

BOOK REVIEWS

A. Britain

1. Hunter Davies: Here We Go Round The Mulberry-Bush

This short novel should be fun to read for young people and adults, and the film that was made from it should not induce you to think the book is psychologically superficial. It is the account of a boy's attempts to meet girls, though it is not exactly a "boy meets girl" story: not edifying enough and the author is one of the English realist writers of the 1960s. Class differences are clearly there, but treated in a light-hearted way that went out of fashion when Thatcherism took its toll.

2. J. Braine: Room at the Top

Joe Lampton decides to stick to his Northern accent for some time still, so as to appear sincere to his genteel and benevolent landlady. He has moved to a city and a job with the County Council and is on his way up from his working-class family background. But he keeps his home-grown vigour and acquires a degree of ruthlessness in his private life, which takes him into a group of middle-class amateur theatre players, including a woman who falls in love with him, and into the family of a rich industrialist whose daughter he marries.

It is a gripping story, surprisingly cynical for a Catholic author (or does Catholicism lead to a more pitiless moral analysis than domesticated Protestantism? See Graham Greene, especially "The Heart of the Matter"), and surprisingly (?) rich in its details on social life for an author who became politically right-wing.

3. George Orwell: Burmese Days

Before he turned anti-Communist, Orwell was an acute observer of social injustice and, in this short novel, of the colonial psyche's misery: the greedy upper-class Burmese businessman cheats the stolid English administrators, making them suspicious of an Indian gentleman who, in accordance with new political guidelines, is to be admitted to the hitherto all-white club.

The Indian's English friend Flory bears some resemblance to the author, although Orwell was a police-officer in Burma, whereas Flory is a timber merchant -- but an unsuccessful one, impaired by scruples and pessimism and full of loathing for his racist compatriots, who drown their boredom in continuous drinking. They are all irritated by the tropics, and Flory, like some of Joseph Conrad's characters, is destroyed by a climate where he does not belong.

4. William M. Thackeray: Vanity Fair

According to the author, this novel -- one of the best in English literature and one of the first (written in the 1840s) of considerable psychological interest -- is "without a hero"; most characters are indeed quite unpalatable representatives of their classes: unscrupulous aristocrats, upper-middle class men who try to look respectable while making excessive profits, ladies full of prejudice; and Becky, an attractive and intelligent woman, makes the most of it: depraved gentlemen make her rich. On the other hand, her former class-mate and friend Amelia, soft and graceful, worships her husband, who was killed in the battle of Waterloo shortly after their marriage. His fellow-officer Dobbin loyally accompanies the

helpless young widow, falls in love with her but tries not to show it. After a long while, Amelia understands, but is able to acknowledge such feelings only after a shocking piece of information given to her by Becky -- and when Dobbin, all too patient, has waited (almost?) too long.

Through a wealth of little scenes well observed, we are thus made to doubt the virtue of women who accept admirers, but not fully; we become painfully aware of decency leading to failure, and of the possibility of idealizing insipidity. We can still adore Amelia, reading how the author presents her; and Dobbin may well be the silent hero of the story; as Thackeray himself (when we read about his life), he inspires melancholic sympathy.

B. AMERICA (U.S.A.)

1. William In g e : The Dark at the Top of the Stairs

In American (as well as in English) homes, "upstairs" means the bedrooms (and bath), and the children, who have to "go upstairs" before the grown-ups do, will see the upstairs landing in the dark. But that is not the only fear to beset Reenie, the daughter in a Mid-West family presented in this play. She also is excessively shy, -- no wonder, considering her overbearing father, her over-caring mother, and their depressingly "standardized" and prejudiced relatives. Although Reenie's father is only a salesman of farming equipment (and his business is declining because he is unwilling to adapt to changes in the market), a friend invites her to a dance in the small town's Country Club, with lethal consequences for her "blind date" escort, an unhappy military cadet. -- Was her Uncle Morris right to go for a walk and never come back?

2. S. L e w i s : Main Street

American realist writing reached a height between 1920 and 1940, not least because of the stylistic merits of novels such as those of Sinclair Lewis.

The Main Street often is the only thoroughfare in a small American town, and the name stands for the narrow-minded, if honest, attitudes of its inhabitants.

Carol, the intellectual girl from the twin cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, falls in love with a kind and quiet country doctor. Once in his small home town, called Gopher Prairie, Carol tries to activate cultural life there by founding a reading club, but she fails to move the ladies; life becomes unbearably dull for her, and she wants to leave for a big city on the East Coast.

The reader -- at least the traditional European one -- may well be astonished to see her husband letting her go (and eighty years ago, too; the book was written about 1920. So even then one would come across such big men, modest and confident at the same time, and therefore tolerant, although principled. Or is true tolerance indifference? Carol, for one, seemed bored.)

After spending some time in the city, amid the stress of pointless intrigues, resignation sets in, and the book ends with Carol's return to Gopher Prairie.

Lewis is a master of describing life in small-town America; the Midwest, where his best novels are set, is relatively unknown to Europeans, although it is an important part of "the States". As travellers may tell you, it has not changed much over the years, and its political weight seems to have increased.

3. S. L e w i s : Babbitt

Babbitt is sitting in the bath-tub, trying to get hold of the slippery soap. This thriving real-estate agent in the thriving Mid-Western town of Zenith is a basically good-natured character. His friend Seneca Doane, a lawyer, is an outright American idealist, who praises American standards: standardized house-building, for example, providing nice clean houses for the average family: However; he takes up the cases of striking workers, as well, and Babbitt, afraid of losing clients, dares not defend him against the fulminating business community. Babbitt also fails in his attempts to escape from the routine of family life during a holiday in Maine with his friend Paul.

