

knew the fault was mainly mine. Yet what fascinated me was the boys' fascination with horror. Was this alarming, I wondered? Was it reprehensible? Was it abnormal? Was it the product of too much intimacy with Mandrake the Magician, Superman, or the modern world as shown in newsreels, movies, and magazines?

PERHAPS over-optimistically, I decided no. The essence of the sublimest tragedy is an identical preoccupation with death. Most mortals, young or old, and in spite of their better instincts, are ambulance-chasers at heart. No adult is so important as the bearer of bad tidings. Anyone relishing life cannot help being concerned with what ends it. The less we know of horror from experience, the more it is apt to delight us in the abstract. To the young, suffering is almost unimaginable, death inconceivable. Pain is not real to them. Violence is. And this, quite naturally, they see as an expression of vigor, a manifestation of health and adventure. No doubt, a measure of our lost innocence, certainly of our growth and our sophistication, is that, though the horrible still fascinates us, our attitude towards it is totally different.

JOHN MASON BROWN.

NEW FICTION

(Continued from page 15)

brother to the Chief? Was it, at the last agonized analysis, one of the houseparty itself who had both attacked the woman and thrust the assegai home?

A renegade Scotsman, McSwine, whips up the battle urge in the besieging kaffirs. The description of Zwangendaba, the black witch doctor, is too revolting to be attempted here, a shuddery but masterful piece of characterization. Of course there are girls in the houseparty and love-making between bullets and spear thrusts, but the kissing and rutting are kept to a minimum and the virile struggle between besieged and besiegers occupies the center of the stage.

Chapter X, called "The Hounds, the Hares, and the Hounds," is about the best piece of breath-taking, heart-thumping writing anyone would care to come across. The present clouds over as you read, and you climb, pant, stumble, and peer, wriggle through mud, and struggle through tearing thorns with two men, out to get the obscene witch doctor, Zwangendaba.

As for the solution, to the satisfaction of us of the lower brow, the author sets it all down at last and ends our futile guesswork. This brings the book to a close and leaves us hoping that young Mr. Krepps will not take another three years to write his promised sequel.

Marginal Men

THE PATH OF THUNDER. By Peter Abrahams. New York: Harper & Bros. 1948. 278 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by JOHN BARKHAM

IN SOUTH AFRICA, that fair and pleasant land, the word "miscegenation" has a particularly ugly ring. It denotes the unspeakable crime. So unspeakable indeed that the country's Calvinist legislators have written a color bar into the law of the land. They have made the mingling of white and black blood an offense punishable with a mandatory prison term. Nevertheless, in a population of some 11,000,000, a little over 2,000,000 are white and close on a million are "colored," the euphemism for half-breeds. And the number of "God's stepchildren" grows year by year.

It is bad enough to be a Negro in

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South Africa; he exists in a feudal world straight out of the Middle Ages. But socially the colored man is in even worse plight. Despised by the whites, scorned by the blacks, the colored people live precariously in a kind of twilight half-world of their own.

"The Path of Thunder," the Harper Find of 1948, is a deeply felt novel about this depressed class, by a man who belongs to it. To the best of my knowledge, Mr. Abrahams is the first of his race to win a world audience. More power to him. This book, his first to appear in America but actually his fourth, marks his coming-of-age as a novelist. On a visit to South Africa last year I came across some of his earlier work. It impressed me then as powerful and sincere, but deficient in style and discipline. In "The Path of Thunder" Abrahams has matured his approach and refined his utterance.

It is obvious that in this book Abrahams meant to state his people's case in the clearest terms. His Lanny Swartz is a colored youth who, like the novelist himself, received enough education in Cape Town to become a schoolteacher. Turning his back on the bright lights of the city, he returns to his parched Karroo birthplace to bring learning to the colored folk there. The white men who run the village don't like the idea, or the colored upstart who thought of it. Here we have a basic conflict: the white man's resentment for the colored man who tries to better himself.

