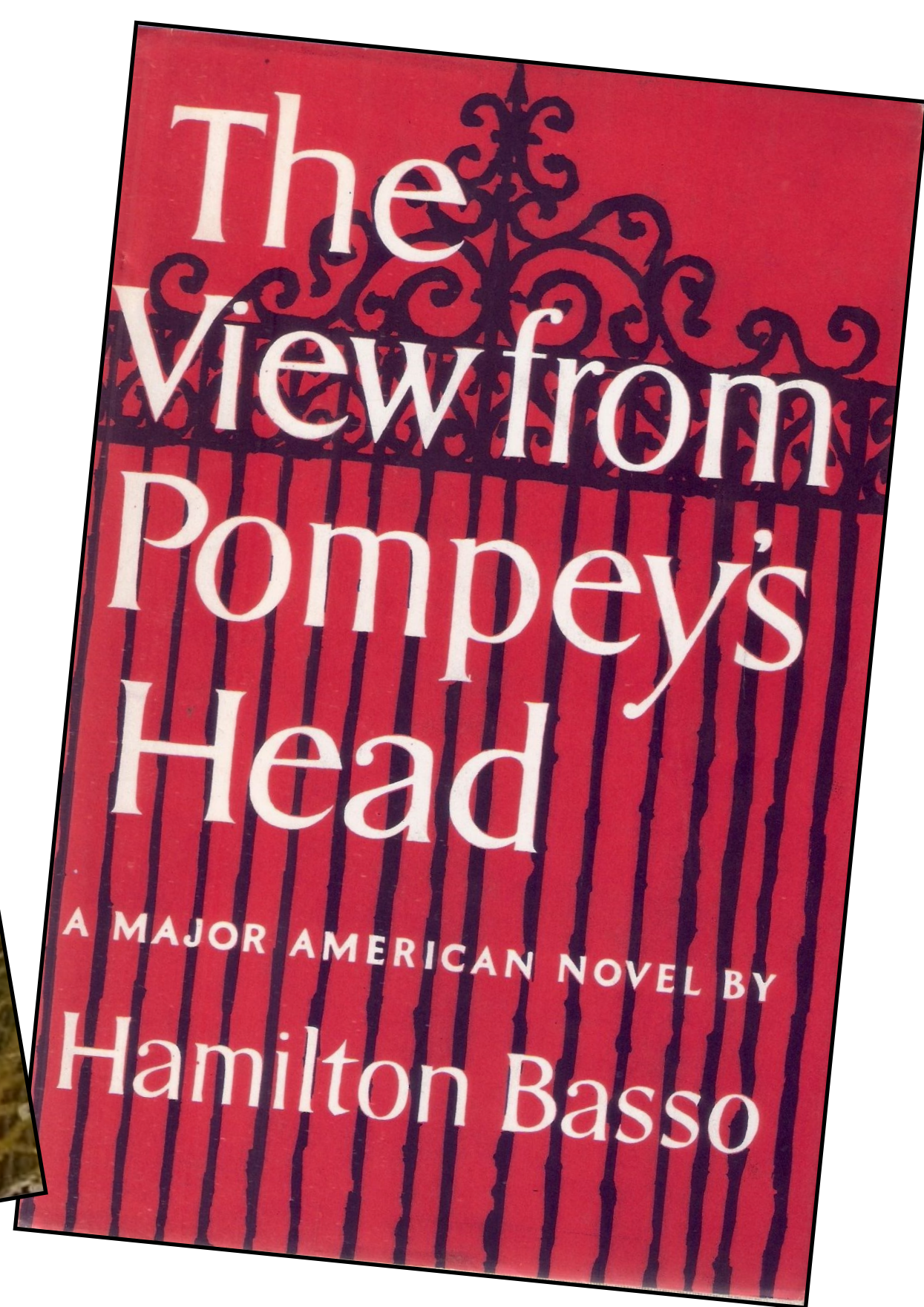
