



her passion for improvement she cannot permit the earth to become too cluttered with her discarded experiments.

Thoreau: He who has not learned all that is really important by the time he is twenty will never learn it. Even I forgot much that I had known very well in my youth.

Shaw: You were merely putting away childish things and had not the wit to know that dreams are well exchanged for realities.

Thoreau: And do you really think that you really know what the most important realities really are? From all you have said so far I doubt that you do.

Shaw: I know that growth and change are real. I know that neither human life nor human society is what it will become. As Nietzsche—another of Life's unsuccessful attempts to create me—proclaimed, "Man is something which must be surpassed."

Thoreau: If man could once understand the unspeakable truth about himself and the equally unspeakable truth about the world of nature in which he lives then there would be no need for him to surpass either himself or it.

Shaw: All my doubts are resolved! Only in Hell could a man utter such blasphemies against the Holy Ghost—an old name for the Life Force—and not be incontinently blasted. But I solemnly warn the Prince of Darkness that I have no intention of spending Eternity in happiness and contentment. I will not become a romantic lover or a musical amateur. Even in the infernal regions there must be a borough council in need of a clerk. And if this Choctaw here is a typical specimen of the citizenry, then the affairs of hell must be in a hellish state. (He rushes vigorously off left to a flourish of trombones. Thoreau remains exactly where he was—on a pumpkin.)

Fiction. Thanks to William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, Margaret Mitchell, and scores of other novelists less celebrated, the mores of the Southern town are familiar to readers all over the world. It is not easy for a new writer to find something to say about them that has not been said often before or a fresh way to say it; but at least Charles Mills competently chronicles a hundred years of a small Georgia town in "The Alexandrians" (below), an outstanding novel in a season like the present when luster is so lacking. . . . The many Americans who have been discovering another South—that of Africa—through the novels of Alan Paton, Elizabeth Charlotte Webster, Doris Lessing, and Daphne Rooke will be pleased to listen to another gifted voice from that continent, Naline Gordimer, author of "The Soft Voice of the Serpent" (page 22). . . . The hero of J. R. Ullman's "Windom's Way" (page 23) may remind many of the Burma surgeon, Dr. Gordon Seagraves.

Silent Senses of the South

THE ALEXANDRIANS. By Charles Mills. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 675 pp. \$4.

By HARVEY CURTIS WEBSTER

NOT many recent novels about the South have escaped the odor of magnolia and Scarlet O'Hara as successfully as Charles Mills's chronicle of a small Georgia town between 1839 and 1939. Alexandria's women are not particularly glamorous and her men are more excited by morals and money than by mint juleps. The "good old darkies" are rarely in evidence and, though there are sections labeled 1861, 1914, and 1939, the wars that mark these dates are not as notable as the fact that the town goes on much as usual. In other words, "The Alexandrians" presents the major rather than the dramatic concerns of a small Southern town.

Like that of most communities, Alexandria's history centers about the most uncommon of its common people. There is Francis Stewart, who kills John McNeill in a duel, conceals it, and becomes a success; Bruce Warren, whose twentieth-century ancestor tries to unite the settlers' descendants in a revolt against the Yankee, Hartman, who has come to control the town's business. Most importantly there is Anna Anderson Redding, daughter of the most admirable of the founders, the most integral preserver of the community original standards, and still alive when the town celebrates its centenary.

Like the ordinary citizens of Alexandria, these extraordinary ones are mostly concerned with the usual affairs that make up most lives. Of course unusual events occur: the duel

already mentioned, rather frequent adulteries, an unusual quantity of suicides. But mainly it is business, getting adjusted to natural deaths, deciding what is and isn't honorable, discovering what religion best adjusts you to the universe, that "The Alexandrians" emphasizes. The multiplicity of dreamers, gossipers, close business men, plain-speaking and reticent women, Southerners who have descended a long way from their original code of honor-above-money and those who have kept the faith, make one feel this small town is not so small after all.

Indeed, that is the trouble with this honest and unpretentious novel. Patiently read, it tells a great deal more about what the South was really like than "Gone with the Wind" and it deserves praise for not emphasizing events that read well and represent inaccurately. But there are too many characters too little in focus, as in a graduation picture of a high school class you never knew. Emotional identification is rarely possible.

Yet it is good to read a novel of such measured realism. Anna Anderson Redding, her grandson John, who continues her tradition of high probity, the acquisitive, unhappily adjusted Hartman, Miss Volly who plays Bach and Beethoven and fools fools, Annie who is beautiful and cold and unhappy, the bookseller who bought the books he hadn't read rather than those that would sell—these are the stuff small towns are made of. If "The Alexandrians," like most books of the season, can make little claim to greatness, it can claim legitimately that it illuminates our understanding of both the South and the nature of small communities everywhere.

African Smiles

THE SOFT VOICE OF THE SERPENT. By Nadine Gordimer. New York: Simon & Schuster. 244 pp. \$3.50.

