

Dark Terror

"The Moon to Play With," by John Wiles (John Day, 247 pp. \$3.50), is a novel of childhood innocence and racial conflict in South Africa. Here it is reviewed by John Cook Wyllie, book editor of the Richmond News Leader and member of the staff of the University of Virginia.

By John Cook Wyllie

IT IS A far cry from the beloved country of Olive Schreiner to the South African society of John Wiles and his contemporaries. The mining of diamonds and gold on the southern end of the Dark Continent has made the problems of race and industrialization intruders in the karoo dust. Novels about Africa, inspired no doubt by the 1948 jackpot of Alan Paton, are now blossoming forth like veldt flowers.

As a novel, one of the latest of these, John Wiles's "The Moon to Play With," is an interesting failure. As prose it has poetic qualities that unhappily died out of the American novel with the passing of Tom Wolfe. These poetic qualities, furthermore, are peculiarly characteristic of the contemporary South African novel, so that Wiles seems in no sense an imitator of Paton, any more than one draught of cold clean water might seem like an imitation of another draught from the same clean cold spring.

Mr. Wiles has taken four or five short stories, two of them superb, one poor, one middling, and has tried to quilt them into a novel. This hasn't worked. The little black boy Pinto is the central character of the stories; and, in fact, the novel takes Pinto from tribal country birth to ritual city death. But the net result of putting the Pinto stories together is not to give them unity. The curtain has come down so often during the novel on what appear to be final scenes that by the end of the book the falling of the curtain lacks finality.

AD MIRERS of Alan Paton and William Faulkner will want to read "The Moon to Play With." Mr. Wiles lacks Paton's compassion for the white man, but he holds greater promise as a writer. He is less mature than Paton, more brittle, not so much of a Pollyanna. He has the same belief in the dignity of man that Faulkner has, and if there is no real sign in this first novel of the promise of its author's stepping eventually into the first rank of contemporary novelists, Mr. Wiles may at least console himself with the



—Landseer.

John Wiles—"poetic qualities."



—Polyfoto.

Kate Thompson—"restraint, good taste."

reflection that neither was there any such sign in Faulkner's first book.

Some Americans will want to know if the African Negro problem, as presented here and elsewhere, has anything to tell them about the American Negro problem. The fact is that in the South Africa of today the Negro problem most closely resembles the American Negro problem of our own carpetbagger days, and surely there is no one now alive who nourishes a nostalgia for the days of Reconstruction.

But the hearts of men change little. The cult of the superman will not only always be with us in some form, it will also always carry with it its sense of undeserved nobility, of lurking fear, of ineffaceable guilt. There is always in every country a little black boy Pinto, fleeing terrified down the corridors of the world.

Brightest Africa

"Great House," by Kate Thompson (Houghton Mifflin, 280 pp. \$3), is the story of a large and vital family living in South Africa.

By Cid Ricketts Sumner

AT A TIME when one is apt to think of South Africa as a place of turmoil, racial hatred, and seething unrest it is a bit startling to come upon a story of that region which, though full of exciting event, moves against an essentially unshaken background. We had not realized that families such as the Derains in their 1749 house were still pursuing their well-ordered lives in a world of benevolence and goodwill. Indeed, throughout the first pages one feels this surely must be a tale of another age. Save for the references to unfamiliar place names, trees and plants and animals, one might take it for a story of the antebellum South. The only suggestion of those deep sociological problems we know exist is no more than the faint rumble of thunder on a summer day. Every servant has a cheerful face except Henry the butler and he was so old he did not have to look happy. It is almost as if the Great House and its people have been miraculously preserved like the treasures stowed away for centuries in the camphor kists or chests in the attic, each one standing in pans of ant oil renewed every month.

Yet one cannot but believe in the existence of this family and its way of life, for Miss Thompson so evidently writes out of intimate knowledge and love of place and people, and she writes exceedingly well. Her vivid descriptions of the country are a delight. One feels the sunshine of South Africa, smells the scented bush which is like "a mixture of green willow, sandalwood, tallow wax, brown sugar and lime blossoms"; one sees the mountains back of Great House, the misty blue marshes of the Cape Flats, and beyond them the pale, silky-looking tents of the Helderberg mountains.

True to the family motto—"I grow green again"—the Derains for several hundred years have been spreading out over the countryside. At Great House live the judge, grave and gentle, leaving his sterner self at the courthouse, and his wife, Reniera, who is at "a queer age, not old, not young," full of wonderings, and shaken by her meeting with the young doctor. She finds "something so young an appealing and lovable about his

(Continued on page 28)

The Fulgent Age of Flux



"The Twenties," by Frederick J. Hoffman (Viking Press, 466 pp. \$6), is an interpretation of American writing during the decade after the First World War. Leon Edel, who reviews it here, is the author of "Henry James: The Untried Years" and visiting professor of English at Indiana University.

By Leon Edel

THE 1920s have become, in American memory, an incandescent period: prohibition on the one hand, a swift release from inhibition on the other—a general state of emotional intoxication upon which 1929 descended with all the finality of an asbestos curtain. In the journals of Henry Luce it has been depicted, indeed, as a "binge" of which the Depression was the hangover. But we know that it was much more than this and that the Wall Street view of the 1920s was not that of Montparnasse nor certainly of Sauk Center.

Frederick J. Hoffman has set out in "The Twenties" to try to understand this decade through its high pitch of literary creativity. By this means he has hoped to apply a corrective to the stereotype view of the era as ticker-tape, rum-runners, and the Charleston. With commendable industry he has devoted a decade to massive research, as if he were writing a full-fledged history of the time. He has read the documents in their inane abundance and talked with the survivors of the "lost generation"—still reasonably numerous. Then, surveying all this material, he has tried to understand the 1920s through certain of its characteristic works of art, seeing them as "representative anecdotes"—"The Sun Also Rises" as reflecting the war and postwar temper; "The Great Gatsby" as speaking for the "very young" of the era; "The Waste Land" as related to the decade's scientific thought; "The Professor's House" as expressing the "forms of its traditionalism," and "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" as catching the whole temper of the time.

Now this is a dubious procedure. It forces each work of art into being a function of one segment of the period, whereas each reflected the entire period. "The Waste Land" and "The Sun Also Rises" are in reality about the

same thing—the disillusion engendered by war, the loss of faith, the loss of a center; and if "The Professor's House" speaks for tradition, does not "The Waste Land"? Indeed, Miss Cather's novel proffers a critique of American life only a little less sharp than the Menckonian blasts against the "booboisie" or the satire of Sinclair Lewis in "Babbitt."

This book's serious shortcomings lie not only in its artificial and highly arbitrary frame, but in Mr. Hoffman's failure to find a center for the period of which he writes. I would suggest that he has not found it because of his distinct initial failure to understand the meaning of the 1914-1918 war. Indeed, in writing about it, he offers us what could very well be called a classic of understatement. The coming of 1914, he tells us, meant that France and Germany "resumed the quarrel of 1870." And the strong-

est words he can find to describe the effect of its coming on such writers as Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, or even Henry James, is that they were "deeply distressed." Now one does not have to read far to discover that "distress" is a cold euphemism for the acute sense this generation had that 1914 represented a horrible relapse into barbarism; it brought an overwhelming collapse of all the values built up during a period in which the Anglo-Saxon world had nourished an ideal of progress and enlightenment. To speak of the great stride of the German armies into Belgium in 1914 as a mere resumption of an old Franco-German quarrel is to overlook the entire meaning of World War I and the emotions it released.

FROM the present perspective it is clear that the 1920s were a search to



Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Cather, Eliot, Pound, Crane, Faulkner, Cummings, Joyce.