



Byron Herbert Reece—"dramatic impact."

## Guilt and Blood

*"The Hawk and the Sun," by Byron Herbert Reece (E. P. Dutton. 192 pp. \$3), is the story of a lynching in a small Southern town.*

By Harrison Smith

ALTHOUGH 1,792 Negroes have been lynched in the United States from the beginning of the century to the present day, there have been no recorded evidences of this hideous form of racial hatred during the last four years, and only two during the last decade. Nevertheless, mob violence ending in a lynching remains a sure-fire theme for today's novelist, who is certain to command a large number of readers if he can keep them in a state of suspense and horror from the first to the last chapter.

If there is some doubt in the minds of readers of Byron Herbert Reece's "The Hawk and the Sun" as to the ethics of reviving this gruesome subject at the present time when we are on the verge of ridding ourselves of an ancient evil, there can be no doubt of the dramatic impact of this short novel on sensitive minds. It is all the better, or perhaps the worse, for the lyrical prose style of its author, who is both a poet and a novelist.

Mr. Reece, a Southerner, has conceived of a small town somewhere in the South from which every Negro, except one old and crippled man, had been sent into exile for an unlikely reason, since in the South all towns, small or large, are dependent, to some extent, on the labor of their colored

population. This strange act was the result of the discovery of the body of a white prostitute, lying in a ditch, with her new-born child, a mulatto, beside her. A Negro had, obviously, had intercourse with a white woman; a racial crime had been committed which inevitably would be eradicated by the murder of a harmless, aged man, whose name was Dandelion.

Dandelion lived in a ruinous shack on "a street of no name." He woke at dawn from a troubled sleep and hobbled on his maimed legs to his daily tasks in the center of the town. Among the houses he served was one belonging to a wealthy old woman who lived in a mansion with her precocious niece, Rhoda. Another was inhabited by a neurotic woman, known to everyone as Miss Ella, who owned the town bookstore. Miss Ella was lying in bed, ill with a fever, when Dandelion stumbled into her room. She screamed like a siren, and Dandelion committed the error which led to his death before nightfall. He ran as best he could down the street. A vituperative woman next door had heard the scream and watched the running Negro. The news spread through the town. Miss Ella had been raped!

Many others, old and young, contributed to the infamy which followed. The single cultured and learned man in town, the high-school history teacher and librarian, called the minister. The pastor's latest sermon had dealt with guilt and blood. That morning adolescent Rhoda had strangled her aunt's cat in an erotic moment as she watched a dark boy, the librarian's son, wrestling on the ground with a blond youth. The pastor refused to interfere with the inevitable lynching. "I am only a sponge," he had said, "to sop the blood from the conscience of my people." The town banker refused to help. "My business is to accept and loan money."

The mob gathered and found old Dandelion lying in a chicken coop behind his shack. He was tortured atrociously and dragged uphill to a tall tree. Since he could not stand to be hanged and his death must be prolonged, he was tied to a limb of the tree. He was stabbed with knives and died at the moment when he was emasculated. Later the librarian watched a hawk perched on his head, providing Mr. Reece with his symbolic title. His son and the blond boy had watched the execution lying in each other's arms. The rest of his appalling novel is concerned with the after-effect on his murderers, a grim story of blood and eroticism to be told in this year of grace, 1955.



—Erich Hartmann.

Robert M. Coates—"no trickery."

## Slow Catharsis

*"The Farther Shore," by Robert M. Coates (Harcourt, Brace. 279 pp. \$3.50), a story set in the tuning department of a piano factory, tells of an ordinary, decent man driven under a compulsion to perform desperate acts.*

By Oliver La Farge

ROBERT M. COATES'S new novel, "The Farther Shore," is a genuinely unusual book, a detailed, sympathetic, and convincing study of a decent man under a compulsion. At the beginning, the reader is provided with the information he needs to understand where the whole thing is going; then, because the story is told so completely from within the main character, Cormoris, and Cormoris is such a reasonable and likable man, the reader finds himself convinced by the man's private logic.

The denouement, when it comes, is a shock. But there has been no trickery; it is all there, all the evidence has been presented as neatly as in a first-class detective story, the characterization is complete. This book becomes most impressive after one has finished it and looks back, seeing how solidly it is constructed, how completely we have accepted Cormoris's mental and emotional processes, how slightly they differed from what we consider normal.

In the process of reading through the main body, not knowing where this quiet tale is leading, a reader may find the book a trifle slow and over-

detailed. Part of its point is that extreme drama builds up and finally explodes among most ordinary people; hence one of the author's problems is to prevent the ordinariness of most of their small sayings and doings from becoming dull. That is no small problem, and Mr. Coates has not entirely solved it. Not many have.

