

## Of Anguish and Incongruity

**"Children Is All," by James Purdy** (*New Directions*. 183 pp. \$4.25), comprising ten stories and two plays, focuses on the paradox of love and loneliness in our age. Ihab Hassan wrote *"Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel."*

By IHAB HASSAN

IN THE last five years James Purdy has published two novels, "Malcolm" and "The Nephew," and a collection of stories, "Color of Darkness." These very nearly established him as one of the most important American writers to appear since the war. The judgment, which in the mind of crusty critics was rendered suspect by a certain voguishness that attended his sudden appearance on the scene, is now confirmed by the present collection.

Like Salinger, Purdy is a writer of love, "pure and complicated." But there all analogies end. For Purdy is a true original within the area where, neither windswept nor entirely claustrophobic, his sensibility dwells. The area, as in so many works of Kafka, is sharply defined in its details and weirdly ambiguous in outline. His focus in human relations is the paradox of love and loneliness in our age, illuminated time and again by terror and humor. This is why Purdy's language, precise, simple, and spare as it seems, often glows in a surreal haze. The originality of Purdy may finally rest in his profound insight that language and feeling, in our day, have severed their connections. Dominated by dialogue, both incremental and repetitive (Purdy seldom describes, never editorializes), his work presents characters who can never say what they are most desperate to communicate. The casual, chatty surface of each narrative covers a cauldron of unappeased desires.

The present volume contains ten stories and two short plays. These fall generally into two categories: gossip pieces, full of feminine intuition and sharp observation, and surrealistic parables written in an entirely credible manner. I confess to my preference for the latter genre, which seems to strike deeply at the origins of our perplexity. The best is "Daddy Wolf," about a man, whose wife has deserted him,

waiting to be connected with a stranger over the phone. It contains this crazy and blood-chilling sentence, so typical of Purdy, spoken by the man's wife:

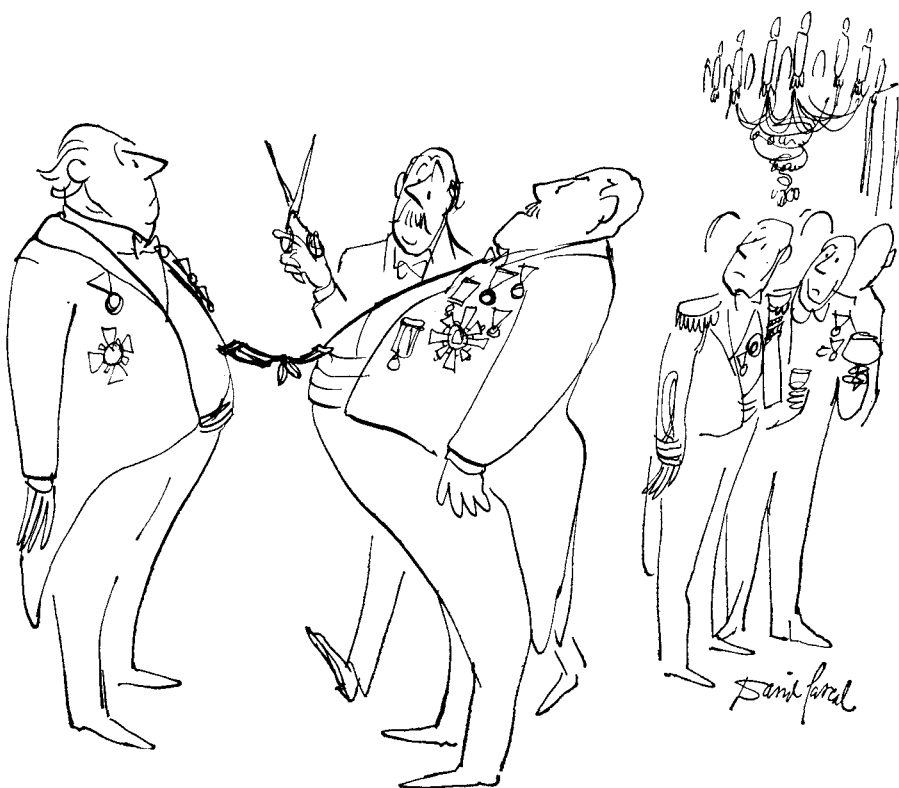
The kid is glad when I go out to sell as he can have the chair to himself then. You see when I and his Daddy are home he either has to sit down on my lap, if I am sitting, or if his Daddy is sitting, just stand because I won't allow a little fellow like him to sit on that linoleum, it's not safe, and his Daddy will not let him sit on his lap because he is too dead-tired from the mitten factory.

Also among the best: "The Lesson," about a teen-age girl speaking to a swimming instructor about nothing and everything; "Encore," about a mother and her son; "Goodnight Sweetheart," about a gentle schoolteacher raped at the age of sixty; and "Sermon," a masterpiece about everything and nothing, in which the preacher says to his audience: "I have talked here tonight in the hope you would not hear, because if you didn't you might not so thoroughly disgust yourselves, and therefore me." Indeed, that message may be what the fine

and unholy art of Purdy disguises from his readers.

The dramatic tension of the plays comes as no surprise. The longer of the two, "Children Is All," portrays two lonely old women, Leona and Edna, living together in a small town. They are fearfully awaiting the return of Edna's son from the penitentiary. The play moves fretfully, yet surely, to a dreamlike climax in which the power and deprivation of love bursts upon us. If the first play is a "tragedy," the second, "Cracks," may be called an expressionistic "comedy." The cast includes an eighty-year-old woman, a waif, a nurse, and the Creator. The play is about birth and death, the end of the world, and the persistence of humankind. There is no doubt that its wisdom is felt; the conclusion of the Creator moves us because it has been dramatized: "After all the pain of creation, the created will continue, after all the pain, after all the pain . . . no matter what we do or say. . . ." The aged woman can now take the child into the grape arbor to await the break of a new day.

