

One Man's Mediocrity



Richard Dohrman—a kindly eye.

"The Heartworm," by **Richard Dohrman** (Harper & Row, 294 pp. \$4.95), tells of the revenge against Life attempted by a disappointed salesman at bay. James Kelly wrote the novel *"The Insider."*

By JAMES KELLY

IN ITS barest outline, "The Heartworm" is a story of one man's mediocrity and the resentment he feels when a boyhood friend, with even less measurable talent, manages to outstrip him in the success department. During his middle years the narrating central figure—an average salesman who has been an average musician and below-average husband since New York sidewalk days—begins to brood obsessively about "the system that appraises men by their ability to prevail." He, Mitchell Bell, begins to feel that Life has given him a raw deal, and it is easy for him to translate this feeling into bitter hatred of old pal Harry Luby, who has made it big as a theatrical producer and happily married man with all his intellectual, cultural, and racial handicaps. Luby becomes the target of Bell's urge to "get even," despite past and present kindnesses, and it doesn't take very long for the also-ran to realize that Luby is vulnerable only through his wife, Vanessa: who takes *her* wins the game. How the cuckoldry campaign progresses accounts for whatever suspense is engendered by this timeless situation, abetted by the unexpected

discovery that the wife in question is herself almost ready to explode with resentment toward her kindly, patient, Old Testament husband. Will Bell win the girl and destroy the Luby myth? He himself supplies an apt thought: "Normal men seldom put themselves in danger of being rebuffed, of having their skimpy male charms evaluated in a woman's laugh. And they know that being successful—which isn't very likely—would probably be worse than being scoffed."

But this is only the framework for a structure of big and little human relationships Mr. Dohrman intends to build. As previously demonstrated in the bravura portrait of "The Cross of Baron Samedi" and the textured human patterns of "For Innocents Only," what really interests him are the cumulative weight of daily details, small encounters, isolated observations, formless conversations, trivial incidents, and shamelessly naked ego behavior that together make up a life. In "The Heartworm" such truly observed life-details are used to realize an unpretty picture which, for most readers, will carry plenty of social recognition. The author's talents as storyteller, reporter, and transcriber of unpretentious, ring-true dialogue could hardly find a better showcase. That the novel is unselective and meandering, that its average pace is that of a runaway glacier, that it is difficult to decide whether the secondary theme is romance or racial conflict, and that it leaves us with some mighty sterile inconclusions do not seem to matter as much as they should. As a camera is unselective, Life is unselective, we are shown. Since most of an adult's frisky fun and sensual pleasure is a matter of luck, anyhow, there's no use trying to fix cards that are already fixed.

A salesman at bay, Mitch Bell holds our sympathy. Bored by his job and daily business contacts, routinely involved with a beddable spinster, haunted by the missed chances of his former marriage, ridden by hatred for Harry Luby and simulated desire for Vanessa, he still manages to contemplate his lot with sardonic humor. He can cope with stray café-society types, handle Vanessa's brother Leopold, an *enfant terrible* if there ever was one, and come up with decent impulses when somebody really calls upon him for help or first aid. At times one almost forgets his

contemptible motives and plodding hypocrisy while watching him doggedly pursue a battered Unholy Grail.

As a chronicler of waspish social conflict, Mr. Dohrman gives Mary McCarthy a run for her money; but a large point of difference between them is his kindly eye and manifest regret that people behave as they do. The Dohrman technique in the novel at hand is to bring people into the world and then step unobtrusively aside, letting them speak, act, and think as they will. His audience is likely to stay with him to the bitter end because it will be made to understand along about page 109 that a mirror doesn't lie, either.

MADMAN'S MISSION: The theme of "Heathen Valley" (Atheneum, \$5), by Romulus Linney, is the darkness that springs from too much love of abstract light. Its villain, if so unhappy and gifted a man may be called villain, is Bishop Ames, who, in 1850, takes an Episcopalian mission into an isolated North Carolina valley. With the bishop goes William Starns, wanderer, murderer, drunkard. The emergence of Starns as a self-discovering, people-discovering, perhaps God-discovering, and very practical Christian is paralleled by the increasing saintly madness of the bishop.

The story is told by half a dozen first-person narrators, and by the author speaking in the third person. Mr. Linney's handling of folk speech in reflection and action is neat, respectful, and effective. He has a real feeling for the mountains, a good deal of basic "root-and-herb" knowledge, and enough strength to make his people fresh and believable. Reading "Heathen Valley" is like peering down into one of the ravines around Blowing Rock, North Carolina, on an autumn morning. You watch the mist rise to show a pine, a gum-tree, a fern-leaf, a cabin, a man—until a world of rounded light and shadow has been made.

Yet in other respects the novel is unsuccessful. Bishop Ames, a brilliant madman, doesn't come through with the clarity and sympathy of the minor characters: Cora, an affection-hungry but truly loving woman; Harl, whose own madness is much more fey and convincing than the bishop's.

