

Hermit with Blacks

BEETLECREEK. By William Demby.
New York: Rinehart & Co. 223 pp.
\$2.50.

By EDMUND FULLER

BEETLECREEK is the name given a small Negro community hung on the flank of a larger white town in a region not precisely identified but which might be West Virginia. But if you think this is the wind-up for presenting another routine race novel you are mistaken. A story possessing a unique and original flavor of its own is offered us by William Demby, a new writer of distinct ability and quality. It succeeds remarkably well with certain delicate and difficult relationships, barely skirting sentimentality—the kind of thing Saroyan and Steinbeck sometimes have mangled horribly. But it has strength and range beyond this single aspect, as well.

By one of those unexpected but possible miracles of human change, old Bill Trapp, the white hermit who has lived in isolation in the midst of Beetlecreek for fifteen years, chips his shell and emerges into human warmth. His emergence is most heartwarming and amusing.

But human nature is such that sometimes a man's change for the better crystallizes suspicions and animosities in others that had lain dormant while the familiar pattern remained. So while some talk with admiring surprise of the renaissance of Bill Trapp, there are also those who are ready to say: "White man don't live around colored people unless he's wantin' somethin' from them or got somethin' up his sleeve." Perhaps, then, it was only a matter of time, inevitably, before the web is spun around poor old Bill Trapp much the way the skein of malice was woven in Lillian Hellman's "The Children's Hour." And this is the core of the book.

Bill Trapp is vividly realized, deeply conceived. There is fine work in the tracing of his lonely life, his carnival wanderings. There are a few moments, now and then, when Mr. Demby gets sloppy with him, but these are relatively unimportant in so generally excellent a characterization.

But the richness in the book's people is scarcely tapped. Among the Negroes are several unusual studies. The boy, Johnny Johnson, who shares the center of the stage with old Trapp, is created with beauty and understanding. One cannot forget quickly the recoil of his gentle and ethically sensitive nature from the cruelties and juvenile obscenities of the Gang. It



—De Antonis.

William Demby—"skein of malice."



Daphne Rooke—"velvet-glove puissance."

is terrible to see this nature—yielding to the fear of not "belonging"—succumb to their destructive vitality as the story mounts to its appalling climax.

David Diggs, Johnny's uncle, is another complex portrait, in his frustrating, tortured link with his wife, Mary. Altogether, there are a host of well-realized personalities: Tolley, the barber; Slim, the numbers man; various ladies of the church—more than I can enumerate.

At the end I feel that Mr. Demby, to some extent, has shirked his obligation to the reader, ducked out on his denouement at the critical moment, avoided showdowns which, if faced, might have magnified the book's stature immensely. This, however, is opinion. There exists a school to defend his choice. As it stands, it is a book of interesting and original qualities.

Folks in Zululand

A GROVE OF FEVER TREES. By Daphne Rooke. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 246 pp. \$2.75.

By JOHN BARKHAM

ONE of the more unexpected manifestations on our literary scene in the past year or two has been the strange burgeoning of South African fiction. That a population no greater than that of the Borough of Brooklyn should have produced since the war such books as "Cry, the Beloved Country," "King of the Bastards," "Ceremony of Innocence," and others is in itself distinctly unusual. When it is remembered that English is the mother tongue of only half this population the fact becomes downright remarkable.

The role that America has played in this South African flowering is much more significant than is generally appreciated. In the past the few South African books deemed worthy of a world audience almost invariably made their appearance in England and rarely reached the United States. Now the process has been reversed. Publication is now first in the United States, then in England, and finally in South Africa itself. In part this may be attributed to South Africa's present tendency to look to the United States for guidance, but in part it is also symptomatic of America's growing influence in English-language publishing.

"A Grove of Fever Trees" is one of the better products of South Africa's literary resurgence. Written by a young unknown, it was entered in a South African novel contest and carried off the premier award jointly with Elizabeth Charlotte Webster's "Ceremony of Innocence." In the opinion of this reviewer, "A Grove of Fever Trees" can fully hold its own with the better-known Webster book. It is less ambitious, less subtle, less literary, less English, but it possesses more power, color, effective characterization, and sheer narrative force than that book. Above all, it is vastly more indigenous; the red blood that throbs in its veins is unmistakably South African.

"The Grove" is not a pleasant book. The family it tells of, the Ashburns, are as queer and unbalanced a group as has appeared in recent fiction. In this, perhaps, they are not unlike the place they live in, the Thornveld of Zululand, with its violent climate and its hothouse beauty. Danny, the "I" of the story, is a warped embodiment of malice who can kill a dog or his brother with equal indifference. His

mother can breed pythons for sale and see nothing peculiar in it.

Nobody in the book is really normal, yet such is Miss Rooke's skill in characterization that all of them are living, breathing people. Her secret lies in an intimate knowledge whereof she writes and in a simple, laconic prose style that makes the most outrageous events acceptable. Again and again she achieves a startling effort with a casual phrase that would shock most people. But when she wishes, Miss Rooke can achieve a simple nobility in her descriptions of the Zululand countryside that is reminiscent of Paton, whose Ndotsheni, indeed, is not far from her Tshaneni:

The evenings on the mountainside were beautiful. Each sound was separated from the other, the lowing and stamping of the nearby cattle, the soft voices of the Zulus. It was a time for prayers, but the Zulus have no prayers. When I lie in bed at night and look out at a patch of velvety sky, I wish I could return to the mountaintop and sit with them once more.