He helps himself by the use of good local color about the men in the tuning department of a piano factory, to which he has added a small but well-chosen group of New York types. His minor characters come out round. That he recognized his difficulty is shown by his several warnings, early in the book, that *Cormoris* is heading towards tragedy. These are frankly author's statements, and seem to reflect a realization that his very success in making us accept *Cormoris* as usual, getting us to like him and go along with him just as the other characters do, may leave us wondering why there are some of the minutiae that turn out in the end to have so much meaning.

I did find, as I read along, that in places I wondered whether *Cormoris* and his Edie were worth the attention they were getting. I have felt the same thing occasionally with some of H. G. Wells's very common men. Now two days after finishing it, the book has grown on me. This is a book one can mull over afterwards with satisfaction. Part of its unusualness is in Mr. Coates's achievement of what I think can be called a slow catharsis.

## Escape to God

*"The Flight Into Egypt,"* by Jean Bloch-Michel (translated by Frances Frenaye. Charles Scribner's Sons. 315 pp. \$3), is a psychological and spiritual story of a French family in flight during World War II.

By Henri Peyre

IT IS surprising that French fiction of the last decade should have drawn as yet so little inspiration from the tragic catastrophe of 1940, from the thrilling and often epic vicissitudes of the Resistance, and from the pathetic woes endured by the refugees fleeing on the roads or by the prisoners in concentration camps. The French have probably preferred to forget and look ahead; their artistic sense must have told them that the perspective of a few more years might enable them to recollect those events in greater tranquility and to shun the pitfall of sentimentality.

Jean Bloch-Michel's *"The Flight Into Egypt,"* which contains very few of the ordinary ingredients of a novel, is the psychological and spiritual story of a family which took to flight in 1940 over congested roads. Pierre and Yvonne and their three children huddled in fear in a cellar while German planes rained bombs around them. In their panic, they were ob-

sessed by only one idea: to flee. The flight was senseless, and one of the weaknesses of the book is that nowhere is it reasoned or explained; even their fear is not powerfully communicated to the reader. They went south, then east, amid scenes of pathos and of violence. One of their children became separated from them during a bombardment and was never recovered; the other two, exhausted, resentful, accustomed to the sight of death like the little girl in *"Forbidden Games,"* learned to live in isolation with their parents but also in secret anger. They had seen their mother stab with her own hand a stranger who, in his hunger, had tried to attack her father in order to rob him. The family of four eventually reached an Alpine retreat in a mountain village whose inhabitants had been deported. For two years, they lived amid the snow and the wind, feeding on what their father could bring from his expeditions to the valley. One day at last he fell into an encampment of friendly soldiers and was persuaded to return to the society of men.

Like very many modern French novelists, Jean Bloch-Michel is primarily a moralist and a subtle artist—not a teller of tales. His earliest volume, *"The Witness,"* had showed remarkable gifts as a study of remorse. The underlying theme of *"The Flight Into Egypt,"* as the title suggests, is moral and religious. A family lives for month after month in isolation, frightened by the inhumanity which the disorderly flight has released in their fellow beings. But all family feelings gradually become corroded by such unnatural solitude; a longing for God, at least for faith in some higher presence, seizes them after they discover a religious fresco in a mountain church, near their mountain refuge. The message of the book and its symbolic value are at no time made too obvious; nor are they ever pretentiously esoteric. The novel has simplicity, humanity, and genuine emotional strength.

YET it is not an altogether successful book. The tone is monotonous, too poetical, and too stylized; the characters are never heard talking to each other in a normal, direct way. Pierre and Yvonne are revealed in intermittent interior monologues which emphasize their growing solitude but fail to bring out the more direct and familiar aspects of their personalities. The family is delineated as morbidly concentrated on itself, to the point of incredibility on the reader's part. There is no humor whatever in their encounters with people, no concern

(Continued on page 62)



## Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

### ARSENIC AND OLD LUSTS



Ruth B. Stebbins of Elizabeth, New Jersey, presents capsule accounts of the demises of ten fictional ladies and asks you to give their names, the titles of the works in which they appear, and the authors of those same works. If, of the thirty pieces of information required, you assemble no more than fifteen, fie upon you; if from sixteen through twenty-four, nice but keep trying; if twenty-five or better, goody-goody. Answers on page 64.

1. After poisoning her husband with the connivance of her lover, who was later murdered by her son, this tempestuous woman committed suicide by shooting.
2. Twice widowed, this forlorn lady killed herself by crashing her car into a tree.
3. This below-the-equator girl was burned to death in the branches of a tree.
4. After writing a letter which caused her cousin to be accused of her murder, this unpleasant wife committed suicide by taking arsenic.
5. This Wessex wife drowned with her lover despite his efforts to save her.
6. Before the story opens, this unfaithful wife was shot by her husband, who then put her body in a boat and sank the boat.
7. This Parisian courtesan gave up the man she really loved and then dies of tuberculosis.
8. This unhappy Russian girl ended it all by throwing herself under a train.
9. This wife of a French physician dittoed with arsenic.
10. This neurotic Scandinavian wife shot herself with her father's pistol.