But his days of sadness alternate with periods of hectic activity and bouts of optimism. Read the description of Babbitt's journey, for instance: the manly triumph of walking up and down a railway platform at night, just getting a whiff of the town you do not have to live in, where your train stands for a while with its doors open for you to return to your Pullman before it starts again.

Do only insecure people feel such things, men like Babbitt? The reader can share the author's sympathy with his characters, in spite of being shown some nasty details of business life.

4. Norman Mailer : The Naked and the Dead

The title of this novel may smack of sensationalism, but the horrors of war, its main subject, are presented in an absolutely matter-of-fact style. We are in the Second World War, with an American infantry unit engaged in "cleaning" a Pacific island of defeated Japanese soldiers, alive or dead. When our "heroes" stumble upon a bombed Japanese position, one soldier remarks how vulnerable human bodies are. Most of his comrades are less sensitive, though, and the Jewish soldier Goldstein is always afraid of their brutality. He is angry at his God exposing him to ridicule as he does not want to join his comrades in drinking. As so often, he tries to write a letter home.

In fact, the feelings of some of these soldiers are the second theme of the book. In a series of flash-backs, we are given pictures of their lives as civilians, before they were called up. There is the lower-class Irishman Gallagher from Boston, who envies the haughty intellectual students of Harvard... He joins a violently right-wing organization, but does not rise in their ranks. Then there is Hearn, who actually was a leftist student at Harvard. Through him we meet the commander of the expeditionary force, whose father was a career officer, too. The commander was a tender boy, protected by his mother against his harsh father. He hates the latter, then slightly despises the former, and reacts by becoming a pedantic officer longing for distinction and loathing his wayward wife.

Towards the end of the book we are with Wilson, a good-humoured fellow, who lies in the high grass, seriously wounded and watching with amazement some ants walking around near his nose. They are so big, and the grass is like a forest.

C. AUSTRALIA

Alan Seymour : The One Day of the Year

The play takes its name from Anzac Day, when veterans of the Australian and New Zealand Armed Corps and other patriots march and later drink, and the general public celebrates a national identity born in the First World War (Gallipoli).

Alan Cook was not a soldier in the war; he is an ageing lift-boy in Sydney. His old friend Wacka is indeed a veteran, but he does not speak of the war or of Australian identity. Alan does all the talking, which irritates his son Hughie, a university student. Together with his

upper-class girlfriend Jan, also a student, he plans to write a polemical feature about Anzac Day for the Student Union's paper, which, of course, infuriates his father. Jan does not know about this; she is enthusiastic about her "proletarian" boyfriend, and when she comes to see Hughie's parents, they all try their best. Although Jan does not want to be condescending, her curiosity is bewildering. Seeing his father humiliated and his mother sad about it, Hughie feels he cannot go on with the anti-Anzac article. He pays for his loyalty by losing Jan -- only temporarily, one hopes; or are class differences too big, even in Australia, to make their union desirable?

D. WEST INDIES

V.S. Naipaul: *The Mimic Men*

The author, of Indian descent, born in Trinidad, but living in England, has been attacked for his pessimism concerning India and (post-colonial) West Indian society. However, his criticisms sound quite convincing in his novel "The Mimic Men" (and his travelogue "The Middle Passage" gives us a balanced and well-informed analysis of the history and present condition of the West Indies).

The inhabitants of a typical Caribbean island "mimic" big countries, especially their former colonial masters; but they fail, not only because they are economically weak, but also because their area and their own number are too small to produce excellence or be a basis for the desired achievements. After nominal independence, the vanity of their tiny upper class becomes evident at wasteful garden parties, petty political campaigns, and inept attempts to attract, and profit from, foreign investment; while, on a deeper level racial antipathies (between Indians and Blacks) are maintained. The few Whites who have stayed on are demoralized by being spoiled and isolated at the same time. (Compare the behaviour of the white wife of our story's Indian "hero" with that of his English cricket coach before independence.)

Only nature offers some consolation (even when it is only during a walk in the cocoa plantation) -- and the servants who, as a matter of course, do their everyday duty, cleaning the house after rather a wild party.

E. INDIA

M. Anand: *Untouchable*

Untouchables seemed to have two allies in British India: British soldiers, who ignored the caste-system, and Muslims, who were either outside or below the castes. This, at least, is what we read in Anand's novel; the author is one of the "Third World" writers who, mainly after independence, saw some good in European influence. (The Nigerian novelist Achebe was another example.)

If anybody thinks the sufferings of the Untouchables are exaggerated in this book, let them travel to India. Even among the poor, however, Indian traditions, good and bad survive, of course. This story, rich in details about the daily life of youngsters in an Indian town, shows occasional contacts between children of different castes being thwarted by authoritarian parents.

F. AFRICA

Chinua Achebe (NIGERIA): No Longer At Ease

One of Nigeria's most prominent writers, Achebe wrote this short novel in the 1970s, when a number of Africans realized that after independence they were not treated any better by their own "elite" than formerly by their colonial masters.

A young Nigerian comes home from an English university and is employed by the newly independent Civil Service, where some comparatively honest Britons still work in senior positions. However, the African village tradition of mutual help is producing widespread corruption in the half-modernized cities of Africa. Our hero refuses to co-operate, and his disappointed fellow-countrymen take their revenge, when he gives in to the demands of his clan: he has to appease his father, who, despite being a Christian just as his son is, opposes his son's plan to marry a girl from a "forbidden", i.e., traditionally sacred family. As the story unfolds, suspense grows, and it would be bad form to tell you the ending.

The mixture of traditional and modern life-styles in African cities is fascinating to observe, and this book offers scenes of the daily life of young urban Africans that are fascinating to read.