

## The Fight for Popular-Priced Books

New Masses makes an author, publisher, reader survey in cheaply priced new and reprint books. Their cost and distribution problems.

"I'M WRITING to register a protest and I think I have a right to do the same. So please listen." These fighting words introduced a letter received by NEW MASSES last year from a reader in Mexico City. Our correspondent had just read Michael Gold's review of *The Letters of Lincoln Steffens*. "I'm sold on the book and I put it on my 'must' list," he wrote. "Suddenly the price hits me between my two eyes—\$10. I object, and damn it all, if Steffens were alive he'd object too. He'd want the book to get in the hands of the right people, and those are the ones who can least afford it. Yes, he'd have them printed at prices at which Joe Worker could buy them."

Could he? That is the question we asked ourselves in preparing this article. What could Lincoln Steffens do, in 1939, to get his books to the millions? For he certainly would have agreed with Joe Worker that the two thousand people (maximum) who bought the *Letters* do not take in all the "right people." The question is not easy to answer. Harcourt, Brace & Co., publishers of the Steffens book, submitted figures to us which indicate that their net profit per set was 30 cents, surely a reasonable profit. Henry Hart, on the basis of his experience with the publishing business, pointed out that "The irrationality of book publishing under capitalism has its perfect illustration in the price of the Steffens *Letters*." For if the letters are to be read, Hart went on, the retail price must be sliced to a level commensurate with a much lower income level; at the same time, if the publishers are to stay in business, they must publish the *Letters* at \$10. And Michael Gold wrote Joe Worker that "I still don't see any final answer but socialism, but one hates to wait. After all, even today it is possible to see some mighty fine movies for a quarter."

Difference of opinion naturally arises as to the solution of the problem, but nobody can ignore its existence. There is an obvious disparity between the book-buying audience in America and the total literate population. That disparity both accounts for and results from the fact that book-publishing is still, for the most part, in the horse-and-buggy era. Unlike the movies and the radio, publishing is a "little" business, beset by all the troublesome hazards, wastes, and inefficiencies of small-scale enterprise in the era of monopoly capitalism. "Something must be done!" is the classical cry of the industry. Over seventy million people pay money to see a movie every week; but if a publisher can sell an average of more than three thousand copies per volume he considers himself pretty lucky.

Authors are in the same boat, of course. They want to be read, or there is not much sense in writing. They have to make a living, or they must quit writing in spite of themselves.

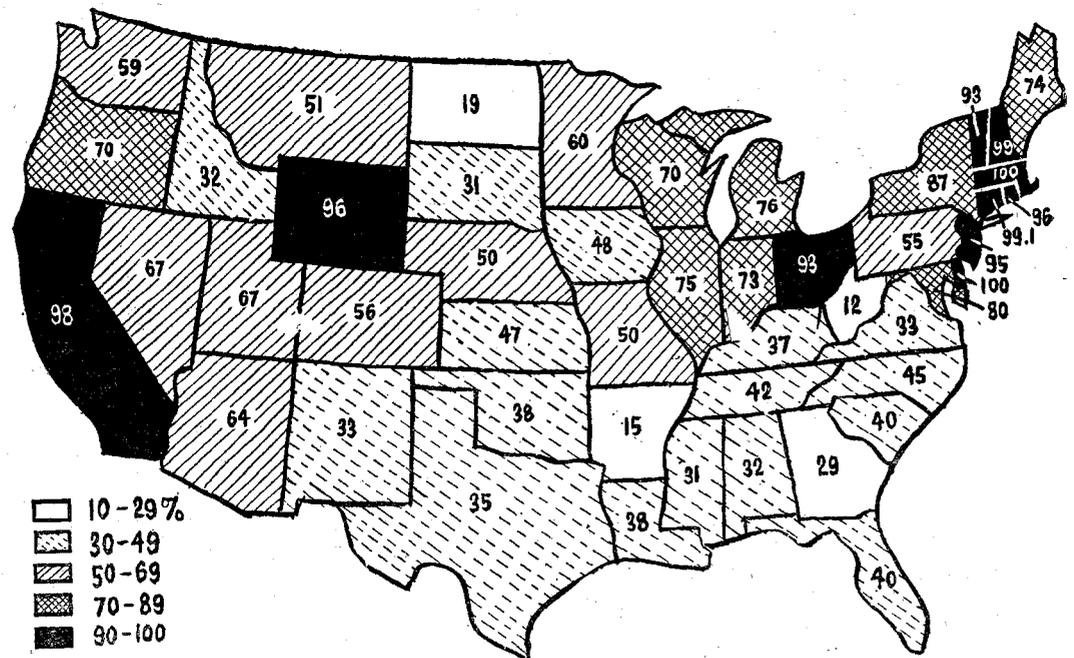
And Joe Worker is not the only reader who feels deprived of the \$10 set. Workers, professionals, middle class groups of various sorts are buying books in fantastically small quantities when you consider their numbers and interests. George Albee points out in his answer to the questionnaire that we sent to several hundred authors that the average novel sells less than one thousand copies, less than one-thousandth of 1 percent of our population. He adds: "A best-seller which reached the unheard-of sale of a million copies would still reach less than 1 percent. What a very small drop in what a very big bucket!" We have asked one thousand NEW MASSES readers how many books they would like to buy and how many they are able to buy in an average year. The figures are revealing.

