

Kroll . . .

THE USURPER. By Harry Harrison Kroll. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1941. 450 pp. \$2.50.

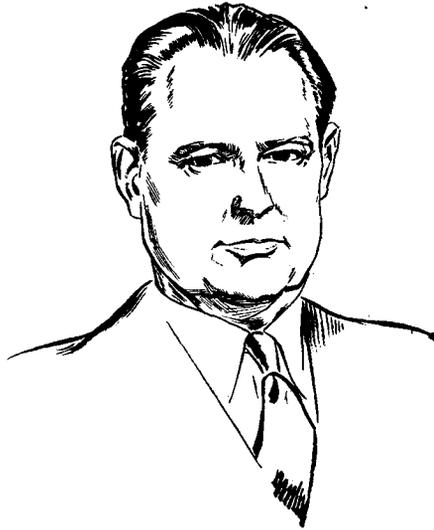
Reviewed by BESS JONES

THE struggle of the outsider to get in, of the nobody to be somebody, is probably one of the oldest themes in the world. Most important novelists and nearly all bad ones have dealt with it, though it takes special form in various places. In English fiction it was often traced through the relentless disciplines of becoming a gentleman. Sometimes it was simply a defense of virtue until marriage could make the loss of it respectable. "Great Expectations" and "Pamela" come at once to mind. In this country we have the term "success story," a kind of Horatio Alger parade from bootblack to banker. New England made things a little harder. Mr. Marquand's novels prove that to become anything you had to be it in the first place.

In the South it was different. More than forty years ago Ellen Glasgow began to show that a society still had vitality when it could permit a whole submerged class to reassert its vigor and competence and mix its rich red blood with the blue. It wasn't easy, either for her as a novelist in the South (and a woman, at that) or for her characters, but she made her point. She knew where she stood.

Mr. Kroll does not seem to know so well where he stands. To be sure, he is at home in the Mississippi Delta Country. His Stan Butterworth's ruthless climb to power over the dead body of the banker and planter class is forcefully constructed, and the speech, especially the racy and illiterate portions, cuts to the bone. (Unfortunately, about half way through, Stan discovers the Harvard Classics and all is lost.) There is marked veracity, too, in the relations between whites and Negroes, whose mixture of "dark laughter" and intuitive loyalty in dealing with their own white folks and whose contempt for white trash intruders are excellently observed in the McFerrin household.

Other aspects of his setting are adequately touched upon: the plight of the sharecroppers and their attempt to unionize, abortive because weakly led and because of fuzzily drawn lines in a society where caste, rather than economics, has dominated the class struggle; the false prosperity of the owning group; the use of ignorance, poverty, and intimidation as weapons of control. Mr. Kroll's book falls short of true importance, however, because it does not make clear the difference be-



Harry Harrison Kroll

tween a genuine social revolution, in which new values replace old, and the turn of a Ferris Wheel, which offers nothing more than a shift in relative positions of the riders. A usurper is indeed a usurper when he can do no more than wear the shirt another man has lost to him. It's the same old shirt, and Stan Butterworth wearing it in the end isn't going to be very different from either D. H. McFerrin or E. E. Olds. Lallie Belle, the earthy young climber he marries, is sure to take on the airs of the Mrs. McFerrin and the Mrs. Olds she replaces, and when she has a daughter old enough, she will scheme as they did, to make her child the queen of the Cotton Festival.

Ellen Glasgow knows better. So does H. G. Wells. I refer you, for a sound comment on the question Mr. Kroll raises but does not satisfactorily answer, to "Tono Bungay": "These people," he writes of the new occupants of Bladesover, "were no improvement. . . . There was no effect of a beneficial replacement of passive unintelligent people by active intelligent ones. One felt that a smaller but more enterprising and intensely undignified variety of stupidity had replaced the larger dullness of the old gentry. . . ."

ANSWERS TO LITERARY QUIZ

1. Francis Bacon: "Of Marriage and Single Life."
2. Robert Burton: "Anatomy of Melancholy."
3. Samuel Pepys: "Diary."
4. Sidney Smith: "Lady Holland's Memoir."
5. Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Montaigne."
6. Benjamin Disraeli: "Lothair."
7. William Makepeace Thackeray: "Vanity Fair."
8. Ambrose Bierce: "The Devil's Dictionary."
9. George Bernard Shaw: "Getting Married."
10. Oscar Wilde: "The Picture of Dorian Gray."

Pinckney . . .

HILTON HEAD. By Josephine Pinckney. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1941. 524 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by HENRY F. PRINGLE

THIS is a first class historical novel. That is to say, Miss Pinckney demonstrates that she is both an artist and a scholar. Her story of Henry Woodward, a young surgeon in the wilderness called Carolina in the seventeenth century, is replete with color and adventure. But it is, in its broad outlines, a true story. Henry Woodward really lived. So did the other major characters of "Hilton Head."

Josephine Pinckney found the story of Dr. Woodward in the Charleston Library, the Library of Congress, and in the library at the University of Georgia where transcripts existed of original documents in the Archives of the Indies at Seville and the Public Record Office in London. She acknowledges elaboration of these musty sources. "Hilton Head," as she points out, is fiction and not a biography. What matters the most, is that it is an excellent story.

Just north of the Savannah river, which divides South Carolina and Georgia, is an island called Hilton Head. Miss Pinckney's novel concerns the stretch of coast between Hilton Head and Charleston. We first meet brash and adventurous young Henry Woodward in the Barbados in 1665, however. He has but lately emigrated from England to the New World. He learns that an expedition is being outfitted to sail for that part of the Carolina coast discovered by Captain Hilton of the ship, *Adventurer*.

