April 19, 1981

Paperbacks: New and Noteworthy

Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, $9.95.

MAUGHAM, by Ted Morgan.—1965), based on his correspondence and interviews with persons who knew him. Although he is shown in almost every conceivable attitude of fear, meanness, spite, indignity and rage, the author remains oddly and convincingly respectful.

A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES, by John Kennedy Toole. (Grove Press, $3.50) Ignatius J. Reilly, a slovenly, ranting fatso who is contemptuous of everything that's happened since the fifth century A.D., falls afoul of the law, setting off a string of mad escapades involving a cast of bizarre characters. This first and only novel of the late John Kennedy Toole has been hailed as a grand comic fugue that superbly captures the special spirit of New Orleans.

AFRICAN CALLIOPE, by Edward Hoagland. (Penguin, $4.95) A report on a journey, mostly by jeep and truck, through the Sudan during the winter of 1977. Edward Hoagland's wanderings took him from the mountain forests to the war-devastated Southern Region and to Khartoum. He has little to say about politics and geography, but his depiction of the misery and sadness of the land is meticulous and touching.

THE ODD JOB MAN, by N.J. Crisp. (Avon, $2.25) George Griffin is a familiar type in spy fiction - the seedy has-been who hangs about London pubs waiting for an offer. But after an American comes along and hires him to "deliver" a foreign espionage agent, N.J. Crisp develops him into a convincing character, meanwhile spinning a quite intriguing yarn.

THE EASTER EGG ARTISTS, by Adrienne Adams. (Atheneum/Aladdin, $2.95) Young Orson Abbott, who's a rabbit, wants to become an artist, like his parents, whose specialty is decorating Easter eggs. But when the Abbots go south on a winter holiday, he can't resist doing daredevil things to flabbergast people along the way. In the end, the Abbots get home safely and get all their eggs decorated in time for Easter, with Orson a wiser rabbit and better artist for the experience. A charmingly illustrated story for 4- to 7-year-olds.

DEPARTURES, by Jane Bernstein. (Avon, $2.50) The "departures" of this book's title are the deaths, real or felt, of three men in the life of a young biologist named Lydia: her immigrant grandfather, her misremembered father, and her lover, who leaves her for fear that their relationship will suffer as their situations in life change. Jane Bernstein has created an unshakably real character and an absorbing first novel.
DOUBLE BARREL. CRIMINAL CONVERSATION. THE LOVELY LADIES. By Nicolas Freeling. (Vintage, $2.50 each.) Three early novels about Inspector Van der Valk of Amsterdam's Central Reserche, by which the British detective-story writer Nicolas Freeling established himself as a peer of Georges Simenon. In "Double Barrel" (1964), Van der Valk's problem is to find out what's behind a spate of poison-pen letters in a drab Dutch provincial town. In "Criminal Conversation" (1966), his help is sought by a leading Amsterdam businessman in finding evidence that a certain person has committed an unsuspected murder. In "The Lovely Ladies" (1971), he sets out to discover why anyone would want to murder an old man who has neither money nor known enemies, a quest that ultimately takes him to Dublin.

THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF JOYCE, by Richard Ellmann. (Oxford University Press, $4.95.) The leading authority on James Joyce discusses the ways in which the author of "Ulysses" adapted, distorted and consolidated his borrowings from Homer, Shakespeare, Goethe and others in order to demonstrate that even in Dublin, life can be cosmic. Most valuable is an appendix listing the 600 volumes Joyce had in his Trieste library while writing his masterpiece.

THE SENATE NOBODY KNOWS, by Bernard Asbell. (Johns Hopkins University Press, $6.95.) For 18 months, in 1975-76, the journalist Bernard Asbell closely followed the activities of Senator Edmund S. Muskie - a time during which the Maine Senator was particularly concerned with environmental pollution, Congressional budget reform and his own re-election contest. These carefully noted observations should enable a reader to draw his own conclusions about the way the Senate works.

FALL OF THE PEACOCK THRONE, by William H. Forbis. (McGraw-Hill, $6.95.) A journalist's report on the historical events and forces that led to the fall of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, 446th and last of the shahs of Iran, and of the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini. An anecdotal, popular account, good reading for Americans seeking an introduction to an alien civilization where monarchy, religious leadership and overnight modernization have been in conflict.

WOMEN OF A CERTAIN AGE, by Lillian B. Rubin. (Harper/Colophon, $4.95.) On the basis of interviews with 160 women, aged 35 to 54, all of whom have been married and have children, a sociologist concludes that most women view the prospect of an empty nest with relief, maintain a lively sexual interest and are concerned about what to do with the rest of their lives. A timely study that offers no universal answers, but does raise some serious questions about traditional assumptions.

THE PASSION ARTIST, by John Hawkes. (Harper/Colophon, $3.95.) For Konrad Vost, resident of an imaginary European city, life has three concerns: his daughter, whom he does not realize has become a prostitute; pilgrimages to the grave of his deceased wife, and visits to a jail where his mother is imprisoned for having murdered his father. At the prison, he becomes involved in an uprising of the inmates. Once again John Hawkes shows that he is one of America's most original and innovative novelists, but this time the fiery show he stages does not provide much illumination.
TORMENTED MASTER, by Arthur Green. (Schocken Books, $11.95.) The life of Rabbi Nahman ben Simhah of Bratslav (1772-1810), a leading member of the Hasidic Jewish sect, whose tales of longing and quest are classics of world mystical literature and were precursors of Kierkegaard and Kafka. This perceptive study by a University of Pennsylvania professor of religion makes it quite clear why Nahman is a thinker most relevant to our time.

EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY, by Elizabeth F. Loftus. (Harvard University Press, $7.95.) The testimony of eyewitnesses is a fragile foundation upon which to rest a criminal justice system - such is the contention of Elizabeth F. Loftus, a psychology professor at the University of Washington, Seattle. In support of her thesis, she describes the many ways in which memories can be radically altered or new ones implanted under interrogation in a law court. An important book about a critical question.

THE DECLINE OF BISMARCK'S EUROPEAN ORDER, by George F. Kennan. (Princeton University Press, $6.95.) The diplomat-scholar George F. Kennan argues that the gradual disintegration of the close relationship existing between Germany, Austria and Russia during the 1880's and its replacement by the Russian-French alliance of 1892 were major causes of World War I. In this volume he describes, vividly and convincingly, the working of the forces and events until 1890; a sequel is promised to carry the story beyond that date.

THE GLASS HOUSE, by John Hix. (MIT Press, $9.95.) The solar house has been a topic of everyday conversation and speculation only since the birth of OPEC nearly a decade ago, but its heritage dates back at least to the 17th century, when botanists developed glasshouses - we Americans call them "greenhouses" - to protect rare plants against the rigors of winter. In this knowledgeably written, richly illustrated paperback, John Hix of Cambridge University traces the evolution of the glasshouse and the application of its principles to human uses from the point of view of the architect that he is. In its later chapters, his study becomes a celebration of 20th-century architects like Paul Scheerbart, Bruno Taut, Frei Otto and Buckminster Fuller, pioneers in designing glass structures for comfortable and economical living. Reproduced above is a drawing of a "conservatory" being constructed for a nobleman in London in 1860.

Illustrations: drawing