

Evidences of Survival

DOES MAN SURVIVE? The Great Problem of the Life Hereafter and the Evidence for Its Solution. By Robert Lindsay Johnson. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1936. \$3.50.

Reviewed by JOHN PALMER GAVIT

IF there be ghosts, they are real—as real as automobiles. Their reality depends not in the least upon faith; no degree or intensity of disbelief, nor any argument or theory however logical its technique, can make the most insignificant ghost any less real than he is; though both faith and disbelief may well be decisive factors as regards communication with him. The truth is true, no matter who says or denies it. It is late in the day to be saying (though many seem to need it said) that there is no such thing anywhere in the far-flung Cosmos as “the supernatural.” Either there are ghosts—meaning thereby actual, somehow integrated personalities for an unknown space surviving the episode of mortal “death”—or there are not. There is no middle ground. It is a question not of belief or disbelief, but of *fact*. Fact to be ascertained.

Ascertainment of the fact, pro or contra, is handicapped and delayed first by the complete absence of knowledge as to *what it is that survives, or does not survive*; and second by the absence of competent, unprejudiced investigation with suitable technique. Most of the investigation hitherto pursued into this ineffable field has been like hunting butterflies with a steam-shovel. Until we have some idea as to what a “living” person is, we shall be cramped in our consideration of what remains of him after he is what is called “dead.” It is quite futile to multiply arguments “about it and about”; to demonstrate by however brilliant ratiocination that personal immortality is or is not possible or desirable. It is not long since all that was done—both ways—about the sphericity of the earth, and about its importance as the center of the universe or its insignificance as a mere fleck of cooling ash therein. Only yesterday the wireless telephone, the radio, television, were nonsense. They were nonsense . . . until across the space of three feet, or twelve inches, the magic current without wires produced *one click*. One was enough.

One actual instance of communication through the Veil from a discarnate personality, a “dead” person, would be enough, though every other ostensible or pretended one were to be otherwise accounted for, or shamelessly fraudulent. In this matter the old Latin proverb, *falsum in uno, falsum in omni*, is not true; 99.99 per cent can be “normal” or faked; but if that one-thousandth, or one-mil-

lionth, pass the test of *fact*, of having however infinitesimal a toe-hold in reality, the case is proved. The rest is perfection of apparatus and technique.

Already science has disclosed the electro-magnetic nature of thought . . . far out amid the infinitesimals of measurement. If thought be (as I personally believe) merely an “interference pattern” of interweaving currents; if personality be, or produce, a nexus of magnetic impulses, it ought to be all in the day’s work for competent genius in magnetic experiment to demonstrate its presence, carnate or discarnate. Years ago I asked Dr. Willis R. Whitney, head of the research department of the General Electric Company, why the researchers weren’t researching in this field. “Couldn’t they do it?” I asked. “Of course they could.” “Why aren’t you fellows doing it?” “Busy about other things.”

So, until the scientists competent to get after this see (and some of them are beginning to see) that it is *their business* and that it is tremendously important, we who do recognize its importance have to content ourselves with such evidence as we have. And what we have is in my judgment overwhelming, however obstinately those competent to appraise it ignore its importance and insist upon devoting their attention to “other things.”

Here is where this book comes in. Dr. Johnson, who is a surgeon of international distinction and a Fellow of several research societies, has amassed and collated a great body of material, historical, philosophical, religious, scientific, some of it old, some hitherto unpublished, much of it within his own personal experience, to illuminate a general conspectus of his subject; creating I should say the best and most complete and up-to-date handbook of what is loosely called “spiritism.” For the dispassionate student it is marred and weakened by its frank bias in the affirmative; even more so by a certain rather exasperating naiveté of credulity, leading for example to his acceptance of any Biblical instance, clear back to Moses, as if its presence in the Bible were sufficient authentication. Undoubtedly the whole book is special pleading; but even with full discount for that the total weight of it cannot fail to be impressive upon any mind open to conviction. Even for those immovably set in the negative, whose last resort in the face of evidence otherwise unanswerable is to cry “fool,” or “liar,” there is plenty that cannot be disposed of otherwise. And always the curious fact remains that while we may explain this and that—clear up to 99.99 per cent if you like—the hypothesis of survival of personality and intelligent communication is the only one that covers them *all*. And just one not to be otherwise accounted for were enough.