Lanny is young, good-looking, well-spoken. Up in the big house on the hill lives Sarie Villier, the white man's pretty, fair-haired sister. They fall in love. For a colored man in South Africa this is about the ultimate in aspiration, and Mr. Abrahams is apparently sublimating a whole people's frustration in posing this relationship. He makes his Lanny the white woman's equal in character, learning, and bearing. She returns his love. In present-day South Africa the mere existence of such a relationship bespeaks its own doom. Mr. Abrahams is realist enough to concede that, and brings his story to a tragic climax.

But the fate of his romance is not the gravamen of his charge. This appears in the scorching passages where embittered, addleheaded Afrikaners (Boers) abuse and beat the colored man who has the effrontery to set himself up as their equal. Here the author's own rancor finds burning expression.

He looks at the problem from every side. In one of his finest chapters Lanny argues it out with a Negro and a Jew. All are of the dispossessed, but the Negro has an anchor in his tribe and the Jew in his age-old past.

The half-caste is a rootless creature with neither a past nor a future.

All this Mr. Abrahams brings to life with an earthy, elemental simplicity that lends an inner dignity to his tale. He writes with tenderness and passion. If the dialogue sounds awkward and gawky at times, this is probably because he is writing in English but thinking in Afrikaans.

This moving story about South Africa's submerged segment is no pasteboard Technicolor romance, but a perceptive book about one of the country's staggering social problems. It

deserves the accolades it will doubtless win. How South Africans will receive it is something else again. Some years ago the South African Government banned Stuart Cloete's "Turning Wheels" for suggesting that the Voortrekkers had done just the kind of thing that brought Mr. Abrahams's colored people into being. Now his open evocation of the supreme taboo may earn him the same kind of distinction. But I doubt whether a little thing like that will hold back a naturally gifted novelist who has come so hard so far.

AMERICANA

(Continued from page 19)

variety. From Douglas Freeman's Richmond to Frank Dobie's Austin, the section is full of intellectual energy.

Yet the direction that Southern writing has taken is open to some question. The area has given us too much sociological and economic analysis, too much discussion on contemporaneous problems; it has given us too little history. The South needs to understand its past a little better before it can comprehend its present. Thus far not one of our first-rank historians has come from below the Mason and Dixon Line. (Mr. Freeman's work falls mainly in the category of biography.) Many single historical volumes of great merit have been written by Southern pens. The section, however, has never given the country a Bancroft or a Henry Adams, a Rhodes or a Channing, a Frederic J. Turner or Vernon L. Parrington.

Perhaps the best of its historians, Ulrich B. Phillips, spent practically all his mature life teaching and writing in the North. Down to 1910, indeed, Southern history was all too largely written by Yankees and Middle Westerners. Of recent years recognition of the need for original work has led to the founding of the admirable *Southern Historical Review*, and to much productivity by monograph-writers and university presses. Broad and penetrating surveys of the Southern past, however, are still a desideratum.

The large cooperative work of which this volume is a first installment promises to do much to fill the gap. Years ago a Confederate veteran, Major G. W. Littlefield, presented a fund to the University of Texas for the collection of materials eventuating in a "full and impartial study of the South and its part in American history." Charles W. Ramsdell, who had received his first training in Southern research under Dunning at

Columbia, and who had amassed a tremendous erudition concerning the Civil War and Reconstruction, took charge of the Texas program. He began to lay plans for using his own and other men's learning in carrying out Major Littlefield's intention. At the same time Louisiana State University, which was undertaking a broad program to inspire interest and literary productivity in Southern history, broached the idea of a general history of the South. It was natural for Texas and Louisiana to join hands. Dr. Ramsdell and W. H. Stephenson were chosen joint editors; they made arrangements for a twelve-volume set; and writing began. When Professor Ramsdell died six years ago, Dr. Coulter of the University of Georgia took his editorial position. Now we have the first volume, covering the dozen years of Reconstruction. Others will follow, ranging from the two initial volumes in which Frank Craven and Philip Davidson treat of the Southern colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively, to the two final volumes in which C. Vann Woodward covers the New South 1877-1913, and Rupert B. Vance deals with the present South 1913-1946.