Nevertheless, although sometimes Mr. Linney seems to be pushing the bishop over the brink, shoving his book into tragic place, there's writing distinction here, along with a steady intensity of purpose that holds the interest even through irritation. And Starns himself, who seems at first as lacking in motivation as a baby rabbit, grows under the eye. By his bitter end he is fully realized. We like him, pity him, and pity

mankind through him. The death of Starns—the book's best scene—has about it a kind of heroic numbness, as though his man were about to speak for the tongueless and the damned, once and for all.

So in a flawed and small but true way, this is a novel that adds a little something real to human understanding.

—PAUL DARCY BOLES.

SADISM AND SALVATION: Both Pamela Hansford Johnson and her husband, C. P. Snow, are novelists and moralists, but there the resemblance ends. Snow's plots proceed smoothly and gravely like carefully loaded ships making for their ordained destination. Miss Johnson writes with a scintillation that illumines one broken fragment of the human situation after another, leaving the reader, if he can, to piece the illuminations into a coherent pattern.

The protagonist in her novel "An Error of Judgment" (Harcourt, Brace & World, \$4.50) is William Setter, a doctor and agnostic, who is tormented by a secret streak of sadism that finally drives him to give up his work lest he find too much scope for his perverse impulses. His strange gyrations are reported by Victor Hendrey, a pleasantly superficial and urbane friend, whose great merit is that he observes everything, understands very little, and presents his brilliant confusions to the reader without undue processing.

Setter, convinced that he is damned—though he has no conventional hell to go to—seems fated to spread ruin wherever he is. His wife drifts away; Hendrey's wife, Jenny, drifts toward the ex-doctor, who has now become a sort of amateur psychologist and social worker. A teddy boy named Sammy, who is suspected of a brutal murder, becomes attracted to Setter, and the latter undertakes the difficult task of arousing some gleam of conscience in the totally depraved boy. How Setter finally handles Sammy and Jenny is indicative of his own personal struggle to escape from the psychological as well as the spiritual curse under which he labors.

The entire novel is a complex study of guilt, damnation, the rumored possibility of salvation—all narrated with a glittering and worldly command of literary sophistication. Unless specially alerted, the reader may not at first be aware that he is moving into Graham Greene territory, even at times into the Dostoevsky preserve.

In short, this novel reveals a literary talent as professionally competent as any functioning today, and a psychological and moral insight that is all the more probing for the grace of the urbane touch.

—CHAD WALSH.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Recipe for Writers

"The Realities of Fiction," by Nancy Hale (Little, Brown. 247 pp. \$5), offers an experienced author's theoretical and practical advice on "creative writing." Warren Bower teaches at New York University and conducts the radio program "The Readers' Almanac."

By WARREN BOWER

OUT OF her lectures on fiction and fiction writing given before student audiences, particularly those at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference, the novelist and short-story writer Nancy Hale has made a book that is studded with happily phrased insights into the nature of creative writing.

This last phrase is not one that she rejects out of hand, though she does note that "creative writing" courses are often taught in wholly uncreative ways. Her own aim, as it is the aim of every effective teacher of writing, is to awaken excitement about writing in those whose creative ability is expressed through the selection and arrangement of words. This she accomplishes with quiet ease, since her essays are full of highly communicable enthusiasm.

Miss Hale starts with a discussion of imagination as "new reality in the process of being created," and then applies this conception to the novel, the short story, autobiographical fiction, and poetry, though her essay on the last is the least illuminating in the book. She is at her best in discussing such matters as the essential differences between novels and short stories and their respective structures and characteristics, and it is when these are personalized through references to her own practices that she is most persuasive and effective. There is, for example, her habit of consigning to a convenient-sized box her notes on ideas for novels or short stories, and paper-clipping together those concerned with the same theme. When she reaches into that box and brings out a clutch of notes, she enlivens abstract theory with pointedly useful illustration.

Students who hear her, and now those who read her as well, meet a literary craftsman who knows what she is doing and why, one who is capable of meaningful discussion of techniques and content, and who can lead skilfully



Nancy Hale—definite opinions.

from craft to seminal ideas. She is also a deft phrase maker: no one has yet polished off the New Critics as neatly and tellingly as does Miss Hale in her reference to their "insistence upon viewing literature in *apartheid*." Often she sums up a complex of esthetic principles in a simple statement, as when she says of meaning in a short story, "What I look for . . . is the reverberation of significance beyond the matters immediately under observation."

As good teachers should, Miss Hale has definite opinions, which she weaves into the fabric of her advice to apprentice writers. She is against didacticism in fiction, which she defines as explaining "the great truth that is yours to impart." Salinger, she says stoutly against the weight of many readers' opinions, "is the only successful didactic short story writer I know of today. He merely proves the rule." She is against compulsive writers, instancing Wolfe as the worst example. Most first novels, she reports from the experience of reading many, have not achieved the sense of flow, by which she means "the rhythm of life when translated into a novel through the art of fiction." She is an intense admirer of Forster, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner; and there are a host of references to such lesser writers as Marquand, Lewis, and Maugham, for both approbation and warning.

What is the audience for such a book? Probably much smaller than one would