JESSE STUART

Hill-Man of Kentucky

HEAD O' W-HOLLOW. By Jesse Stuart. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

JESSE STUART is the native Kentucky poet who gave us over seven hundred pages of loose-jointed sonnets in his “Man With a Bull-Tongue Plow,” a book that was an extraordinary poetic autobiography, rich in the atmosphere of a particular locale. Now he has gathered together a book of stories in prose concerning his native place. As literature this second book is better than his first. Though he is a natural singer, a good deal of his first book was negligible as poetry. He repeated himself often and was apt to write carelessly. His stories are fuller, for the most part, of his own idiom; and his descriptive phrase, so fresh and forceful in his best sonnets, is quite as good in his prose. There is also a firmer fibre and richer variety in this book.

His stories concern those who live in log shacks by lonesome waters, “Up the toe-paths, across creeks and through the paling gates where yard apple trees loom ghostly shadows in front of unlocked doors—doors to log houses where men and women sit resting in front of them on the stone doorsteps and in chairs,” resting from hard work in the corn fields, listening to the whippoorwill. They are full of most refreshing colloquial phrase: “The mule’s sides work in and out like a bee smoker,” “wind that sizzles like wind coming out of the mule’s nostrils,” “to die like a copperhead fighting a forest fire turns on its back to die,” “she went home fast as a pullet wantin to lay an egg.”

We learn all sorts of interesting and startling things about mountain life: how a good Forty Gallon Baptis’ can accurately “get the token” to change worlds, and prove it to a lot of Free Willers; the tall stories Uncle Casper could tell; the lot

of a strong woman in the house with drunken husband and drunken brother; stark heroism through a dark winter; several kinds of revivalism, involved with rattlesnakes and copperheads; the horror of a mountain poorhouse; the equal horror of a negro tramp callously and brutally killed; mountain jamborees, at the belling of the bride and on a birthday; the almost epic description of the death of Battle Keaton; what fortitude it needs to be a Republican in those parts; psychic phenomena among the natives; and the extraordinary annals of the Powderjay family. Nor is that all of the book by a long shot.

Whether wildly humorous, as in "Governor of Kentucky," or grim and even macabre, these are stories worth reading; all written ruggedly and honestly, racy of the soil and the local folk-ways. There is the art too of the "natural-born" observer. Mr. Stuart has fresh and vital American material to present, and he knows his own people thoroughly.

Alvin Johnson's Novel

SPRING STORM. By Alvin Johnson.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

THIS is a novel both naive and mature—naive in the elementary quality of its structure, mature in depicting certain levels of life among rural communities in the West. The fable concerns the coming of age of Julian Howard on the farm to which, when Julian is a boy, his dreamy father transports the Howard family—and we are rather afraid that the rotund speeches put into the mouth of the parent are intended to represent conversation among the cultivated classes. But the book is better than the elder Howard's philosophizings.

Young Julian meets three groups of people—the neighboring farmers, the masculine population of a bleak small town, and the shiftless and lovable squatters at the Bend, from whom he picks out his chum. The squatters are well enough done in a sense, albeit they are a little too uniformly sagacious and kindly for belief. But the triumph of the book is Mr. Johnson's penetration into the mind and conversation of the farmers and small-town young men—their scorn of the city dweller, their harping on sexuality, their shy and surly neighborliness. In Henry Millsbaugh the author has created one of the few wholly credible farmers in recent fiction. Julian falls in love with Henry's girl-wife, and the author's treatment of the denouement of this episode is not merely novel but strangely veracious.

Barring the elder Howard's conversation, the style is throughout competent and gracious, rising at intervals to placid beauty. Mr. Johnson's verbal economy is part of the strength of the novel.

