

A Boy Is Risen

THE MORNING WATCH. By James Agee. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 120 pp. \$2.25.

By OLIVER LA FARGE

HERE is a successful and satisfying *tour de force*. Mr. Agee tells of some three hours in the life of a boy in early adolescence, at a Catholic boarding school on the morning of Good Friday. This could have been a sketch or an essay in sentimental religiosity or mere trivia, but it is none of these things. It is a well-balanced, exciting study of a human being at the beginning of the long process of discovering himself.

Richard, the main character, with two companions of his own age, Hobe and Jimmy—boys of a somewhat coarser fibre—has the privilege of keeping watch before the altar in the period beginning at four in the morning. To this he goes profoundly imbued with the sense of Our Lord's yearly-repeated agony, death, and eventual resurrection.

A long first section of the book is an internal monologue with necessary interwoven description, advantageously modified from the Joycean technique, carrying through Richard's awakening and his vigil. For a moment before the altar the narrative tends toward stickiness; partly, I think, because the reader is unprepared for so much intensity within so little action. Once over that hump the reader's absorption steadily increases.

The study of the boy is neither ro-

mantic, sentimental, nor cynical. It is realistic in the best sense, an exposition of credible thoughts and feelings in an adolescent under the influence of intense devotion through which constantly cut a boy's normal preoccupations and interests. There is a fascinating passage in which Richard works himself into a vicious circle; sincere contrition for wrong thinking brings a sense of relief from which springs a sense which he takes to be the sin of pride—hence his contrition is undone and he must start over again, only to end in the same dilemma. He finally gets out of this problem through his own healthy inability to remain concentrated on a single line of thought for long.

After the exaltation of their vigil the three boys play hooky. One of Mr. Agee's notable accomplishments is in making the reader feel that this decision is made in accordance with an intuitive logic, that it is reasonable and inevitable. In the course of their brief escapade a series of minor events occur which are magnified and seen with a new vividness because of Richard's emotional condition. He has learned something, as yet half grasped, of importance concerning himself and has strengthened his capacity for relations with others.

It does not sound like much, but there is a lot here. The reader is left with catharsis and a memory of first-class writing. I repeat, this is a *tour de force*—and a sound work of art.

Oliver La Farge's novels include "Laughing Boy," which won a Pulitzer Prize, and "All the Young Men."

A Fête Accompli

FESTIVAL. By J. B. Priestley. New York: Harper & Bros. 607 pp. \$3.95.

By BASIL DAVENPORT

WHEN I was in the Army we had reason to be grateful to many volunteer entertainers, some of whom made up in warmth and spontaneity what was lacking in professional polish. I remember in particular one young juggler, who reached the climax of his act by riding a unicycle while keeping a number of Indian clubs in the air; after a few seconds of this he called out with engaging candor, "Better applaud now; I don't keep this up very long."

It is the amazing thing about that veteran entertainer Mr. Priestley that he can keep it up, almost without end and apparently without effort. In this book his unicycle is the Festival of Britain in Farbridge, a provincial town that has voted down the idea of having a local festival. Chief among his glittering Indian clubs are Laura, a girl who loses her job in the first chapter; Theodore, a shy young man from the Colonies with money but as yet no friends; and Commodore Horace Tribe, one of those lovable old rogues living by their wits, who realizes that if Farbridge can be persuaded to reverse its decision and have a festival, with him as its director, there will be a good deal of money passing through his hands.

In the manner of Mr. Priestley's "Good Companions," whose success this is sure to duplicate, each member of this trihominant has a chapter devoted to him at the beginning; then they meet at a café table and pool their fortunes. These are the chief objects that are kept spinning; but there are a number of others—the mysterious lady to whom the Commodore is attracted, who disappears and reappears and tells a different story of her past every time, the private inquiry agent who turns out to be a god from the machine, a self-made man with a manner of brass and a heart of gold, and innumerable minor figures all more or less caricatured—the local magnates who must be won over, the artists who take part in the festival.

