

try," "Notes for a Case History") attempt to avoid possible stereotypes by unexpected twists or bizarre comedy. But, unlike a number of her English contemporaries, Iris Murdoch for example, Miss Lessing is not at her best with either the comic or the bizarre. These stories tend to remain essentially flat portraits. The author as sociological journalist is, in this collection, less interesting than the author as articulate and sensitive feminist.

Seldom a neat writer or master of the perfectly precise phrase, Miss Lessing, at her best, manages to avoid the easy formulas with which so many of us seem to explain our experience. Compulsive rationality, the need to arrange every element of experience in logical terms,

may be a contemporary disease, but, as Miss Lessing demonstrates in the fantasy "How I Finally Lost My Heart," as well as in other stories, the attempt at rationality originates in the center of the human spirit, and, besides, we suffer from irrational diseases as well. Similarly, we often complain about our failure to communicate with others. Doris Lessing's characters frequently communicate quite easily; in many of the stories people form relationships, go to bed together, have children; they care and they live. But their problem is that, within a complex world, the communication they've already developed either demands a responsibility they're unable to accept or changes its meaning as experience continues.

ing his "nadsat" language. Here, for example, is a typical passage:

But when he'd ookadeeted and I was making this very strong pot of chai, I grinned to myself over this veshch that P. R. Deltoid and his droogs worried about. All right, I do bad, what with crasting and tolchocks and carves with the britva and the old in-out-in-out, and if I get loveted, well, too bad for me . . .

Nevertheless, when the reader finally gets with it, the slang reinforces the hallucinatory unity of the novel, and becomes an effective means of distinguishing Alex's outlaw mentality. Stanley Edgar Hyman, in an "Afterword" to this edition (Norton, 95¢), appends a glossary of "nadsat" terms, which aids comprehension considerably.

A much easier introduction to Burgess is *The Wanting Seed*, which has been described as a "Malthusian comedy." The style presents no unusual problems, and the scheme of the story, reminiscent of the early Waugh, is simple enough: because the people of the world have sinned against nature in drastically holding down population (homosexuality is encouraged, and the birth of more than one child to a family is a crime), a mysterious blight destroys the food supply. War has been outlawed for some time, there is no mass bloodletting, and the people of England are driven to eating one another, with traditional British good manners.

"It would seem," said Tristram, "that we're all cannibals."

"Yes, but, damn it all, we in Aylesbury are at least civilized cannibals. It makes all the difference if you get it out of a tin."

This is the essence of the jape, the aspect of the future indefinite that seems to haunt Burgess most. Although he rings a good many changes on the idea, his theme is simply that reason itself will not save mankind. Indeed, fertility is restored to the crops only after society reverts to certain primitive rites; the wanting seed becomes wanton, a synthetic type of war is revived, the Pelagianism of the guiltless life replaced with a sterner Augustinian code of grace—the Christian categories being Burgess's.

I doubt if Mr. Burgess is opposed to Planned Parenthood, but he is skeptical of the universal overplanning that seems to be creeping through the world as it fills up. The story is told through Tristram Foxe, a man for all seasons who is able to accommodate himself to the constant shifts of state policy without surrendering his integrity, an Everyman upon whose conscience, courage, and common sense the salva-

Fe, Fi, Fo, Fum . . .

The Wanting Seed by Anthony Burgess (Norton. 285 pp. \$3.95), reminds us that there will always be an England, although perhaps not the one we've been used to. David Dempsey is a frequent critic for SR.

By DAVID DEMPSEY

ANTHONY BURGESS, the talented English writer, has published four novels in this country during the past two years, to considerable critical recognition. His latest, *The Wanting Seed*, like the earlier *A Clockwork Orange*, gives us a shrill and terrifying portrait of English life as it could be at some future time. *A Clockwork Orange*, which has recently been issued in paperback after a short period of hard-cover gestation, is a bitter satire on the welfare state in *extremis*. Written in the first person by its protagonist, a young hoodlum named Alex, in a teen-age argot largely derived from Russian, the novel traces his downfall and redemption at the hands of the state planners. It is a fable describing what Burgess finds most threatening about the continual expansion of political power over the life of the individual in modern England.

Alex is a repulsive creature who, with his cronies, conducts a nighttime reign of terror that includes rape, robbery, and senseless murder. Eventually, Alex is caught and sent to a correctional institution, where he becomes a Pavlovian guinea pig for an experiment in reform; through reflex conditioning he enters a new life of non-violence that is as automatized as his old. He is now at the mercy of society,

unable to defend himself against his former victims. Moreover, his bully-boy cronies (unreformed), having been made policemen, are free to beat him up.

The book ends with Alex in a hospital listening to Beethoven's Ninth—classical music is his one mode of genuine feeling—while being groomed by the Minister of the Interior to be an agent of the state. The crowning irony of the novel is Alex's transformation into an outward respectability that will enable him to play a more insidious criminal role with state sanction, a role that even Alex now finds repugnant. The all-powerful state, Mr. Burgess implies, must of necessity train its ablest performers rather than its best men.

A Clockwork Orange is not an easy book to read, and one constantly asks oneself if the author could have achieved the same results without us-



Anthony Burgess—"pessimism."

