

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

novel does not immediately grip the imagination but slowly grows upon it, like the landscape seen from a train:

A landscape without distinction which one passes on a journey and immediately forgets; and wonders where it came from when one day it reappears in the memory, more distinct than any of those looked at more carefully. Meadow, wood, air and water: these life-giving four.

That sounds terribly writerish here,

but in the context it doesn't. Anyway, that is what happens.

Alberta Alone is not one of the very great novels—the kind that change you and become part of you forever—but it is one of those that make you remember certain things you thought you had forgotten. To read it is, in part, to relive the painful experience of growing human.

And apparently that process has not changed much in the last half-century or so.

Professor's Pajama Games

The Doctor Is Sick, by Anthony Burgess (Norton. 260 pp. \$4.50), recounts the impact of lowlife on a contentedly ossifying professor of linguistics. Elinor Baumbach is a free-lance writer and critic.

By ELINOR BAUMBACH

AS ANTHONY BURGESS's reputation grows in this country, his publishers push ahead with the publication of his entire canon. In the past few months we have had the early *A Vision of Battlements*, the excursion into criticism *Re Joyce*, and now *The Doctor Is Sick*, a witty study of an ossifying professor of linguistics whose life has become defined by the dogma of language and whose emotional decay is reinforced by the growth of a brain tumor which, as the book opens, requires immediate treatment.

Dr. Edwin Spindrift has been bumbling contentedly along, immersed in his consonant blends and comparative dialects. His lack of sexual appetite seems a distasteful but irrelevant fact, although he is unhappy about his uninvolved involvement in the implications of his wife's adulteries. When a sudden fainting spell brings him to a doctor, he is more irritated than dismayed. Whose life finally could be more rational than his?

However, from the moment Edwin finds himself enmeshed in the terrible efficiency of a London hospital, his world begins to crack, erupt, convulse into the sort of horrific comic vision which Burgess handles with consummate skill.

Unfortunately, in this case the vision ultimately fails. It is black enough to suit our time, and certainly funny; but Spindrift does not have sufficient weight. His predicament behind the comic situation is not serious enough. Céline once

said that futility is the intellectual's vice. Convinced as we are of Edwin Spindrift's futility, we need more than grotesqueness to persuade us of his redemption.

But what Burgess does well, he does very well indeed. Refusing to accept the fact of his illness, Edwin, repelled by the grim cheer of the hospital technicians, who are extensions of the machines they operate, distracted by his wife's disappearance with her newest lover, decides to escape. With wrinkled pajamas and freshly-shaved skull he descends into the surreal bar which is his wife's last forwarding address. When his baldness is discovered by the Dickensian characters who frequent the illegal establishment he becomes a minor celebrity. In a brilliant series of Keystone capers, which flash before us like scenes from the new cinema, Edwin spins from the clutches of the Stone Brothers' show-biz ambitions for him as a contest winner ("Undred nicker an' a film-test. Fink of what vat means to you, only a poor bleedin' perfesser."), into the arms of Bob Courage, a mad-eyed mobster who has developed a yen for what he guesses to be Edwin's special perversions. He bobs in and out of the hands of the law and finally, in best farcical manner, opens a wrong door innocently to find his wife in bed with a perfect stranger.

THE book is punctuated by memorably amusing scenes: Edwin lecturing on semantics to row upon row of prostitutes and pimps; the climax of a chase when Edwin, crowned the "Bald Adonis of Greater London" in a humiliating circus of flesh, spits an obscene word into the television microphone before being leapt upon by all his pursuers.

Throughout Edwin's travels there have recurred commercials for a new cleaning device, the "Spindrift." This joke is emblematic of a deeper flaw in the book as a whole. Its milieu throughout is a shade more picturesque than ex-

acerbating—a failure, it would seem, of Burgess's generally mordant intention. When Edwin emits his four-letter expletive, the word is described, not quoted. This sort of evasion might produce comedy, but not the Swiftian revelation that has become a Burgess trademark.



Mechanized Caesar: The opening pages of *Gascoyne* (Putnam, \$4.95), Stanley Crawford's first novel, read like a wild parody of the hard-boiled detective story. Receiving a tip that Rufus Roughah, "prominent citizen and big crook," has just been shot, Gascoyne visits the Roughah estate, where an extraordinary amount of action goes on, including an exquisite interrogation by Gascoyne of Roughah's young widow.

It soon develops, however, that Gascoyne is very much more than a private eye. A thoroughly mechanized man, he literally lives in his car, which is equipped with a telephone and various other appurtenances. He has reduced his animal needs to a minimum, subsisting on two candy bars a day and half an hour's sleep. There is a girl, "good old Marge," in his life, though her status is uncertain; but Gascoyne's interest in sex is largely confined to its potentialities for blackmail. For more than ten years he has ruled his unnamed city, which appears to be in California: he has erected housing developments for all sorts and conditions of men (including what is probably the world's only prefabricated slum), and provided them with a chain of supermarkets. He owns the used-car lot, the demolition company, the newspapers, the funeral home, and the police commissioner. Gascoyne also holds under government contract the top-secret zoological warfare station, where security precautions are so awesome that upon the entrance of visitors the typists zip themselves, desks and all, into large plastic hoods labeled "Shhhhh!"

When Police Commissioner O'Mallololly insists on calling Roughah's death a suicide, and absconds with both the corpse and the murder weapon, Gascoyne smells treachery within his empire, and things proceed rapidly from bad to horrendous, culminating in the epic Battle of the Police Tower and a subsequent saturnalia in the Celeste Gascoyne Maternal Memorial Auditorium. To divulge any more would be unfair to Mr. Crawford's unbridled imagination.

Gascoyne's first-person narration, deadpan if grammatically uninhibited, adds a dimension to the preposterous goings-on, until one wonders uneasily just how exaggerated they really are. This is an uproarious book, but the fun does not obscure the chilling reality that inspired it.

—RUTH L. BROWN.