Here is a problem which equally concerns publisher, author, and reader. Theoretically,

their interests are far from antagonistic. The publisher wants to sell; the author wants to be read; the reader would like to buy. What, then, is the difficulty? We were not surprised to find that price is the root of the evil. But we are more concerned with an inquiry into the realistic possibilities, within the framework of the profit system, of a wider distribution of books. It is well known that in the Soviet Union it is a question of *billions* of books, as Albert Rhys Williams and other commentators have recently shown. The figures at the Soviet Pavilion are a powerful reminder that "the final solution" of the problem, as Michael Gold told Joe Worker, is socialism. Our inquiry has been limited to the immediate prospects in America. For we are profoundly convinced that the strengthening of our democracy depends in large part on a much wider distribution of good books.

### QUESTIONNAIRES

We have therefore sent three sets of questionnaires to authors, publishers, and readers. While the questionnaires differed in details,



**PUBLIC LIBRARIES.** Percentage of population of each state residing in local public library districts, 1934. Note the vast light-shaded areas. Of the 45,000,000 Americans without library service, 88 percent live in the open country or in towns of less than 2,500. This number is 74 percent of the total rural population. The 6,235 public libraries in 1935 owned 100,500,000 books that were very unevenly distributed. One-eighth of the total was contained in one state—New York. A resident of New Hampshire had thirty-five books at his disposal to every one that a resident of Arkansas or Mississippi had. The average number of volumes per capita for the United States was 0.89—less than one book for each American. It hasn't been getting better very rapidly: nine years earlier the figure was 0.62. When will we get the last chapter of that book?

the basic problem underlying all three was: What practical proposals can you make for widening the book audience in America? We publish the results below.

**AUTHORS**

Over one hundred authors responded to our questionnaire.

The replies revealed a wide range of interests which suggests the representative character of our sampling. It is not possible to list all the names. Such diverse fiction writers, for example, as Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Upton Sinclair, Thornton Wilder, Irving Fineman, Sidney Meller, George Albee, Grace Flandrau, Albert Maltz, August Derleth, Stanley Young, Hans Otto Storm, Jennie Ballou, Clifford Dowdey, Mark Schorer, Mari Sandoz, Clara Weatherwax, and William Cunningham contributed. We received replies from many writers on labor problems: Leo Huberman, John Stuart, Horace B. Davis, J. Raymond Walsh, Grace Hutchins, and others. The opinions of Max Lerner and Anna Rochester, Vida Scudder and Corliss Lamont, Genevieve Taggard and Frank Marshall Davis, Jean Starr Untermeyer and Louis Zukofsky, Victor A. Yakhontoff and V. D. Kazakevich, Cedric Belfrage and Holland D. Roberts are represented in our findings.

**AUDIENCE**

The first two questions, on the types and numbers of readers reached by the writer, may be grouped together:

1. How would you describe the audience to which your books are addressed? 2. Have you any way of determining the extent to which you have succeeded in reaching this audience? What has been the average price at which your books were sold?

The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from the replies to these questions is that authors are painfully aware of a wide gulf between their desired and their actual audience. The average price of the books mentioned was \$2.50. Those writers whose work had appeared in editions under a dollar reported more successful sales than the others. It is interesting to note that where a writer's work was published originally at two or three dollars and then reprinted in a cheap edition, the sales on the latter far exceeded the original sales.

Thirty percent of the answers indicate that the writers had no specific audience in mind when they published their books. The other replies may be divided into five groups: labor, intelligent middle class, specialists, "escape" readers, "intellectuals." The majority of replies group labor and the intelligent middle class as the audience which the writer addresses.

The replies from poets were least hopeful: "I write for those who cannot afford to pay \$2.50 for a thin book of poetry," Genevieve Taggard replies; "for those who cannot afford to pay even 50 cents. . . . Books have sold at an average of \$2.50." Several writers suggest that there's many an ironic slip between intention and reality. Thus Horace B. Davis: "My books are addressed to the labor audience primarily, i.e., militant trade unionists. I understand that they are read chiefly by students and personnel managers." Bob Brown notes that his delightful cookbooks "reach an audience directly in proportion to their price. . . ."

Writers of first books are particularly bitter. They point out that a new writer cannot sell his book for \$2.50 unless the publishers engage in special sales campaigns. They feel that publishers are ordinarily reluctant to spend money advertising newcomers, and that the bulk of the publisher's budget is devoted to already established writers. At the same time, the newcomer must compete with the author of reputation on the same price level.

Anna Rochester points out that "Workers' editions at \$2 or less have sold more than 'trade' editions," and she is convinced that by lowering prices middle-class audiences can also be greatly increased. Other writers make the point that if readers wait long enough they can get books at prices they can afford. Original editions of \$2 or more had to be remaindered; and they could only be sold out when placed on the 39-cent counters.

