

The central theme of Sir John Myres' book is the system followed by Herodotus in arranging his material. The view that Herodotus was an unreliable gossip-monger has long since been discarded. The view that he was at any rate wildly discursive has persisted. This latter opinion Sir John disposes of neatly by pointing out that many of the allegedly discursive passages would in a modern work have been relegated to footnotes and appendices for which the literary apparatus of the fifth century B.C. did not provide. On the contrary, he puts forward the theory that the whole work is most carefully written according to an intricate principle to which he gives the name "pedimental composition." To follow this principle, the writer must arrange the episodes he wishes to recount on either side of a central climax, instead of proceeding from event to event in chronological order. Sir John examines its application by Herodotus and finds that the *Histories* do in fact consist of a series of such central climaxes or triptychs, observing that the "pedimental structure" of the book has eluded literary critics probably because the literary skill of Herodotus "has so completely united the substance of history with its form."

There is a good deal more in the way of comment on Herodotus which is as fresh and as fascinating as any of Sir John's lectures at Oxford. He has found passages in which iambic rhythm is frequent; there is an interesting section on the philosophy of Herodotus, a most valuable chapter on the critics of Herodotus, and an illuminating note on map making in the fifth century. About half the book is given up to the discussion of some of the principal topics of the *Histories* such as early Lydia, the history of Samos, and the battles of the Persian war, illustrated by plans based on those of the Greek general staff. After a lifetime given up to Ancient History and the study of the classical background on the spot (to say nothing of his experiences in one of H.M. ships during World War I), nobody could be better equipped than Sir John to give us the definitive commentary on Herodotus. If we are not to get this from him, *Herodotus Father of History* is certainly the next best thing.

BICKHAM SWEET-ESCOTT.

## New Novels

**A Kid for Two Farthings.** By Wolf Mankowitz. (Andre Deutsch. 7s. 6d.)

**The Nature of Love.** By H. E. Bates. (Michael Joseph. 10s. 6d.)

**A Ring for Luck.** By John Pudney. (Michael Joseph. 12s. 6d.)

**The Alien Sky.** By Paul Scott. (Eyre & Spottiswoode. 12s. 6d.)

THE reviewer hopes for an interesting book once every few months; four in one week destroy his carefully constructed attitudes; and worse, keep him awake at night doing the one thing that worries him: reading.

*A Kid for Two Farthings* is Mr. Mankowitz's second short novel. His first, *Make Me an Offer*, was exciting enough to stir the air in the offices of the most respectable weeklies. Now, he hasn't (thank God) done it again—in terms of supremely confident insolence—no, he's done something new: he's gone gentle. He's declared himself unafraid of sentiment; he's written about an East End childhood with the cocky, unselfconscious humility of an East End child. Where his first book was all winks and wisecracks, a brittle shell over a vulnerable core, his second is simpler—and smiles, where the other grinned. It tells the story of Joe who lives in Fashion Street with his mother, with Mr. Kandinsky the trousers-maker and his assistant Shmule, an embryonic wrestling champion known in the game as "Hammer," and with Africana, Joe's unicorn. There is nothing more to the story than the arrival and departure of Africana. And inside the carefully limited confines of his (overtly) Jewish-folk-story mechanism the characters move surely, confident of their places. There is no straining for effect; nor, more importantly, is there any withdrawal. Weight for age, this is a magnificent performance. Mr. Mankowitz as a two-year-old showed great promise; *A Kid for Two Farthings* demonstrates beyond doubt that he is a potential classic winner. Potential? Yes, the qualification remains; for the full size, the full breadth and depth of chest need to come yet.

Where he openly welcomes and weaves feeling, Mr. Bates rebuffs it. The three long-short-stories that go to make up *The Nature of Love* are so disparate in weight, while being identical in texture, that they should be dealt with separately. After all, Mr. Bates is one of our most able prose technicians. I have yet to read a single page of his post-war writing that is not admirably achieved. And yet?

