

ancholy; congenial and friendly, yet lonely and brooding; gentle, but capable of a sharp retort; reaching for others, but himself unreachable. His friend Professor Gershom Scholem describes Agnon's frequent conversations with others as "actually walls guarding his loneliness."

Agnon calls to mind his own story "Tranquillity," in which the just and God-fearing neighbor of Moses asks the lawgiver to do him a personal favor when he goes up to Sinai: would he kindly ask the Lord to grant him a little tranquillity? Moses promises to do what he can. After his mission is done, Moses puts in a good word for his neighbor. And God replies: "Son of Amram, everything that I created, I created during the first six days; but tranquillity I did not create." Agnon is that restless neighbor, still searching for that which he alone must create. —EMANUEL FELDMAN.

Emanuel Feldman, currently on leave to teach at Bar Ilan University in Israel, is rabbi of Congregation Beth Jacob in Atlanta, Ga.



Angst on the Autobahn: The lack of subtlety and the pseudo-realism in Agnar Mykle's new book, *Rubicon*, translated from the Norwegian by Maurice Michael (Dutton, \$4.95), is exemplified by this brief passage:

The man gave a quick smile, a shy and slightly twisted smile, and then in impeccable Norwegian said: "Yes."

Mykle tends to the hyperbole when he strives to depict actuality. The main character, the twenty-three-year-old Valemon Cristvåg, is introduced in an unlikely scene at the German-Danish border in June 1939, and followed on a trip by motorcycle to Paris. He shudders, has chills, is terrified, and turns pale throughout the narrative. He crosses not one but many Rubicons, all of which have about the same breadth and depth, although they represent decisions as different as whether to flee Norway after a shotgun marriage or to eat a piece of rare beef in a *prix-fixe* restaurant. Time and again Mykle undertakes to build up suspense, but succeeds principally in creating a series of false cadences.

The author's intent has been to portray *Angst* through a series of recollections that release complex associations in the mind of the hero. The technique is commendable; but the situations Valemon remembers are supposedly real rather than psychological interpretations of experience. As a result the reader is disappointed, even though he recognizes that Mykle has considerable talent in working with words, as evidenced by

striking images scattered throughout his prose and especially by the two-page "1939 Overture," an original and clever conversation among a group of musical instruments written in German. Flashes of originality do not counterbalance the cyclopedic filler with which Mykle has extended his novel: remarks on the language controversy in Norway, observations on Norwegian geography and folk life, and even the lamely allegorical précis of a tale from the Younger Edda.

In an earlier novel Mykle walked the brambly path between art on the one side and pornography and blasphemy on the other. As a result he became involved with the law and acquired a name on the literary scene. He may subsequently have overlooked the fact that while a new esthetic in imaginative literature can elevate what hitherto has seemed bold and daring, boldness is no guarantee of a new esthetic. There are a few scenes in *Rubicon* which would have been considered piquant and overly frank only a decade ago, but they will not raise many eyebrows in antepill 1967. They certainly do not suffice as the book's *raison d'être*.

—P. M. MITCHELL.



No Company: On the opening page of William Sansom's *Goodbye* (New American Library, \$5.50) Anthony Lyle, an executive in the bond department of a London bank, learns that his wife is leaving him after eighteen years of marriage. Incredulous at first, and expecting her to stay, Lyle stumbles about looking for sympathy. When the split proves to be permanent, he becomes by turns sour, resentful, and falsely buoyant; but he feels most often the pangs of wounded self-regard. His wife, determined to avoid a noisy scene, is finally angered into a venomous monologue explaining her decision:

"To me you're nothing, absolutely nothing. I don't hate you, I don't even dislike you. I just don't feel anything about you. And who in God's reasonable name wants to go on living side by side with a nothing? It's no company."

Confirmed in his hopelessness, Lyle strikes back with a maniacal scheme designed to end in double death by poison.

Except for a lunatic disorder at the close, much of the material in *Goodbye* is drawn from the familiar repertoire of recent urban comedy. At a dinner party people are exposed by the nullity of their conversation; at a neighbor's house the injured husband hopes for consolation but gets instead a catalogue of the other fellow's love life. As his desperation increases Lyle becomes childish, irrit-

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able, and eager for company. In a predictable set-piece he visits a prostitute, but is too weary to respond to her.

Since the people and the action are so familiar, *Goodbye* depends for its life on Sansom's ability to make poetry out of "dull daily bread." But, at best, his scenes are little more than shrewd pieces of social observation, eliciting a mild "Yes, that's the way it is." The routine bourgeois will be a comic bumbler in time of stress; but Lyle's fecklessness had become a tic long before his collapse, so that at the crisis he has already forfeited compassion and interest.

Some of the novel's brightest moments are provided not by the Lyles, but by people who walk on, do their comic turns, and move off again: Chalcott-Bentinck, defending marital strife as "passion's policemen"; Savory, an unmarried copywriter, collecting photographs of oddly shaped drainpipes; an ancient handyman, admitting that he hasn't spoken to his wife in twenty years:

"Felt a bit funny at first. . . . You know, bangin' into each other in the passage. You soon get used to it. Learn to swerve like a fish. Soon get used to anything."

In answer to a recent biographical questionnaire Sansom listed his recreation as "watching." The rewards and hazards of the pastime are obvious in *Goodbye*. —LAWRENCE GRAVER.

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—*FRED J. COOK, Saturday Review

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—Compiled by NAD SOFIAN.

Realism, Not Absolutism

By ZENA SUTHERLAND

THE CULTURAL affairs editor of the *State* (a Columbia, South Carolina, newspaper) responded to "Children Face Reality" [SR, Jan. 28] with a long article in which I am raked over the coals for having praised realistic books for children.