It is all light fiction but light fiction on a heroic scale. It is no small feat to make a soufflé the size of a wedding cake and keep it from collapsing. Mr. Priestley does it by varying his stories and his moods. He knows the trick, which Scott learned from Ariosto and applied in "Ivanhoe," of keeping a number of stories intersecting and of varying the mood. Whenever there is a possibility that

The Dismal Month

By Melville Cane

STRUGGLING to shake off
The clutch of sleep,
To strike off
Winter's irons,
Spring, imprisoned maid,
Stirs, arises,
Bedraggled, disheveled,
Dead leaves sticking to her hair.

March is the dismal month of her
delivery.

Cautiously,
In gown of shabby green
She picks her way unsteadily
Under lowering skies,
Over ruts still frozen,
Through dregs of snow.

But, as the sun
Ever so faintly

Nudges through a bank of slate,
She brightens with its shine.

Now,
Less wearily,
Less warily,
She quickens
Over the hill,
Across the meadow,
Down twinkling brooks,
Hair flying,
Dead leaves blowing.

Soon—
Such is her art of magic and surprise—
You will awake one morning
And behold!
Pure gold!
A rush of confident crocuses
Before your eyes.

we might become tired of the difficulties of organizing a festival against local opposition Theodore and Laura fall in love or it looks as though the Commodore's past was going to catch up with him or something happens in a triangle of other people whom I haven't even mentioned or Theodore and Laura fall out or the mysterious lady sends Theodore to burgle a house. Sentiment follows farce, romance alternates with caricature. Where you have had enough of the average light novel by the end of its three hundred pages, here you read the whole six hundred and would be glad of more. Scale counts, as Aristotle says: a good big work of art can always lick a good little work of art. This is to the average light novel as the epic to the epigram.

In the face of so much sheer entertainment it makes little difference that the characters are stock figures or that the misunderstanding between the lovers is pretty silly even for a light novel. And in a book generally so gay and genial there is an occasional note almost of spitefulness that strikes false. Mr. Priestley himself seems to feel that he has indulged his characters once too often in the good old wish-fulfillment fantasy of talking back to the boss or the traffic cop, for after the last scene in which somebody tells a bigwig what he thinks of him another character protests. And if for the author of the modern verse play Mr. Priestley has in mind the man I think he has his parody is unfair and his criterion is inept.

But it is ungenerous to be anything but grateful to a book which gives so much sheer pleasure in its comedy, its sentiment, and above all in those passages where Mr. Priestley sets out to capture the absolute, ancient enchantment of entertainment. In those passages, when he is describing the theatre, fireworks, a festival the magic is indeed caught; the unicorn becomes a unicorn.

A Husband, a Wife, and a

CONJUGAL LOVE. By Alberto Moravia. Translated by Angus Davidson. New York: Farrar, Straus & Young. 183 pp. \$2.50.

By DAVID DAVIDSON

IN HIS third book to be published in America the Italian novelist Alberto Moravia makes use of a tricky literary device which calls to mind the famed Quaker Oats trademark: a mother holding up temptingly before her child a box of Quaker Oats upon which is imprinted a mother holding up temptingly before her child a box of Quaker Oats upon which. . . . And so forth until the eye fails. In short, "Conjugal Love" is a novel about a novelist writing a novel under a title none other than—"Conjugal Love."

The analogy ends in the fact that Signor Moravia, as demonstrated by his previous books, "The Woman of Rome" and "Two Adolescents," and by most of the present work as well, is a writer of outstanding skill, perception, and distinction, whereas his fictitious counterpart, Silvio Baldeschi, is presented as a poor, uncreative, sterile dilettante. Not until a rather horrifying and spectacular experience at the very end of Signor Moravia's novel is Signor Baldeschi so awakened finally as to see life with keen eyes and be enabled presumably to go on and produce a novel as good as this one.

