BARD, Joseph

school of fish. He liked to clown around

BOOKS

Teller of Tales

DOROTHY AND RED *by Vincent Sheean.* 363 pages. *Houghton Mifflin.* $6.95.

This memoir begins in the breathless manner of a modern Ouida. The place: Berlin. The time: 1927. The occasion: the brilliant polyglot birthday party of a great lady shining with the glamour of international journalism in an age of prima donna correspondents.

At 33, Dorothy Thompson was at the beginning of her later fame, and at the bitter end of her marriage to Josef Bard, a sponging Hungarian cad whom she had mistaken for a genius. Despite the presence of a former Prime Minister of Hungary, the "momentous guest" was a 42-year-old American novelist—Sinclair Lewis. After dinner, the guest wasted no time, cornered his hostess and asked her to marry him (he neglected to mention that he was already married). Replied Dorothy: "I don't even know you, Mr. Lewis."

Wet Lip. Biographer Vincent Sheean did, and what he did not know then he later learned as house guest of the Lewises at Barnard, Vt., and from the Dorothy Thompson papers at Syracuse University. "Jimmy" Sheean was "too pretty" and had "a wet lower lip," his friend Dorothy noted in her diary, but there was nothing the matter with his eyesight; his book about the private and public life of Dorothy and "Red" Lewis is an extraordinary thing. Involving as it does the privacy of two people recently dead and known to thousands of others who are still living, it has an awful fascination.

The fascination comes chiefly from Dorothy's letters and the excerpts from her diary; Lewis' letters are relatively short and humorously impersonal. Some of Dorothy's entries are almost embarrassingly intimate, such as the entry for Sept. 21, 1927, eight months before they were married. "A dreadful night . . . At 8:30 he phoned. His voice was thick. 'I'm shot . . . come here, darling.'" She found Lewis passed out on his bed. "I cried terribly. Something in me collapsed." She bathed his face. He woke, and "lifted me into his bed, clasped his arms around me, and went fast to sleep again on my breast." For the next few hours, Lewis alternately woke and slept. "All the time I was sobbing. I saw how everything is going . . . I saw that being a woman has got me, at last, too . . . All the time he was making love to me. Feebly, but tenderly." Lewis got up, lurched into the night, and returned with a bottle of cognac, which he could not manage to open. "Suddenly he looked at me. His eyes were like red moons. He started to whimper. 'I cannot ruin your life . . . you are wholly good . . . Get up—you mustn't stay here—I will take you home . . . Tomorrow I will go away . . . You will never see me again. I am finished . . .' I saw he could not take me home . . . And so I went back to bed, and he held me close to his heart, and slept softly."

But Sheean found Dorothy formidable. His image for her is Boadicea, militant queen of the ancient Britons, who cut men down to size by affixing scythes to the wheels of her war chariot. In her letters to Josef (some of them never sent), she recited all his infidelities like a great divorce lawyer. She reproached him: "I was a girl and you made me a woman, a woman and you made me into a man." She developed a theory of marriage and love that could occur only to the unhappy.

"His sexual nature suffered to the very brink of impotence through this physical humility," writes Sheean, though how he could possibly know this is not made clear. This gratuitous bit is typical of other bits of amateur psychoanalysis that Sheean attempts throughout the book. He is more diffident about including evidence that Dorothy—while demanding all of a man—had divided sexual loyalties herself. Her diaries do indeed confess to emotional engagements with other women. Especially bizarre is the fact that one of the women involved was the Baroness Hatvany, strapping authoress of that classic of the schoolgirl crush, *Mädchen in Uniform.* But, overall, the relationships did not seem to amount

SINCLAIR LEWIS & DOROTHY THOMPSON ON THEIR HONEYMOON
The love of Boadicea and a man who did not exist.

She proclaimed that men were getting worse and women better, and therefore men were unfit to dominate women. It was clear, her letters and diaries tell, that she could love no one but a philosopher-king of preternatural beauty who was also kind to children.

