



3/24/76
↑

**David
McCullough's
EYE
ON
BOOKS**

FIFTY years ago, in April, 1926, the Book-of-the-Month Club sent out its first Selection, *Lolly Willowes*. There were 4750 members then, but a month later the membership figure had jumped to 12,000 and by the end of the year reached nearly 47,000. There were no Alternate Selections in 1926. A single book was offered each month, and the authors included John Galsworthy, Edna Ferber, Ellen Glasgow and Elinor Wylie.

Lolly Willowes—like all but one of the books offered by the Club that year—was a novel, the first novel by a young Englishwoman named Sylvia Townsend Warner. At 83, she is the only 1926 Club author alive today and remains an active writer and regular contributor to the *New Yorker*. I wrote to her recently at her home in Dorset, England, to ask about her memories of the founding of the Club. Since BOMC was the first book club in the United States, I was especially curious if authors at that time had any qualms about having their books sold by mail-order rather than exclusively by bookstores.

In her reply Warner did not mince words: "I was never one," she wrote, "to look a gift horse in the mouth. When I learned that the Book-of-the-Month Club had selected *Lolly Willowes* for its first choice I was astonished, delighted and confident that any organization daring enough to pick up an unknown author would be a valuable asset to contemporary literature."

Not everyone was as confident as Warner. According to Charles Lee, an English professor who wrote a history of the Club back in 1958, Henry Seidel Canby, a member of the board of judges that selected *Lolly Willowes*, was afraid the novel was so "very literary and specialized" that it would wreck the company before it had a chance to get started.

It looks as though Canby worried in vain. After

fifty years, both the "gift horse" and Sylvia Townsend Warner seem to be going strong.

MUSSOLINI wrote one novel. Disraeli turned out more than a dozen, but until now fiction—admitted fiction, that is—is something political figures on this side of the Atlantic have avoided. Now, suddenly, there are pol-made novels everywhere. Spiro Agnew has a novel. John Lindsay has a novel. William Buckley—who was once defeated by Lindsay—has a novel. John Ehrlichman has a novel. Even former New Orleans D.A. James Garrison has a novel.

John Lindsay—whose novel is entitled *The Edge*—now divides his time between being an ABC newsman and his private law practice. I dropped by his Rockefeller Center law office the other day to talk with him about his new career as a novelist. It is a corner office with an impressive view of the steeples of St. Patrick's Cathedral, and it is crowded with mementos of his seventeen years as a congressman and mayor: testimonial plaques, medals, honorary degrees, informal family pictures, a fireman's helmet, a London bobby's hat, two photographs of Winston Churchill and something that closely resembles a slot machine. Lindsay, perhaps a little grayer now, looks much as he did when his face used to peer out at us almost daily from the front page of *The New York Times*.

Before I could ask him a question, he asked me one: "What did you think of the book's ending?" I told him that I found it easier to believe the pessimism of the first half of the novel than the optimism of the second half, that finding local and national government in shreds was easier to believe than the hope that a lone congressman could almost single-handedly turn things around. It wasn't an answer that pleased him. "The upbeat ending is very important. It is very important for people to believe that there *is* hope for good government and that individuals *can* make things happen."

What made him turn to fiction? "Now that I'm a lawyer again, I spend a lot of time on planes. I've recently been to the Middle East six times on business. So, I began using the time writing. I wrote a long essay about the relationship between politicians and police systems, and when I finished I realized that there are only about eight people around who would give a damn about reading it. I really wanted to say something about the process of law, the rule of law, and the absolute need for an attorney general who can say 'no' to a president. And I thought, why not do it in a way that might be fun to read?"

(Continued on page 24)

EYE ON BOOKS (Continued from page 6)

"When I was mayor and Johnny Carson was doing the 'Tonight' show out of New York, I used to drop in every now and then. I'd usually be on for about five minutes and out of that time Carson would give me about thirty seconds to get my message across. The rest of the time was banter, but those thirty seconds were worth more than a fifteen-minute speech. I think I was trying to do pretty much the same thing with the novel."