Not many best-selling authors are represented on our list; but we are convinced by the replies that the overwhelming majority of writers are in a state of permanent depression about the size of their actual book-buying audience. As we shall see, however, they do not take a defeatist attitude toward what is plainly a bad situation.

3. What realistic possibilities do you envisage for that widening of the book-buying audience which we all feel will strengthen our democracy?

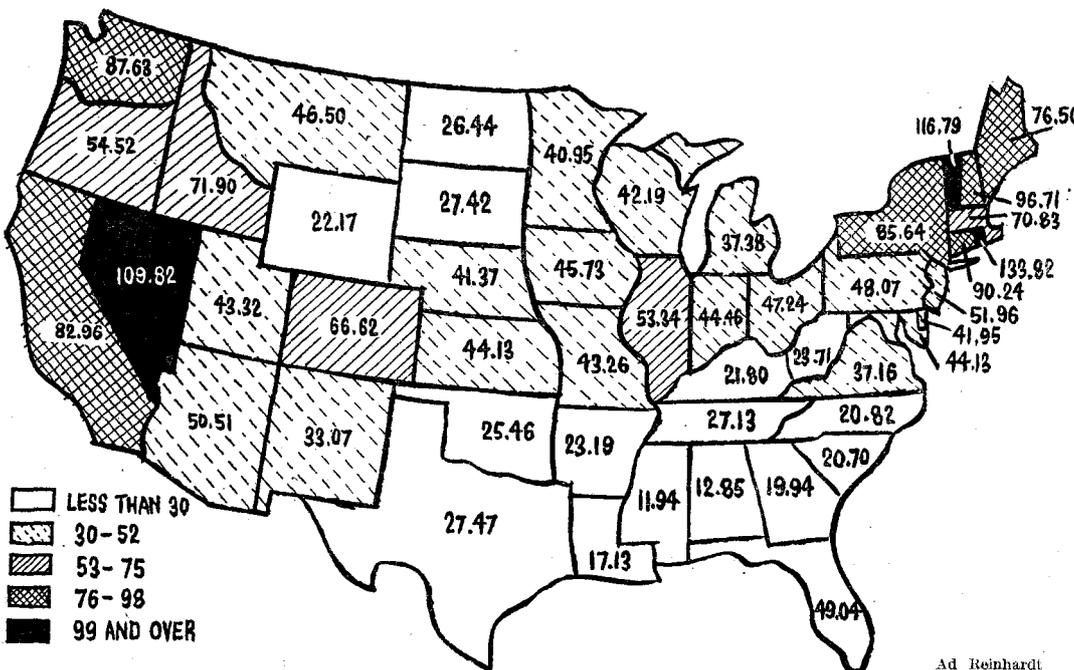
Two or three writers comment on the phrasing of this question. One author writes: "Not at all sure about correlation books/democracy. It all depends on whose books you sell. And I note that illiterate people sometimes are the hardest ones to regiment." The last sentence is highly dubious as sociology. But the caution as to the character of the books distributed is of course pertinent. Another puts it this way: "It all depends upon what books are sold and what public buys them. I rather agree with Jimmie Walker, who once said that he never heard of a girl having been seduced by a book. A book may help, that is true, but cannot be the decisive factor. The same does apply, I think, to the strengthening of democracy."

While the vast majority of replies show strong support for cheaper books as the best solution (see next question), a wide variety of interesting suggestions are made for additional possibilities.

The need for a redistribution of income is stressed by a number of writers. Max Lerner writes: "As I see the problem, it is a two-fold one: the people who have the money are usually not the ones who like good books; the people who like good books do not usually have the money to buy them. This involves a dual change—a change in income distribution and a change in reading habits." William Cunningham reminds writers that "to reach the masses we must raise wages and shorten the work week, extend WPA, provide old-age pensions, better houses, better schools."

The question of education is mentioned frequently. Vida Scudder combined the income and education factors: "I suppose the practical way of widening the book-buying public is to educate it to a book hunger—and ultimately to secure for everyone a decent margin of income beyond a subsistence." Irving Fineman, expressing a widespread feeling that the teaching of literature in our schools could stand improvement, urges: "replacing the dull and forbidding cramming of classics by a lively introduction to old and new fiction as a reflection of life itself." Dorothy Canfield Fisher places much hope "in the rapid growth of 'adult education.'"

Writers who live in small communities uniformly stress the need to make books available as a preliminary to education. Mari Sandoz writes



**BOOKSTORES.** Gross number of bookstores per one million population, 1935. The wide open spaces again. There were six thousand bookstores in 1935, heavily concentrated in a few areas. About 32,000,000 people, largely in rural areas, were without bookstore service. Rhode Island had one bookstore for every 7,462 people; Mississippi, one for every 84,035. Sparse distribution of population makes operation of bookstores unprofitable. But the recently reduced postal rate for books offers one way to better the situation. Compare the maps facing each other on these pages and you'll see that the states represented with good library service are better supplied with bookstores too. On the map every bookstore has been counted as one unit, regardless of size. Remember that the Far West and Northeast not only have more bookstores, but sell more books than do the other regions.

from Nebraska: "In my home community, thirty miles from a railroad, with few who have gone beyond the eighth grade, I have started a bit of a library, with books varying from bird guides to philosophy, from light novels to Racine and Euripides. They are being read—some more than others, of course. But not long ago few had ever opened a book beyond the rural school texts and the Sears, Roebuck catalogues, because nothing else was available." And August Derleth, writing from Sauk City, Wis.: "I think it should be made clear that there are many sections of our nation completely without any library facilities of any kind." (Which raises a very large and decisively important question beyond the immediate scope of our survey—see chart on Page 18.)