Woodward goes with the expedition, of course, but sufferings and hardship lie in the path of even an attempt to colonize. The youthful doctor, never quite certain whether he believed the more in blood-letting, in herbs, or in astrology, shared the sufferings and embarked on many an exploit of his own. Woodward is the hero of "Hilton Head." He becomes in due time one of the founders of Charles Town.

Henry Woodward lives hard and dies young. He acquires wealth, after many a set-back. He acquires fame, too. He is the hero of "Hilton Head." But the two women he marries are first-class heroines; turbulent Meg who longed to return to London and was drowned in an attempt to get there, and Mary, the second wife, who was Henry's first love. Again, being a poet, Josephine Pinckney writes with warmth and beauty of Henry Woodward's two loves.

Benson . . .

JUNIOR MISS. By Sally Benson. New York: Random House. 1941. 214 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by GLADYS GRAHAM BATES

THE one unsatisfactory thing about this series of stories concerning young Judy Graves (you remember her from *The New Yorker*) is that there are not enough of them. Judy is a terror and a delight and she is habit forming for the reader. She gets hold of your emotions and won't let go, and she very certainly divides your personality because you suffer with her, as you read, the nostalgic misery of having your every young motive misunderstood by a practically moronic adult world, and you suffer with her elders the sense of fury and frustration at the optimistic but only occasionally controlled energy of youth so damaging to the smugger middle years. You will be amused almost continuously through these adventures with Judy but you will be harrowed, too, for Sally Benson's humor is based on the inherent conflicts between the ego and its environment, and not on any superficial "quaintness" of children.

Judy is almost always somebody else and the slowness with which the family recognizes the dramatic personalities of the moment accounts for many of the hilarious situations which form the background of the stories. There is the time Judy went to the movies with Fluffy Adams and saw the film about the "almost hysterical devotion of a curly-haired little girl for her father, a whimsical Englishman who had been lost in the shuffle during the Boer War and found again through the untiring efforts of his little daughter and the dignified acquiescence of Queen Victoria." Judy's unlikeness to the little heroine and her father's total dissimilarity from the Englishman did not prevent her from driving her parent almost mad with her sentimental attentions. When she coyly shook her curls at him he, being unable to detect the curls on Judy's straight-haired little head, asks her woundingly if she has something in her ear. But there is little use trying to give the charm of the stories by telling what they are about, for Sally Benson has made her incisive, word-clipped style an integral part of them. She has an uncanny accuracy in catching the exact detail of description which will bring a whole personality to mind with the sharpest effect and in touching upon the one incident which will recreate the whole of a childish tragedy. If you put these tales aside as children's stories simply



Sally Benson

you will miss some extremely shrewd comment on human nature in general and our own day in particular.

Whether Judy is trying to lead her mother to the more sophisticated in winter coats for the Junior Miss (with her sister Lois pointing out that she will look as if she is going to "you know what" with the bow tied over her plump stomach); or printing out the head piece for Pink Beauty, "Trained Mouse. Died June 7, 1940 A.D." which, as a matter of fact, she had come upon for the first time just as it was drawing its last and certainly untrained breath; or spending her entire week's lunch money to buy a bank in which to save half of the said sum, whatever she is doing, she is doing it the hard way.

Judy is nobody to be taken or left at will. You should know her. It will do your adult complacency considerable and shocking good. Her fierce and dramatic attitude towards life will wear you down as it moves ruthlessly upon its way towards its own unfathomable ends, but it will give you a salutary reminder that life begins practically at birth.



Stuart David Engstrand

Engstrand . . .

SPRING 1940. By Stuart David Engstrand. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1941. 357 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by KLAUS LAMBRECHT

WHAT strikes the reader most about Mr. Engstrand's book is a sense of unreality that prevails throughout despite the author's efforts to write realistically. It is not just a matter of details, such as German soldiers inevitably dying with a "Heil Hitler" on their lips, or anti-Nazis who, in the face of death, seem to be calmly reciting newspaper editorials on the subject of non-violence. These details are just part of the pattern which writers of anti-Nazi novels have worked out, routine descriptions, so to speak, that are bound to fit in automatically. It is the story as a whole which in itself carries the quality of the unreal. The young Norwegian who after years of living and training in Germany returns to his native country as a heel-clicking soldier, spouting about the ideological blurb he has been fed, is still the most likely character in the book. Being one of Hitler's "tourists" he betrays his family, causing the death of one of his two brothers and the mutilation of the other. He also betrays the girl he loves who, to make things worse, happens to be his step-sister, and when the Germans come he fights, along with the local Quislings, on their side against his own people until nothing is left of the village but his family's home, heroically defended by his father. His mother, a woman of supernatural moral strength, as it seems, kills her own son when he comes up to demand their surrender, then takes her other children up to the safety of the mountains, looks on as her husband is blown to pieces by a bomb that hits the house and, after some discussion among the rescued as to whom the honor of self-sacrifice should be granted, she takes a rifle and calmly marches down the mountain to finish the chief Quisling who amidst the ruins of the village is still alive.

The sentimental effect of tragedy is always relative to the range of human experience and imagination. Here tragedy has been carried almost beyond conception or belief. This does not necessarily imply that a similar story might not actually have happened, but merely that Mr. Engstrand has failed to bring it within human reaches. His story, for all its early psychological build-up, is raw and unmodelled, and a structure without casing.