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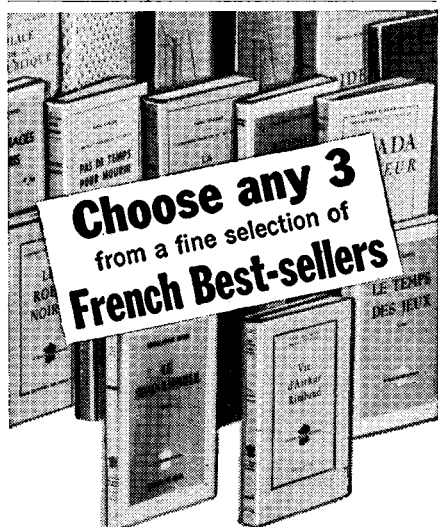
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tion of the future hangs. And what makes this future so terrifying is that it is such a clear extension of the present. Not everyone will share Burgess's pessimism, but there are few who will not enjoy his biting wit.

Dear Ex-: The protagonist of Gerda Charles's *A Slanting Light* (Knopf, \$4.95) calls herself "a new kind of provincial-urban, intellectual Bovary." Having just left her husband after sixteen years of marriage, Ruth is now settled in London as housekeeper to a visiting American playwright and his family. This novel does not show the forces that have shaped her, though apparently Miss Charles is not convinced that we could readily understand them. No one in England, her heroine laments, except possibly George Orwell, could have understood her. "No one who has not lived it can know the grey meanness of provincial, lower middle-class life at that time. . . . No wonder it has hardly been touched on by our writers; since to re-create it would make wretched both reader and writer."

These remarks indicate why a promising theme in the novel is dropped. They indicate, too, what kind of fiction Gerda Charles writes, a kind Orwell used to write before *Animal Farm* and 1984: sharp-witted, essayistic, limited. *A Slanting Light* gets around its limitations, to some extent, by being epistolary; it consists entirely of the cruelly candid letters Ruth writes to her ex-husband, and one could hardly object to the expository character of letters.

What she writes about is mainly the impact on her of the playwright Bernard Zold. He is no Orwell but he understands. Yet his understanding of her finally does not matter, for he himself becomes the subject of the book. Ruth forgets herself, not because she finds the lift of style and grace in the Zold ménage engrossing but because Zold interests her, his griefs and his talent as much as his anachronistic virtue:

The fact is, he is not only an expatriate in other ways, he is also one in time. His kind of situation, the attempt to behave well within narrow, domestic boundaries, the concept of sacrifice and patience with suffering which lies near to the hand . . . these are nineteenth-century virtues. Charles Lamb for instance could devote his life to his mad sister without a sneer from the outside world, however worldly. Good behavior was in tune with the times. Bernard requires twice the moral courage to behave half as well.

Zold's failure to captivate anyone but Ruth, even in the world of the theatre, where his play had a rather successful run, is a bitter indictment of the sophisticated circles that prove as false and

dull as those Ruth left behind in Liverpool. The best thing about this book is the thoroughly persuasive way in which the author shows the producers, critics, fellow playwrights all snubbing Zold because he maintains his innocent earnestness and honesty. From him Ruth learns that the latter should count for more than the elegant life she dreams of—a prosaic enough lesson, but in this book, with these characters, somehow impressive. —MANFRED WOLF.

Loaded in London: You have to get in the mood to enjoy Paul Scott's novel *The Bender* (Morrow, \$4.95). Remember the A and B buttons on London telephones. Warm gin. Phrases like "the loo" and "a woman for the rough." The loneliness that fogs the middle-class heart. And, above all, the class-consciousness that infects everyone from the corner bobby up (or down) to Lady Butterfield. Perhaps a few of the angry-young-men British flicks would be the best preparation; after that, fun is possible.

George Lisle-Spruce, whose bender is here chronicled, is, however, no angry young man. He is forty-three, aimless, and depressed. Furthermore, as recipient of an inexplicable £400-a-year legacy from Sir Roderick Butterfield, he has never worked in his life but has eked out the years with cheap lodgings, desultory interests, hovering debts, and a growing taste for gin. His virtues are charm, compassion, and a certain wry humor.

Faced with crisis, however, the virtues seem inadequate. Gillian, the seventeen-year-old daughter of his stolid brother Tim, is pregnant (by a local plumber's mate, whom she sensibly refuses to marry). Tim, who needs the money for Gillian's discreet "vacation" in Wales, demands repayment of the £200 he loaned George a decade ago. George, at the moment, has about ten bob.

The rest, as they say, follows. George squirms through a day of horror, punching innumerable A and B buttons. He spends an hour with Gillian, who is possibly the most endearing seventeen-year-old existentialist ever to lighten a London coffee house. He drinks too many martinis at one of Lady Butterfield's "Thursdays," and goes off with his younger brother's mistress, Anina—a like man-crazy type girl who claims she's an Indian from Islington-pore and Nehruville. He gets royally, totally drunk. But in the end he discovers that life, after all, may have an aim—even on £400 a year.

Mr. Scott writes skilled and funny dialogue, and has created some marvelously original characters. All you have to do to enjoy him is to get in the mood first. —MARGARET PARTON.