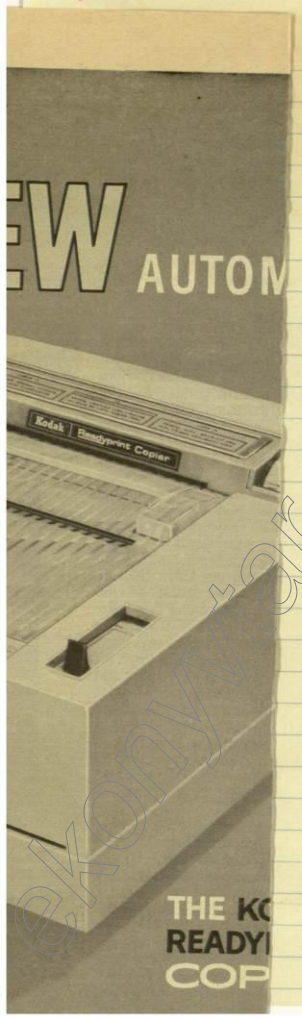
Clown v. King. Sinclair Lewis can only be pitied for having sponsored himself to fill this tremendous bill. On one count he did: he was the most famous American writer of the decade. But philosopher he was not, and in public he was more clown than king. His genius worked only when he was alone—and sober. And he was to prove very unkind to children—especially his own.

As for beauty, Dorothy had fallen for Josef's dark looks, and learned beauty was deceptive; she was prepared to settle for Red's mottled ugliness and honest gaucheries of manner. Sheean, however, finds heavy significance in Lewis' "disastrous" complexion—lumps and pustules which he called "hickeys" and left untreated (with occasional exceptions: he got cleaned up by electric needles to receive the Nobel Prize). The hickeys produced an "awful involuntary humility." to much. "Have no fears, I ain't thataway," Dorothy wrote Lewis once.

Back to Babbitt. The Lewises spent their honeymoon rattling romantically by "motor caravan" over idyllic English and Scottish countryside, Sinclair diligently working on his next novel, *Dodsworth,* and Dorothy reporting the sights for U.S. readers. The trip was marred by Lewis' occasional outbursts of bad temper, but the marriage did not begin to run into real trouble until after Red and Dorothy returned to the U.S. in 1928. They found the country subtly but profoundly changed, and the change affected the precarious private balance between them. Mrs. Babbitt, whom Lewis had invented, had joined a women's club to listen to Dorothy Thompson. From her pulpit in the New York Herald Tribune, Dorothy became the most novel and formidable of a new kind of popular leader—the political commentator. As her fame rose, Red's receded, eclipsed by a sophistication he had helped to create.

But the fact is that private life for the Lewises had become impossible. When Lewis was not working, he drank like a

BARD, Joseph



school of fish. He liked to clown around with pals, and at a party would do everything short of putting a lampshade on his head. But Dorothy was deadly serious. Their apartment in New York, like their house at Barnard, was often filled with pundits or important news sources. He often taunted her: "You, with your important little lectures—You, with your brilliant people."

Dorothy wrote a number of long, sad, reproachful letters trying to make Red into something other than he was. They were unanswerable and usually were unanswered. Anyone could have told her that when a wife has to write letters to her husband, the game is up. It was the last straw when Red got badly stage-struck. He made a fool of himself in his own terrible play, *Angela Is 22*, and cavorted with a series of leading ladies in a series of other plays. "I am horrified," Dorothy wrote. "You are happy. I happen not to be. I have loved a man who didn't exist."

Wrong Fury. Lewis lived nine years after their divorce in 1942. The lonely, tragic fiasco of Lewis' last days has been told in Mark Schorer's biography, and makes nonsense of Sheean's theories. The furies that possessed Lewis were not traceable to a schoolboy complexion. As for Dorothy, her last days were calm, anonymous and happy in a third marriage, to Maxim Kopf, a thick-knuckled Czech painter who treated her, perhaps for the first time, as a woman with no knives on her chariot's wheels.

But Sheean's liberal use of her intimate diary has removed that anonymity from everything else. Sheean says that the fact some passages were annotated or edited proves that Dorothy wished them known to the world. Other friends insist that she had been going over her records with the intention of writing her autobiography. Certainly, those entries give the book its chief quality. Beside their directness, Sheean's running commentary often seems outrageously intrusive. It is as if the reader had been watching through a one-way glass the agonies and the ecstasies of two troubled people—then suddenly out pops Sheean, the friendly family psychiatrist, commenting learnedly on the painful scenes just witnessed as if they were just so much case history.