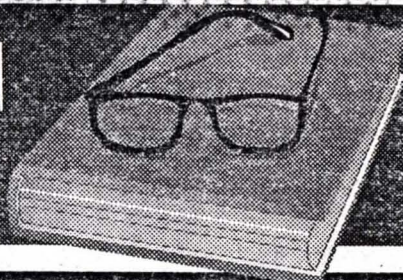


THE BOOK REPORT



A New Yorker state of mind

Short stories and profiles that span the decades

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Like The New Yorker at its best, two new spin-off collections — *Wonderful Town: New York Stories from The New Yorker* and *Life Stories: Profiles from The New Yorker* — have a certain timelessness: You could dip into them tomorrow or 20 years from tomorrow and the pieces you'd read would be every bit as fascinating. *Wonderful Town* collects fiction from the last 50 years by the likes of Vladimir Nabokov and Philip Roth, all of which are set wholly or in part in New York City. *Life Stories* offers profiles of the famous and obscure, ranging from Marlon

Brando in his prime to Richard Pryor in his sad, slow decline.

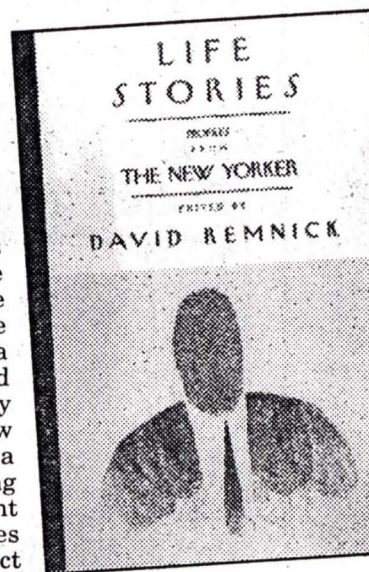
Reigning New Yorker editor David Remnick offers brief, modest introductions that basically explain why certain pieces were excluded. (According to Remnick, Tom Wolfe's New York-set stories weren't up to snuff, while a number of classic profiles — such as Joseph Mitchell's novella-length "Joe Gould's Secret," the basis of an upcoming Stanley Tucci film — were too lengthy for inclusion.)

Contrary to some people's belief, says Remnick, founding editor Harold Ross did not invent

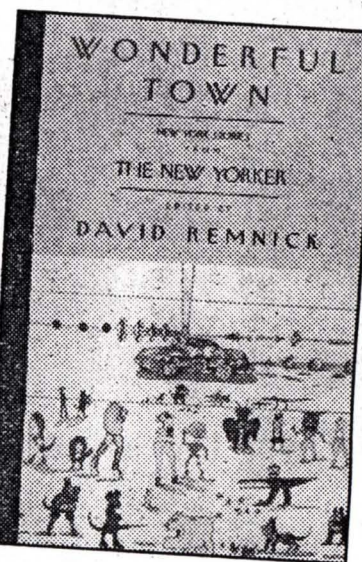
the profile. Plutarch and The Saturday Evening Post beat him to it — but Ross' New Yorker, contends Remnick, perfected it.

As far as fiction is concerned, no one would dispute the magazine's one-time preeminence. For a writer in the '50s and '60s, getting a story published in The New Yorker was like a stand-up comic getting a slot on "The Tonight Show." The names included here reflect that: John Cheever, Ann Beattie, J.D. Salinger and Susan Sontag among them.

Most of these stories are well-known, like Woody



Allen's "The Whore of Mensa," that hilarious gem about men who get their kicks from women who



for a fee. And while the stories are juxtaposed as imaginatively possible — Peter Taylor's old-fashioned prose butting

up against Donald Barthelme's playful modernism, for example — the fact that these stories are so familiar and widely available undercut the collection's claim to distinction.

Far better is "Life Stories." While the short stories range all over the magazine's history, with 10 stories from the '40s, nine from the '80s and a batch from other decades, the pieces are heavily weighted toward the '90s, which Remnick contends are the glory days of The New Yorker.

Whether or not that claim is true, the sketches that are included are terrific, from Kenneth Tynan's fascinating glimpse at Johnny Carson

to Wolcott Gibbs' famous decimation of Time's Henry Luce.

The collection begins, appropriately enough, with one of the best pieces by a master of the character sketch, Joseph Mitchell's "Mr. Hunter's Grave." It ends with Janet Malcolm's look at the artist David Salle and offers detours along the way to Ernest Hemingway, Mikhail Baryshnikov and a charming imposter who claimed to be a Russian prince named Michael Alexandrovitch Dmitry Obolensky Romanoff.

Unlike the short stories, many of these pieces are difficult if not impossible to find in other compilations. Where else could you read Mark Singer's playful look at the sleight-of-hand master Ricky Jay or Susan Orlean's delightful riff on the show dog Biff?

On their own, the stories in "Wonderful Town" have already stood the test of time. "Life Stories" — the more necessary of these collections — will certainly do the same.