

NO SUDDEN SUCCESS

Prize-winning Novelist is Radio Writer Too

(Written for "The Listener" by BARBARA MATTHEWS)

RUTH PARK, the young New Zealander who won the £2,000 award given by the *Sydney Morning Herald* for an Australian novel — the highest prize ever offered for a literary work in Australia—is no novice in the world of letters and is well-known in radio circles in Australia and New Zealand.

Success, when it comes in the spectacular manner of prizewinning, is often



RUTH PARK
No literary forebears

regarded by the public as a stroke of luck, but in this case it has come as a happy culmination to years of hard work and the usual disappointments that beset the hard path of the aspiring author. That Ruth Park has made a niche for herself in the radio and writing world is due largely to her unusual capacity for work and a spirited determination which overcame difficulties that would defeat most other young writers in the first round. In view of these experiences, it is not so surprising that she has given birth to a novel which promises to place her among the foremost of Australian authors. And though it is too early to predict what status she may attain among New Zealand writers, there is interest in the fact that she was writing a novel with a setting in this country before the Australian competition results were announced. She is an ardent lover of her own country.

Early Days in Auckland

Ruth Park started writing in earnest when she was a pupil at St. Benedict's College, Auckland, in 1932. By 1934 she had had about 20 stories published, mostly in Australian and New Zealand newspapers. At the age of about 18 she joined the *Auckland Star* as a copyholder, graduated to reader, and eventually became children's editor, a job with many ramifications. Experience gained here stood her in good stead later in Australia. All the time she kept up a steady flow of free-lance writing. She has always had an amazing vocabulary and an unusually expressive style.

She is highly imaginative and sensitive and this may be accounted for by her ancestry, which is a blend of Scots, English, Swedish and Irish. She is a descendant of Mungo Park, the explorer of the Nile, but has no literary forebears.

In 1941 Ruth Park went to Sydney and married a young journalist, Darcy Niland. She kept on writing steadily, but found the free-lance field a hard and heartbreaking one to establish a name in. Then her husband was man-powered as a shearer to the outback and she followed him. When circumstances forced them to part she worked, sometimes fruit-picking, or at any jobs that came her way. She even turned her hand to cooking for a shearing gang. All this was good experience of Australia and that country's peculiar conglomeration of peoples "in the raw," and none of it was lost to Ruth's pen. She kept her typewriter busy, with some fair measure of success. She also kept up her writing of children's stories, and several were published in American magazines. It was about this time that she turned seriously to radio work, writing children's radio serials and plays, and giving a series of talks about New Zealand over the ABC.

In a Sydney Slum

When the shearing was over, in 1943, the Nilands returned to an overcrowded Sydney and could find accommodation only in rooms of a slum tenement in the Surrey Hills area. A girl baby was born while they were there, and this was a hard time, for conditions about them were what most New Zealanders would consider incredible. In one of her articles she describes Cornwall Street, where they lived, and says:

Throughout Sydney, that immense, sprawling city where riches and appalling poverty shoulder each other, you'll find many slum areas like Cornwall Street. Places like Auckland's Freeman's Bay would be pleasant residential districts in Sydney. The houses leaked so much that often in the torrential rains they were quite flooded. . . . and always there were bugs, savage, indomitable against all forms of insecticides, quite ineradicable because "they had got into the walls." Drunkenness and sordidness ruled there, and kindness and true charity, too. Until you've lived in Cornwall Street, you just don't know what life in the raw is, for these people were savages in clothes, as unrestrained, uninhibited and as primitive in instinct as any Fuzzy-Wuzzy. They robbed, murdered, fought, screamed, and made love in public. Saturday afternoon, when almost the whole street was a staggering mass of foul-mouthed brawling, shrieking men and women, was a revelation to one who had been brought up in an ordinary New Zealand working-class home in a working-class suburb, as I had.

Ruth Park came to New Zealand for a brief holiday when her child was a year old, and returned to Sydney and better living quarters—a small flat—for the birth of her boy, who is now two-and-a-half years old. Throughout all these vicissitudes she kept on writing. Her health was never good, but her typewriter was tireless.

Stories for Children, Too

Her consistent efforts were by this time earning reward. She wrote two children's books which are still awaiting

(continued on next page)



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