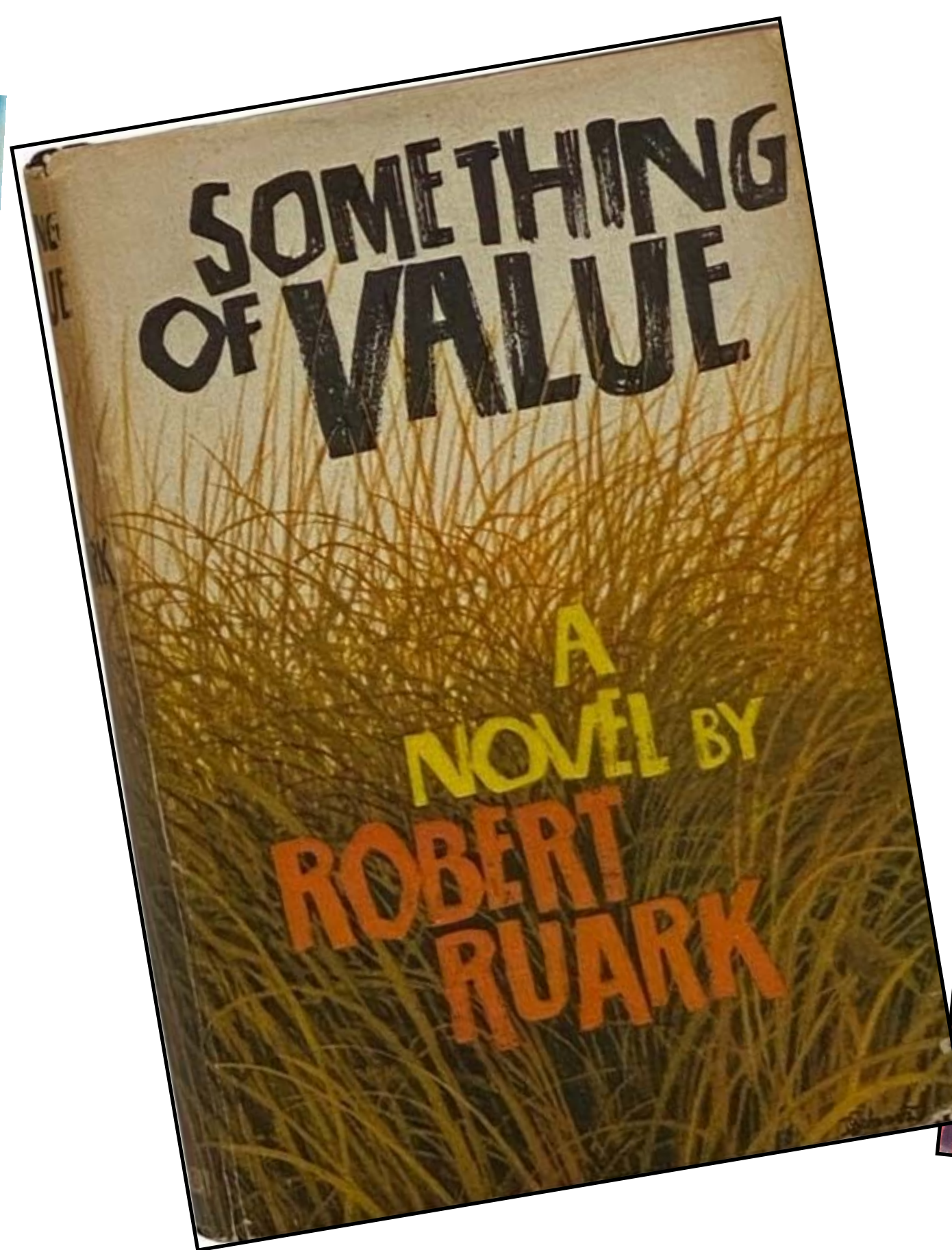
