

Crime and Punishment

THE CONDEMNED. By Jo Pagano.
New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
1947. 215 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by NATHAN L. ROTHMAN

JO PAGANO in this book has a try at the ethical problem of crime and punishment. It is a good try, and that is no condescending phrase but an exact statement of quality. Men like Dostoevsky and Dreiser covered a great many more agonized pages than has Pagano, in their pursuit of the same problem: Who is guilty? Who is the murderer? Where does responsibility lie? And if they did better than he, one reason (among others) may be just that matter of space and extension. Pagano's job is good, intense, sincere; but it is also slick, speedy, tailored. It is thrown together with a lot of skill and whipped into shape right in front of our eyes.

Here is this fellow Wineberg, killed without reason by two crazy, hopped-up, small-time crooks. After a few gas-station hold-ups they have a try at kidnaping a rich young man for ransom. It looks good, until Jerry Slocum decides they have to kill Wineberg because it's safer that way. Jerry is an uncontrollable force; he whips himself into a fury until he hates his victim, and his accomplice too. This is Howard Tyler, who has been led all along the way, a kind of helpless victim of a sloppy childhood, of poverty and no luck and no skill, of the fascination of Jerry, who always knows what to do next. (But Jerry never knew why he did what

he did, never knew about the tumor that pressed upon his brain. They found that later, in an autopsy.) Howard didn't want to kill Wineberg, and he couldn't live with the secret after it happened. He goes visibly out of his mind, and spills to the first girl he can get alone. They are caught, then. And, for an added filip, they are lynched. Who is innocent? Who stands condemned?

Into these two hundred pages Pagano has packed a mass of violence, and a vital gallery of actors. They live, there is no doubting them. The strength of this tale is in its people, their wrenching gestures at living, their cries heard and unheard as they clamor over one another like animals in a pit. And the weakness is Mr. Pagano's passion to orate, the moments when he clambers in, too, and points the trembling finger, utters the prophetic judgments. There are too many pages, such as 171 to 173, when the thing seems frozen for effect, like a room of horror in a wax museum, with Mr. Pagano standing by, lecturing to a gum-chewing audience. There the book loses tone, and the philosophy becomes tawdry. Waiving the philosophy, then, which needed more space, more brooding, more real humble seriousness—the book is a powerful job and will reward reading.

Glandular Imbalance

COUNTRY PLACE. By Ann Petry.
Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1947.
266 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by BRADFORD SMITH

THE READER who chooses this book from its title, expecting a charming country piece, is in for a disappointment. For Ann Petry's second novel (her first was "The Street," written on a Houghton Mifflin literary fellowship) is a tale of lust, avarice, and disillusionment in the kind of New England town where "nothing ever happens."

Johnny Roane, coming home to Lennox (Connecticut) after four years at war, finds his wife Glory cold and unresponsive. Still technically faithful, Glory soon runs to another man's arms. Meanwhile her mother, married again, has been carrying on in similar fashion with—believe it or not—the same man. Mother, however, adds to lechery the sin of avarice; she tries to kill her second husband's mother in order to become mistress of the household.

This should be enough of the story to illustrate the fact that here is no



—Illustrations by Joseph Steffanelli from "The Condemned."

tale for those who have fallen in love with country life. The book seems to say (though not for the first time) that humanity is as degraded in Lennox as in Studs Lonigan's Chicago. The trouble is that, while the reader is made to understand the social forces which produced Studs Lonigan, there is no comparable explanation for Mrs. Petry's characters. Her "good" people—Johnny, his mother, the drug-gist who tells the story—are shadowy, while her "bad" people lack motivation or background. They come to focus through a certain deftness of description—as in the case of the Weasel whose mean tongue and prying eye are responsible for much harm—but the basis of their actions appears to be purely glandular. So when old Mrs. Gramby (incorrectly spelled by the blurb writer) nearly dies because her daughter-in-law has fed her chocolates and hidden the insulin, you feel as if the incident were symbolic of the whole sorry tale: Glory, Ed Barrell, Lil need some unnamed drug to purge them of driving and purposeless lust as Mrs. Gramby controls the sugar in her blood.

Characters thus seen at the mercy of their glands cannot develop or change; maybe that is why their passions seem so listless and why Mrs. Petry felt the need of a hurricane to whip things up. Maybe it is why even the fight between Johnny and his wife's lover, with Glory hovering nearly naked in the background, has a dreamy quality. For a reader cannot feel emotionally engaged in characters for whom no basis of sympathy has been provided. And what is fiction without emotional engagement?

