

The World in Words—from India to Erin

In the Fiction from Foreign Lands Other Peoples Are Introduced

ISRAELI ICONOCLAST: The world has a new problem, one often alluded to deviously, seldom confronted or defined. The problem: order cannot be maintained anywhere unless a great many things unworthy of respect continue to be respected, and large numbers of people, young people for the most part, have, unhappily, found this out. Perhaps the secret should have been better kept. In any case, the knowledge that things hitherto taken as serious are really quite nonsensical has spread like a contagion. What is to be done?

The young Israeli novelist Yoram Kaniuk has treated this problem in his first novel, *"The Acrophile"* (Atheneum, \$3.50), and made of it a personal fantasy that is touching, diverting, comical, even wise, and, to this reader at least, irresistible.

The hero of *"The Acrophile"* tells his story in snatches of memory; in monologues that are interrupted by other characters (who often borrow his rhetoric and continue his fantasy); in absurd and sometimes unbelievable encounters with strangers; in dreams, proverbs, meditations, jests. There is a total disregard for normal narrative order in this book and the beginning of the story is much closer to the end than is the middle. Kaniuk has made a game of what is silly in serious novels and thus found a form for his own troubled probing into the larger question: how can what was once the seri-

ousness of life seem to be so silly? And what are you to do when you have found out that it is? How do you get married, go to your mother-in-law's funeral, fight properly with your wife, pursue a scholarly project, rise to a high academic post, or even eat a meal in a Lebanese restaurant? How are any of these far from abnormal activities possible to a person who has not unlearned to recognize nonsense when he comes across it? Kaniuk's hero has not unlearned, and never will unlearn, that nonsense is nonsense no matter how useful it may be not to regard it so. Now I believe there are a great many young people all over the world who are in this very difficulty, and I think that Kaniuk's hero speaks for them.

To have seen through society means to have seen through one's own parents. Kaniuk's hero makes a touching effort to overcome his loss of respect for those who brought him into the world by exalting his grandmother and even mythologizing her, so that he is almost ready to credit her own claim to have lived 260 years. He says he wants his body to be a "tall monument" to her memory.

Brilliant as a whole, the novel is occasionally imperfect. I think, too, that it may owe something to Camus's first novel, *"The Stranger"*; especially, I was struck by the incident in which the hero of *"The Acrophile"* kills an Arab boy as a result of wanting to save

the boy's life. And when in Kaniuk's book the university dean asks the protagonist to explain why he, now a renowned scholar, has chosen to sell ice-cream cones on the university campus, the violent retort given reminded me of the famous scene in Sartre's novel *"Nausea"* when the protagonist of that book calls the framed figures in the gallery of portraits "bastards."

I hope, though, that the references to Sartre and Camus will not give the impression that *"The Acrophile"* is even slightly pretentious, or the least bit solemn, for it is not. This book, translated by Zeva Shapiro, is light and delightful from beginning to end. There is sadness in it, to be sure, but, as the author remarks, sadness often relieves us from being sad. In a quick, casual, carefree way the novel touches on what is certainly one of the real problems of our time, which the big, thoughtful, ponderous novels now being turned out never seem to get to: what has mattered much to most people now matters to many less than nothing.

—LIONEL ABEL.

IRISH ANTAGONISTS: Una Troy's whimsical story of two Irish towns, obsessed with the past, of the bitter feud that inflamed them and threatened to engulf the whole countryside, begins as a folk tale that might have been sung to the tune of "Kilkenny Cats";

*From South Africa, France,
Ireland, India and from
Israel come the novelists who
bring an international
flavor to fiction*



From South Africa: David Lytton.



From France: Roger Vailland.

but the author, following the cumulative pattern of "The House That Jack Built," weaves into "The Other End of the Bridge" (Dutton, \$3.50) a series of complications in a swelling crescendo.

The feud, which forms the dream-play of the rival communities, is kept in constant tension by a number of eccentric individuals, with the towns' respective mayors in the van. It reaches its apex when the brand-new Mercedes-Benz belonging to the son of the mayor of Corkbeg and the dilapidated Jaguar driven by the son of the mayor of Waterville crash in the center of the bridge, followed by a glorious free-for-all between the partisans of both sides. And by next evening the Corkbeg mayor's thirteen-year-old daughter, an Irish Juliet, has fallen in love with the driver of the battered Jaguar. As in the development of a fugue, Miss Troy builds up her climax, showing how the feud invaded every family and affected young and old alike.

