



Books

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LITERARY HORIZONS

Sons of Successful Fathers

ALTHOUGH I have seen favorable comments on *What's the Big Hurry?* and other novels by James Yaffe, *Nobody Does You Any Favors* (Putnam, \$5.95) is the first book of his that I have read. He is, as I had assumed, a thoroughly competent writer with full command of his material. In this particular book, however, it seems to me that he hasn't given himself a fair break.

The novel's principal character is Arnold Hermann, who was brought to the United States as a child and who made up his mind by the time he was fifteen not merely to escape from poverty but to become rich. When the novel opens, in 1932, he is doing fairly well in the manufacture of leather goods, is married, and is looking forward eagerly to the birth of a son. Thirty-three years old, he believes that he has reached a decisive moment in his drive for success, and when he has a chance to take advantage of a competitor, he seizes it despite the remonstrances of his wife and his brother.

Twenty-five years later Arnold is enjoying the fruits of success, including a Cadillac with chauffeur to take him to and from his office. What worries him now is his son, Roger, who wants to be a painter instead of entering Mary Tudor Leatherwear, Inc. Arnold has given him a year in Paris, hoping that he will get the painting nonsense out of his head; and on his return Roger agrees to work for his father. He is a success, too, but his heart is not in the designing of handbags, and when he meets a girl who admires his paintings, the conflict between father and son starts all over again.

This is a tale that has been told again and again in American fiction, especially in the Twenties and Thirties: the self-made man whose only values are pecuniary and who unsuccessfully tries to mold his son in his image. Neither of Yaffe's characters can be dismissed as a stereotype, however. Arnold loves

money, but he also loves business and can imagine no more exciting activity. Though he always manages to suppress his self-doubts, he does have them. As for Roger, he is not a genius, and without the support of the girl he eventually marries he might easily have been defeated by his father. One can believe in these characters, but, having met their like before, one can't be much interested in them.

On the other hand, *All the Little Heroes* (Bobbs-Merrill, \$6.50), a first novel by Herbert Wilner, brings to the reader a fresh and stimulating experience. It is the story of what happens to a bunch of kids in Brooklyn during the last ten days of World War II. It is also the story of Dr. Oliver Selfridge, a man who has as far as possible kept himself apart from life. Like Bill Barrett in Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman*, Oliver is the last representative of a once distinguished family, and his detachment is rather like Barrett's, except that it has been carefully inculcated by the aunt who brought him up.

Oliver, a draft-dodger and no longer a practicing physician, goes to Staten Island to find his father, whom he has not seen since childhood. During the interview, in a moment of panic, Oliver strikes the old man, who has had a heart attack and may or may not be dead at the moment the blow falls. Nearby the Brooklyn kids have a camp, and when one of them is burned by hot fat, the youngest, Matty, goes to a nearby house for butter and comes upon the doctor and the corpse of the old man.

From now on Oliver's life is deeply involved with the lives of Matty and eight or ten of his companions. Wilner has chosen to tell the story in a complicated, sometimes difficult, but in the end effective way. The passages dealing directly with Oliver, showing how he came to be what he is, are written in the third person and show Oliver from both the outside and the inside. Then there are chapters in which Matty tells, usu-

- 45 Literary Horizons: Granville Hicks reviews "Nobody Does You Any Favors," by James Yaffe, and "All the Little Heroes," by Herbert Wilner
- 46 Letters to the Book Review Editor
- 47 "The Road to Sarajevo," by Vladimir Dedijer
- 48 "Eagle Day: The Battle of Britain," by Richard Collier
- 51 "For Spacious Skies," by Pearl S. Buck with Theodore F. Harris
- 52 "Love and Hate in China," by Hans Koningsberger
- 53 "Postscript from Hiroshima," by Rafael Steinberg
- 54 "491," by Lars Görling
- 54 "It Only Hurts a Minute," by Don Mankiewicz
- 55 "The Seahorse," by Anthony Masters
- 56 Books for Young People, by Alice Dalgliesh
- 58 "Two Under the Indian Sun," by Jon and Rumer Godden
- 59 "Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist," by Hortense Powdermaker
- 60 Check List of the Week's New Books

ally in the present tense, what he did and what he saw. Some other characters are also allowed to tell their own stories, including Judith, Matty's older sister, who falls in love with Oliver, and Bimbo, father of one of the boys and in his own mind the club's adviser and benefactor. Finally Priest, who in 1945 is the most responsible of the boys and the club's president, looks back on the happenings twenty years later, after he has become a psychiatrist, and tries to understand them.

Although Wilner sometimes confuses the reader with the turns and twists of his way of telling the story, he states his theme clearly at the outset, for he concludes the first chapter, the account of the death of Oliver's father, with a statement about Oliver's character and destiny. After saying that the death has meant little to Oliver, he continues:

He has been preoccupied in the past months with what he has come to think of as his own posthumous life. He has resigned himself to the idea that he is soon going to die, and he has imagined a need to find someone to whom it will matter. . . . The way out of being alone has always been for him the most

intolerable kind of loneliness. He has no story, even now.

He stays on in the house, deluding himself, waiting at the end of things for something to happen. It will come by chance. It will be, at last, at the end, the start of a story for him. If it will have no meaning, it will have consequences. Endlessly, there are consequences.