#### OTHER SUGGESTIONS

Genevieve Taggard calls attention to the radio as a medium for broadening the poetry audience. Better advertising and distribution of books are mentioned repeatedly. A very large number of contributors dwell on the fact that magazines compete with books. Hans Otto Storm expects "the effect of price on volume to be a moderate one until the price of books gets low enough to compete with magazines, and for this competition \$1.25 is still too high." Grace Flandrau knows "too many people" who "don't even read magazines any more, they look at photographic magazines."

Mr. Storm adds a postscript that will be appreciated by many: "If they could make review copies so they would wear out and not get in the second-hand stalls before publication date, that would help too." V. D. Kazakevich makes another fruitful proposal for his special field: "Most economists cannot write good English; that is the first problem. Most economists insist on being involved and unclear, which is not at all necessary. Many economists have nothing to say, but just go on writing from force of habit."

Quite a few authors raise the problem of distributing books through trade union channels. Leo Huberman, for example, suggests that "unions can do more than they are doing to get books cheaply for their members by buying them in quantity." Horace B. Davis feels that the natural market for labor books is the organized labor movement, and

he observes that efforts in this direction instead of being confined to national offices of unions should be extended to trade union locals.

#### 4. From your point of view as an author, will you comment on the desirability of inexpensive books (average maximum of \$1.25)?

The verdict is practically unanimous. Indeed, a majority of the authors take exception to the suggested maximum of \$1.25 on the ground that the estimate is too high. Dorothy Canfield Fisher would like to see cheap books "far below \$1.25 in price." The young Negro poet, Frank Marshall Davis, says that no price over \$1 will materially alter the present situation. Cedric Belfrage remarks that "In this country we ought to think less about tony bookstores as distribution media, and more about 5-&-10's, newsstands, and drugstores. Then we would begin to sell editions like they sell in the Soviet Union."

At least four authors comment on the fact that they could not afford to buy their own books at the price for which they are retailing. Vida Scudder says of her books, "I should never buy one of them myself, at the prices charged." And Stanley Young deplores the fact that "we ourselves, who measure our lives in books, find it necessary to go to the libraries to borrow books that we should like to own."

Authors want to be read, and they feel that inexpensive books will carry their work to more people. Albert Maltz writes that he "prays" for cheap books "every night." Stirling Bowen says, "I think desirability (of cheap books) is no longer in question. Without wanting to be rhetorical, it is a case of necessity." Thornton Wilder feels that reduced prices would double the market. Upton Sinclair comments: "Of course I would be delighted to see large editions of cheap books and I am at the service of any publishers who will try experiments."

But many writers wisely point out the element of risk which must first be eliminated. Some publishers in reducing book prices have reduced authors' royalties out of proportion to the price differential. The precarious living that most writers make must be guaranteed against such scalping. Another possible danger referred to by contributors is the danger of doing sloppy work; but this fear is generally set to rest by the quality of Modern Age Books, for example. Many authors, incidentally, seem to be under the impression that Modern Age has been a financial failure. One of the reasons for this impression is implicit in Max Lerner's comment: "I am all for the inexpensive book—provided it really does succeed in widening the book audience and not merely (as has been too often true thus far) in obscuring the existence of the book." The point, of course, is that cheap-edition books have been shockingly ignored by the press reviewers, despite the obviously high quality of many of these books. This problem of a book's prestige—and to that extent, sale—is a serious one for any author.

The results of the questionnaire give striking confirmation of the view that most authors are primarily concerned about reaching a wide audience, and that they consider the inexpensive book idea as an invaluable approach to this goal. Authors are solidly behind the slogan: Books for the Millions.

#### READERS

In order to document our impression of the reader-reaction to the question of book prices, we sent a questionnaire to a thousand readers of *NEW MASSES*. Perhaps this will strike people as bolster-

ing the obvious. Unfortunately, what is obvious to the layman is sometimes a mystery to the specialist. One publisher told us that if people are really interested in books, price is no obstacle. The answers to our questionnaire echo our horse laugh when we heard this remark at a publishers' luncheon recently.

#### 1. How many books do you buy in an average year?

The replies vary from zero to fifty. The median figure is between five and ten.

#### 2. What determines your selection of these books?

In the interest of accuracy, we are compelled to report that a plurality of first votes were cast for *NEW MASSES* reviews. The other choices follow in order: Reputation of authors, other reviews, personal recommendations, and advertisements.

