

Man's Place in the Landscape

Death in Midsummer and Other Stories, by Yukio Mishima, translated from the Japanese by Edward Seidensticker, Donald Keene, Ivan Morris, and Geoffrey Sargent (*New Directions*. 181 pp. Hardbound, \$5.50. Paperback, \$2.25), reveals new dimensions of insight and sensibility in the Japanese novelist and playwright. Howard Hibbett, professor of Japanese literature at Harvard, translated Junichiro Tanizaki's *Diary of a Mad Old Man*.

By HOWARD HIBBETT

MOST Japanese "novelists" (*shosetsuka*) are in fact primarily writers of short stories, sketches, vaguely fictionalized essays, all of which are indiscriminately called *shosetsu*. Not surprisingly, in view of the age-old ascendancy of minute poetic forms in Japan, brevity has never been considered incompatible with the highest artistic value, and one often finds that "novels" which are acclaimed as masterpieces turn out, on inspection, to be stories or sketches of a few pages in length. Such works are particularly tempting to the translator but editors and publishers have seldom shown much interest in them. It is therefore more than ever gratifying to welcome this fine collection of stories, with a play for good measure, by the internationally well-known novelist and dramatist Yukio Mishima.

Paradoxically, perhaps, the title story, "Death in Midsummer," is at once the longest and the most moving. Two small children and their aunt, who suffers a heart attack, drown in the shallows off a lovely, unspoiled beach (discreetly identified as A) near the southern tip of the Izu Peninsula. Summer is at its blazing height, the setting is idyllic, and, though there is "anger in the rays of the sun," even the cruelty of the sea is masked by its scintillating beauty. Summed up in an epigraph from Baudelaire ("*La mort . . . nous affecte plus profondément sous le regne pompeux de l'été*") and exquisitely illustrated in Japanese literature for more than a millennium, death in such a setting takes on a poignant irony.

But Mishima goes on to the aftermath: the customs that must be followed, the requirements of society, the private, irrational fluctuations of grief, and the old

intrusive, unseemly emotions of irritation, resentment, jealousy. Tomoko and Masaru are a conventional young couple, with a conventional inability to face the reality of their true feelings. Masaru reacts by retreating into his work, by drinking late in the evenings, by allowing himself a trivial infidelity out of dissatisfaction with his failure to match his wife's sorrow. Yet even Tomoko finds forgetfulness stealing over her, distressingly improper as that seems, and life predictably asserts itself. "The outlines of the incident were slowly giving way, dimming, blurring, weathering, disintegrating." Still, her experience has been one that her husband could not share; she remains more vulnerable to the cruelty of the sea and the blinding midsummer sun.

In this simple but profound and beautifully finished story, more vividly than in even such ambitious novels as *After the Banquet* or *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Mishima has succeeded in investing an "incident" with imaginative life. Psychological analysis in the classic French tradition is enhanced by awareness of the changing seasons, by a sensibility fusing passions, meditations, and landscapes in the great tradition of Japanese literature. Elsewhere in his work the incident sometimes remains stubbornly unrealized, richly detailed yet as remote from poetic truth as a bald news-

paper account or a dry medieval chronicle.

The theater, however, has always stirred Mishima's imagination, and two of the finest pieces in the book are "Dojoji"—a Noh play as brilliant as any of his earlier *Five Modern Noh Plays*—and "Onnagata," a masterly study of emotional currents set up behind the scenes at the Kabuki by Mangiku, an aloof, seductive performer of feminine roles whose feelings offstage are as theatrical as his flamboyant entrances and exits. An admirer sits in his dressing room awaiting him—"The mirror suddenly burst into crimson flames as Mangiku returned to the room, filling the entrance with the rustle of his robes"—or sees him leave, under an umbrella with a surly young director, in a delicious parody of the exit of star-crossed lovers. Both as an evocation of the Kabuki magic and a study in involved emotions, the story shows Mishima at the height of his powers.

Notable among a number of other striking stories in this collection are "The Priest of Shiga Temple and His Love," an elaborately embellished version of an old tale about the conflict between sacred and profane love, and "Patriotism," a romantically exalted but gruesomely realistic account of the ceremonial suicide of a young army lieutenant and his wife. Sometimes the embellishments seem too elaborate, the incidents too obviously contrived into the semblance of a deeper significance. But there is no question of Mishima's versatility and lively talent; nor, thanks to the flawless translations of Edward Seidensticker, Donald Keene, Ivan Morris, and Geoffrey Sargent, is there any doubt of his virtuosity as a stylist.



"It was hard enough to stomach the news
in black and white let alone in color."

The Crime of Not Caring

A Sentence of Life, by Julian Gloag (Simon & Schuster, 380 pp. \$5.95), explores the ethical dilemma of a modern innocent charged with murder whose real crime is indifference to his fellows. Joseph Haas is an editor and staff writer for *Panorama Magazine* of the *Chicago Daily News*.

