

## Nathan . . .

*(Continued from page 6)*

the size of a young boy; he increases the ineffectiveness of the Little Man's protest against the brass hat mind by giving his central figure the quite inadequate vocabulary of a lad not yet in his teens; and he increases the reader's sense of the impact of warfare upon the Little Man by imagining an invasion of the United States. Back of the novel, in other words, are such literary traditions as "Gulliver's Travels," "Tom Sawyer," and the fantasies of the earlier H. G. Wells.

Mr. Nathan's characters are not individualities, though they have personality. Any mother reading this book will say to herself—"That is my boy, that is my girl, that—but for the grace of God—is I." Here, in short, is the recent historical novel in reverse; or potential history as history may reveal itself to the mind and emotions of the future Little Man.

The formula, to be sure, has the defects of its virtues, symbolized with unconscious irony by the dust cover which wraps the book. This pictures the boy and girl hand in hand, the mother, the small sister, and the perambulator on a smooth pavement bounded by neat green fields. There is no mob of refugees, no military, no airplane, albeit a vague blur of red in the background presumably indicates a fire. The whole thing irresistibly suggests "Sunday in the Park" from "Pins and Needles." There are no blood and sweat and tears, and Mr. Nathan's prose, though Sylvie is wounded and the little family is temporarily broken up, is too neat, too well ordered, too elegant to be quite convincing. Even the dead whom the wanderers meet are trimly described, as if a wild sort of picnic ran temporarily into something unpleasant and hastily withdrew. Mr. Nathan does not so intend it, and would be horrified at the thought, but there is a certain way of looking at his story which makes it into a rather jolly book—something like a grown-up "Bastable Children." The lyric method has certain limitations when applied to a theme of epic proportion. I do not mean that "They Went on Together" should have been like "War and Peace," but it could have been more like "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," with profit. Irony is not the same thing as iron. In these iron days Mr. Nathan moves us to pity, but he does not move us to pity and terror, and pity and terror, according to ancient doctrine, are supposed to be the chief means of cleansing the soul of man.

## De Meyer . . .

*BRIGHT WAS THEIR DESTINY.* By John De Meyer. New York: Wilfred Funk, Inc. 1941. 312 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BENJAMIN APPEL

THIS is a novel whose people are not important in themselves as living human beings performing living meaningful acts, but as symbol characters performing in a contemporary morality play. The time is the present. The scene is Osgood, a New England industrial town "... a strong town a hundred years ago—yes, even fifty, maybe. All those stories you hear about men who went down to the sea in ships are true. The fortunes they made and the factories they built were true. There were really some damned good men in those days."

But in the 1930's, Osgood's destiny was no longer bright. We see the change through the eyes of Patricia Walker, the narrator of the story, who with her brother Terse comes to New England from a desk on the *Brooklyn Eagle*. Terse is to be editor-in-chief of Osgood's two newspapers, both owned by William Osgood VI, Pat is to run a column. They soon discover the newer New Englanders. "Germans, Irish, Poles, Swedes, Frenchmen, Italians, Czechs, Lithuanians, and some others about whom you couldn't be sure." Pat marries Bill Osgood VII, and her brother has an affair with Bill's sister, Eleanor. These two paralleling love stories, however, never seem too meaningful because their participants are nearly all symbol characters.

Terse is the hardboiled, likable newspaper man, Eleanor the modern descendant of the pioneering Osgoods. Bill VII is Pride-in-the-Past. He temporarily stops a strike in his factory with a sincere speech. "He wanted to bring back the days of his grandfather, and some of them knew what those days were." His mother, Nellie, represents the codfish aristocracy. His prophetic Grandma Osgood says of Bill's father. "Men like Willy won't last much longer in this world, Pat. They've been soft too long." And all through the book, there is Sophie, the Polish Leader-of-the-Workers. The strikes she leads are a little stagey.

The pages are full of grim foreboding, of uncertainty, of change. This psychological electricity in the atmosphere is truer than any of the people. John DeMeyer is looking upon his times, and he is wondering. But wonder and sensitivity are not enough. A novelist must create deeply felt human beings.

## Brousseau . . .

*EPISODE ON WEST 8TH STREET.* By Jule Brousseau. New York: Smith & Durrell. 1941. 413 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PHIL STONG

THE principal technical difficulty with this book may be suggested by the statement that it is fairly easy to review any one part of it without reviewing all four. The various narratives that make it up have a good deal of philosophical relationship but only the slightest dramatic tangents. Nevertheless, it is very passable Dostoevski and perhaps one can suggest its manner and content most succinctly by saying that it is a minor "Brothers Karamazov" set in Greenwich Village in the early years of the Great American Depression.

The closest thing to a denominator in the story is the history of a pious Yiddish button-maker who sticks his scissors into the middle of his nagging boss, one hot August day, more or less as a matter of reflex action. This performance, since its effects are mortal, radically changes the circumstances of the simple button-maker and leads him to some introspections and philosophies that are too well written to grow very tedious.

Story Number Two is that of the daughter of a Russian coal miner in Pennsylvania. The girl wants to be a poet and she hasn't the slightest equipment for the trade, so, without any particular passion or despair, she commits suicide to escape her confusions. She is so vague that she has to commit it twice.

The third story is that of a young architect and his wife. Since the architect is not professionally employed his wife is, of course, expecting a baby. Nothing much ever comes of this situation except some excellent sketches of the "Salesmen Wanted" and "Business Opportunities" projects.

These stories barely touch each other and there is no pretense of any general interrelation between them and the affairs of the professional Russian harlot, the pious Irish libertine, and the various other commentators and interlude actors who run in and out of the novel.

There are amazingly good passages and sketches in the book but the whole thing needs design and focus of some kind. It makes the general point that is made in the Book of Job—a patient and noble person can ignore the cruelties of a petulant Jahveh or by opposing end them, perhaps—but as a narrative the book is tenuous and inconclusive.

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