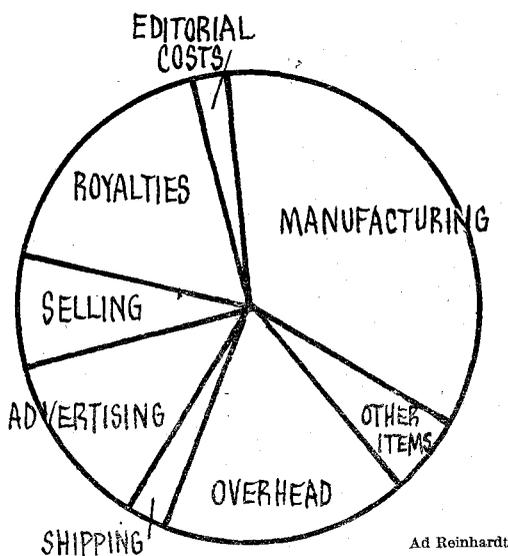
#### 3. What major factor or group of factors limits your purchase of books?

An overwhelming first was the factor of price. The terms vary, but the meaning is the same: "cost," "money," "finances," "low income," "funds," "cash," etc. (We did not realize that there were so many ways of saying money.) Other factors mentioned in many of the letters are: time, lack of interest, and remoteness from places where books are sold.

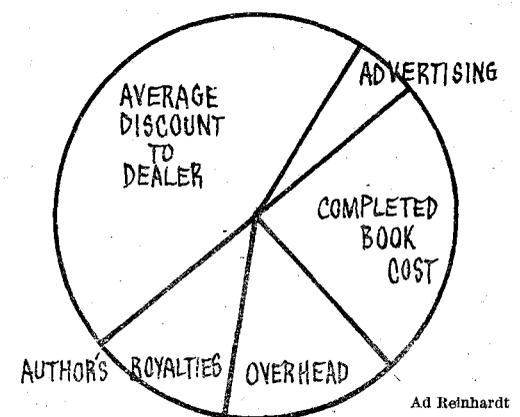
#### 4. What possibilities do you envisage for expanding the audience for books?

Here again a reduction in book prices was stressed. Typical answers: "Seems to me that when a good book costs the same as a movie, a great many more people will read." "Cheap editions will mean more readers." A number of readers, commenting on inexpensive editions, pointed to the desirability of making these physically attractive. Many confirmed the findings of our chart on page 20 with respect to the bad library conditions which prevail in most sections of the country.

If any publisher is in doubt concerning the sentiment of readers for cheaper books, we invite inspection of our files. These files suggest the possibility that among our readers the unusually high median of five to ten books per year would more than double with a downward movement in book



ON A 75-CENT BOOK. Manufacturing becomes the major cost in estimating the cost of a popular-priced original book. Shipping and selling gain a greater proportion of the total cost factors. Compare with chart opposite.



ON A \$2.50 BOOK. Here is how the various expenses in producing and selling an average priced book break down. The book-dealer's discount overshadows any other factor in determining the sales price. So great a stock of books must be carried and so slow are sales of \$2.50 and \$3 books that the considerable discount is needed to support the shopkeeper.

# MODERN AGE



## The unrepressed history of our times . . .

**T**HE INFLUENCE of books on public opinion is all out of proportion to their actual number. And the reason for this potent influence is not hard to find. Books, more so than any other medium for the interchange of ideas, are free from the repressions, distortions, suppressions imposed by lack of time, shortage of space and the threat of advertising revenue. Modern Age authors, and therefore Modern Age readers, are especially fortunate in this respect. They have distinguished themselves by shedding light in very dark places, making clear many puzzling events, adding to the public store of vital knowledge . . . and at the lowest prices at which new books have ever been available. But make no mistake—they are not a serious, grim-faced group of writers. They report what they discover with zest and good humor; they are entertaining *and* informative—an unbeatable combination. Check over the titles listed and you'll see what we mean.

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### 2. HEALTH IN HANDCUFFS

by JOHN A. KINGSBURY

The national health crisis—and what can be done about it. A discussion of the socialized and group medicine proposals which shows what medical science can do for modern Americans if it is allowed to operate freely. *Just published, 75c*

### 3. THE MYSTERIOUS MICKEY FINN, or Murder at the Café au Dôme

by ELLIOT PAUL

This newest Modern Age best seller has had a glowing reception from both press and public. It's like nothing you've ever read before . . . packs more laughs and more surprises than *Hellzapoppin!* *50c*

### 4. YOU MIGHT LIKE SOCIALISM

by CORLISS LAMONT

"Here is a voice worthy of the ear of every office worker, factory owner, bank clerk, farmer and mill hand. It is the voice of a reasonable man."—*Greensboro, N.C., News.* *95c*

### 5. HITLER IS NO FOOL

by KARL BILLINGER

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by PAT SLOAN

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### 9. AIR WAR

by W. O'D. PIERCE

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## Perennial Best Sellers

### 10. SCHOOL FOR BARBARIANS

by ERIKA MANN, 50c

### 11. THE PASTURES OF HEAVEN

by JOHN STEINBECK, 25c

### 12. SECRET ARMIES

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Moving Toward a Planned Society  
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An editor of *The New Republic*.

The Promise of American Labor  
SIDNEY HILLMAN  
President of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers.

