

BOOKS

Look We For Another?

A Man and His Wife. By Frank Sargeson. The Caxton Press, Christchurch.

CYNICS may laugh, and it certainly is ridiculous, but I was followed through this book by a text: "Art thou he that should come? Or look we for another?"

Texts of course come easily to those who have been brought up on the Bible, are often misquoted, and frequently misunderstood. But in this case I know what I am saying. Katherine Mansfield is dead. Before her there was no one comparable with her. Since her I am aware of no one unless we have now met him. We can't say Guthrie-Smith: his single triumph was less a book than a life. I don't think we can say Robin Hyde: all her life she was sick, and the healthy thing was never said. I am sure we can't say John Lee or John Guthrie or John Mulgan, yet. We can't say Jane Mander. It is Sargeson or nobody, and I now say Sargeson.

But I will not waste time measuring one against the other. It would be as useful to measure gooseberries against glass-house grapes. They use a different language, express a different world, have nothing in common but the fact that they belong to the same country. And though each sounds like an echo, each is an original voice—and it is a New Zealand voice. Why each chose to follow foreign models technically they alone could tell; but in essentials one is no more America than the other is Russia.

Nor can I see any profit in asking why one exploits toughness as assiduously as the other exploited the "little noiseless noise among the leaves." An artist's world is his own. If he prefers maggots to moonbeams we may or may not be able to respond, but we certainly can't condemn. I am personally not squeamish about toughness. If a writer is more interested in entrails than in brains—I am by no means suggesting that this is Sargeson's case—I can think of no literary reason why he should not follow his interest. But if he does follow it, and the public as a result abstain from buying him, I can think of no moral reason why he should complain. I don't think (in such a situation) that the author of this book would complain, and I hope, now that he has made his choice, that no one will complain on his behalf.

After all, no one writes such stories as these without knowing what he is doing. There is not an accidental line in them, not an accidental word. The very stops have been considered, and put in or left out according to a long pondered plan. And if the details have had so much thought the fundamentals are the author's blood and sweat. In



FRANK SARGESON
"... A laureate of hoboes"

subject, style, and execution these sketches are Frank Sargeson's mark.

Well, I have said that I think his mark will remain. But it is a curious mark. In itself it would suggest to posterity that New Zealand during the last twenty years has been a kind of rural slum; a few disgusting exploiters and a large number of brutish victims. Most of us don't see it like that. We don't see our neighbours as morons, our young people as sensual louts, our teachers and preachers as liars and hypocrites, our patriots as profiteers. We know, however, that such people exist, and their place in the picture need not worry us if Sargeson sees them, can't take his eyes off them, and can't help presenting them as they are. It is his affair and not ours if he chooses to be a laureate of hoboes.

Necessarily, however, it means a bitter book—biting sarcasm, sneers, and a pitiless humour.

There is kindness too, of course, but it is a kindness that seldom escapes from the shack. In general only the poor are pitiful, only the successful ugly. And even the poor can lie, thief, murder, and grin like lecherous lunatics.

But again—to every artist his own material.

I do not find the title-piece, "A Man and His Wife," the best or the most powerful of these sketches. It has subtle touches, but is quite unreal; while "Sale Day," which must be the crudest story ever printed in New Zealand, is almost breath-taking in its truthfulness—an abominable picture of sensuality and cruelty in a country kitchen. Cruelty is also the theme in "I've Lost My Pal," a pathological incident set in a shearing shed; but "The Making of a New Zealander" is the real farm piece politically and poetically. "An Affair of the Heart" is an almost conventional study of a theme that is as old as the first human wanderer, and I don't know whether to pity or envy those who will read it dry-eyed. But I

am tempted to place first and side by side—if "Sale Day" is disqualified for rankness—"A Great Day," a study, just credible, of jealousy and murder, and "Old Man's Story," which is pure poetry.

So my question is this: has he come? I think he has. If, however, he has not come to stay, whom shall we at present place beside him?

In the meantime Christmas is coming. Buy the book. Buy it for yourself, buy it for your friends; start thinking about it; start others thinking. The way of the artist is hard. If you think it should be kept open, put your hand in your pocket.

—O.D.

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