By JOSEPH HAAS

IN HIS first novel, *Our Mother's House*, Julian Gloag took on the task of exposing the true face of childhood, and his achievement was compared favorably with *Lord of the Flies* and *A High Wind in Jamaica*. With *A Sentence of Life* he has set himself an even more difficult goal, the dramatization in terms of a man of our time of Pilate's crime—the refusal to accept responsibility.

This ethical dilemma is explored within the framework of a suspenseful murder case and taut trial scenes. Yet, admirably as these are managed, they never overshadow the theme of the crime of indifference. The murder case is essential only as the catalyst that forces Jordan Maddox to come to terms with himself.

Maddox is an upper-class Englishman of proper emotions and manners whose life is of such soothing order that he might have lived its entirety without having to acknowledge its quiet desperation. He has a lovely wife, a loving small daughter, few but comfortable friendships, an undemanding position with his uncle's staid publishing house. When a friend who amuses him suddenly drops his facetious manner to confess to the "aimless lust or agonized emptiness" of his life, Maddox is embarrassed because he can offer no "answering terror of his own." He has placed himself beyond such vulnerability by refusing to accept the responsibilities of meaningful relationships with others.

Then a young, unmarried secretary from his office is found strangled in her apartment, and an autopsy shows that she had been two months pregnant. Maddox is routinely questioned and professes his innocence, of course; everyone who knows him would consider any other possibility a poor joke; old Jordan would never complicate his life that way. But, bit by bit, inconsistencies in his statements and circumstantial evidence amass against him, and he is charged with murder.

At first, Maddox accepts eagerly the isolation of his cell; it is his ultimate detachment from life. But the ordeal of the courtroom is nothing compared with the trial of his solitude and of the memories that flock to give evidence against him. The world will not permit him to plead *nolo contendere*. In the past he had been the "perpetual lamb, shorn and sad-eyed" because it was "much easier to be the innocent, to allow others to take the responsibility for what you become." Now he is denied that comfort of self-pity.

People had stretched out their hands to him, in need, for love, friendship, comfort, understanding, but he had not responded to them. And so he drove his wife to her private shame, failed his

daughter, and, most terrible of all, denied solace to his pathetic Uncle John, the old soldier who had fought a good war and returned from it to deteriorate among toy soldiers, dreams of past martial glories, and a secret weakness for children. They sinned, too, but out of a necessity to act; his sin was that of omission through indifference.

Finally he must concede that "If you—all of you—are not guilty, then I am guilty." But he is denied even the comfort of selecting which crime he shall be guilty of.

Although Maddox is a totally realized, memorable man, he is only the crown of Mr. Gloag's accomplishment. With an enviable exercise of the writer's tools, the author limns a dozen characters, major and minor, in moving, significant dimensions.

And all of it is directed toward the slow revelation of Maddox's soiled innocence. The conclusion—and to reveal more of the tension of the plot would do a disservice to the reader—holds up a mirror that Mr. Gloag will not permit us to ignore.

Growing Up in Paris

Alberta Alone, by Cora Sandel, translated from the Norwegian by Elizabeth Rokkan (Orion, 762 pp. \$7.95), a trilogy, pictures its heroine as a shy, awkward, small-town girl, as a young woman living among artists in prewar Paris, and finally as a mature human being. Dorrie Pagones studied comparative literature in Europe under a Fulbright grant.

By DORRIE PAGONES

IF A reviewer writes that a novel is "a near masterpiece" or "almost a great book," that novel goes unread. So I shall say without qualm that Cora Sandel's *Alberta Alone* is a masterpiece.

I had never heard of Miss Sandel. In Norway, where she grew up, and in Sweden, where she now lives, the eighty-six-year-old author may be, and I hope she is, as celebrated as the late Somerset Maugham (with whose *Of Human Bondage* it is impossible not to compare *Alberta Alone*).

The work is a trilogy, the first part of which appeared in 1926, eleven years after *Of Human Bondage*. Like Philip Carey, Alberta dreams and idles through a dreary childhood, the victim of acute shyness and small-town Good People. Then, like a revelation, comes prewar

Paris and the brief years of freedom, art and love, no money, and infinite possibilities. Finally, with the end of youth there is the inevitable destruction of its hopes and, possibly, the beginning of a new kind of freedom for Alberta, the hard freedom to accept the limits as well as the powers of her own nature.

As a writer, Miss Sandel is Maugham's superior. She has not his gift of irony, but her emotional depth is far greater. Where he remains a worldly observer of life, she is always an actor. Yet she achieves a detachment wholly without cynicism. She must have begun like Alberta, in the early Paris days:

To plunge into it. To drift, wander about, watch, absorb it all, with no other purpose . . . penetrate unknown territory, buy fruit from carts and eat it sitting on benches, hear the clock strike in different ways in different church towers and know that it didn't matter, no one knew where she was, no one knew where she belonged.

If the book has a fault, it is in being a little too unhurried in its wanderings. Miss Sandel is a stylist, a writer of marvelous delicacy; and the standard trouble with beautiful writers is that not enough happens in their books. Alberta merely exists in Norway, only begins to live in Paris, has a child by a painter, tries sometimes to write. Nothing more.

At first one is disconcerted, for the