

When Flyboys Cracked Up

CAPTAIN NEWMAN, M.D. By Leo Rosten. Harper. \$4.95.

ANY old infantryman will tell you that American airmen were the glamor boys of World War II. In their 40 mission crushed caps and polaroid sun glasses, the fair-haired flyboys were stereotyped forever as a brash undisciplined lot who slept between clean sheets, drank only the very best booze around, and took away everybody's women because of the considerable differential in the pay scale.

Leo Rosten's novel is not a story of that air war. There isn't a bomber base or a fighter mission or even a "rodger, dodger" in the book. Rosten chronicles the war of ward 7, the psychiatric ward at a southwest air corps base during the forties.

Under Capt. Newman, M.D., the ward beyond the locked, barred door is a haven not only for men shattered by aerial combat, but for many a strange, quixotic personality. There is Coby Clay, the happiest man in the world, who baffles the entire army—by refusing to make his bed; Hammerhead Lawrence, cursed with the fascinating compulsion to swear at all officers; Jackson Laibowitz, the orderly who believes suffering is normal and all contentment is neurotic; Pepe Govoni, who believes all of mankind's woes can be cured by lavish doses of "kindness and salami." Not to mention 14 Italian prisoners of war who turn up one unforgettable day.

Newman himself is always a doctor first, an officer last. He is an understanding psychiatrist, never a hard nosed military man. As a case in point, consider the exchange

between Capt. Newman and Cpl. Laibowitz:

"What's holding up Tompkin's treatment, doc? He's waiting for you to make the move."

"It is not," Newman said brusquely, "the function of an orderly to advise the chief of the neuropsychiatric service —"

"Doc," Laibowitz said, "from peasants I expect pride. From psychiatrists I expect imagination."

What Tom Heggen's Mr. Roberts was to the crew of the Reluctant, Rosten's Capt. Newman is to ward 7. To Col. "Corsets" Pysar, Newman is an exasperating nuisance, but to his nurses and orderlies and patients, Newman is a healer, a fixer, a mender—a beacon of light in a dark nightmare world where even the strongest men lose their way.

Leo Rosten is, of course, the creator of the irrepressible H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N, and one of the funniest writers around, and "Capt. Newman, M. D." is chockful of

funny writing. But to judge it a "funny book" is only half the story. It is a serious funny book. And you can bet your combat boots most readers will love it. Even old infantrymen.

GEORGE VUKELICH.