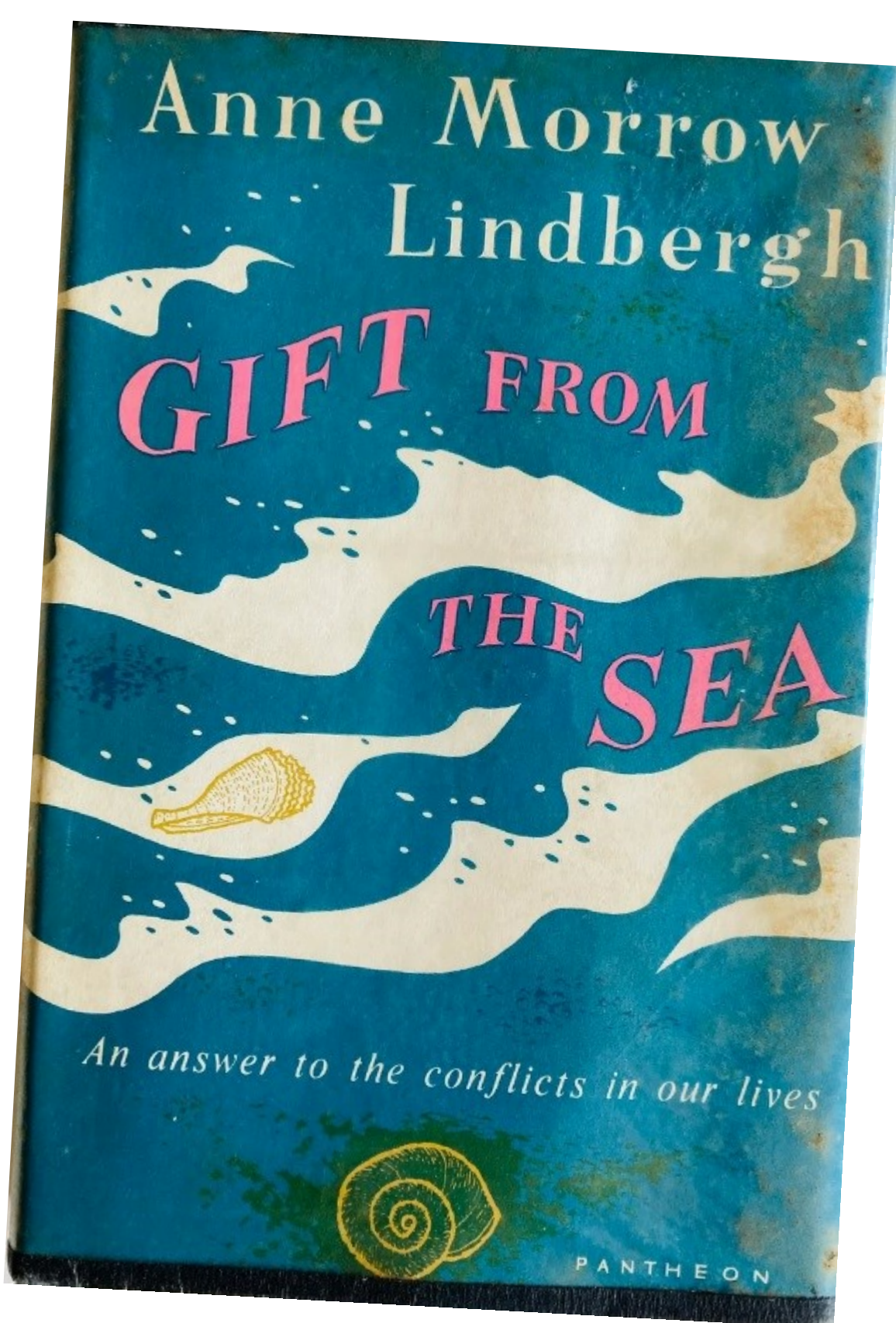