The Reconstruction period is at once the most exciting (except for perhaps the Civil War years), the most depressing, and the most controversial in Southern history. It is exciting in the sense of being full of lurid violence, cataclysmic change, and heroic endurance. It is depressing because it shows a people in defeat, humiliation, and sore distress—often downright misery. It is controversial, of course, because the conflict between radical Northerner and conservative Southerner, between Negro and white, between old ideas and new, threw up a series of fiercely-fought issues on which everybody was partly right and partly wrong. A just treatment of this crowded and chaotic pe-

riod makes heavy demands upon any writer's scholarship, judgment, and literary skill. Mr. Coulter's book ably meets most of these demands.

Political reconstruction, as the author shows, was a failure; that is, the reconstruction which the Northern radicals tried to impose upon the conquered South broke down, and in time was abandoned. Social and economic reconstruction, on the contrary, was a success; this was the reconstruction which Southern whites and blacks alike, often as harmonious partners, carried out of their own will and motion. Mr. Coulter writes distinctly from the old-fashioned Southern point of view. He rejects most of the interpretations of the period which appear in Du Bois's "Black Reconstruction" and in the *Journal of Negro History*, and clearly thinks that the results would have been far better had the white Southerners (as Lincoln and Andrew Johnson intended) been left free to guide the section's destinies. It may be said that he does not explain clearly enough *why* they were not so left. If they had been wise enough to give the best-educated and propertied Negroes the vote, as Lincoln suggested, if they had abstained from the folly of the worst features of the Black Codes, if they had been less hasty in electing important Confederate officers to high position, and if they had accepted the Fourteenth Amendment, military reconstruction might have been avoided and the Fifteenth Amendment postponed. The Southerners themselves contributed to their plight. It may also be said that Mr. Coulter errs in paying more attention to the good side of the old-time Ku Klux than to the bad side. It may be said that he dismisses much too briefly the benefits of the state constitutions written by carpet-baggers and scalawags; that he does less than justice to the record of the Negro in Congress and in state office. By and large, however, he is unquestionably correct in his conclusions on the bankruptcy of radical reconstruction. His massive array of evidence defies question.

What is most striking about the book, however, is its learned and exhaustive treatment of social, agricultural, educational, and intellectual advances from Appomattox to the full

LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

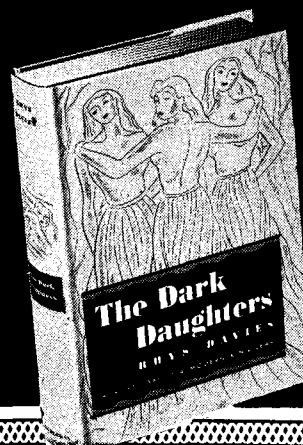
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restoration of self-government in 1877. For two years the South seemed flat on its back. Its people, plunged in poverty, suffering from outrageous Federal levies (Mr. Coulter brings out the full iniquity of the cotton tax), and horrified by the misgovernment of the time, were in despair. Yet by 1868, when a large cotton crop at good prices brought money into the section, the turn toward prosperity was clear. The breakup of the great plantations, or most of them, geared a healthy agricultural reorganization. With the aid of keen Yankee migrants and Northern capital, new cities sprang up or old towns boomed into lusty little metropolitan centers—Atlanta, Birmingham, Chattanooga, Jacksonville, and others. Durham and Lynchburg became thriving tobacco-manufacturing cities; Norfolk an important port; Anniston a made-to-order iron town. Florida developed as a winter resort, and Texas as a great cattle-growing area. Journalism and literature both rose in these dozen years to prouder heights than they had attained during slavery days. They could look ahead to still better days, too, for a free-school system was for the first time taking sturdy root, while by 1880 most old Southern universities were on their feet again, and some important new seats—Vanderbilt, Johns Hopkins, Arkansas, the University of the South—had arisen. Negroes played their part in this progress. Mr. Coulter might be more generous at points in his ascription of credit to them, but he does point out how far they advanced in agriculture and in acquisition of property.

