

pain is anesthetic against the ravages of the disease. Then there is escape, and Kathy tries every form, seeking to avoid the knowledge of how much she has been damaged. Then there is the feeling of guilt and the futile questions: Why me? What have I done? And then there is the separation from others, and the beginning of the struggle with loneliness. Kathy's mother and her brother David hover around her and she hides her bewildered terror behind a shell which grows more impenetrable as the months pass. She becomes, finally, a stranger, entirely surrounded by strangers.

How Kathy is persuaded to help herself and relearn to walk on her one good leg, not because she is courageous but because of her fear of being abandoned and of her fear of being separated from David, on whom she is completely dependent, Miss Barber handles with subtle clarity.

Kathy returns to college, makes friends, joins a sorority, and it would seem that, although she walks still with David's arm as crutch, she has done all that could be expected to

help herself. Yet the final, brutal facts are still to come, the facts that are never apparent when disaster first strikes. Kathy slowly learns that if the body is hurt, so are the mind and heart. She has been maimed spiritually as well as physically. She begins to see that she has become selfish, passive, envious, and blind to the feelings of others.

Her victory over these sins of pride, these poisonous seeds that are always sown by suffering, make up the remainder of the story. Miss Barber writes with insight and compassion. Her narrative has pace and liveliness. She is guilty of one or two sentimental and fortuitous situations, and her ending is too slick and idyllic. Yet she must be excused on the ground that she renders valuable service to all those who would understand the pattern of reaction to tragedy, a pattern which she has tapped at the universal level, so we learn when we have finished her book that we have experienced the feelings and thoughts not only of Kathy Storm, but of all individuals who have ever been seriously hurt.

## *In Bondage to Evil*

*THE DESPERATE WALL.* By Roberta Hill. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1949. 250 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by KENNETH S. DAVIS

**P**RECISELY what Roberta Hill was trying to do in this, her first novel, remains unclear to me. She is not without talent. She manages to infuse her generally unsavory characters with a kind of lurid vitality, and her landscapes and interiors—bathed though they be in gloom—are uncommonly effective. Her style will undoubtedly be praised by critics who like it "spare" and "understated" (as though understatement weren't as serious a distortion as overstatement). Certainly it is of the kind which has become traditional for "realistic" portrayals of small-town life and it is in perfect harmony with the harsh subject-matter.

But the book as a whole is a reworking of ground that has been churned to a dusty boredom since Ed Howe first plowed it in his "The Story of a Country Town"—back in the 1880's, wasn't it?—and I find it difficult to believe that Miss Hill did not intend a deeper meaning. Puritanical religion is arraigned as a vicious hypocrisy. Small-town life is arraigned as ugly and frustrating, a breeder of aggressions which express themselves in malicious gossip. And

heavy upon the characters lies a dreary hopelessness. Only the evil persons of the book display any force of character; the others are all in helpless bondage to the evil ones, or to the sordid environment which evil has made.

The story revolves around the psychological sadism and lust for power of Aunt Carrie Bittner, a grossly fat and wholly repulsive old lady who runs a cheap hotel in the tiny Midwestern town. Her principal vocation is the ruination of her nieces and nephews and these latter, with a disgusting lack of spirit (or is it masochism?) permit themselves to be ruined. They submit so passively, indeed, that I don't see how the old lady can get much fun out of it. The book ends when a niece by marriage kills herself and her no-good husband in a deliberate auto wreck, staged in a blinding snowstorm—an event which seemed to me a distorted echo of "Ethan Frome."

The publishers describe the novel as "tense" and "compassionate." I disagree. There is lacking that tension between opposite poles which makes for dramatic interest: the evil side has won all the victories at the outset. And equally lacking are those deeper intuitions of character which make for a certain sympathy even with those who, in the eyes of the world, are wholly evil.

