

**Fiction.** *There is little evidence in the fiction published early this summer that the public prefers light romances in hot weather. Two of the books reviewed this week, Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist novel of the fall of France and the courageous Resistance movement, and Robert Van Gelder's "Important People," a revelation of the purposeless activities of intellectual New Yorkers, would have been cold-weather reading a generation ago. A comparison between "The Blood of Others" and "Important People" is interesting, for the French novel is founded on a rigid philosophy of life — man as free agent — and the American is a satirical attack on aimlessness and confusion.*



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## Godless Pilgrim's Progress

**IMPORTANT PEOPLE.** By Robert Van Gelder. New York: Doubleday & Co. 1948. 339 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by JOHN WILLIAM ROGERS

**R**OBERT VAN GELDER has looked on the modern sophisticated scene and found it vital, hard, vulgar, at moments mean, a little desperate, wistful, grasping, and fiercely charged with the jungle instincts that lie just below its slick surfaces of chromium and plastic. He sees a world almost untouched by the benign influence of spiritual values.

In "Important People" he has gathered together a record of all these impressions and put them into a novel that is clamorously contemporary. He has called his story a satire. There are strong touches of satire in the first and last chapters where are depicted

the denizens which inhabit the cocktail parties of a fashionable New York hostess. But the rest of the book seems rather to report than to reflect the ridicule that by definition satire contains.

In the front of the volume is the conventional notice (for libel protection) "that the characters, the location, and the incidents in this book are entirely of the author's imagination." And of course the author writes with a novelist's license as he should; but the majority of his characters do not seem to spring full-blown from the writer's brain and to possess him. Rather he appears to be describing people he has known and hardly approved of. But no small part of the appeal of the novel lies in giving the impression that through fiction its author can reveal important people who exist in a way he could never do otherwise.

If there is exaggeration in the story, it comes from the number of violently unpleasant incidents that are crowded together between the covers of a single volume. Van Gelder is intent upon keeping your attention with strong colors and arresting action, and for this reader he succeeds.

The story grows around one Dixon West, just returned from combat in the Pacific. Dixon is a physically magnetic young man with a keen mind and an integrity of purpose. He is the grandson of a fabulously rich and successful publisher, an isolationist who molds public opinion in his magazines. Dixon comes home to face the problems of taking over this empire, and "Important People" tells what happened to him and his thinking in the first weeks of his return to civil life.

He makes the reacquaintance of his playboy father, his invalid mother, and his driving grandsire. He finds a not-too-satisfactory wife in the woman he has long dreamed of who is now a brittle, nostalgic war widow. He meets

the chief editors of the magazine *Cover*, and he becomes involved in a couple of near riots in Harlem as a result of the back wheel of his car—all unknown to him—breaking the body of a child. One of the editors of *Cover* has a daughter and one of Dixon's elegant cousins has a son. Through these two, we are given a thoroughly disillusioning picture of the privileged teen-age generation, and thrown in is what might happen when a white girl has a crush on a Negro athlete in her class at school. Dixon is a sort of Christian going forward in a present-day *Godless Pilgrim's Progress*. Everyone seems to be living an unsatisfactory life and when the young hero finally goes to see the new headmaster of his old school, Dale Davenport, whom he has always considered a pillar of strength and wisdom, the encounter leaves as bitter a taste as anything in the book.

In life, such people as these, without religion, turn to wit and the wisecrack for the release from their tensions. Van Gelder has divertingly captured this amusing surface glitter of the world he is depicting. And he has been exceptionally skilful in reproducing the conversation through which a large part of the story is told. Even when his characters use approximately the same language, he has subtly suggested the different rhythms of the different people who are speaking. The editor, Boykin, for instance, and his wife have a flavor of speech that could never be confused with the West family talking among themselves. It is perhaps in this sensitive ear for contemporary talk that the writing of "Important People" is most distinguished.

### FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT: No. 265

*A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 265 will be found in the next issue.*

LBO KCATCGTO GRT

GPHDKCL EPSRKCT. K BCHF

KCATCGTO GRT VKQYG BCT

GRPG SPC XT YRNG BVV.

GRBEPY TOKYBC

### Answer to Literary Crypt No. 264

A jealous person is one who debases himself in the vain and ignoble effort to discredit others.

ARCHIBALD RUTLEDGE.

# Mouthing Basic Existentialism

*THE BLOOD OF OTHERS.* By Simone de Beauvoir. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1948. 292 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by RICHARD McLAUGHLIN

THE austere, clear-cut prose of Simone de Beauvoir's "The Blood of Others" reads like a catechism by a novice whose purity and singlemindedness leave no room for boudoir dalliance or sundry high jinks. Less diffuse, if less sensational, than Sartre, Mme. de Beauvoir reveals herself to be "la plus Existentialiste des Existentialistes."

