

## OTHER NEW FICTION

## I am Yours

VERNON SCANNELL

**Love and Work** by REYNOLDS PRICE *Chatto* 25s**As Towns with Fire** by ANTHONY C. WEST *MacGibbon & Kee* 36s**Seven Foot with a Wooden Leg** by PETER KING *Gollancz* 30s**Guzman, Go Home** by ALAN SILLITOE *Macmillan* 30s**The Wild Cherry Tree** by H. E. BATES *Joseph* 25s

In *Love and Work* Reynolds Price has set out to examine the familiar proposition of lovers: 'I am yours and you are mine'. He exposes the thread of necessary self-deception on which the words are strung, and then he goes on to show the continuity and interdependence of life and death, of selfishness and charity, and to show that love cannot be sustained without work and that work is given point and direction by love. Price's prose is a delicately fashioned but steely instrument, sharp enough to cut through the fatty tissue of appearance and falsehood to the nerve and bone of truth; time and energy are not wasted by graceful or vigorous flourishes in the air, with the result that the language reverberates in the imagination in a way that rhapsodic, 'poetic' writing rarely, if ever, manages to do. The story is, on the surface, simple, limited almost claustrophobically in time and place: Thomas Eborn, a writer and university teacher, experiences in the space of four days the death of his guiltily loved mother, the death of a young stranger killed in a road accident, and the threatened death of his own creativity and of his ill-nourished marriage. The weakness of the novel lies in the preciosity of the main characters, with their unrelenting self-absorption and tiresomely tireless introspection; and I simply don't believe that anyone, even a Professor of English in an American university, would quote to himself a long and apposite extract from the *Odyssey* when in the throes of extreme mental and spiritual anguish. *Love and Work* shows a definite advance in subtlety and depth on the earlier novels, *A Long and Happy Life* and *A Generous Man*, but it is a pity that its intelligent seriousness should at times thicken into weighty solemnity.

Anthony C. West's enormous novel (it must be easily five times the length of *Love and Work*) is an ambitious attempt to record the years of the Second World War as experienced by a young Ulster poet, Christopher MacMannan, who hates war but eventually joins the RAF and flies with a Pathfinder Squadron; it is not 'a lonely impulse of delight' which drives this Irish airman into the clouds but something much more ambiguous and never clearly defined. West has obviously put a lot of work and probably a lot of love into his novel but, for me, it has been wasted effort. His prose is flushed and corpulent, a dithyrambic adjectival flubber that, more often than not, obscures what it is meant to illumine; and the dialogue might be called stagey except that it would be difficult to imagine any actor agreeing to say lines like 'We stretch our various surrenders over the anonymous

years . . . ' or 'The unending armageddon of the bed.' As for the narrative, it somehow reduces the huge historical events to something flatter and duller than old newsreels, and Christopher's long series of copulations are interesting only in that he shows an unusual preference for middle-aged ladies, though, since he is a poet, every woman he encounters, whatever her age, shape and station, shows more than willing.

David, the main character in Peter King's first novel, *Seven Foot with a Wooden Leg*, does pretty well for crumpet, too, though he finally gets the brush-off from a classy bird called Claire who joins him at the bookbinder's where he works but turns out to be there, not as an honest labourer, but to observe conditions for the university thesis she is working on. We are supposed to be in working-class Cardiff but it is much more like Sillitoe country, with little that is locally identifiable about it. Very early in the book we get the familiar evocation of the bad old days viewed with nostalgia and horrified affection: the flea-pit, fish and chips, Gran and the ruined brick-works where innocence began to crumble in the dust. It could be argued that all provincial cities are much alike, but my confidence was shaken by a scene where David stands on a hill looking down at the rows of little houses and TV masts: he shouts, 'Terrace houses . . . -tion!' I could just see Albert Finney or Tom Courtenay in the part. The realism of the book is filtered through fiction and film, but Peter King has made a lively debut which is often funny and always good-natured, and the relationship between David and his parents is observed with an accuracy that the more knockabout stuff lacks.

So, into Sillitoe country proper with a new collection of stories, *Guzman, Go Home*, though the title story, the best in the book, is in fact set in Spain where a fugitive Nazi war criminal, portrayed with exact but not unsympathetic clarity and considerable wit, runs a small garage and waits for his inevitable nemesis. I have always found Sillitoe's short stories preferable to his novels: he is one of those rather rare prose writers who finds the form not only congenial but positively helpful in imposing a necessity for compression that gets rid of the wordiness that has often put too much weight on his novels. Another common fault of the novels, that awful sense of strain, the thick veins standing out on the surface of the writing, sometimes obtrudes in the new stories, and he still splatters the narrative with clumsily contrived metaphors.

Nothing could differ more from *Guzman, Go Home* than H. E. Bates's new collection of short stories. There are no knotty veins on the surface of the prose here, but neither is there any sense of there being solid bone and muscle underneath. The language is mellifluous and it is spread with a great deal of skill, but the sweetness soon begins to cloy. Most of the stories reckon to deal with frustrated passion, loneliness and the killing lack of the capacity for loving, but they fail to set up the least frisson of sympathetic response. Lovers are separated by circumstance or their real or imagined inadequacies; defeat and betrayal are everywhere, yet the stories slide down and are digested effortlessly. They leave behind a quite pleasant, slightly scented flavour but nothing else at all. It is a very smooth, professional performance and it would be foolish to deny its cleverness but, for my money, almost any one of Sillitoe's stories is worth more than all ten of Bates's confections.