The pattern of Mr. Coulter's book is almost entirely topical. Though he begins with a picture of the devastated South, and gives an account of the political mutations of the period, ending in "the disintegration of radicalism," he does not attempt to furnish the story of reconstruction. His chapters, instead, take up one subject after another and exhaust it with little regard to overall chronological development: transportation, cities, and factories, cultural phases, churches, and schools, Negro laborers and landholders, recreation, and so on. In a work covering only twelve years in the life of one section, this topical pattern was unescapable. The lack of a narrative current, however, contributes to the heavy quality of the book. Nobody would call it a highly readable work. Partly because it tells so little of a story, partly because it scants the interpretative elements, partly because of a certain monotony in the presentation of an immense mass of facts, it fails of any inspiring qualities. More feeling, more fire, and more stylistic quality would help it. But it



has remarkable freshness throughout, for Mr. Coulter has used an immense variety of sources; and it is so comprehensive and so thorough that no reader can help being impressed by its solidity. Here are *all* the facts that are needed to understand the South in one of the most fateful periods of its history.

All the facts, that is, which concern the South as a separate section. We become aware in reading this book of some of the limitations of a purely sectional treatment; no doubt in subsequent volumes these limitations will be still more evident. At points it is hard to see the South clearly without seeing the North as well. In treating the political aspects of radical reconstruction, for example, Mr. Coulter needs to tell us something of sentiment in Pennsylvania and Illinois; in describing Southern cotton-manufacturing, he needs to give us a somewhat ampler background account of textile mills in New England. These limitations are unescapable, and it is a tribute to the author that we do not often feel them. Professor Coulter's volume worthily inaugurates an important historical series, in which the general public, as well as the student, should take a keen interest. His part of this new temple of Southern history is solidly and enduringly built. It has an interest of its own, too, for our generation caught in the wake of a great war. He demonstrates how rapidly some of the losses of a wasting conflict can be repaired, how quickly even a badly crushed people can rise again to its feet, how strong are the regenerative energies of society. A lesson of encouragement can be drawn from these balanced chapters.

WORLD NOT ALL BAD

(Continued from page 20)

which saw the perfection of the air-plane, the development of plastics, etc. And labor, then as now in unrest, had still to win the full extent of the powers it wielded by the time the Second World War broke out. Its status still engaged the sympathy of the generous young and fiction burgeoned into its proletarian phase.

Today there are new causes that enlist our youth. Their fathers fought for general principles, to make the world safe for democracy, to end war. The sons generalized less, for, faced with the monstrous possibilities of evil in human nature, they were first and foremost concerned with overthrowing an autocratic power such as the world had never known. They were doubtful even as they fought as to the elimination of future wars; all they knew was that to make life endurable the forces of evil must be overthrown. They were confronted with the shocking racial doctrines of Nazism and it was but natural that on their return they should examine the social inequities of their own land. Heirs of the frankness of speech which their fathers had won, they found a public ready to accept discussions of human conduct, of depravities and perversions, which would have been unthinkable even in 1920. They have differed from their elders

in the focus of their attacks, and they have differed, too, in another way. For they, though like the earlier veterans full of remonstrance and wrath, yet write without the sweeping accusations that marked the earlier period. Their world is not all wrong and all irretrievable. It is, to be sure, punctuated with ill, but it is not the whole country they indict and deplore. They are crusaders, rather than satirists, and like all crusaders they march not only to overthrow but to win.

A. L.

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