In Sartre's novels there is far more irony, since he deals with characters who have yet to become existentialists; and because he would like to show us how they founder in their own rationalizations, he allows them to talk on and on, revealing how they have lost the will to act as a result of an excess of principles. Simone de Beauvoir's characters are practising existentialists, literally mouthpieces for the basic tenets of the philosophy. It would seem that she has succeeded where Sartre has failed. She violates some of our conceptions of good narrative writing, true; but she has written the real thesis novel in an economical, sometimes flat style which conceals a remarkably sustained note of suspense and mounting excitement due to the sheer vitality and force of her ideas. This is perhaps the way a novel of ideas should be presented, not loosely sprawling all over the place, trying to appeal to three or four levels at the same time.

Of course what we seem to forget in comparing Simone de Beauvoir to Sartre is that each one, aside from having his or her own distinctive method of approach to the existential doctrine is, in this specific instance, writing about two different periods in the political and social life of France. Sartre writes of France in 1938, when the most humane, well-intentioned Frenchman was locked in a paralytic vise of indecision, and artist and artisan wished to shift his own responsibility to his neighbor, or actually do nothing about opposing Hitler or aiding the Spanish loyalists for fear of becoming himself involved in danger. Mme. de Beauvoir's novel deals with the tense days before the fall of France, and the period of trial and error and final glorified action that followed with the Resistance. It illustrates vividly and in a most succinct fashion that existentialism is not a philosophy of complete despair but a philosophical movement which, in mirroring shattered postwar Europe,

is in continual development and consequently apt to be at times contradictory in principle.

At the heart of existentialist thought is the concept of man at liberty, man responsible for his own acts, with no deterministic values or excuses for his existence, free to create himself and his own values as he wills. Yet one is forced to doubt the ultimate achievement of this liberty, since if the existentialists insist on total responsibility they also urge total involvement.

In this novel of the French Resistance we get a grim but somehow heroic picture of the existential philosophy inspiring men and women to positive action. The people in the book represent intellectuals of the Parisian working class as well as the bourgeoisie; and though one feels they are a sturdier, more partisan group altogether than Sartre's muddled esthetes, students, teachers, prostitutes, pederasts, taxi drivers, Communists, barmen, and bums, one recognizes sisters and brothers under the skin. We ask ourselves if these people, joined together in the underground, living together briefly or meeting death before a Nazi firing squad, but at least existing, even acting with a purpose for the first time, are not the desperate playmates in Sartre's bizarre gallery now grown up according to existentialist standards?

"The Blood of Others" may be read as a love story of our day by those who are not particularly interested in its philosophical message. But even here existentialism shapes the destiny



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of Mme. de Beauvoir's tragic lovers; so much so that we begin to feel that love is an obstacle to existentialist aims. Jean and Hélène certainly have a wretched time of it from the start. Their tortured love affair is never quite resolved. On one hand we have Hélène forever in pursuit of her quarry, whether it be a bicycle she has set her heart on and sends her lover to steal, or a husband, or death in the shape of Nazi steel in her lung. On the other there is Jean, pursued by the Erinyes of his bourgeois conscience, the rationalizations of a proper middle-class upbringing, and the bourgeois luxury and burden of a wife in Hélène. The more persevering reader is sure to be curious to know the outcome of this merry chase. And Mme. de Beauvoir, anticipating just that, decides that death will solve all; if not for both lovers, then for our lovely heroine—but not before she has joined the underground movement and has reaped the double reward of knowing that dying is a positive action both against Fascism, and against a world that would be intolerable without Jean, who has cast her aside. Everything to this point seems to follow the cold, uncompromising party line of existentialism. It is then we discover to our great amazement that Mme. de Beauvoir's heart has melted and she believes that the death of a beautiful woman is every bit the artistic production Poe claimed it was. Not only that, but Jean has terrible pangs of remorse, and it looks as though Hélène may live to be reconciled with her conscience-stricken lover. But we may rest assured that Mme. de Beauvoir regains her balance and Hélène expires, an existentialist to the last. Only Jean knows what her death means. He knows that he is responsible for it, just as he is responsible for the others in the Resistance who risk death at his bidding. There will always be that sense of guilt casting a shadow over his very will to act—"the blood of others" has been shed for him. But Jean, the existentialist, can at least gain some comfort in the knowledge that the guilt of the war lies as much with "sparing blood as in sharing it." The existentialist who is aware of the unity of all life can come up with that still more ironic reminder: "Other people's blood is the same as one's own."

Here, then, is the doctrinaire novel which Sartre has never succeeded in giving us. Indeed, it is quite likely that "The Blood of Others" is the fictional primer on existentialism we have all been anxiously awaiting. Certainly a great many more readers are going to have a clearer picture of existentialism in action than ever before.