

Nature Is No Sentimentalist

Hill Country Harvest, by Hal Borland (Lippincott. 377 pp. \$5.95), offers vignettes of a way of life in which nature plays an important part. Robert L. Perkin of the University of Colorado Medical Center takes a special interest in conservation.

By ROBERT L. PERKIN

HAL BORLAND is a man who counts the individual flowers on a wand of goldenrod. (There are, he reports, 3,023 flowers per plume, each flower consisting of from five to ten florets, and thus by arithmetical extrapolation a grand total of between 15,000 and 20,000 florets.) He is also a man who carries a ten-power magnifying glass in his pocket on his rambles, and thus has counted the flowerlets of Queen Anne's lace (2,450 to a head of seventy umbrels). I suspect that some day soon he will come up with a tally on the number of leaves on one of his sugar maples, although for the present he pretends this is beyond his capacity.

These tabulations are indicative of his curiosity and patience, but I would not want to suggest for a moment to anyone who has not yet enjoyed the pleasure of his company that Mr. Borland is some sort of woods-queer statistician. The thousands who have met him in prior readings know that he is, quite simply, the most delightful companion one could imagine for excursions out-of-doors in all seasons, through the pages of a book or the columns of a newspaper. He shares with Joseph Wood Krutch the gift of being able to endow the least and most common aspects of nature with excitement, meaning, and value. It is an uncommon gift, and Mr. Borland is an uncommon man.

A quiet zest for participation with everything living pulses gently in his words and phrases. He has seen and relished a lone fox making a clown of himself in the pasture. He knows, from observation, the consummate grace with which a deer "floats" over a fence. There is a spot on the now-wild hillside behind his house where a domestic lilac ekes out a living beside a rubble of stone that was once a home. The hardy, truant lilac evokes reflections on plantings that outlive the planter; the felling of a noble maple, mortally damaged by lightning, reminds the muser that nature is no sentimentalist.

Mr. Borland is familiar with the birds, visitors and migrants, by sight and by song. His ear is also tuned to spring peepers. His eye is dazzled annually by autumn color, and he was a silent watcher by the shallow pond on the evening when a swimming muskrat, startled belatedly by man-smell near at hand, misjudged his soundings and dived head-first into the mud, leaving an exposed rear-end high and dry. The nature Borland knows is sometimes an antic mother.

He admires the nervous wit of the chipmunk and the beautiful economy that packs half a dozen leaves and a large flower into a hickory bud. He remembers the "almost sensual pleasure" of summer mud between the toes of a barefoot boy. He is the intimate of stars and the wind, of the eddies of storm that play along the surface of the Housatonic as it flows past, just beyond his doorstep, and of the moment late in August when autumn really begins with a change of light and mood predating the laggard equinox. All of this he writes about in a language as relaxed and comfortable as an old tweed jacket.

These random samplings of what Borland sees, hears, feels, and does as a countryman are taken from the latest collection of his personalized nature essays, *Hill Country Harvest*. His hill country is in the Berkshires of northwestern Connecticut, where, after a



youth in Colorado and a distinguished career as a city journalist and writer, he has elected to live. The new book is of a pattern with several of his earlier outings—*Beyond Your Doorstep*, in particular, and *Sundial of the Seasons*, *Countryman: A Summary of Belief*, and *This Hill, This Valley*—and it will delight the same readers. It represents a condensation and revision of some of the half-million words Borland has written over the past few years for the newspaper in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, a few miles up the river from his farm near Salisbury. In a series of short sketches—none runs much beyond a couple pages of print; Borland is not a man to belabor a point—the reader is guided around the calendar, from late winter when the hounds of spring strain impatiently at their leashes and longing runs deep for new green, through summer with its tumult of life, past the Harvest Moon and the Hunter's Moon, and back again to chill January and the silence that is defined by the hoot of an owl. Along the way Borland drops pointed comment now and then on modern man and his civilization, viewed with the perspective of a countryman of decent prejudices and humane instincts.

On his final page, seeking an explanation of why a way of life that makes a place for nature is important and satisfying, Borland summons Emerson into testimony: "He who knows what sweets and virtues are in the ground, the waters, the plants, the heavens, and how to come to these enchantments is the rich and royal man." Borland concedes the style is a trifle lush for his taste, though the truth is there, and suggests that Emerson's friend, Henry Thoreau, would have said it better and "with more bite." Perhaps Thoreau did so in *Walden*: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover I had not lived."

One of the early vignettes in *Hill Country Harvest* has special appeal for me. Borland is talking about moonlight, and he tells how he took a mutual friend of ours, a beloved professor of literature who is now gone, out in his boat on the Housatonic to watch the sun go down. They had indifferent success with the sunset, but as they started home the full moon rose and the boat "seemed to ride in the moonlight itself." Our scholar friend whispered a word or two of wonder and then began talking softly to the moon in the words of Shakespeare, whole passages from half a dozen plays. Perhaps this is a private matter between me and this fine and gentle book; but most readers, I think, will find in it scenes and moments of acute discovery when life, their own or Borland's, is indeed lived deliberately at its keenest.

The Unholy Trio

Quarry, by Jane White (Harcourt, Brace & World. 252 pp. \$4.95), allegorizes an act of gratuitous violence on an innocent victim by a trio of diabolical British boys. Richard Freedman, who teaches English at Simmons College, has contributed frequently to the *Kenyon Review* and *Book Week*.