"Society's Woes . . . Topic for Youth?" it asks. "Too tardily," Adger Brown's article begins, "I recognize myself as the product of a misspent childhood—bereft of the benefits of exposure to really good literature." . . . you must share with me my bitter regrets of a benighted childhood." Mr. Brown then goes on to describe his own childhood reading: Mother Goose, the Tarzan books, Dickens, Alcott, Greek myths, Zane Grey, the Bible, et cetera.

"These stories did not lack for gore and violence, but I'm afraid they still would not be those Miss Sutherland so much admires." Well, now. What a coincidence; I read most of those books, liked them, and gave them to my children. I still like them, despite the occasional gore and violence that—by implication—were an appealing factor.

What makes a reader go off on this kind of tangent? If you read an article by the food editor in which she announces that bananas are a delicious, nutritious food that can be used in a variety of recipes, do you jump to the conclusion that she eschews bread and milk? Does she stand accused of vegetarianism? Can one approve of realistic books and still approve of family stories, folk tales, poetry, science fiction, or biography? One can and one does.



—From "A Dog's Book of Bugs."

Another reviewer told me that she had had an indignant letter from a Minneapolis schoolteacher asking how she could possibly have recommended, in view of the economic opportunity programs and other bootstrap efforts, a book that extolled poverty. The book was La Fontaine's *The Rich Man and the Shoemaker* (Watts, \$3.95), in which, the review stated, the cobbler found that material possessions were not always worth the responsibility they entailed. What the teacher had seen, it later developed, was a terse interpretation in her school's library purchase bulletin: "A shoemaker finds it is better to be poor and carefree." Personally, I'll vote for being rich and carefree.

I've participated in many passionate debates with other reviewers, on and off the platform, and of course we don't always agree. My plea, however, is for carefulness in reviewing and carefulness in reviewing reviews. It isn't difference of opinion I object to, and it isn't Adger Brown's dislike of realistic books that I object to, but the ignored fact that my article had begun, "I'd hate to see an avalanche of grim realism bury the happy in publishing." Please pass the tranquilizers.

Grandpa. By Barbara Borack. Illustrated by Ben Shecter. Harper & Row. 32 pp. \$2.95. For all those who have, or once had a loving grandparent, this should bring the pleasure of recognition, because Barbara Borack sounds exactly the right note from the very start of the book. Marilyn ingeniously and lovingly recounts the delights of being with Grandpa, beginning with, "My cousin has to call him Uncle Jack. But I can call him Grandpa." He clearly dotes on Marilyn, and Marilyn enjoys to the hilt every ploy, every secret, every bit of petting or teasing. The illustrations pick up, with engaging simplicity, the warmth and humor of the text. Ages 3-7.

The Guard Mouse. Written and illustrated by Don Freeman. Viking 48 pp. \$3.50. Chin up, shoulders back, tail smartly curled, Clyde the Guard Mouse stands on duty outside the walls of Buckingham Palace. He is clad in the uniform of the Grenadier Guards, and it is his duty to keep small creatures from creeping through the spaces in the palace wall. When Clyde has an unexpected visit from American relatives, he gallantly escorts them on a quick trip around London, thereby affording Don Freeman an opportunity to paint some delightful London scenes. The story ends with a minor, easily surmounted crisis, Clyde back on duty, and the American

cousins (happily ensconced on the head of a stone lion) watching the ceremony of the Changing of the Guards. The illustrations are awash with color, movement, humorous details, and a splendid feeling of amused affection for Londoners. Ages 5-8.

How You Talk. By Paul Showers. Illustrated by Robert Galster. Crowell. 35 pp. \$3.25. It isn't easy to avoid the pitfalls of popularization and pedantry when writing a science book for the beginning reader; Paul Showers succeeds very nicely, as he has in previous books about human physiology. He discusses the parts of the body used in making sounds and suggests some simple home experiments that clarify or corroborate the text; he describes the progression from an infant's apparently aimless noises to the intelligible speech of the older child, and he adjures the young reader not to tease the lisping child or talk baby talk to the prattler. Ages 7-9.

A Dog's Book of Bugs. By Elizabeth Griffen. Illustrated by Peter Parnall. Atheneum. 58 pp. \$3.25. "This is a book for dogs that like bugs. They search out the ways of bugs with patience, with curiosity, and with joy. This book is for them." It's a book for anyone with a sense of humor; the delightful black-and-white illustrations show an insatiably curious hound observing the antics of an assortment of bugs. The random arrangement and the lack of an index limit the book's usefulness somewhat, but the drawings are beautifully precise and often very funny. Ages 7-9.

The City and Its People: The Story of One City's Government. By Alvin Schwartz. Photographs by Sy Katzoff. Dutton. 64 pp. \$3.95. Not until the close of the book does the reader learn that the city being described is Trenton, New Jersey; wisely, the author prefers that the reader think in terms of a typical city rather than a particular one. He discusses, objectively and clearly, the problems of contemporary urban administrations, changing patterns resulting from population pressure and physical deterioration, and the functioning of the branches of municipal government and its services. Ages 8-12.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. By Pearl S. Buck. Illustrated by Mamoru Funai. John Day. 80 pp. \$3. All the more moving because it is told with no note of pathos, this story of four Korean children is only slightly weakened by the pat ending; it is an affecting account because the youngsters are illegitimate waifs rejected by society and struggling for survival. Matthew's mother, ashamed of having borne one of "Those," arranges to lose her child of shame; Matthew picks up another, younger boy and calls him Mark, having heard an American say "Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. . ." Luke has been trained as a thief; the child whom Matthew names John is only five. During a children's party at an American camp, Matthew makes a friend. The soldier decides to adopt him, and the book ends with Matthew pleading successfully for the adoption of his three "brothers" by the other people of the small American town. Ages 9-11.

(Continued on page 100)