

Rooms for Misfits

***The Boarding-House*, by William Trevor** (Viking. 287 pp. \$4.50), displays a motley group of solitaires who meet their several disasters through efforts to reach others. Victor Chapin is the author of "The Company of Players" and other novels.

By VICTOR CHAPIN

IN HIS second novel William Trevor has written a sad comedy about solitaires. Mr. Bird, the boarding-house owner, who dies on the first page, had chosen his lonelies carefully, and—presumably out of kindness, but possibly to be cruel—brought them all together in his establishment. By willing the house jointly to two of them, a heartless nurse and a petty criminal, he has arranged to destroy his own creation.

That is the situation; one that, as it turns out, is not resolved according to plan. The agent of destruction is not one of those appointed by Mr. Bird, but another, the one who is the most alienated of them all. This climax momentarily deceives by producing what appears to be a catharsis in a story in which no real catharsis is possible. However, the meaning of the allegory is made clear and we find that, just as the jacket copy claims, this novel is "a microcosm of our disjointed society." We are all, it seems, residents of the boarding-house: lonely, obsessed, and unconnected.

Since the allegory is not an obvious one, the story can be read without it, though the characters and situations are not in themselves truly interesting. Mr. Bird plays God; Miss Clock, the nurse, is fixated on the elderly; Miss Rose Cave, having been born out of wedlock, has no identity; Miss Clerricott is obsessed by her own ugliness; Mr. Scribbin, abnormally tall, has a train fetish; Major Eele, shabby-genteel, is a voyeur; Mr. Obd, a Nigerian, pursues a white woman until she rejects him. Everybody meets his private disaster as a result of attempting to communicate or cooperate with others.

Read on one level, ignoring the Pinteresque allegorical overtones, this is a "black" comedy that is essentially unfunny in its characters and situations but sustains a certain humor through its author's outlook. At times the total effect is reminiscent of Muriel Spark or Angus Wilson, and, when the action moves below stairs to the servants' quarters, of

Henry Green. This is not to say that the author does not sustain a style of his own, for that he does do; and in the end he impresses the reader through the intensity of a vision that, while it conforms to the classic rules of comedy, amuses less than it disturbs.

A novel of this kind cannot appeal to everybody, for the story matters only for what it implies, and the characters, manipulated by the author in their games of loneliness, are all impaled by their own obsessions. William Trevor has been compared to Evelyn Waugh, which makes one realize that Waugh, once so much a contemporary, was writing for a different time. Trevor's kind of comedy is very much of this decade, which offers



William Trevor—games of loneliness.

little that is grandiose for deflating and in which the absurdities come not from habits and institutions but from the sudden loss of the meanings that once were attached to them.

Conversations with Hallucinations

***Yes from No Man's Land*, by Bernard Kops** (Coward-McCann. 207 pp. \$4.50), records the visions and memories of a dying patriarch. Emile Capouya is currently teaching American and English literature at the New School in New York.

By EMILE CAPOUYA

JOE LEVENE is dying of cancer in a hospital in London. Much of the time he communes with hallucinations, grateful visions of his childhood and of his dead wife, unwelcome colloquies with his oldest son who has settled in Israel. In his lucid moments he smokes shag tobacco, abuses the nursing sisters—for this is a Catholic hospital, to add insult to injury—and impatiently awaits the visits of his daughter Sophie, the family's fond lackey and unappreciated conscience. Visits from his second son, Barry, the rising young architect, he does not expect, for the darling boy is so busy. In the few hours in which the story unfolds, Sophie arrives, late and out of breath as usual. Unaccountably, Barry appears, too. He comes with his sweetheart, a handsome and intelligent girl, chief among whose perfections is the fact that she is not Jewish. He wants her to see *what he has risen from*.

Quite a scenario, and painful and con-

vincing enough, as far as that goes. The technical problem in constructing a novel around the visions and memories of a single character is the difficulty of avoiding stasis; to that end the protagonist must be made the center of a rich human interchange. Joe Levene, the childish and curmudgeonly patriarch, stranger in a strange land, representative of a complex culture—albeit somewhat debased in his person—seems to me to be a more or less adequate figure for the role he must sustain. Accordingly, *Yes from No Man's Land* is successful on its own terms.

Is it successful on more ideal terms? The Jewish culture that is celebrated or deprecated in so many novels is obviously splendid material for literary purposes. A dramatic culture, a self-conscious and reflective culture, and a racial experience that is emblematic of the history of man. The trouble is that Jewish novelists writing in English are tempted to paint a picture for the uninitiate, emphasizing what is paradoxical or exotic in Jewish life, or what must seem so to the outsider. Or else, at a further stage of assimilation—perhaps the stage represented by Mr. Leslie Fiedler's suggestion that all Americans can qualify as honorary Semites—the novelist is likely to address his readers as if *en famille*, as if what is distinctive about Jewish customs, patterns of speech, or ways of thinking were after

all the common currency of the larger culture.

But that tactic rests on a misunderstanding, and the novels that employ it are likely to seem hysterically cosy. The example of Isaac Bashevis Singer, writing in Yiddish of ghetto life with a kind of deep-chested power and ease, will show by contrast what I mean. Clearly, most of the novelists who try to make use of their Jewish background are not in Mr. Singer's position, and it is not desirable that they should be. But the position they *are* in is a very difficult one—so much so that to my mind the most successful are those who, like Mr. Philip Roth, appear to be writing out of what can only be called anti-Semitic rage, the familiar impatience of the prophets with their stiff-necked people. That emotion puts an edge on what Mr. Roth has to say. Mr. Bernard Kops, though he deals in this novel with death and betrayal, is a gentler sort. His book suffers accordingly—sometimes it isn't nice to be nice.