It is with the consequences, of course, that the novel is concerned, the consequences for Oliver and for the boys. Wilner tells the story with humor, tenderness, and irony. He can be gently funny, as in his description of Matty's sexual initiation; and he can be farcical, as in the account of Bimbo's plot to rescue Oliver, which is almost as ridiculous as Tom Sawyer's plot at the end of *Huckleberry Finn*. He writes about the boys with a friendly sort of gusto, but he never sentimentalizes them; they are tough kids even though they have their generous moments. As for the change in Oliver, it is not a miraculous transformation, and the question remains whether his attempts to help some of the boys do harm or good.

The method he has chosen compels Wilner to write in a variety of styles, and he carries them off very well. The third person narrative is always firm and good and sometimes brilliant, as in the account of a track meet in which Oliver once took part. The first-person passages always seem true to character, and the handling of the vernacular, especially in Matty's chapters, is very good indeed. The book has its faults—it doesn't need to be as long as it is—but it is alive in a way that the Yaffe book and a lot of other novels aren't. A real imagination is operating here, and I am eager to see its subsequent workings.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT No. 1198

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1198 will be found in the next issue.

OZVMSO VLCCSVOLW—ONS TFD
XNL DSPSW XFDOK OL KSS
QLHW OZVMSO HDCSKK QLH
FWS FKCSSJ.

—S. P. CHVFK

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1197

The true use of speech is not so much to express our wants as to conceal them.
—GOLDSMITH.

LETTERS TO THE Book Review Editor



Christian Atheism

MR. DAVE HILL has said (Letters to Book Review Editor, SR, June 25): "I readily accept Christ, and subscribe to his moral teaching, but this does not necessitate a belief in the God Christ believed in." . . . To quote St. Paul . . . : "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. . . . If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most to be pitied." (I Corinthians 15:17 & 19.)

The dictionary definition of Christian is: "A person professing belief in Jesus as the Christ, or in the religion based on the teachings of Jesus." To me one of the saddest commentaries on our times is the great number of people calling themselves Christian who are ignorant of the real meaning of the term.

J. B. DIXON.

Pensacola, Fla.

YOUR ARTICLE "The Urban Renewal of Religion" [SR, May 14] and more recent letters referring to it are very interesting. "Old-fashioned," I think, describes much of today's religious argument. The Presence in every man, an idea on an entirely different level than the "God is or is not dead" idea, has been understood by students of metaphysics for many years. Also, those who claim to follow Christ but disbelieve in God are in error through ignorance. The inspiration for Jesus the Christ's character, it is reported, was his silent communicating with his Creator and indwelling Companion, whom he called God.

MARGARET WATROUS.

Hamden, Conn.

Childhood Without Magic

AS A SIXTEEN YEAR OLD who thinks he can see himself "growing up" I must take exception to Anna Balakian's review of *The Opoponax* [SR, July 2]. "That children see but do not judge" and feel without need of meaning, are valid and important assumptions. Once I could not cry at the death of a close relative, and I assure you that my only regret was that I could not meet the accepted standards of showing grief.

What is the difference between an adult and a child if it isn't the latter's privilege of seeing without feeling? Childhood affords the privilege of not having to pass judgments or make commitments. It provides the privilege of impersonal stubbornness and irresponsibility. In childhood we accumulate bits and pieces of reality which are the basis of future judgements. And is this reality not the uninterrupted flow of experience, meaningless, except for the elements of fear and physical pain?

So I suggest that "the wonder of childhood and 'the magic glow' of the world" are both simply silly notions of people so far removed from childhood that they

imagine or remember it as a poetic experience filled by an indomitable spirit of optimistic appreciation of daffodils, Little Bo BEEP, and the world in general.

Even now, I must doubt the existence of the human spirit which is said to be most abundantly endowed in youth. I cannot ask any child to believe in love or hate in his universe dominated by the sciences, and especially those of biology and psychology.

In Modern Society, I think a fundamental and increasingly obvious problem arises from this conflict. The society increasingly encroaches upon the inalienable privileges of childhood by imposing more and more "meaning" earlier and earlier in the life cycle. This superficial education (starting with games, puzzles, television) creates semi-adults making malformed judgements based upon distorted values. Still, people are shocked by the increasing percentage of today's youth floundering miserably in the contorted maze of values which has been created.

And so I wish Professor Balakian had not condemned *The Opoponax* to "the literary wastelands" merely because it is an attack upon her mythical conception of childhood and youth. It is a mistake to be "willing, sadly, to accept *The Opoponax* as the world of a particular, arid conscience" because it is not a sad book. It just happens to be more truthful and valuable than Fournier or Wordsworth.

NARESH KHANNA.

New York, N.Y.

Cause Defined

THE CLOSING PARAGRAPH of Abram Sachar's review of *The Spanish Inquisition* and *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, Vol. II [SR, June 18] contains a common misconception evident among many leaders of the modern Jewish race, a strange reliance on racial isolation. Does it ever occur to the "many Jewish leaders of today" who "insist that Jews must rely more and more on inner strength, on their own resources, on self-help" that they are prescribing the cause rather than the cure for anti-Semitism and all its deplorable results?

JAMES K. CLARK.

New York, N.Y.

Nervous Umlaut

REGARDING THE EUROPEAN LITERARY SCENE in your issue of July 2: It is disconcerting to pedantic German professors when a writer, writing on German literature, and, what is worse, with a Munich byline, has a nervous umlaut. There is no umlaut on the first "a" in the very common German phrase "gesammelte Erzählungen."

E. W. ROLLINS, JR.

DeLand, Fla.