Whatever satisfactions this convoluted device may have given Moravia personally it is the novel's least notable aspect. Where "Conjugal Love" shines and where it most fascinates is in its Proust-like ability at times to evoke profound significances from seemingly trivial happenings in the relation of a man and his wife.

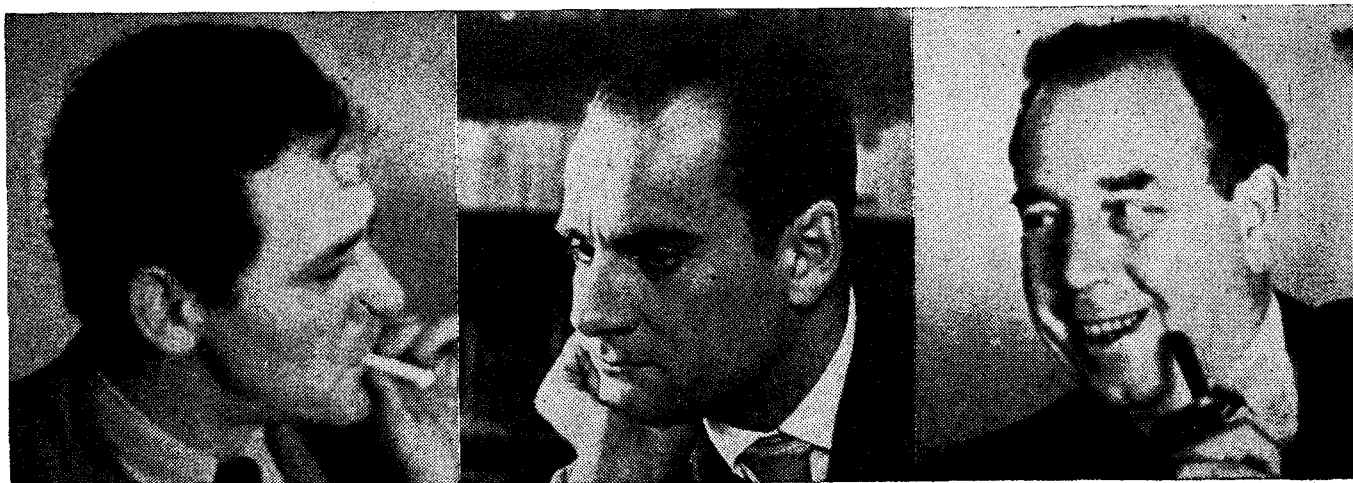
Baldeschi's wife, Leda, was a beautiful but not overly cultivated

with a calm bordering on a not to his displeasure. The one signal perhaps was the odd she sometimes struck in which appeared to be "thrusting away some imaginary danger and at the same time indicating . . . that the danger of assault was not unwelcome." Entirely absorbed in the chef d'oeuvre which would lift him from mediocrity, Baldeschi basked in Leda's "good will," though sensing it to be a little patronizing. Matters came to a head over Baldeschi's barber, who Leda complained had pressed against her insolently while dressing her hair. But Baldeschi, for the moment totally occupied with writing about their marriage as he fancied it to be, laughed the matter off as an accident.

It was weeks later after giving himself up as a novelist and returning full force as a husband that he began to see the deeper implications of the incident. By then he was reaping the whirlwind, a failure as husband and novelist both. In Leda stood revealed hellish new aspects he could never have imagined. And some gentler ones, too.

The climax of the story and Baldeschi's oddly masochistic acceptance of it are not likely to strike every reader as plausible, including this one. But along the way and in the closing pages Moravia offers rich and subtle fare. His newest work, despite its almost novelette shortness, leaves far more sticking to the ribs than many a seven hundred-page "giant" of recent memory. The translation by Angus Davidson, incidentally, reads smoothly and naturally enough to have been an original.

David Davidson is the author of "The Hour of Truth," "In Another Country," and other novels.



—Walker Evans.

James Agee, Alberto Moravia, J. B. Priestley—"scale counts."