

writers” over misbegotten projects or moronic producers, they could pack up their Smith-Coronas and go back to the theater, as they did with *The Diary of Anne Frank*. And when the entire system began crashing around their heads, they simply said, “Let’s get out of here.” And did.

The system denigrated writers and depended on them, and it will continue to do so as long as movies tell stories. The value of “hacks”—the good and even the bad—was defined by one of Hollywood’s legendary talent users and abusers, Irving Thalberg, the boy genius of MGM, who called writers like Goodrich and Hackett “the most important people in film”—and then added, mogul that he was, “and we must do everything to keep them from finding out.”

—STEVEN BACH

*A BOLT FROM THE BLUE:
And Other Essays.*

By Mary McCarthy. Edited by
A. O. Scott. New York Review Books.
443 pp. \$24.95

Introducing this selection of Mary McCarthy’s occasional writings from the 1930s to the 1980s, *New York Times* critic A. O. Scott writes that “one of the ambitions of this book . . . is to make a somewhat paradoxical case for [McCarthy’s] importance as a novelist—one of a handful of indispensable American writers of realist fiction in the immediate postwar era.” The collection succeeds in this ambition, though by a path different from the one Scott likely had in mind. The occasional staleness of McCarthy’s quintessentially midcentury voice as an essayist—its political fierceness, its axiomatic contempt for the tastes of the middle class—serves to point up the contrast with her novels, which remain fresh and even topical, particularly such masterpieces of social observation as *The Company She Keeps* (1942) and *The Group* (1963).

Those books, as it happens, also splendidly demonstrate the theories of the novel that McCarthy (1912–89) puts forth in the sturdiest of these essays, “The Fact in Fiction” (1960) and “Ideas and the Novel” (1980).

Novels, she notes, are first and foremost repositories of *news*: The great 19th-century novels “carried the news—of crime, high society, politics, industry, finance, and low life.” By the mid-20th century, it seemed that such realities as war, Auschwitz, and the bomb had made fictional depictions of “reality” incomprehensible or irrelevant, and realism’s effectiveness as a literary technique began to weaken. But such developments came too late to hurt McCarthy’s own novels, which, if not exactly “realist,” are crammed with documentary miniatures. *The Company She Keeps* records the precise progress of an adultery in a certain literary set, while *The Group* features an exact account of the procedure by which an unmarried woman got fitted for a pessary, or diaphragm, in 1933.

All this immediacy flags when McCarthy casts her observations in the mold of general cultural criticism, perhaps because her vocabulary takes on a palpable residue of the 1930s sectarian political wars that shaped her. Though her perceptions remain firm and scintillating when she talks of Tolstoy or Salinger, her declarations about “Americans” can descend into meaningless political posturing. “What the foreigner finds most objectionable in American life is its lack of basic comfort,” she wrote in 1947—at a time when Europe still lay in ruins. It does not help to be told a paragraph later that “the immigrant or the poor native American bought a bathtub, not because he wanted to take a bath, but because he wanted to be in a *position* to do so.”

McCarthy’s lasting allure comes partly from her personas, literary and otherwise—on the one hand the authorial voice, sharp, sure, sensuous, and on the other the beauty, the many marriages, and the lurid, abuse-filled childhood detailed in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1946). The memoir and novels hold up best, followed by the wry, perspicacious theater and literary criticism. With so much of McCarthy’s work still in print, this collection necessarily has the feel of odds and ends. Still, if it sends readers in search of the rest of the corpus, that may be success enough.

—AMY E. SCHWARTZ