The uncanny technical skill of Purdy brings his material to terrible life because it is backed by an authentic vision of love, anguish, and incongruity. When the vision falters, the work becomes fussy, nasty, or narrow. But this so seldom occurs that we can rejoice again in the possession of this new work by one of America's best writers.



# Love and the Lyricist

***"Not All of Your Laughter, Not All of Your Tears," by Steve Allen*** (Bernard Geis, 374 pp. \$4.95), examines the nature of love through the story of a Hollywood song writer who leaves his family for another woman. Formerly a newspaperman, Walt McCaslin is now a free-lance writer and critic.

By WALT MCCASLIN

STEVE ALLEN's "Mark It and Strike It," which came out two years ago, was the kind of autobiography that men who have passed through career or family crisis often have the urge to write. It was a clearing of the air, for writer-therapy as much as for reader-education—an avowal that the victim had suffered, survived, and, above all, grown. The popular television star admitted to intellectual aspirations, claiming that a man of comedy has a perfect right to deal seriously with such topics as war, politics, love, and religion.

In "Not All of Your Laughter, Not All of Your Tears" Mr. Allen has surmounted some but not all of the dangers confronting a funnyman who turns mindful.

The novel concerns an ill-mated Hollywood song writer who leaves his family to live with another woman, a situation hopelessly complicated by his background of Irish Catholicism. From



Steve Allen—a right to deal with war, politics, love, and religion.

what appears at first to be mainly a theological dilemma, the book develops into a broader examination of the nature of love. Dan Scanlon realizes at last that in his arms his mistress "had not been just Elaine but Woman, and that he had learned to desire Woman, to need Woman." This quote perhaps suggests the involved case history of emotional denial and blind seeking that we must assimilate prior to Dan's pilgrimage of self-discovery. Truth, we gather from the novel's title, is to be found in Gibran's "The Prophet":

But if in your fear you would seek only love's peace and love's pleasure,  
Then it is better for you that you cover your nakedness and pass out of love's threshing-floor,

Into the seasonless world where you shall laugh, but not all of your laughter, and weep, but not all of your tears.

Our seeker is helped along the lonely paths of this "seasonless world" by a friendly guru who seems to have a good deal in common with Gerald Heard.

Mr. Allen's characters are consistently realized. His writing is fluent and rich in the details that, although seemingly trivial, give fiction the tempo and texture of life. His side excursions into philosophy, however, range from penetrating to platitudinous. There is an exceptionally interesting dialogue on the way various religions and cultures cope with the human condition; just after this we find a lot of truisms on Americanism, race relations, and social bigotry which are extraneous to the book's central problem. Although Steve Allen has many things to say and he frequently says them well, a stern editor with a pencil and a pair of scissors might have kept the book in better focus.

**HERITAGE OF TREASON:** "I hadn't done much for Bobbie in his life. . . . While he lived he was largely an unknown quantity to me, yet I felt surer than I felt anything about myself that he was incapable of betrayal . . . that the virtues I lacked, he had." With this conviction, Sam Curry, the protagonist of Richard C. Stern's new novel, "In Any Case" (McGraw-Hill, \$5.50), begins a five-year search to ferret out the truth behind his son's alleged treason.

Whatever emotional complexities obfuscate the issue for Sam, the accusation remains the same: Three years after his death, Flight Lieutenant Robert Curry, member of one of the largest, but least successful, special English intelligence groups operating during World War II, is described in print as the betrayer of his company.

Like Macbeth, Sam comes to the sober conclusion that it is "better to be with the dead . . . than on the torture of the mind to lie in restless energy." Thus he is spurred to track down and question anyone formerly connected with the spy network; and, for the first time in his life, does not evade action.

That the action provides a sop to his conscience cannot be denied, for Sam is disturbed by memories of the years after his wife's death when he was a matutinally brusque, nocturnally penitent father. Symbolically, he attempts to pay his debt as he did then, awakening the boy from sleep to apologize for his trenchant behavior and to express fleeting sentiments.

As Sam dusts and rearranges the fuzzy facts, he reasons with remorse that if Bobbie had been traitorous, it might have been the result of a congenital character deficiency, harking back to Sam's own treason, which had taken the form of wife-betrayal and child-neglect. He then begins to feel ". . . with Bobbie a blood kinship of change and testing, brother as much as father to him, and perhaps his son as well."

Mr. Stern's treatment of World War II espionage is subtle and fresh, thanks to a cliché-free style, economically stated flashbacks, and the perpetuation of honest suspense. The characters, too, seem unworn, each revealing a remarkable, unromanticized combination of virtue and corruption, making them sympathetic in spite of themselves.

Progressing with Sam through continuous re-evaluation of people and situations, we move hand-in-glove with the Kantian idea of the impossibility of knowing reality. We also are exposed to the theory that there is no guarantee that men can be measured by their actions or circumstances, a concept to which this reader takes mild exception, if only for idealistic reasons.

—JOAN BOSTWICK.

**SOPHISTICATED INNOCENCE ABROAD:** The relationship of "Ultramarine" (Lippincott, \$4.95) to Malcolm Lowry's masterpiece, "Under the Volcano," is roughly that of "Portrait of the Artist" to "Ulysses." Both are autobiographical, the work of very young men who are testing their powers for greater things to come. Yet as we can enjoy "Portrait"