The Promise of American Life, a poem  
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prices. We feel that it is reasonable to expect a similar increase among groups which at present buy only one or two, or perhaps none, per year.

PUBLISHERS

Will the publishers supply the capital to finance the issuance of low-cost books in volume large enough to meet the demands of a mass market? They will—if they think they can make money out of it. To date most publishers' efforts in this direction have been confined to the reprinting of well known titles for a popular market. A generation ago J. M. Dent and Thomas Nelson pointed the way to big sales with pocket-sized books and when Alexander Grosset devised the idea of popular copyrights the reprint plan became the foundation of several new houses.

Reprints became a good business bet in America when Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer took over the pocket library of the Bonis in 1925. At that time it had grown to a series of 109 titles with a total sale of 350,000 copies a year. Today their Modern Library boasts 220 titles in the regular series at 95 cents and forty-eight titles in the Giant editions at \$1.25. Last year more than a million Modern Library books were sold.

Everyman's Library, issued by Dutton, and the Oxford World's Classics have secured tremendous sales in this country and abroad. Grosset extended the popular market when it put out 50-cent books for the children's counters. Doubleday brought non-fiction into the reprint field and sold widely in uniform \$1 editions. Drugstores added dollar non-fiction to their 75-cent fiction reprints and even railway stands began to see a good thing in books. Prices were lowered and markets broadened when Doubleday took up the odd-penny price special spawned by the '29 crash and bulked books high in drugstore windows.

Now almost every publishing house issues its own special series of reprints. There are the Appleton-Century Dollar Library, the Houghton Mifflin Eagle Editions, Harcourt Brace's Harbrace Books, and a number of others. Although their prices vary from 75 cents to \$1.50, a scale considerably below that of the \$2.50 to \$5 editions of new books, they cannot really be classed as cheap books within the reach of the millions. Large as their sales may be, they are still but a tiny fraction of the potential book audience.

Much progress in the inexpensive book field has been made by labor publishers. Thirty-five years ago the Chicago firm of Charles H. Kerr supplied American workers with 25- and 50-cent editions of socialist classics. These were widely sold, together with nickel and dime booklets, at trade union and left-wing political meetings. Eugene V. Debs, for example, sold thousands of copies of his writings at meetings and lectures. Literature sale has been a traditional feature of progressive forums, picnics, and conventions. Despite certain inadequacies of editing, which were inevitable at the time, Kerr's books made a profoundly important contribution to American intellectual development.

That contribution has been carried on and strengthened by International Publishers under the editorship of Alexander Trachtenberg. Next month International celebrates its fifteenth anniversary. Appealing to an extensive audience in the lower income brackets, the firm has from the outset attempted to peg prices as far down as possible. It has done outstanding work in making available to English readers all the Marxist classics. (Incidentally, as far back as 1918 the first Lenin document published in America between covers—*Soviets at Work*—was issued by Rand School under Trachtenberg's editorship. The booklet sold for 10 cents. Its numerous editions added up to a million copies.)

In addition to its regular trade editions, International sells books to workers and progressive bookshops in large quantities which permit a lower discount basis and therefore lower prices. Many of these shops sell to organizations as well as individuals. As a result the ultimate consumer in an organization can frequently purchase a \$2.50 book for \$1 or less. New markets have thus been created. For few workers would otherwise be able to purchase books at regular list price. In addition, some of these organizations sell books on the installment plan.

International must operate on a strictly commercial basis, of course, since it is not exempt from the usual financial burdens of any publishing enterprise. But its emphasis on mass sales has enabled it, for example, to issue Lenin's *State and Revolution* and Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism* for 10 cents. Each volume has sold in editions of 100,000. In addition, a wide range of titles—including biographies, literary works, studies in American history, and so on—have sold for from 15 cents to \$1.25. Albert Maltz' *The Way Things Are* sold for \$1.25; *Proletarian Literature in America* sold fifteen thousand copies at \$1; S. Funaroff's volume of verse, *The Spider and the Clock*, sold at 35 cents; and a number of booklets on Negro history at 15 cents.

PUBLISHING COSTS

The fact that so few commercial houses have ventured into the low-cost field shows most publishers don't believe there's gold in them thar hills. Answering the NEW MASSES inquiry, one publisher told us: "Everyone gets all the books he wants today, no matter how poor he is." And Stackpole wrote: "Our experience doesn't indicate that the production of inexpensive books can represent a gain for publisher and author."

But there are a few brave business men who look at the cheap book problem differently. Two years ago Modern Age Books plumped into the picture with a heavy investment. Its arrival was greeted with loud hoorays from book-starved readers and writers discontented with talking to intimates in editions of eight hundred. The old stalwarts in the industry tsk-tsked over the foolhardiness of the upstart. But Modern Age bucked ahead and this summer warmly greeted an-

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other aspirant in the field, Pocket Books. The newer house limits itself to reprints; Modern Age handles both these and new books. The other big factor in the attempt to make cheap books a success in America is the British firm, Penguin. A tremendous hit abroad, having sold over 25,000,000 copies since its beginning three and a half years ago, it now operates in this country, importing the English editions.