Successspots in Their Haunts: It would be impertinent to call a man an author of great promise when he has been working steadily at the novelist's trade since 1909; but one ought to be allowed to say that *Quadrille* (Doubleday, \$4.50) is a novel of great promises. In his offering for 1965 Frank Swinnerton promises something dark and sparkling in modern London—wicked high life, sordid beatniks, love, lust, lurid death, and something better than any of these: a message. In the end the reader is out on the street blinking, like the visitors to Barnum's Museum, still believing that he is really going to see the whale.

Fifty books in fifty-six years is surely a sign of great energy, and Swinnerton conveys this energy, together with an attendant sense of things about to happen, in *Quadrille*. Vitality and suspense are great gifts to a story; as an old master Swinnerton can show that they are enough to hold the reader. He attends to plot, character, dialogue, and the rest in a jovially perfunctory manner.

This is the last of a quartet of novels in each of which there appear members of four generations of the talented Grace family. In *Quadrille*, set in 1960, young Laura Grace, of the fourth generation, is a brilliant pianist who will shortly be famous. But first she must tread the dangerous mazes of the dance. Her host at a cellar party falls to the floor drunk and strips; a dangerous girl of twenty-four, the author of shoddy but successful historical biographies, gives her coffee and biscuits, a fierce vision of England as a matriarchy in the twenty-first century, and the revelation that people are not as they seem. An older man whom Laura adores falls into disgrace, nearly

dragging her down with him in all her innocence.

Quadrille is a novel of Life, but not of the murky working-class existence Swinnerton projected so handsomely in *Nocturne* back in 1917. It is not merely the story of one girl genius; it is star-studded with success. There is the great London hostess, once a celebrated sleeper-around, who has calmed down and married none other than Noble Buckingham, libidinous octogenarian financier. There is Sir Charles Hoodright, a fashionable surgeon "who must know much about the domestic affairs of famous people." Sir Charles is "easy in his blond cleanliness" and possesses an "impeccable façade." He can sit with Noble Buckingham, that formidable millionaire, "for

twenty minutes at a time . . . telling quiet stories about medical and racial experiences in the Near East." There is Lance Thomas, a monocled journalist "whose ears were flat against the sides of his head." His secret diary "when published in A.D. 2000 would provoke scandalized revaluation of all public figures of the new-Elizabethan era."

Swinnerton's absurdities of style can't be blamed on his having become one of the living literary monuments. They stood out long ago. In *Nocturne* a Cockney girl is seen eating chocolates "enjoyingly." But while in *Nocturne* he made a fine thing of the drabest London background, *Quadrille*, as a picture of the successspots in their haunts, is barely worth a smile. —H. C. GARDNER.

The Violated Land

The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones, by Jesse Hill Ford (*Atlantic-Little, Brown*. 364 pp. \$5.95), concerns the devastating impact of a Negro divorce action on a small Tennessee town. Samuel I. Bellman of California State Polytechnic College (Pomona) writes frequently on contemporary fiction and is currently working on a biography of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings.

By SAMUEL I. BELLMAN

THE FAULKNER country is a rough territory to win back, as it was in the old days, and as it is now, with the descendants of the plantation owners and the slaves and the poor whites, with the Yankee agitators and the curse on the land that won't be removed until all the evil is bleached out. Nobody else has even come close to winning it back, and a lot of those who tried wound up with pretty little stories, or cathartics about "violence erupting in a quiet Southern town."

Jesse Hill Ford, a Southerner with ancient roots in his land, is considered a promising writer. But *The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones*, for all its exposure of the nineteenth-century mentality of a small Southern town today, is essentially a concocted cathartic.

Somerton, Tennessee, in 1963 is a backward, semilawless place where Negroes are lucky to be left alive. Those who have anything the white men want are apt to be jailed on a trumped-up charge, beaten senseless, raped periodically (if they are women), or otherwise harassed until they give up what they've

got. Old family servants are regularly treated like performing monkeys who hate themselves. What little dignity there is seems to be found only among the whites, who try to allay their civil rights fears with proud memories of the Confederacy and pep talks about White Southern Womanhood and "keeping the niggers in their place." Even this "dignity" is spurious, because the whites panic at the thought of Federal intervention, and the men among them find Negro Southern Womanhood irresistible.

Lord Byron Jones, a Negro undertaker, is the richest man in town and the impotent husband of a beautiful nymphomaniac. His name is ironic, and his manner also. Always the unruffled gentleman, he would still be willing to patch things up with his wife, despite her open adulteries with a degenerate white policeman and her withering contempt for his own sexual shortcomings. But the only thing Emma intends to do for Lord Byron is to keep taking his money; and so he files suit for divorce. And thereby hangs a tale.

City Attorney Oman Hedgepath, much against his wishes, agrees to represent Lord Byron. Emma, now pregnant by her lover (who continually mistreats her), plans to contest the action. The leading members of the white community launch a concerted attack on the undertaker and his wife to keep them from continuing a suit that would besmirch the name of a fine, upstanding law officer. A nightmare of terror and bloodshed ensues.

Ford's novel is an exercise in unrelieved horror, suggesting only in the most superficial way the ambiguous beauty and pathos of William Faulkner's violated land.

SR/June 26, 1965