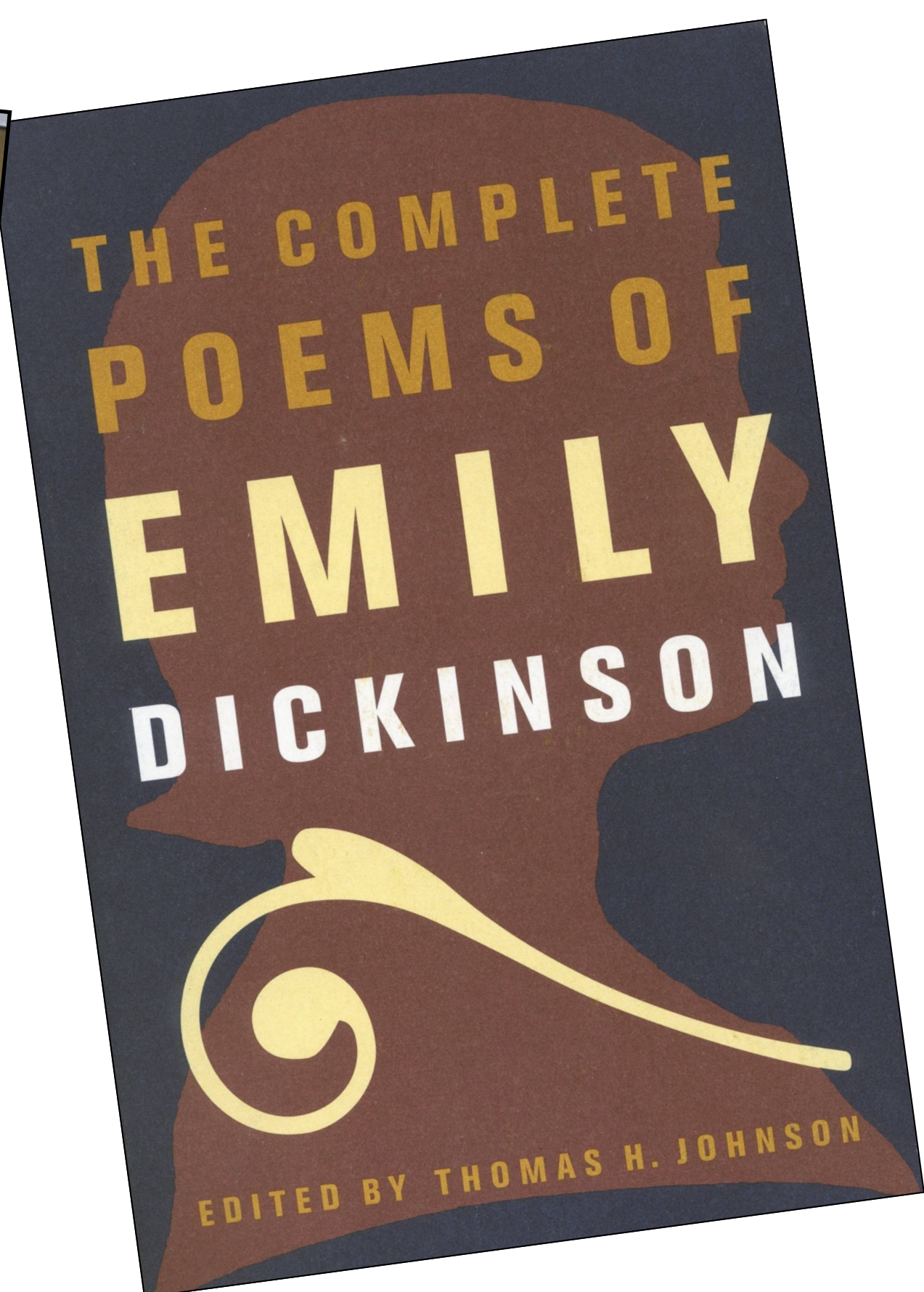
