

# BOOKS OF THE TIMES

By CHARLES POORE

VAN WYCK BROOKS'S great season-haunted panorama will, we hope, eventually cover the whole field of American literature. It will range, perhaps, from the Mayflower Compact to still unknown works that today may be receiving that drastic criticism of publishers' rejections which some famous books have counted as part of their pasts. (A Voice: "Not to mention those the critics overlook.")

At any rate, when Mr. Brooks comes to the wintry slopes of the early Nineteen Forties, we hope he will take some notice of the vigorous clamor about mystery stories and their place in literature that is flowering now.

## Of Crime and Publishing

It seems to be one of the Significant Trends of the day, to be ranked with historical novels, doctors' books and the Rustic Revival. Champions of the two-dollar felony are everywhere on the march. Somerset Maugham's rousing declaration in their favor has been duly noted. That brought hearty responses in many places. At the moment, The Publishers' Weekly is conducting a searching symposium on crime and publishing, peppered with brisk, authoritative briefs. And just this Winter Rex Stout read a deeply impressed Herald Tribune luncheon audience the handwriting on the wall.

The day will come, the voice of Nero Wolfe said, when the growing hordes of mystery writers will outnumber all other authors, "and then we'll see who gets the front-page reviews!" Going on to discuss strategy in that titanic coming struggle for power, Mr. Stout made these revelations: "I think," he thought, "probably we'll make a good job of it while we're at it, and just take over the first ten pages" of the weekly book reviews.

## More Thumbprints on the Sands of Crime

"The front page each week will go to the mystery with the most murders in it, and so on right through. On page ten will be a collection of shorter reviews of the one-murder opera. And back in the foothills will be found clusters of paragraphs under such headings as 'Miscellaneous Novels,' 'Biography and So Forth' and 'Books to Be Read Part Way Through.'"

Mr. Stout made it scrupulously clear, however, that the triumphant clue-laureates did not intend to be unfair. They would not fall into the destroy-

ing sin of arrogance. Nor would their point of view be tainted with chauvinism. On the contrary, tolerance would be observed. If (he cited as instances) a lost play by Sophocles or a novel by Fielding is discovered, it will be given a column, according to Mr. Stout.

Well, when the day described by Mr. Stout dawns, we may see even more reversals than the ones he notes. For example, who knows whether the people who now read nothing but mysteries will not suddenly discover poetry, biography and the novel of ideas?

Who knows, for that matter, but what the statesmen who are now said to read nothing but one pearls-and-poison thriller after another may not turn again to the reading of history?

## Death Among the Artists

**S**PEAKING of murder mysteries, here (by an uncanny coincidence) is Kenneth Fearing's "Dagger of the Mind."\* It is a lively, adult and uncommonly well-written story, though Mr. Fearing concentrates too much on the murder, too little on the mystery. Yet perhaps the most felonious aspects of his novels are the thoroughgoing inhumanities of thought, deed and word practiced upon one another by the Kilkenny members of an artists' colony.

Three people—and a dozen nail-scarred reputations—die before the story is over. Mr. Fearing is more interested in characterization and commentary than he is in suspense. This inevitably leads to something of a let-down toward the end, when, truth having prevailed, consequences are drawn out in considerable detail. However, Mr. Fearing anatomizes his strange gallery with clinical precision. One by one, through the devious processes of their own minds or the arsenic-tipped remarks and revelations of their associates, they are pinned squirming to the wall, bringing a new grisliness into the literature of crime.

The scene of the story is said to be "modeled on an actual settlement not very far from New York." We are inclined to doubt that Mr. Fearing will ever be widely regarded as the sunny, sympathetic, kindly old patron saint of the place.

\**DAGGER OF THE MIND.* By Kenneth Fearing. 286 pages. Random House. \$2.