Does he entertain any thoughts about getting back into politics? "I ran for things for seventeen years, and I have no desire to do it again. I don't want to go back. Anyway, you need to have time as a private citizen. One of the points of *The Edge* is that Washington is a terribly isolated place. The people there know each other, but too many of them have lost touch with the people back home. Politicians tend to be clubby people because they thoroughly distrust each other, and the clubbiest place of all is Congress. It is a subtle kind of clubbiness. It cuts across party lines, and a rebel on either side is considered a danger to both sides.

"Anyone who needs politics emotionally or financially should get out of the business. They are people who can't live without a narcotic, and the narcotic is power. Still, it's a tough bug, and it doesn't die easily."

If he's not interested in going back to politics, is John Lindsay going back to another novel? "Not now, not until I have something to say." What interests him most now, he says, is practicing law once again. Besides clients that take him to the Middle East, he also has some local cases to handle, including a lawsuit over a dog bite. "Know anything about torts? It's really a fascinating case. Every dog in New York City is allowed to bite someone once. One free bite, and after that the dog's in trouble. Except for German shepherds. They get no free bites, and the dog in my case is a German shepherd. So, it's all more complex than you might think. My partners, though, like to tease me about it. When they pass me in the hallway, they say, 'woof, woof.'"

IN *Who's Who in America*, Will Yolen lists himself as "Kite flying champion of the world." This follows listings of more prosaic titles, such as newspaper reporter, publicity director for the amusement area of the 1939 World's Fair, writer of the "Gangbusters" radio series and author. He is also the founder and president of the International Kitefliers Association (IKA). His latest book is *The Complete Book of Kites and Kite Flying*, which

(Continued on page 26)

THE BOOK OF DANIEL by E. L. Doctorow

A novel "anchored in" the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, by the author of *Ragtime*. Hailed as "the political novel of our age" when first published some years ago, it is the story of a young graduate student's search for the truth about his parents, who were executed as atomic spies in the early 1950s. "Angry and more deeply felt than all but a few contemporary American novels"—*Newsweek*. "The ringing fulfillment of all those things Dos Passos promised for fiction"—*Philadelphia Inquirer*.

(Pub price: \$10.00) Price to Members: \$7.95

THE BOAT by Lothar-Günther Buchheim

Translated by Denver and Helen Lindley

An international best seller hailed as the *All Quiet on the Western Front* of World War II. "A superior war novel, a work of art, intelligence and compassion"—*Chicago Daily News*. Lothar-Günther Buchheim, who served aboard a U-boat in World War II, tells the terrifying story of German submarine warfare in what has been called "the best German novel ever about the front in World War II."

(Pub price: \$10.00) Price to Members: \$8.95

KEEPING YOUNG & LIVING LONGER

by Josef P. Hrachovec, M.D., D.Sc.

A specialist at the Gerontology Center of the University of Southern California explains how the aging process can be dramatically slowed or even reversed by a daily program combining proper diet, sensible exercise and regular periods of rest and relaxation. Dr. Hrachovec also discusses how to lose weight without counting calories, the medical pros and cons of certain "crash" diets, the best type of exercise for middle-aged people and more.

\$6.95

THE DREADFUL LEMON SKY

by John D. MacDonald

A suspenseful, intricately plotted Travis McGee mystery. This time McGee, the urbane private detective, is out to discover why a young woman who appears on his houseboat with \$104,200 in cash turns up dead two weeks later. "A crime writer who never lets the customer down"—*Saturday Review Syndicate*.

(Pub price: \$6.95) Price to Members: \$5.95

THE PILGRIMS by Francis Dillon

A fascinating account of America's most famous immigrants—the "godly and sober" men and women who founded "Plymouth Plantation" in 1620. The author explores the religious and social unrest that drove the Pilgrims to the New World, examines the difficulties that beset the Plymouth colony and discusses Plymouth's contribution to the establishment of democracy in America. "A delightfully fresh and different informal study"—*Publishers Weekly*.

(Pub price: \$7.95) Price to Members: \$6.95