From Iceland and Norway

MORNING OF LIFE. By Kristmann Gudmundsson. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company. 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by AGNES ROTHERY

NOVELS about Iceland—or books of any sort about Iceland for that matter—are so rare that "Morning of Life" which is laid in that "cold and dreadful land" beside the "glitter of the sea and the radiance over the shining distant snowfield," has the immediate virtue of novelty. It is a genuine novel, the plot growing from its characters as they, in their turn, grow from the soil—if one may use that euphemism for the black lava sand of the beaches and the scanty turf of the meadows. The unusual local color is far more than perceptive bits of description, excellent as these are. It pierces the winter with the green and yellow northern lights: it envelops the summer with translucence, and it permeates the substance of the tale.

This novel by a young Icander who gained many English readers with "The Bridal Crown" concerns itself with a group of coast fisherfolk who have been born by the basalt pillared bay and draw their provender from the thundering sea. It concerns old women like Lobba with red rimmed eyes, flaccid, mud colored face, and a mouth suggesting a scabbed-over gash; young women like the tall Salvr "with strong white neck and the bosom that rose and fell in healthy and luxuriant serenity," or girls like the lost Ingelin whose tender face floats forever through the dreams of Haldor Bessason. It concerns men who sit solidly on the thwarts of their ice covered boats, "sub-human in their untanned oiled leather clothing, and up to their knees in fish. Their arms and upper part of their bodies were as if grown to the oars they handled with a heavy joyless stroke." It is chiefly the story of that same Haldor Bessason, heroic and weak, who sins against the women who love him and, at prodigious cost, saves the lives of men who mistrust him: of Haldor and Salvr—first of their passion and then of their vicious desire for each other's ruin.

There are superb incidents, notably the shipwreck commencing with the storm which smashes Haldor's boat and flings the half drowned crew upon the iron boulders. This bit is supremely well done and so, in briefer compass, is Haldor's saving of the English yacht, and his rescue of Ragnar from the tawny flood of the river while the ice floes are forced through the rapids.

"Morning of Life" has emotional tension and magical wild setting.

Agnes Rothery is the author of "Sweden: The Land and the People," and "Finland: The New Nation."

BEYOND SING THE WOODS. By Trygve Gulbrandsen. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PHILLIPS D. CARLETON

M. R. GULBRANSSEN has written with lyric romanticism of a Northern past. His tale is not of the peasant and his too religious devotion to the soil—a slow, careful story exact in its psychological probing; he tells us of the great houses who ruled the peasant, of feuds among the great landowners; his figures are a bit beyond life size, swollen by the passage of time to the dimensions of myth. A huntsman goes forth to slay a bear of the breed that has slain his ancestors, and is himself slain; an ancient battle axe drops from a beam overhead to warn a man meditating the conclusion of a long family feud. A proud pale lass waits for the word that will raise her from poverty and despair. "Beyond Sing the



TRYGVE
GULBRANSSEN

Woods" may well be a collection of the stirring events in the century-long chronicle of a ruling family in one of the narrow valleys in the Norwegian hills. The broad acres of farming land in the lower valley were held by a family of the old nobility. To the north beyond the great strip of woods, in the hills themselves, were the holdings of another family older and fiercer, who ruled amongst poor cotters, small farmers. The tale tells how this latter family of Bjorn-dal bred strong men, and how Von Gall of the broad acres lost his wealth and his pride. It tells of marriage and death, of how a sad misunderstanding was cleared and a fair bride won.

The author's knowledge of custom, his quick accurate delineation of characters, his loving care of minute detail give the novel a solid air of reality that it could never have if it were merely a tale of the old days written with a warm gusto. Mr. Gulbrandsen's writing will awaken a kind of nostalgia for the past in the reader.

"Beyond Sing the Woods" has none of that dreadful interest that Sigrid Undset could awaken in us over the misdoings of the fourteenth century; it lacks the very quiet charm of Selma Lagerlöf's early reminiscences of the great estates of Sweden. It is pleasant, moving, swift. We hope the reader turns to this vision of a world a spot more utopian than our present one.