*Dulcima*, the first story, is quite the best. Hardysque the blurb says; let's say ourselves (unfairly but in better taste adjectivally) a cross between Stella Gibbons and Simenon. Visually, it is far stronger than the others. Here too, the dry-mouthed, pounding

moment of passion is realised with brilliant economy and force. Ugly Dulcima, greedy for acceptance and surprised by her own power to arouse desire, takes her thick body into miserly Mr. Parker's bed, gives her awakened heart to a gamekeeper and—by playing one against the other to get the maximum of long-craved satisfaction—breeds violent death. Sordid, under-written, *Dulcima* has the real, gritty taste of suburbanised country living in it. Judged on this alone Mr. Bates is moving towards Hardy in all truth, blurb or no blurb; but—

But *The Grass God* picks up every weakness of *Dulcima* and waves them, like a—what would be the word?—a laundry of dirty handkerchiefs. Full of Lawrencian echoes, the story traces the rise and fall of a love affair between a virile temporary dweller on the land and a decadent land-owner. Echoes? A white peacock struts through the weed-filled shrubbery; the woman yearns towards the sun "her body going deeper brown, a pure corn-colour"; the grass her pale homburg-hatted lover worships is a god with roots; and—the most telling echo, perhaps—the woman

"stood close to him, so that her body almost touched him threading a pink-white bottle-brush flower into his buttonhole."

In *Lady Chatterley* you remember the threading—at an equally important moment in the character development—was significantly lower down. Here one knows from the first page or two that the destructive element, clearly apparent in *Dulcima* but softened there by an internal awakening to beauty, will win brutally and finally. The retreat from feeling becomes a rout.

In *The Delicate Nature* the rout becomes a farce, worthy of a Bluntschli. This is no more than warmed-up Maugham, highly competent, as is everything that Mr. Bates does, but yesterday's mashed potatoes nevertheless. This is the one about the woman the young man dreams of, who's married to the older man he loves—but hates and, who uses him to make her husband jealous, and then—when the husband's killed—says "I hate you. Now you suffer" to the young man.

Three stories, very different in weight I said, but identical in texture, all of them withdrawing from feeling. The heart of them is as clammy as wax. Something central that beat strongly in *The Purple Plain* and, muffled but still there, made *Dear Life* memorable has got lost. So women are bitches, seems to be the moral of *The Nature of Love*. And the waxwork feeling stretches over page after page of brilliantly worked dialogue and narrative. Were Mr. Bates not such a nearly-great writer it would be irrelevant (let alone ungrateful) to say this. But unless warmth comes and acceptance comes, it is hard to see how the final flowering, of which he has given such bursting promise, can be achieved.

With Mr. Pudney one is on much firmer ground. He tries less hard, he goes for a limited objective—and he succeeds. *A Ring for Luck* is a Third Programme thriller, as exciting as you can hope for and as real as smoked salmon. Here is Glen Jessup in the Caribbean, an up-and-coming executive, stumbling in his stupidly efficient way on the sort of mysteries usually described as Unspeakable and managing, at the same time, to operate a Hemingway sort of love-affair which actually clicks in with the plot. Schematically the book builds up in three parts, to a cymbal-filled climax, as suspenseful (as they say in the film reviews) as anything I've read for a long time. Literate pieces of exciting entertainment like this are extremely rare; let's rejoice; and hope that Mr. Pudney will produce some more, soon.

Lastly *The Alien Sky* by Mr. Scott. It's been so damnably hard to look any serious novel about India straight in the eye since Forster. But here is a sensitive and ambitious study of the reactions of the Anglo-Indians to August, 1947; and one mustn't shirk it by saying that it's just not as good as. Mr. Scott wisely, and very ably, uses the device of an American with a personal preoccupation unrelated in any way to those of the English, to throw the characters the book is really about into sharper relief. By and large the *trompe l'oeil* is successful. And, by and large, so is the book as a whole. There is no doubt that Mr. Scott is an extremely clean and competent writer. *Johnnie Sahib* demonstrated that within a small circumference he could write movingly and tightly. But the overall feeling that *The Alien Sky* leaves me with is one of not knowing enough about the vast, tortuous problem that Mr. Scott sets out to describe; or enough about the people he manipulates in front of the problem; that he has bitten off more than he can chew. Somehow the book lacks a focal point, a centre around which the characters, in relation to each other—and to India—could swing and swivel into a newly truthful place. Nevertheless, this is an extremely able and delicate piece of sustained writing. And anyone who has the courage to tackle the theme is deserving of every encouragement and praise.

JOHN METCALF.