In sizing up his prospects in the inexpensive book market, a publisher considers three factors: the number of people he can count on to buy his books; the number of good authors he can get to write them; and the number of outlets he can expect to distribute them. Mass production is what makes the 25-cent and 50-cent books possible. If the price is to remain low, the publisher must feel certain that there are now or will soon be sufficient bookbuyers, authors, and outlets to warrant his investment.

Publishers' estimates of the number of potential bookbuyers run (according to their answers to our questionnaire) from 200,000 to thirty million people. Their estimates are based upon several facts. Public and rental library statistics indicate that there are from five to ten times as many people reading books as buying books, a proportion that would be increased if we could calculate the wide-scale borrowing that goes on constantly between individuals. Others cite the fact that America is one of the most literate countries in the world, and conclude that most people who can read would like to buy books. They don't because they can't afford the \$2.50 which is the price of the average general book today.

Of course it is not simply a matter of economics. Lots of the people who do have money don't spend any of it on books. And if the wages of the depressed one-third of the nation were suddenly raised to a decent level, the bookstores wouldn't be immediately overrun with new customers. To make America "book-conscious" we must also have more and better schooling and libraries and increased leisure. But those are long-term factors. The immediate step to be taken is the drastic reduction of book prices to a level within the means of the great majority of the people.

That step has been taken by the Modern Age, Pocket, and Penguin houses. In its first four months Pocket has sold 700,000 books. Without exception stores have reported that the rapid turnover of Pocket's 25-cent reprints has stepped up business and brought in new customers. Modern Age, which at first speculated on new book editions of fifty and a hundred thousand, has sobered up to an average sale of twenty thousand copies for books priced at 50 cents, 75 cents, and 95 cents, the smaller editions forcing them to raise their prices. Publishing new books is a more expensive proposition than doing reprints, which are free of plate cost and bear a lower overhead and royalty expense. Penguin has made only a beginning here, but with a huge

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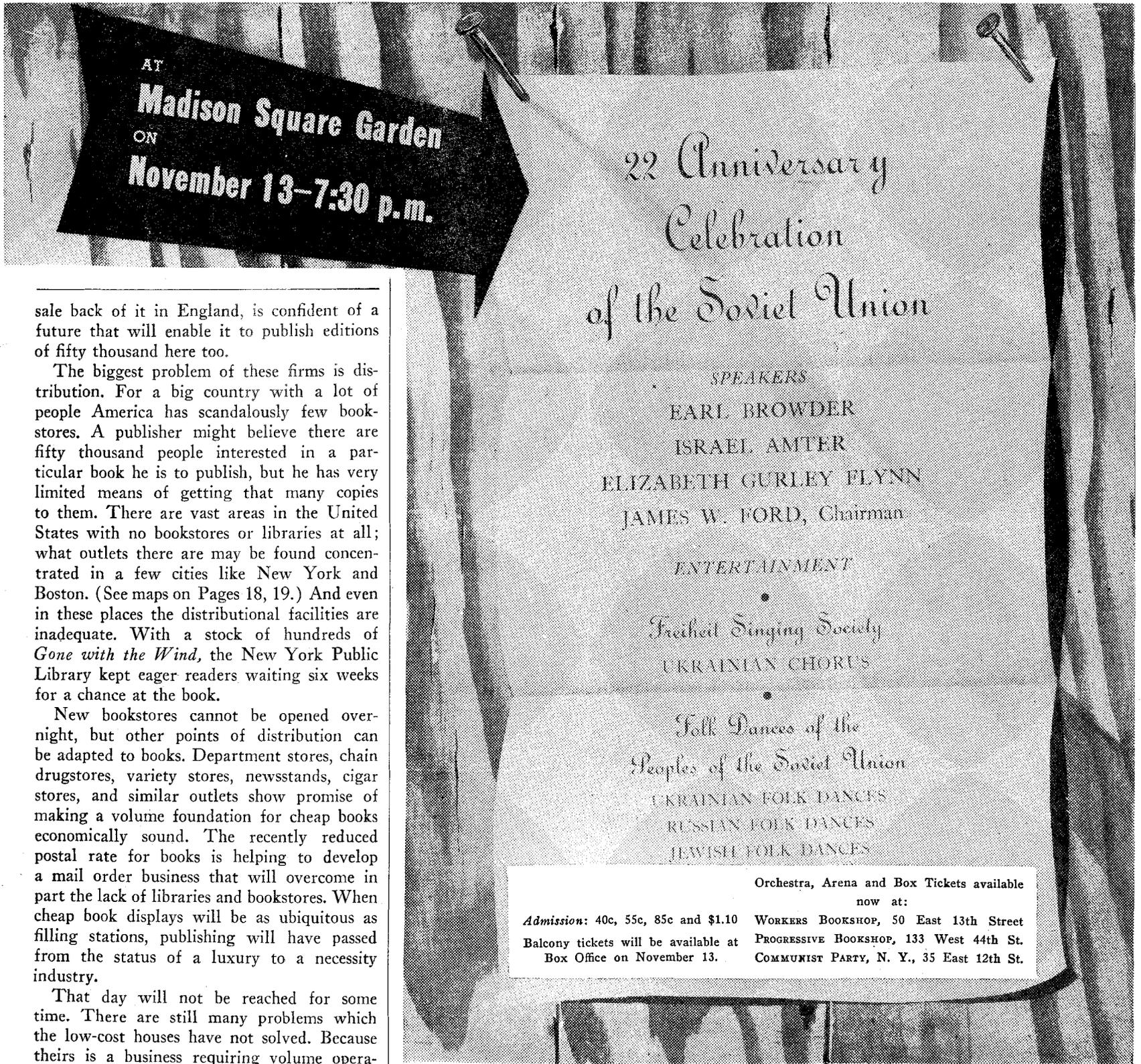
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sale back of it in England, is confident of a future that will enable it to publish editions of fifty thousand here too.

