

A Sudden Shaft of Light

Not for Publication and Other Stories, by Nadine Gordimer (Viking, 248 pp. \$4.95), set mostly in South Africa, captures people "caught in varied postures of human frailty." Edward Hickman Brown, a free-lance writer, is a native of South Africa now living in New York.

By EDWARD HICKMAN BROWN

THIS superb collection of stories most decidedly *is* for publication. And I believe it represents a giant step forward for Nadine Gordimer.

What has always puzzled me profoundly about her writing in the past was why so small a proportion of her deftly executed, perspicacious stories made a really deep impression upon me. Hers was clearly more than an exceedingly skillful technique allied to a perceptive eye and an acute ear. One was constantly aware that a sensitive and intelligent mind was at work behind the stories that generally depicted—with rare accuracy—people caught in varied postures of human frailty. I found them infinitely superior to her two earliest novels (I missed the last one); but, although I enjoyed and respected most of the stories at the time of reading, relatively few of them remained impaled



—Hans Knopf.

Nadine Gordimer—"the equal of any."

upon my consciousness through the ultimate test of the passage of time.

My far from certain conclusion, when last I considered this matter several years ago, was that it might perhaps be a case of too much dispassion and detachment on Miss Gordimer's part, for one should surely not be so everlastingly conscious of the author's own cool intelligence hovering above her stories. But the entire issue now appears to be academic. For this collection confirms, quite dramatically, a new authority that I believed I had noticed in the odd story read in various periodicals over the past couple of years. Some indefinable additional ingredient has been added. For lack of a better term, we can only (and inaccurately) label it experience. And with it there seems to be less conscious striving after ever greater economy—nor any need of it.

It is a measure of Miss Gordimer's mastery over her subject that she moves one so easily and swiftly into the grip of each story, giving her art the illusion of effortlessness. Whatever the subtle extra element might be, the amalgam has magically jelled. This writer who has never been sufficiently honored in her native land can now surely rank with the finest exponents of the short-story medium. Certainly, there are no inferior stories among the sixteen gathered together in this book. And, just as surely, each reader will come up with his own special favorite.

For myself, I particularly liked "A Chip of Glass Ruby," a simple tale

whose climax lies in the quiet but vivid moment of realization that comes to an uneducated Johannesburg Indian, a hawker of fruit and vegetables, when he suddenly knows what it was that made him marry an ugly widow with five children. The reader anticipates him in this knowledge; but, reading of this good woman—so natural and unpretentious and credible a spirit—who makes her protest against the injustice she sees around her just because she must, he learns many other things. Or perhaps he merely has his memory jogged.

Miss Gordimer is a master at capturing a single electric moment of illumination. In "A Company of Laughing Faces" a sensitive girl of seventeen finds beauty and meaning in an initial confrontation with death that abruptly clarifies the confusion she had experienced during a seaside holiday while working so hard at the business of "having the time of her life" predicted by her mother. "The Worst Thing of All" ends in a different kind of moment, but with an equal dramatic force: here a husband stands revealed in all his shabby superficiality before the wife who had previously clothed him in qualities of her own imagining.

"Tenants of the Last Tree-House" grasps the alternating clarity and vagueness of which a young girl's immediately pre-adolescent days consist. In "Some Monday for Sure" Miss Gordimer, writing in the first person from a man's viewpoint, sensitively evokes the feeling of alienation among black South African political refugees in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanganyika: the misery of the narrator's sister, unable to learn the language and painfully conscious of resentment on the part of her hospital coworkers; the brother's own homesickness in spite of his efforts to put a cheerful face on things.

I could go on and on. These excellent stories have the unmistakable ring of truth, and will not easily fade. Most should prove well worth rereading; half their number will in all likelihood become well-thumbed favorites of mine.

Miss Gordimer's regular readers would undoubtedly have bought the book regardless of anything I might have said. But this is a particularly fine opportunity for those who have not made her acquaintance to become familiar with a storyteller who seems to have matured into the equal of any about.

FRAZER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT NO. 1135

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1135 will be found in the next issue.

RSRQP ARDRQZBGNO FZTACL
ZB BCR NFE HZLCGNOL WTB
HNFFNKL QRFGAGNTLFP BCR
ORK.

CROQP EZSGE BCNQRTZ

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1134

Folks that blurt out just what they think wouldn't be so bad if they thought.
—KIN HUBBARD.

Coming May 15:

**SR's Spring Children's Book
Feature.**

Erin on the Dark Side

Michael Joe: A Novel of Irish Life, by William Cotter Murray (Appleton-Century. 336 pp. \$5.95), underscores the banality and pietism found in rural Ireland. Sean Callery has contributed to British and Irish publications, and in the U.S. to *Commonweal*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Cincinnati Enquirer*.