Underlying the action, she has set in counterpoint the deeper theme of genuine rebellion against a partitioned Ireland, an attitude personified in the character of the postal clerk, Dennis, a Nationalist revolutionary. The voice for the author's philosophy is Mr. Blaney, a madman known as the "Apostle," who, like a *genius loci*, haunts the bridge of discord, dressed in black, bowler-hatted, and waving a red umbrella. In the end Mr. Blaney becomes, if not the *deus ex machina*, the expiatory victim; the moral of the tale is summed up in his words: "The dream is vanished forever, Dennis. Those who dreamt it died for it, and those that were left to win had no dream to help them. Is it not strange that so few realize that dreams are essential for realities?"

This artfully constructed fantasy, with its rich overtones of pathos and

humor, evokes out of the Ireland of today an Ireland that has all but vanished.

—WALTER STARKIE.

SOUTH AFRICAN GANGSTER: A Cape Colored man who was fathered by a white Boer predikant (priest) of the Dutch Reformed Church is the protagonist of David Lytton's "The Goddam White Man" (Simon & Schuster, \$3.50). The Boer preacher sowed his seed and went his way, leaving the black woman and her bastard child, Johannes, on that arid stretch of semi-desert coastal land known as the Cape Flats. These people (mainly of mixed bloods) live in animal conditions that stunt everything. There Johannes's mother dies of snakebite, and he drifts like a little stray dog from one stunted family to another until he ends up in Cape Town's slum area with a slightly better-off Colored family, who give him a chance at a smattering of schooling.

His schooling is just enough to make him decide that the scheme of things in South Africa is all wrong and that the only way a Colored man can get ahead there is by going in for crime. At the story's end he has apparently proved his point that the whites are so stupid that all any smart Colored man has to do is organize a successful criminal gang in order to escape the economic and social consequences of the South African racial horror.

As someone who grew up in the kind of setting Mr. Lytton writes about, I frankly found nothing to admire in his novel. As a piece of social reporting it is superficial in the extreme. The ugliness is a surface ugliness that neither shocks nor horrifies in the way good social reportage does. Instead, one is left with a feeling of depression that so much time and energy have been devoted to an almost pointless depiction of ugliness for its own sake.

And as a piece of creative fiction

the book is even more unsatisfactory. Johannes is flat and unreal, compelling no sense of involvement. It is possible that an Alan Paton or a Laurens van der Post or even one of the younger South African Negro novelists like Ezekiel Mphahlele could have developed the story so as to shed a meaningful light on the human tragedy inherent in the South African situation; in the hands of Mr. Lytton the story itself is the tragedy. A pointless compendium of hate, violence, sordid sex, it is utterly lacking in that tender and creative compassion which has been the hallmark of the best writing out of South Africa in recent years.

—PETER ABRAHAM.

INDIAN HOST: Once I met a Hindi writer, who was struggling to translate a story by William Faulkner. "His people," he sadly complained, "vital in English, are wooden in Hindi." By this simple sentence he had penetrated the problem of all writers who have to translate the feelings of one culture with words of another.

R. K. Narayan has no equal among the Indian novelists writing in English. While his sense of this language is not particularly refined, he nevertheless manages by a miracle of perception and choice of detail to convey the Indian without a single false feeling or gesture. It is true Rudyard Kipling in "Kim" and in his scores of stories, and E. M. Forster in two of his books, have managed to catch the essence of India, but then they were both Englishmen whose major focus was Anglo-India, a twilight zone that enclosed both the natives and the masters. The India Mr. Narayan deals with is of ages and sages. It breaks the bounds of a cultural experience—the contact with the British. It overflows until all her people, in whatever occupation, are engulfed in the novelist's ink.

"The Man-Eater of Malgudi" (Viking,



From Ireland: Una Troy.



From India: R. K. Narayan.



From Israel: Yoram Kaniuk.