The biggest problem of these firms is distribution. For a big country with a lot of people America has scandalously few bookstores. A publisher might believe there are fifty thousand people interested in a particular book he is to publish, but he has very limited means of getting that many copies to them. There are vast areas in the United States with no bookstores or libraries at all; what outlets there are may be found concentrated in a few cities like New York and Boston. (See maps on Pages 18, 19.) And even in these places the distributional facilities are inadequate. With a stock of hundreds of *Gone with the Wind*, the New York Public Library kept eager readers waiting six weeks for a chance at the book.

New bookstores cannot be opened overnight, but other points of distribution can be adapted to books. Department stores, chain drugstores, variety stores, newsstands, cigar stores, and similar outlets show promise of making a volume foundation for cheap books economically sound. The recently reduced postal rate for books is helping to develop a mail order business that will overcome in part the lack of libraries and bookstores. When cheap book displays will be as ubiquitous as filling stations, publishing will have passed from the status of a luxury to a necessity industry.

That day will not be reached for some time. There are still many problems which the low-cost houses have not solved. Because theirs is a business requiring volume operation they must have not only large editions of each title, but a sufficiently large number of titles on which overhead charges can rest and through which publicity, advertising, and promotional expense can be placed on an efficient level. That is why the firms now in the field welcome new ones. Several hundred titles a year, widely varied in reader appeal, will accustom the American public to buying low-cost books and permit the expansion and development of distributional facilities which cheap books must have. To facilitate their growth, the low-cost houses now in existence should cooperate along fundamental lines, such as the establishment of better distributional facilities, the standardization of advertising, promotional, and sales methods, and a joint effort to make the pub-

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lic conscious of the advantages of low-cost book buying.

The progressive movement has a lot to gain from the widening of the book audience in America. The radio, newspapers, magazines, and movies, media controlled by big business, mislead public opinion more often than they inform it. It is hard for an author of progressive views to find a publisher among those who issue expensive books for a limited audience. But when book prices are brought within reach of an audience of millions, the problem changes. The publisher must select authors whose work will appeal to these millions. The experience of low-cost book publishers shows that great numbers of people want progressive books. In England, Pen-

guin's *Searchlight on Spain*, a book by the democratic duchess of Atholl, went rapidly through six editions of fifty thousand. In this country, Penguin's best seller has been a special book on Poland. In contrast, Penguin's sponsorship of a book by the reactionary Lord Lothian was disastrous, for it sold only eleven thousand, one of the worst records in that firm's history.

Modern Age reports that of some eighty titles on its list, sixteen books dealing with important social issues from a progressive slant have accounted for more than half of the house's total sales.

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### "Men in Battle"

David McKelvy White reviews Alvah Bessie's new book.

This book, whose chronology covers only my own experience in Spain, and whose sentiments are purely my own, is intended to elaborate and explain (by indirection) the role that these Americans played in what is still called the "Spanish Civil War."

IN THIS way Alvah Bessie, at the beginning of *Men in Battle* (Charles Scribner's Sons, \$2.50) sets his task before himself and, for judgment, before his readers. By *indirection* he presumably means that he is not using the essay form that would be implied by the words *elaborate and explain*. Actually he employs with great brilliance the most direct of methods—the method which comes the closest possible to such direct communication of experience as will make explanation superfluous.

The reader all but lives the life of a member of the Lincoln Battalion, guided by Bessie's alert and sensitive observation and by his disarmingly honest attitude toward himself and the life and death around him. In 350 pages his admirably tight conciseness thus enables him to crowd a great wealth of experience and vivid detail.

This is not to say that Bessie's method does not impose limitations. By adhering firmly to his own experience, there are of course certain aspects of warfare that he cannot know about or depict. "For," as he most correctly observes, "to the average soldier, battle always remains a chaos and an impression of immense confusion; he has only a worm's-eye view of the affair; he has no way of knowing what it's all about. One minute he is advancing under fire; the next he is lying low; the next, withdrawing. He receives definite orders and they are immediately countermanded; he rarely sees the enemy and the fire that is directed at him assumes astonishing impersonality, as though it were independent of any human agency."

Actually Bessie's first action—that at Batea at the end of March 1938—was among the most efficiently planned and executed in the history of the Fifteenth Brigade. As here experienced and described, this action is, from a military point of view, completely incoherent