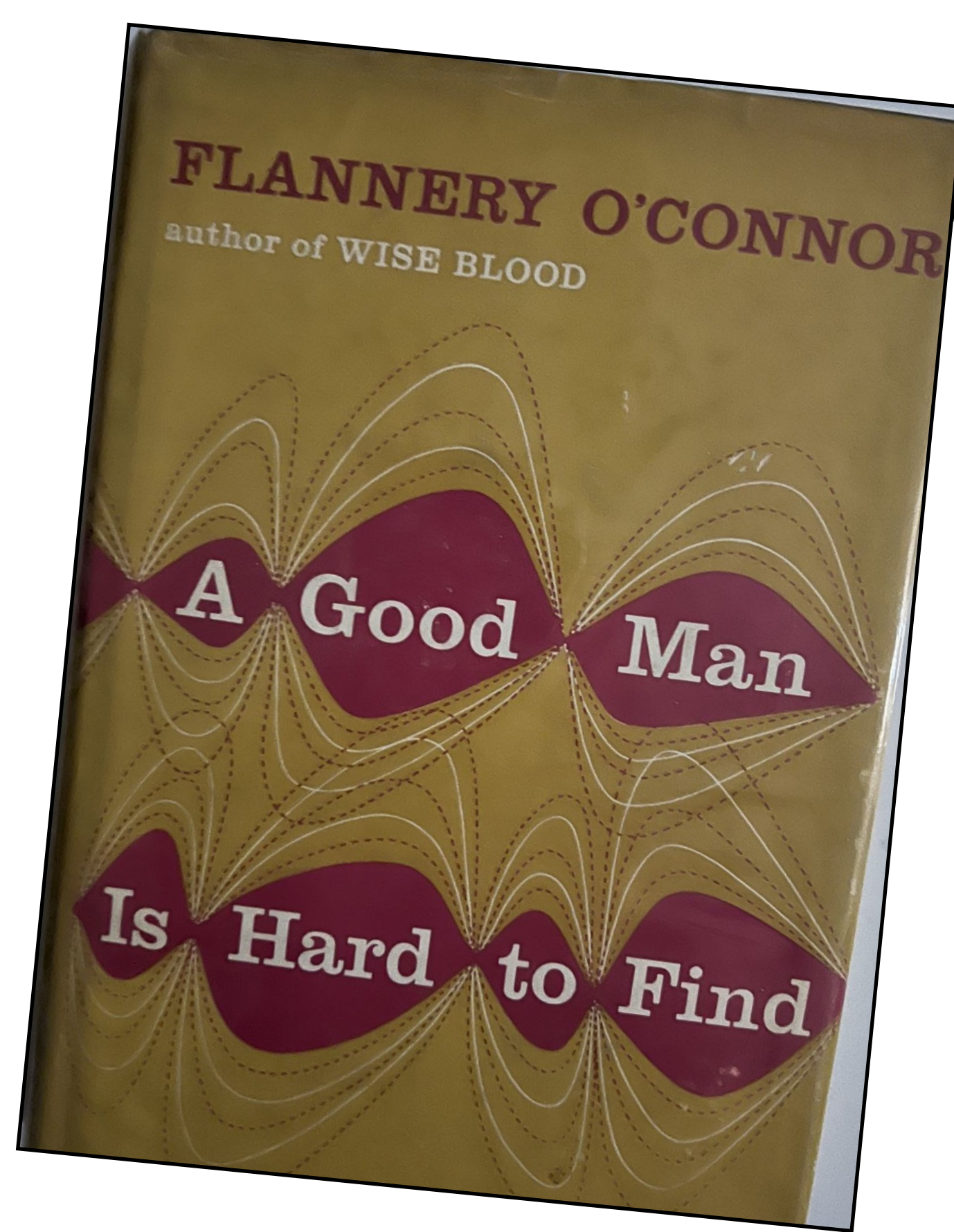


