

A Writer And The Bottle

SAMS IN A DRY SEASON, by Ivan Gold.
Houghton Mifflin, 244 pp., \$19.95.

By Richard Elman

LIKE IVAN GOLD, Jason Sams — the protagonist of "Sams in a Dry Season" — was "once a prince of promise." But six years have gone by since Sams' last novel got a "killing review" in *The New York Times*; he's become an alcoholic and is in danger of losing his job teaching writing in Boston.

Sams, the author of only two books, is said to be a former Lionel Trilling student and a friend of such writers as Dan Wakefield and Robert Stone. Gold, on the other hand, who also attended Trilling's Columbia, has not published book-length fiction in 20 years, after being acclaimed a talent for such ambitious works as "Nickel Miseries" (a prize-winning collection of five novellas) and "Sick Friends," the 1969 novel in which Sams first appeared.

In this sad and painful book we jump from a sardonic third-person narrative of Sams getting fired over lunch by an old academic buddy to a virtuoso stream-of-consciousness account of Sams' trip to New York to see his agent, his editor and his aging parents. On and off alcohol for quite some time, Sams heads down to New York a drunk again. During his Big Apple bender he attends a family funeral, is rebuffed in his efforts to scam an advance from his new editor, sleeps over at a friend's and drinks all the booze on hand. During an anxiety attack on the train back to Boston he is comforted by a young actor.

The final part of this fiction is a rather straight series of memoiristic jottings about Sams breaking down in front of his unhappy wife and son, his first A.A. meetings in the Boston area — recorded with humility, occasional humor and hardly any literary pretense

— and his recognition at a worldwide A.A. convention in Montreal that he is just a drunk carrying a flag.

It is very hard to write sensate, moving fiction if one is impaired by drink, or other substances, and it is courageous and honest of Ivan Gold in the person of Sams not to blame anybody but himself for his impairments and loss of esteem. For Gold to cast aside his fictive persona in the final part of "Sams in a Dry Season" and make a pitch for A.A. as the only hope for most alcoholics bravely skirts being maudlin.



Vera Gold

Ivan Gold

childhood, old girlfriends, school, the Army, courtship, marriage, baby-making, botched manuscripts. This is not always freshly set forth.

Yet sometimes a surprising gusto returns, as with this astonishing recollection of Army chow in Japan after the Korean war: "It seemed important to record somewhere that he had never in his life . . . eaten as well as he had for those two years . . . and that he would spend the next 23 years of his life if not the whole of it trying to duplicate the taste of the pork tenderloin that came his way every Tuesday evening at Camp Otus near Kyoto"

Though I was partial to the pork chops and apple fritters at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, such Jewish nostalgia for Army pork, in my opinion, is imaginatively more alive than writing about going cold turkey. But some writers have to write their confessions before they can go on to write with all their latent powers.

Richard Elman's new novel, "Tar Beach," will be published early next year.

Much of "Sams in a Dry Season" is the familiar story of the drunk: hostile, abusive, always blaming others, falling short of his own high standards, remorsefully ruminating about