decade of "tough stuff." "Anthony Adverse" caught the temporary hunger for literary "guts," "All Quiet" a short-lived wave of horror against war, "The Citadel" a wave of distrust for the methods of orthodox medicine—(coinciding with a world-wide nature-cure-cum-diet craze). And so on.

THEY are a peculiar phenomenon, these sudden solidifications of public taste. Impelled by some uncanny instinct the minds of people who read seem to take a common direction after having absorbed from every conceivable printed source a heterogeneous mass of common ideas and common catchwords.

The book which deals with a subject in which the reading public is momentarily interested, which reflects a mood or a philosophy in which the reading public shares for the minute, which provides a refreshing contrast at the exact moment one subject, mood or philosophy is run to death, is the book that can be assured of wide sales. If, by any chance, it is a good book—if its story, characterisation, theme are strong in the shade of strength required by the literary taste of the moment—then in all probability its sales will run to hundreds of thousands.

Requirements

It seems that the "best seller" sells because it has the luck to be born a red-hot topicality—whether a topicality of matter, morals or merely moods. There are, of course, a score of other common qualities detectable in best sellers—they must never be really disturbing, unpleasantly truthful, complicated or subtle—but that queer amorphous topicality seems to be the secret ingredient by which they rise high above a host of other books definitely superior to them.

And so to business. There are, by the way, no books of "queer, amorphous topicality" in this week's list.

VIRTUES ARE LOST IN DULL LENGTH

THE fashion for what might be termed "long-distance portraits," that was started so profitably by "Anthony Adverse" and "Gone With the Wind," is exceedingly tedious when it descends from the heights into mediocrity. Rare indeed are the authors who can hold true to integral design when they are dealing with an illimitable quantity of fabric.

Unfortunately, Elizabeth Corbett's new novel, "Light of Other Days," does not proclaim her as one of the rare few. This long and rambling account of the fortunes of an Irish family settled in a small Mid-Western town in America shows real skill in portraying the spirit of a bygone age, also a talent for subtle characterisation. At its best, it is moving and life-like.

But its virtues do not compensate for the overburdening retrospective writing, for the lack of planning, and the general splurginess of the theme.

"Light of Other Days," by Elizabeth Corbett (D. Appleton-Century Company, New York and London). Our copy from the publishers.

THEATRICAL ENTERPRISE

MY beloved mother used mournfully to say, 'If you had given the time, energy and enthusiasm to accountancy that you are giving to the theatre, you would have been at the top of the tree now.' And all I could answer was that I had not wanted to be at the top of the accountancy tree. That, no doubt, if I had given the same time etc., to pork butchering, I would have been a most successful pork butcher; but I did not want to be, for at long last I was doing the job I really liked, and that to me seems to be the chief secret of human happiness.

This is a passage from "Overture and Beginners," by Ronald Adam. (Victor Gollancz Ltd). It finds Mr. Adam at the start of a remarkable theatrical enterprise which he sketches in his book. Under his management the Embassy Theatre, at Swiss Cottage, had produced such fine things as "Precious Bane," "Lady in Waiting," "Marriage by Purchase," and "Delicate Question." However, the lessees had to give up and Mr. Adam, with £87 in the bank, decided to carry on! Funny, sorrowful and stirring periods followed until triumph emerged. It had been brought about by a courage great enough to present the public with "Miracle at Verdun," "Judgment Day" and other achievements.

A most valuable part of the book is that in which Mr. Adam sets out his ideas on the theatre.

"Overture and Beginners," by Ronald Adam (Victor Gollancz, Ltd., London.)