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of Literature**

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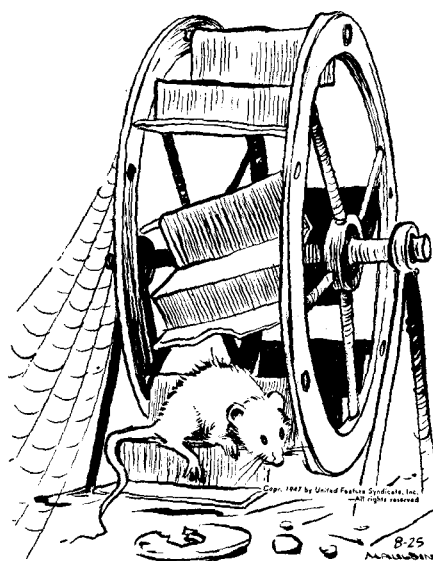
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Published by The Saturday Review
Associates, Inc., 25 West 45th Street, New
York 19, N. Y. Harrison Smith, President;
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Of Men and Mice



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THIS drawing by Bill Mauldin appeared on August 25 in the newspapers carrying his cartoon-plus-text syndicated feature. There was no undercaption; but in a story accompanying the drawing, Mauldin wrote that he saw the mice exhibited at a "Mickey Mouse Circus" sideshow of a State Fair carnival. The circus consisted of a "collection of vermin-ridden, undernourished mice whose original color had been white, before they had been dipped in dye which turned their matted hair into startling shades of pink, purple, and green. . . . The battered pen which enclosed the 'circus' reeked of mouse sewage, and the only indication that anybody had bothered to take care of the animals in weeks was a litter of broken cheese crackers around the floor."

Reader response was quick and

dramatic. Letters cascaded onto the artist's drawing board. People demanded that the carnival owners be drastically punished. There was a uniform sense of outrage that such cruelty toward helpless animals could be openly practised without the law stepping in. Many readers requested that their letters be forwarded to the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which would best know how to cope with such gross neglect.

Bill Mauldin read these letters and was encouraged and grateful for them. But he was also a little puzzled. This was the first time he had received any such effective response on any of his drawings. For months he had been dealing with indignities suffered by human beings. He had tried to call attention through his cartoons to the grotesque sufferings of the displaced and the damned throughout the world. He did his best as a satirical artist to point up the interstellar gap between the largesse in America and a hunger vacuum in Europe and Asia.

But there was little response. There were, of course, some letters from readers who accused Mauldin of propagandizing in favor of bringing the refugees to America at a time when the country was already overrun with furriners. But no letters offering unlimited help, no letters protesting against degradation and indignities when the victims happened to be human beings.

This dazzling incongruity is by no means unique. Many persons who would contribute with alacrity to a fund to salt over icy pavements to keep horses from slipping would promptly freeze over themselves if asked to chip in to supply food and clothing to needy families a few thousand miles away. Many persons who would risk their lives to rescue a cat from a skyscraper ledge wouldn't put themselves out to the extent of walking two blocks to mail a postcard to a Congressman asking that this country take the *immediate* and *adequate* measures that could keep millions of lives from toppling in Europe this fall. Too many large problems, apparently, are too large to be meaningful.

But if Mauldin is puzzled, try to imagine what goes on in the mind of one of the actual victims when he tries to comprehend why it is that so little has been sent so far compared to the need; why Americans are enjoying more meat per family than ever before in their history, the ratio being eight tons of grain to fatten up animals for table meat to one ton of grain shipped abroad; why the reports two years ago urging America to act at that time to block mass starvation

were so little understood, and so largely ignored; why the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency was disbanded only a few months ago as having completed its job; why there has been so much bungling and maneuvering. Try to imagine, too, what goes on in his mind when he is told that there are traditional niceties of political strategy in America that make it awkward for the President of the United States to ask Congressmen to return to Washington before recesses are over so that they can consider appropriate aid.

Still taxing the imagination, try to visualize how you would explain to a scrawny, sickly youngster somewhere in Britain or France or Czechoslovakia or Austria or dozens of other places why it is considered perfectly all right to dump millions of tons of potatoes into the ocean when a single potato could be a feast. Try to explain to him, if you can, that this is done because it is sound economics since it helps to keep prices up, and then explain to him why everyone in Washington seems so mystified about the critical problem of bringing prices down.

Try to explain to this youngster how it is that the President of the United States now says that the war will not be fully won until there is a decisive victory over starvation abroad, but why it is that the President of the United States seems unwilling to risk political losses by asking the American people to fight the starvation war with the same measures over food and prices that were necessary to win the shooting war—there being no difference in his mind between the critical nature of the shooting war and the starvation war.

Try to explain why we knew only yesterday in the shooting war that victory depended upon a full mobilization of the nation's resources under law, rather than under "voluntary" measures; but why we think today that in an equal crisis we have only to pledge ourselves to forego meat on Tuesdays and chicken on Thursdays, although it is all right to have meat on Thursdays and chicken on Tuesdays, especially for those people who do not favor both meat and chicken at a single sitting.

Try to explain, finally, why America has not risen up in a vast and dramatic outpouring of mercy, opening up its hearts and its homes with a sense of dedication that at least proves we have not fatally segregated ourselves from greatness. For if we can explain this, we have also explained why a full and expanding stomach can exist in the same body with a thin and contracting conscience.

.. N. C.