By SEAN CALLERY

The Irish are a fair people; they never speak well of one another.

—SAMUEL JOHNSON.

AFICIONADOS of romantic Irish legends and even those vaguely suspecting that rural Ireland is a pleasant place to live are urged to boycott *Michael Joe*. The author has chosen, rather daringly and ambitiously, to recount the archetypal Irish tale, the merciless and deliberate destruction of the male's sexuality by the women in his life.

Deceptively simple superficially, *Michael Joe* is moored firmly within a suffocatingly narrow perimeter. A young football hero of the small merchant class in a remote village loves a spirited girl of his own *milieu*. His mother discovers Nell Cullen's frightful past—an illegitimate child put out for adoption in England.

Apprised of these horrendous happenings, Michael Joe reacts in the pietistical

fashion that is an Irish commonplace: the girl is a deceiving slut and ought to be ostracized and persecuted *ad aeternam*. Indeed, when she accepts the marriage proposal of another suitor, Michael Joe attempts to destroy the match and is astonished that his successor is willing to marry a girl who does not match up to his own notions of purity. As much for saving face, as for any other reason, Michael Joe contracts a loveless marriage with a girl from a farm and sets up house-keeping with her and his mother—a thoroughly respectable and unsavory *ménage à trois* in the Celtic manner.

At this point a new, macabre cycle begins. Seemingly rivals at first, mother and daughter-in-law soon discover a common mission. The unloving bride gives her husband one male heir, and she and its grandmother embark upon a thoroughgoing program of inhibiting any sort of aggressive masculine develop-

ment that they might detect in the child.

Mr. Murray has utilized an artful, somewhat self-conscious style to ornament an old-fashioned story. Literalness is the dominant characteristic, a device that perfectly underscores the primitive psychology of his characters and the banality of their lives. Let us hear from the traditional elucidator and custodian of morality in Ireland, the canon: The morning after Michael Joe has physically attacked the successful suitor of his first love we find Canon Lyons sermonizing from the pulpit on the subject of Anger. "Right here at home, in our very own parish, before our own very eyes we can see the wrack and havoc caused by this sin that likens us again to the ravening packs of wolves that once roamed our country before the coming of Saint Patrick."

In his first novel Mr. Murray proves to be a lineal descendant of a once-familiar figure in Ireland, the *seanchuidhe*, the professional storyteller to whom the tale was everything and nuance be damned. Evidently more of a catharsis than most initial works, this one is marred somewhat by a paucity of perspective, humor—yes, even Charity. Ireland is everything the author says it is, but it is a great deal more too.

Another Night on the Town

Mr. Right Is Dead, by Rona Jaffe (Simon & Schuster. 192 pp. \$4.50), containing a novella and five stories, offers further examples of its author's fascination with the glamour of New York and its sad, sophisticated waifs in search of romance. David Boroff, teaches English at New York University, frequently comments on contemporary fiction.

By DAVID BOROFF

THE ENORMOUS success of Rona Jaffe's first novel, *The Best of Everything*, was the sort that makes serious writers grind their teeth in helpless rage. A book of scant literary merit, it was largely a rehash of all the clichés about little girls in the big city—*Kitty Foyle* updated. While other writers, steadfast in their craft, languished in obscurity, Miss Jaffe became grist for the publicity mills, and if her literary reputation was ambiguous, her role as a full-fledged celebrity was not.

A writer's current work, to be sure, should not be evaluated in terms of past sins—many of which, in Miss Jaffe's case, were less her doing than done to her.

(Indeed, there should be a literary statute of limitations.) I summon up Rona Jaffe's glamorous past only to establish some continuity with her present work and to point up the weight of prejudicial judgment with which a reviewer must struggle.

For the truth is that Miss Jaffe's new work, *Mr. Right Is Dead*, shows considerable development since the author's first easily-scored victory. The subject matter of this novella and five stories is much the same as that of her first novel: the girls of New York, at once predatory and preyed upon. But the author's sensibility now has a harder grain. Her young women, though wistful to the end, have a shrewd sense of reality and a stubborn stoicism. If they are still diminished by the New York experience, Miss Jaffe at least eschews the cheap melodrama of abortion and suicide.

In *Mr. Right Is Dead* her characters survive, and what survives in them, too, is that nervous romanticism—almost as much tic as illusion—about the glories of New York. What gives this book its tension is the pull between the unquiet dream of fulfillment in New York and the knowledge that it is all silly, ultimately defeating, a hoax, for Mr. Right, indeed, is dead. And Miss Jaffe has



—Clarissa Pryce-Jones.

William Cotter Murray—a lineal descendant of the *seanchuidhe*.