POPULAR BOOKS



IN AND OUT OF BOOKS

Numbers

WE have been so servile to statistics that we hardly know it's Christmas. So it should be: because this is the last forever Sunday of 1955 and it is our job to look back on the whole kit and kaboodle of books—and make what we can of them. As a book-keeper and as a reporter. We therefore got masses of paper covered with masses of facts and figures. We talked to some of the publishers and editors. And here is the picture, as good a positive as we can get from the dubious negative we found.

Some 11,600 books were published this year, about four-fifths new books, and one-fifth new editions of old books. Roughly 2,000 works of fiction were turned out—and not down—by the publishers. Fiction is, of course, the largest single category in any typical breakdown. Juvenile books made the second largest category this year, ding-donging to about 1,500 titles. Religion (775), biography (760) and science (750) were runner-ups. The category (as Publishers Weekly uses it) of General Literature and Criticism wasn't too far behind with a swashbuckling 600 titles.

Quantitatively, the total 1955 figure is some 300 titles superior to the total 1954 figure. You want to know what all that means? We could tell you to go cook a goose (which we hope is getting done somewhere on this lovely day), but instead, and because it is more nourishing, we give you Sweet Will:

*We fortify in paper and in figures,
Using the names of men instead of men:
Like one that draws the model of a house
Beyond his power to build it.*

Figures

CONFRONTED by this massed enemy, the Book Review struggled with some magnificence and heroism if not with some success. It may seem a pitiable sum, this figure we are about to put forward, but we are confident that it would stand up under any quantitative comparison. The Book Review devoted during the year some half-million lines of type to reviewing 2,439 books. It also devoted some 175,000 lines of type to "commentary"—that is, literary essays, letters, and such weekly departments as Speaking Of and In & Out of Books.

To the Best Sellers, that index into what the most people are reading the most of, the Review pages gave up approximately 18,000 type lines, and throughout the year 89 titles appeared under the General category of the Best Seller chart, 79 under the Fiction category. So that one can say, with some decent assurance, that readers in America during this past year created 168 best-selling books. It is also reasonably safe to say that 168 au-

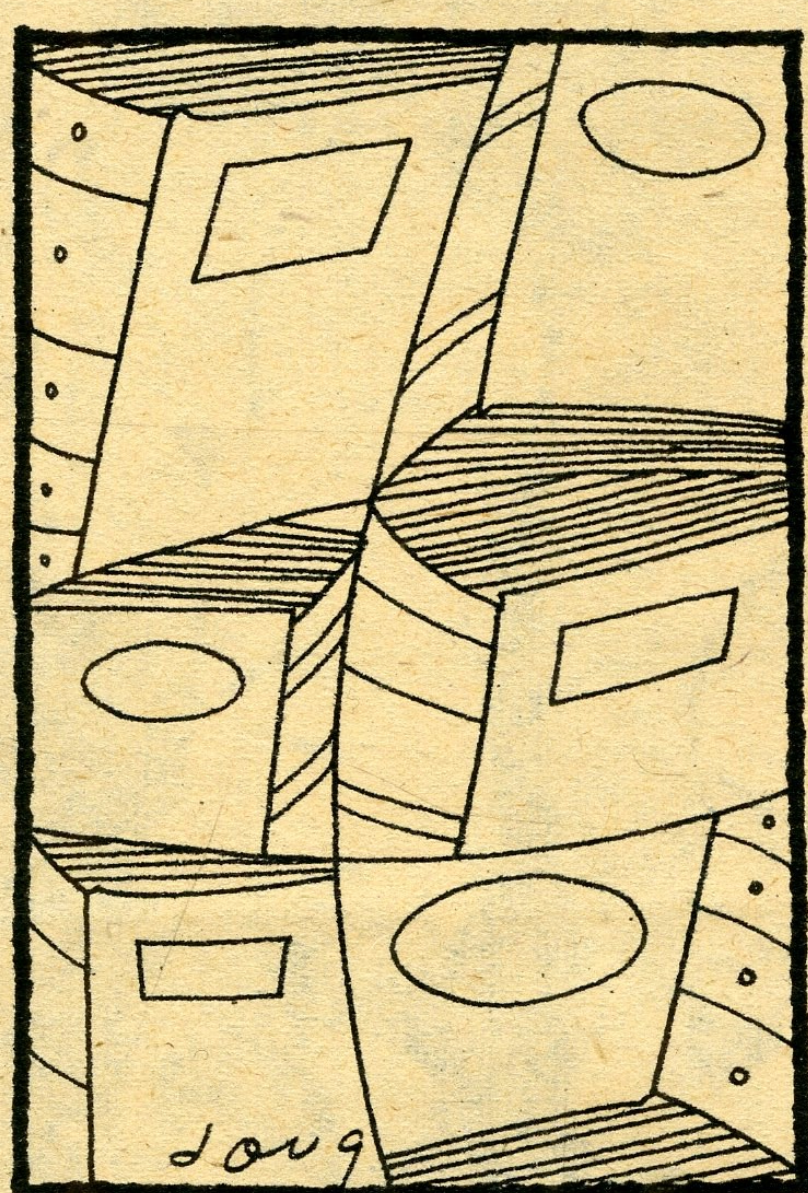
By HARVEY BREIT

thors thank the readers of America.