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*Quiet Chap*

**ON THE HIGHEST HILL.** By Rod-  
erick Haig-Brown. New York: Wil-  
liam Morrow & Co. 1949. 319 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by BRADFORD SMITH

**C**OLIN ENSLEY grew up in Can-  
ada's western lumbering country,  
hated conflict of any kind, was shy,  
withdrawn, and preferred the solitude  
of the mountains and forests to be-  
ing with people. His teacher, young  
Mildred Hanson, thought him des-  
tined for greatness and ultimately fell  
in love with him. But all her encour-  
agements and all Colin's travels in-  
cluding a trip to Europe made pos-  
sible by the war failed to develop the  
greatness she had sensed. Colin re-  
mains shy and withdrawn, and when  
his beloved solitudes are destroyed by  
logging, he is destroyed too.

A few of the book's other folk—par-  
ticularly Colin's father—come clearly  
into focus, but not enough to put  
springiness into a tale that Colin's  
own quietness seems to muffle.

Mr. Haig-Brown appears most in-  
spired by the vast and unpeopled Ca-  
nadian mountain country, which he  
evidently knows well. The reader who  
longs for forest solitudes, mountain  
climbing, and trap lines may find him-  
self living vicariously through Colin  
Ensley. But Mr. Haig-Brown's skill as  
a story-teller is not sufficiently strong  
to arouse the enthusiasm of a reader,  
even a lover of nature, who expects  
more than the satisfying of such a  
special interest in his fiction.

The novel is competent on most  
counts but not exciting. Why not? I  
think because Mr. Haig-Brown has  
not clearly enough understood the  
central character on whom the whole  
book depends. We are led at the be-  
ginning to expect Colin to grow up to  
greatness, and we are disappointed.  
By the tests of our culture he fails be-  
cause he fails to live with anyone or  
for anyone but himself. Mr. Haig-  
Brown seems to have notions of mak-  
ing Colin into a tragic character, but  
for tragedy one must have great as-  
pirations, great struggles, in order that  
the ultimate failure may be full of  
meaning. Colin, despite his gentleness  
and his physical skill, never comes to  
grips with the world. His retreat is  
not even a retreat of one who has  
tasted the world's rewards and found  
them not worth striving for. The fix-  
ation on his mother is introduced too  
late and pursued too little to explain  
Colin and convince the reader.

It is possible that Colin's creator  
wanted to criticize a society in which  
such people as Colin must be judged  
failures. If so, he has failed to per-  
suade, for Colin fails to contribute  
anything to society, and we have no  
other scale by which to measure a  
man's value.

Static rather than dramatic and  
lacking humor in either the wide or  
the narrow sense, "On the Highest  
Hill" is a book which will appeal  
primarily to readers who are already  
excited about lumbering, or western  
Canada, or living alone in virgin for-  
est, or who find in Colin a spirit like  
their own.

**The Criminal Record**

*The Saturday Review's Guide to Detective Fiction*

Title and Author	Crime, Place, and Sleuth	Summing Up	Verdict
<b>THE CASE OF THE FAMISHED PARSON</b> George Bellairs (Macmillan: \$2.50)	Bashing of emaciated Bishop at English seaside resort where Insp. Little- john is vacationing sets stage for intricate, excit- ing chase.	Littlejohn's per- suasive methods with cast of amus- ing—and sufficient- ly sinister—char- acters gives extra zest to ably plotted, mystifying affair.	Grade A British
<b>PLUNDER OF THE SUN</b> David Dodge (Random House: \$2.50)	Operative Al Colby, in Chile, takes on smug- gling job that leads through sundry fatali- ties to partial salvage of lost Inca treasure.	Struggle to get parchment that tells all about Inca hoard provides plentiful action, in- formation, colorful backgrounds, and some romance.	Excit- ing
<b>WALK THE DARK STREETS</b> William Krasner (Harper: \$2.50)	Knifing of small-city nitery entertainer in hotel offers variety of tragic suspects to plod- ding but imaginative Homicide Capt. Birge.	Sordid first slay- ing, murderous aftermath, and strange solution portrayed with bleak but entirely effective realism. Punch but no frills.	Grim— and good