By JOHN BARKHAM

TO THE chorus of eloquent voices emerging from South Africa, add a new one, that of Nadine Gordimer. It is a fast growing chorus. Paton, Lessing, Rooke, Van der Post, and now Gordimer—until a few years ago none of these names was known here; but they have begun to speak and their voice is heard in the land. They will be heard from again, especially Nadine Gordimer.

This flowering of talent in a remote outpost of civilization is, of course, no accident. South African literature, both English and Afrikaans, is reacting impressively to two tremendous stimuli. Afrikaans writing (unknown outside South Africa) proudly and poetically reflects the Afrikaner's reconquest of his native land. And the English writers mirror their helpless compassion for the oppressed and their anxiety over the strife which rends their beloved country. To this latter group belongs Miss Gordimer.

Readers who seek in these score or so tales any direct reflection of the headlines will not find them there. Miss Gordimer is a subtle writer who makes her points delicately and obliquely. A beach interlude with an Indian fisherman, as in "The Catch," will indirectly tell you as much about the color bar in South Africa as any editorial. A young couple (white, of course) grow to admire an Indian fisherman who has landed a big fish. Driving into the city later, they offer him a lift. The presence of other white passengers suddenly makes them con-



Nadine Gordimer—"a subtle writer."

scious of his color—and therefore of his "inferiority."

But most of these stories are not, even remotely concerned with headline types or affairs; rather with the happiness and disappointments of daily living. Anyone who has lived in South Africa, as this reviewer has done, will recognize the accuracy of Miss Gordimer's types, the validity of her situations, and the acuteness of her perception. This is South Africa as it really is, not as it is painted for this purpose or that.

Easily the best story in the book is "A Watcher of the Dead," an account of a family death and its attendant ceremony that is a marvel of selective detail and artistic sensibility. But each of these tales will strike its own chord of significance. Some readers may see in the agonized penal official of "Another Part of the Sky" a figure not unlike that of Alan Paton, who, as head of the Diepkloof Reformatory, must in the past have found himself in situations just like this. Others will undoubtedly admire the author's apt use of symbolism, as in her juxtaposition of a legless locust with a legless man. (The insect also had wings.)

Not all of Miss Gordimer's stories come off, but her batting average is high. "The Defeated" might have been a poignant study of the unbridgeable gap between the first two generations of immigrant Jews, but the point is blunted by the over-coolness of the narrative style. Nor is the author sufficiently emotional in handling the incipient love affair that climaxes "The Hour and the Years."

But these are minor blemishes in what amounts to an unusually impressive debut. Miss Gordimer has elected to make herself known to the American public through a medium at once demanding and ungrateful. She comes through triumphantly. South Africa has a new and exciting interpreter.

Manic Gloom

WISE BLOOD. By Flannery O'Connor. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. 232 pp. \$3.

By OLIVER LAFARGE

THE trick of achieving satire and humor through turning values inside out and describing the most outrageous behavior and ideas with complete calmness is not as easy as one would think. Grotesques, to hold interest, must be extra convincing, and there is danger that outrageousness will turn into mere sordidness. Also, a continuous succession of bizarre actions can become as dull as any other form of repetition.

Edgar Mittelholzer pulled the trick off remarkably well in "Shadows Move Among Them." He has there accepted behavior that ordinarily one would violently reject; yet he, with his fine sense of humor, occasionally failed.

Miss O'Connor has taken up this device with a vengeance. Her story is built around a fanatic who believes that there is no Christ, no redemption, and no soul, and who goes about preaching this doctrine with complete dedication. There are possibilities in the idea, but they are not realized, for one reason, because the individual is so repulsive that one cannot become interested in him.

This individual, "Haze," is surrounded by a supporting cast that ranges from imbecility to viciousness. The result is inevitably a gloomy tale. The author tries to lighten it with humor, but unfortunately her idea of humor is almost exclusively variations on the pratfall. If a character carries an umbrella, the umbrella collapses; if he walks in the aisle of a train, he falls over someone.

Neither satire nor humor is achieved. Perhaps it was only the blurb-writer's idea that it was intended. Perhaps Miss Flannery's aim was a savage and bitter study of the nethermost depths of a small town, with special reference to the viciousness of itinerant preachers. Savage she certainly manages to be.

Two incidents involving policemen indicate the nature of the whole book. In one, a policeman learns that Haze has no driver's license, so he whimsically pushes Haze's jalopy over a cliff. Later, when Haze is blind, deathly ill, and, as far as I can make out, completely insane, he disappears in a storm and an alarm is sent out for him. Two policemen find him in a ditch, barely alive, so one of them clubs him over the head, killing him. At least this policeman does the reader the service of terminating a story which has long since become sheer monotony.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT No. 466

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 466 will be found in the next issue.

LDLFAGNBCK MCOCRQC BH

GPOLC SRF TPKCBSBELCG.

—GPEBGMH.

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 465
One self-approving hour whole
years outweighs of stupid starers
and loud huzzas.

—A. POPE.