*Within this wall of flesh
There is a soul counts thee
her creditors.*

Graphs

AS we said before, we talked, and talked and listened. All publishing hands agree that this past year has been an excellent one for the book trade. "One of the best years, if not the best one, since the war." Even the bookstores couldn't complain. According to Publishers Weekly, the Doubleday bookshops everywhere were up 15.4 per cent during Novem-



ber over last year's November (poor last year's November). Brentano's concurs. When we mentioned this to one publisher and asked him what happened now to the bookshop's complaint against Book Club competition, he replied: "When books aren't selling, you need a scapegoat. When books are selling everybody's too busy even to think about a scapegoat." Okay. We didn't know that we agreed, but we thought it a neat-enough formula.

The fact is that all kinds of books are selling, the big \$5 novel ("Andersonville"), the highly expensive good book ("The World We Live In," at \$13.50 a copy has sold over 30,000 copies), and the paper back books, at 25 and 35 cents. There is no doubt that the book-buying public is quixotic. Who would have dreamed that Millar Burrow's "The Dead Sea Scrolls" would go into a fourth printing? Not even Viking, the publisher of the book, dreamed it. But there is, as well, a secure feeling now that the public is prepared to buy good books at a higher cost. Last year's \$3.50 book was priced this year at \$4 without too much fear and trembling. The public bought it. So that even if unit sales haven't increased, some publishers argue, the gross business is better. And they are already working on next year with optimism and passion.

*I have important business,
The tide whereof is now.*

Reasons

THE year has been an exceptionally fine one. How come? Why is that? What happened? We found no revelatory answers but there were plenty of credible ones. Most publishers agreed on two main reasons for the prosperity (relatively speaking) of the book trade: the general prosperity and the diversity of good books.

The general prosperity is a clear enough reason. Business is booming and there is more money to spend period. The second main reason, the diversity of good books (most publishers cited Wouk, Kantor, O'Hara, Warren, Schulberg, Wilson, both Sloan and Edmund, Gunther, Lindbergh, Carson, Truman) is operative in the following way. A fellow wants to buy the Wouk novel, walks into a bookshop, sees O'Hara, Warren and Kantor, buys the Wouk novel and later returns to buy one of the others. He is, the explainers explain, excited.

Of course, nothing succeeds like success. If people have more money to spend and spend it on books, publishers (who are people) will spend some of that extra money on additional promotion—and that helps the book trade too. And more people are more schooled on the college level, "probably making more readers," one publisher told us. We told him how much we admired his choice of the word "probably."

*I am no breeching scholar
in the schools;
I'll not be tied to hours nor
'pointed times,
But learn my lesson as I
please myself.*

Summary

CURIOSLY enough, the praise was universal (within our limited range) for the American reader. It was a year—whether you admired the books or didn't—in which a lot of writing people had a lot to say. And, according to the eulogistic publishers, the readers are to be praised for being drawn to them. One publisher said to us, "There's not a damn thing wrong with the American reader. He's a peculiar animal, that's all. He isn't a reader the way the English reader is. The American goes more for vitality and content. He isn't trained to read." When we listened to that description of the American reader we thought, "Why, how very like the American writer."

And maybe that's it. Maybe it was a lucky year in which somehow writer and reader were never too far apart. The best-selling books tended to be serious and popular both, and they were diverse—as against those years, for example, when there was a monolith of historicals.

That is all we know. We frame our picture most tentatively, because, mark you:

*Good reasons must of force
give place to better.*