For a first novel, this is a surprisingly poised performance. Admittedly, Miss Rooke's plot and her people are highly colored, being her projection of Nature's violence in her characters. But here, without doubt, is a genuine storyteller who grips and retains the reader's attention from the first page to the last of her brooding tale. Her vivid imagination, virtuoso narrative, and velvet-glove puissance make this a book to remember.

Fiction Notes

NON-SCHEDULED FLIGHT, by R. L. Duffus. Macmillan. \$2.50. All things considered, when your number's up it is right that it should be so. There is nothing like the over-all picture to assure us of this fact of final justice. Take a group of travelers bound for Guatemala; analyze them, gauge their qualifications, their achievements, their desires, and their chances for further earthly benefits. Place them on a chartered plane flown by a somewhat aging pilot, shake well, season with understanding, and commit to the flames. The dead have joined the older dead of a past civilization, and the living are granted a new life.

The passenger list is as familiar as the pattern of flight. Still there is the shock of the inevitable crash and the undeniable interest in the distribution of deserts. Decidedly *déjà vu*.

THE BEAUTIFUL BEQUEST, by Eric Hatch. Little, Brown. \$2.75. In the accepted manner of the Dybbuk, the
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Belles-Lettres.

Last week SRL reviewed the first two volumes of *The Twentieth Century Library*, edited by Hiram Haydn, an important new series on the men who shaped the contemporary world. Both dealt with scientists. The first volume in the series to deal with a literary subject is covered on page 19, W. Y. Tindall's deftly balanced consideration of James Joyce. Normally scholars wait at least half a century before undertaking to adjudge the stature of important figures. The other books reviewed below indicate they are running true to form. George Woodcock is trying to unravel "The Paradox of Oscar Wilde." Gilbert Highet in "The Classical Tradition" outlines the ways in which the ancient Greeks and Latins influenced the literature of the Western world. And now that Russia's current literature is of negligible quality, our scholars are evaluating its past, as in Marc Slonim's and Ivar Spector's works reviewed below.

Slavic Letters Before Stalin

THE EPIC OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE. By Marc Slonim. New York: Oxford University Press. 367 pp. \$5.

AN INTRODUCTION TO RUSSIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE. By Ivar Spector. New York: D. Van Nostrand Co. 454 pp. \$6.

By JOHN COURNOS

THE Ukrainian peasants had an adage: "When there is no vodka, let's talk about vodka." And so it has come to pass, there being no Russian literature to speak of under Stalin & Co., the critics—those of the West, at any rate—are busily engaged in re-tailing the glories of those days when Russian literature was one of the Slavic glories, today well worth remembering.

But the Russian literature of the old, proud days is also subject to subdivisions and even sharp breaks in its continuity. Thus, Marc Slonim could not help but follow in the footsteps of D. S. Mirsky in ending the first of his two volumes (the second is yet to come) with the year 1881, which marks the end of an era, "The Golden Age of Russian Literature," as Ivar Spector aptly calls it. In that year Dostoevsky died, the story of the Brothers Karamazov unfinished; two years previously Tolstoy underwent a conversion, more or less disowning his previous works and launching on a career of writing moral tracts, and Turgenev was still writing his prose poems, significantly entitled "Senilia." A new age was being ushered in, the age of industrialism, the age of the petty bourgeoisie, whose spokesmen were Chekhov, Gorky, Andreiev, etc. Even as Mirsky has done, Mr. Slonim promises to deal with these in his second volume.

Mr. Spector's book differs from Mr. Slonim's in that it does not follow any precise and coordinated plan; it devotes only a relatively small if very interesting portion to literature, covering in eighty-six pages "A Century of Russian Culture 1815-1917," giving up the rest to a history of Russia, beginning with Rurik and concluding with Stalin; while Mr. Slonim, ignoring politics except as a background, begins with the church chronicles of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and progresses to Pushkin and Gogol and the great ones who followed, concluding with Tolstoy.

Mr. Slonim's carefully-thought-out book invites comparison with Mirsky's "History of Russian Literature," which, on the whole, remains my favorite, and this is largely due to the fact that for a Russian Mirsky had a singularly detached mind, which permitted no tendentiousness, the bane of Russian critics, to color his judgment. Russian critics, from the great Belinsky down, have been assiduous in pressing social values on the consciousness of the reader, and Mr. Slonim as well as Mr. Spector, in spite of Western associations, has still something left of the attitude of purveyors of the social message. This does not mean that they ignore form, which they stress in all cases, but they do indubitably reveal a preoccupation with social meanings far greater than is usually shown by Western critics.

Thus, the reader accustomed to Western standards of criticism may read with raised eyebrows Mr. Spector's statement: "Dostoevsky was a genius, while Turgenev was an artist. Turgenev achieved his mark through restraint—Dostoevsky through the absence of restraint. Turgenev was vivid through expression, Dostoevsky through passion. Turgenev was a man