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Books

The Mags

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ONE of the reasons I have always enjoyed the Saturday Review is that it has never made any great attempt to be pretty.

On the occasions that it attempts to do something in the way of layout, it takes on all the rich glamor of an instruction pamphlet on turret lathe operation.

Rosenfeld Ideas, the magazine says, are the thing. Read the articles or don't read them. Here they are. We wouldn't have printed them if we didn't think they were good. It's up to you.

THIS IS EDITING without the frills. Love the Saturday Review or hate it, it is what its editors want it to be, not what they think it is expected to be.

Magazines — and I am speaking of good magazines with ideas and with something to say — have come to fill a unique roll in American letters. The Times Literary Supplement, surveying American writing, has observed that article and essay writers "are making the language vital . . . expository prose is asserting its claim to be recognized as the true voice of the early sixties."

That may be. It is at least true that the good magazines are publishing — and are frequently the first to publish — the major ideas, the major criticism and the major dissents.

If it is intelligently edited, a magazine has several natural advantages:

1) **IT ASSUMES THAT** the reader is there to read, that he understands what the magazine is attempting to do and is willing, at the very least, to give it a try.

2) It is free from local prejudice and convention. Its readers, even if they live in the same city, are still a long way off.

3) It need not find it necessary to limit its range of ideas within some kind of acceptable span.

4) It assumes that the reader will understand what he is reading. If not, it wishes him Godspeed. It will not change.

Admittedly, not many magazines fit these specifications, although occasionally even in the most blatantly commercial a fine article will appear to paraphrase C. Northcote Parkinson, like the demon king amongst a group of pantomime fairies.

All this is provoked by the appearance of a new collection, "Best Magazine Articles: 1966." (Crown, \$5.95). The collection is edited by Gerald Walker, who is editor of the New York Times Magazine. Mr Walker says he stopped counting when he read 3,000 articles in preparing the book. He has selected 20, "in my opinion the most outstanding articles published in American magazines during the year just ended."

Without quarreling with Mr Walker's effort — and Mr Walker would probably be the first to admit it — this can't be so. I didn't like several of the 20 which seemed to me to be at best merely ordinary.

THERE ARE, HOWEVER, a number of striking pieces. Dwight MacDonald's analysis of the Warren Report, written long before the current literary furor, is not only intelligent but a sheer delight to read. ("The Warren Report is an American-style Iliad, ie, an anti-Iliad that retells great and terrible events in limping prose instead of winged poetry . . . The lawyer's drone, the clotted chunks of expert testimony, the turgidities of officialese, the bureaucrat's smooth-worn evasions. For the Homeric simile, Research; for the epic surge and thunder, the crepitating clutter of Fact").

I particularly liked Tom Wolfe's "Ramito! Jibaro Hero," James Mills' "The World of Needle Park" and Elie Wiesel's "The Last Return."

The high points are worth it all.

PAGE 10—SPOTLIGHT