

"...to Whom So Much Was Owed"

OVER TO YOU. By Roald Dahl. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. 1946. 182 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by MICHAEL STRAIGHT

IN literature, the air crews of the war are their own worst adversaries. They are the few to whom so much was owed by so many. They spoke their own language, lived their own lives, rejecting with scorn and laughter the regimentation and pomposity of the West Point officers whom they called "the trade school boys." They drew their own caricatures: the hot pilots of the AAF with their squashed-in flighter caps; the R.A.F. "skippers" and their "kites." They were democratic and easy going. They outraged middle-class morals and drove their C. O.'s to despair. They were left in freedom because they were so crucial in wartime. Where they came and went they left the most unforgettable impression of the war. They were obvious, treacherous copy.

A foundation of veneration for heroism was built around them, and on it was raised the gingerbread of maudlin romanticism. The air crews themselves reacted against this distortion. In their service journals they recorded painstakingly and without literary style their experiences in combat. In a few instances fliers were able to draw underlying generalizations from these experiences and to give to them literary value. H. E. Bates wrote of the lives of the bomber crews in England: very beautifully, but from the ground forces point of view. In the same spirit, in "Over to You," Roald Dahl, who was a wing commander in the R.A.F., has written of the quite different lives of fighter pilots, from the point of view of the pilots themselves. In contrast to Bates, these stories lack finish and simplicity, but they are more intense and conceived on a larger scale.

Dahl saw many fragments of combat and his stories are fragments. He writes almost entirely of the fighter pilots and only in a few of these stories does he try to speak for the fighter pilots as a group. One of these, "Katina," is a restrained and moving account of the retreat from Greece. Another, "Madame Rosette," is a pure folk story. It describes life in a squadron, and the squadron mascot—in this case a scorpion, with an unmentionable name, that trained on marmalade and died peacefully after winning forty-two inter-squadron fights. It describes a pub brawl by three pilots ending in a raid on a brothel and the rescue of the girls



—Casson

Roald Dahl "is an author of great promise and he has written a memorable book."

that will bring back memories of similar evenings to every pilot.

Most of Dahl's stories deal with fantasy, legend, and death. A pilot parachutes down in France and is drowned in the pond he lands in by his German adversary. His spirit watches his body being drowned with pleasure. A pilot loses his dog, but acts as if the dog were with him. A pilot listens to the sounds of his roommate undressing and going to bed, hours after he has been killed. A fighter pilot with fuel for an hour and a half lands a day later, convinced that he has been gone for no

more than an hour. He sees another pilot killed and remembers flying through a white cloud to a fier's paradise where he tried to land beside the planes of dead pilots and was unable to. Soon after his plane is hit on a mission. As he goes down, the other pilots hear him on the radio: "I'm a lucky bastard," he was saying, "a lucky, lucky bastard."

Most of the reviewers of "Over to You" have rejected these stories as young - man - with - an - imagination. Most readers may fail to understand them. But Dahl is not writing entirely from imagination. He is trying hard, even here, to write for the pilots.

Many groups suffered as terribly as the air crews in the war. But no group of men were forced for as long and as steadily, beyond the limits of human endurance. In exhaustion, and faced almost inescapably by death, some pilots came, as a last measure of defense, to a sense of apartness from life and an intimacy with death. Medical officers looked for and feared this sense. They called it "combat fatigue." They tried to save the men whom it possessed by grounding them. They understood that they could never analyze or describe it. Description remained for the writer. When to this sense is added, as in Dahl's case, a vivid imagination, startling images arise, and are real.

Sometimes he comes perilously close to exchanging content for dramatic effect; yet Dahl is an author of great promise and he has written a fine and memorable book in "Over to You."

Roger and Out.

Off-Tackle Play

By Sgt. Hargis Westerfield

THE Lieutenant called the next play
Around right tackle; the tall
Slav sighted his BAR
Through the fork of a tree; the cumbrous
Great rifle clattered; an automatic
Wind blew overhead; Tom grasped
His grenades; Pablo followed
Around right tackle; they made ten yards,
Dropped flat in the grass; Tom's first grenade
Fell short, under the black slot
Of the pill-box; three inches over
His shoulder, a counter-blast
Rattled dead branches down on his helmet;
A Jap grenade rang in his ears; Pablo's carbine
Crackled; Tom's second grenade
Landed high on the bunker's roof.
The BAR chattered; the counter-blast
Silenced the tall Slav; Tom ricocheted
A rifle clip point-blank into the maw
Of blackness; Pablo passed a third grenade.
Tom lobbed it high and true: a blue flame
And a sputter on the pill-box sill:
No more counter-blast, only lazy lifting smoke,
A last low groan. Thus was a pill-box
Won by a play through right-tackle, a short pass
Over the line; a pill-box won by men
Trained for war on a high-school football team.