By RICHARD FREEDMAN

ADOLESCENT boys are the natural heroes of American literature. From Huck Finn to Holden Caulfield, they are presented as inherently superior to their corrupt or insensitive elders because of their pristine virtue and unspoiled perceptiveness. The English, on the other hand, with Old World tragic wisdom, have their doubts about the innate goodness of boys, as such terrifying glimpses into pre-adolescent original sin as Richard Hughes's *A High Wind in Jamaica* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* effectively demonstrate.

Quarry, a first novel by a talented young Englishwoman, clearly follows this somber tradition. Three teen-aged boys keep a victim slightly younger than themselves in an abandoned quarry for a few weeks until they are ready to commit the ritual murder they had planned.

The unholy trio consists of Todd Gascoigne, a brilliant, wealthy boy Oedipally involved with his selfish, seductive mother; his classmate Randy, a fastidiously murderous Catholic living with an uncomprehending, Protestant uncle and aunt; and, for "ballast," the dull, unimaginative, lower-middle-class Carter.

On the eve of graduation from school, which they are aware will end their unstable friendship, the boys determine to commit what Hawthorne termed the unforgivable sin: to violate, "in cold blood, the sanctity of a human heart." Like Leopold and Loeb in the famous 1920s case, they choose a victim, or quarry (the deeper sense of the book's title) who has never harmed them.

Their unnamed prey, a bright, preternaturally self-possessed twelve-year-old, follows them willingly into the cave. Although he can escape at any time, he remains there—except for a brief, mysterious excursion from which he voluntarily returns—until the boys have committed their act of gratuitous violence upon him.

Each of them pays a solitary visit to the lad, who acts as a catalyst, bringing out whatever was latent within them. Carter, the youngest of the three, finds himself regressing to a childhood he has not quite left, and enjoys himself for hours playing pirates with his proposed victim. The seething violence of Randy erupts during his visit, and Todd succumbs to his unacknowledged homosexuality, recently exacerbated by the forthcoming marriage of his widowed mother to a worldly, superior man.

Obviously, like *Lord of the Flies*, *Quarry* is an allegory with a variety of more or less cosmic overtones. The action takes place not in a normal, pastoral English summer, but in an arid wasteland during a fierce heat wave. Images of darkness and light are strewn about almost as lavishly as in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and the cave is philosophically associated with the one in Plato's *Republic*.

THE victim, especially, is given much symbolic weight to bear as a universal scapegoat. Occasionally he is as contemptuous of his tormentors as Prometheus chained to his rock; sometimes he sits "cross-legged and immobile" like a Buddha, and ultimately, of course, he is Christ, "with clear bright eyes which seemed innocent of deceit." Todd is sensitive enough to realize that "we are your prisoners as much as you are ours," which is the crux of Jane White's parable.

For ultimately the book is about the complex symbiosis between persecutor and prey. The quarry is as passive in the face of violence as were the Chicago nurses who were slain last year, or the concentration camp inmates. And yet, when Randy asks if he wishes to be blindfolded, he answers: "Why? Do you want to hide from me?" For all the de-

tailed violence in the novel, its theme is the basically optimistic one that the victim wins a spiritual victory over his otherwise unpunished murderers.

If *Quarry* is less richly imagined than *Lord of the Flies* and lacks its verbal distinction, it is nevertheless an extraordinarily assured first novel, and is even superior to Golding's in its control of allegory, the bare bones of which are less frequently allowed to obtrude.



Dissection of a Dismal Wife: Elizabeth Jourdelay, aged forty and married twenty years, doesn't like her husband, Richard. In fact, it soon becomes apparent that she didn't much like him when, carrying his child, she was trapped into marrying him, which meant giving up her chance to get a college degree and her dreams of becoming a Labour M.P. She doesn't care deeply about her two sons, either—the children she feels she had to stay home to take care of all these years. She doesn't like Flora, the writer and TV interviewer whom she and Richard had known at Oxford and who suddenly appears at the hotel in Morocco where the Jourdelays are vacationing. And, although she is mildly attracted to the young man who is traveling with Flora, she doesn't like him enough to go to bed with him. Most of all, Elizabeth Jourdelay doesn't like herself.

In *A Woman of My Age* (Harper & Row, \$4.50) Nina Bawden, an English novelist who studied at Oxford herself, performs a clever dissection of the bored, neurotic middle-aged housewife who resents the world. Writing in the first person from Elizabeth's point of view limits the author's exploration of her other characters, but in flashbacks she fills out Elizabeth's background as that self-centered woman sees it—her eccentric maiden aunts; her frivolous, pathetic mother-in-law, and Richard, dependent on her yet always lacking in appreciation.

Elizabeth, who has a nasty habit of imagining what others are saying about her ("*Elizabeth is so compassionate and considerate, she thinks how other people might feel*"), is very, very sorry for herself. When she is taken up by a wealthy, older Englishman and his wife, who has a weak heart, and then discovers that Richard has slept with Flora, the result is predictable.

What is not so clear is why Miss Bawden wants to use her not inconsiderable talent to tell this story. She has nothing new to say, and has picked a particularly dreary group of characters through whom to say it. Although the novel seems aimed more at women than men, it pictures marriage, and indeed life itself, as a dismal business for a woman of any age. —ELIZABETH EASTON.