Variation On An Old Theme

HER HUSBAND'S HOUSE. By Catherine Pomeroy Stewart. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1946. 314 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by AMY LOVEMAN

HERE is a novel on a theme which was in high favor at the end of the last century—international marriages — but written with a frankness of speech and a timeliness of incident which make it very much of the present. It is the story of the union of an American woman and a patrician and wealthy Italian, set against the background of Fascist Italy, a story in which the stresses are both personal and nationalistic, and in which the author has deftly woven the general inquietude and confusion of the period into the relationship between her main characters. It is a well-written, thoughtful, and consistently interesting tale, and one whose personalities live with the reader after the book has been closed.

"Her Husband's House" is set in part in Rome, in part on the country estate in Calabria of Don Alessandro Cavaliere, where his American-born wife has come to love—even when she still laughs at—the ways of the simple people who are her neighbors and servants. The international marriage, made for love and not, as so often, for money or title, has proved a happy one and easily able to surmount the differences of experience and tradition of its principals. But the serene tenor of its way is interrupted, and eventually disrupted, when the American wife takes into her home and her heart a peasant waif whose beauty and neglected condition make an irresistible appeal to her.

Alessandro, wiser in the ways of his people than Lucy, has warned his wife that adoption of the child will not be countenanced by the Italian folk around them, and has persuaded her to take the girl as an indentured servant rather than as her child. Pia is a completely amoral person whose young past has been such as to strip her of the conventional outlook and restraints which are native to a home such as she has now entered. By the peasantry of the neighborhood she is regarded as a witch, and by the son of her foster parents, as she grows older, as a woman to be desired as a wife.

She is a constant irritant between husband and wife, whose growing discord is rendered the greater by

the son's feeling for Pia and his hatred for his father, and by the divergence of feeling of husband and



wife on national policies as Italy advances toward the war.

Miss Stewart builds up her story carefully. She has understanding and

concern, insight into the influences which govern conduct, and skill enough to give her story a happy ending without making the latter seem forced or gratuitous. She brings both scene and personalities to life, and makes credible and interesting the growing discord between two persons who are fundamentally alike in purposes and ideals. And she has succeeded in creating characters sharply differentiated in their national traits as well as in their ideological and in their psychological reactions.

The story is uneven, and at times confusing — as indeed the times it depicts are confusing—but it has warmth, and it has freshness and color.

While in no sense a remarkable novel, it is one that stands out above the run of current fiction.

Boy Meets Girls

WINTER MEETING. By Ethel Vance. Boston: Little, Brown and Co. 1946. 255 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GRACE FRANK

MISS VANCE'S novel begins brilliantly and for the most part maintains throughout a high level of subtlety in its understanding of human behavior. Ethel Vance—as she showed in "Escape" and in "The Bitter Tea of General Yen," written under her own name, Grace Zaring Stone—possesses not only urbanity and a sense of humor, but a special appreciation of the delicate overtones resulting from the impact of widely divergent individuals upon one another.

Here she is concerned with Slick Novak, winner of the Congressional Medal, who is unable to play his role of hero because he is living in a private hell. Novak's hurt derives in part from his experiences at home and during the war, in greater part from a religious background (he is a Catholic) that makes him interpret some of those experiences as punishment for his sins. To escape from his lost faith in himself he drinks too much or takes refuge in the insolence and cynicism of a tough guy.

We see this boy for the most part through the eyes of a woman who on the surface is everything that he is not. Novak tells her that he has no ancestors, since his forbears came to America after '48 to fill a need for cheap labor, and this makes them just plain immigrants. Susan's New England antecedents include strains reminiscent of the Edwardses and the Jukes, and indeed her early life was

nearly wrecked by this combination. When she meets Novak she is living immaculately in an ivory tower, writing poetry, trying to forget. Urbane and perceptive, virginal and fastidious, she nevertheless yields to the boy, to his need of her, to his peculiar, almost priestly, gift of divination, to her own need of him. And in this yielding there is for both of them something of tragedy, something of a cleansing release.

There are other characters in the book, notably Stacy, a sophisticate who cultivates his friends as he does his dahlias, who looks like any forgotten Vice-President of the United States, and who leaves behind him "a fusty, meretricious feeling." There is also Peggy, his very pretty secretary, the personification of sex, who "rears like a cobra in search of its mate" when she first sees Slick Novak.

All these people and many more who enter the story are provocatively presented in terms of each other as well as themselves, and every contact between them strikes sparks. Mrs. Stone has made the relation between Susan and Novak as well as their individual problems a matter of deep concern to the reader. She is also particularly successful in catching the flavor of differing speech-habits and in making them potent with suggestion. If the love story seems somewhat bloodless at times and if one or two of the incidents near the end have the artificiality of a contrived plot, nevertheless the novel as a whole gives the impression of ultimate validity and is certain to delight those who value grace, wit, and distinction of thought.