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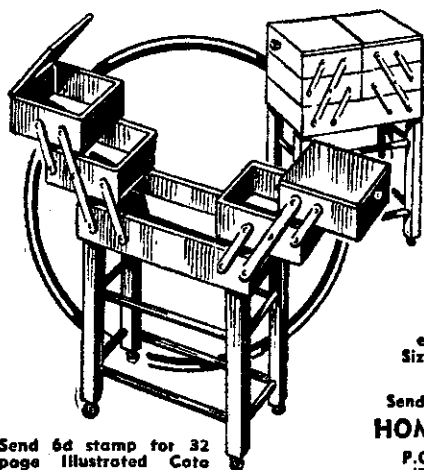
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Literary Cannibals

PROBLEMS of a novelist in a small community are discussed by the New Zealand writer

John Brodie in an interview on page 15. The most interesting, perhaps, is literary cannibalism, the habit of "eating" one's friends and countrymen in the interests of art. It is not easy to write a novel with a local setting without convincing various people that they have been brought into the story; and since the opinion they have of themselves is generally favourable, they are surprised and hurt by what they see in the author's mirror. Nothing is to be gained by explaining that a character is a composite figure. If a single feature is recognisable, it is assumed that the whole person is there, and that he is there to be ridiculed.

These hazards exist everywhere. A novelist in London may seem to be well hidden; but he has his own circle of friends, and if he finds interesting material among them, and makes good use of it, he can be sure that the victims will be identified. It is, of course, a little easier in London to avoid the penalties of publication. Opportunities for retreat are limited in a country town, or even in Wellington. The disapproval of a small community can be felt in a number of ways, mostly unpleasant. To avoid embarrassment, New Zealand writers have adopted several devices. Some of them—including Mr. Brodie—have used fictitious place names. But this habit is disliked by critics, who point out that the places are recognisable, and that exasperation is felt by readers as well as by people who believe themselves to be in the story. The danger is reduced if a novelist goes to London and writes of his own country from a distance. But then it is

replaced by a new difficulty, concerned more with creative method than with social pressure.

An expatriate's New Zealand becomes stationary. He discovers that if he is to write convincingly of his own country he must not stay in the present, which is changing beyond his knowledge, but must go back to a clearly-defined period—the years of depression, for instance—or to his own childhood. Sometimes, as with Katherine Mansfield or James Courage, the latter method has an artistic necessity. It enables the writer to resolve emotional conflicts through an imaginative return to scenes which have been coloured in memory by personal associations. But literature needs more than the sensitive rediscovery of a child's world. There is, perhaps, a necessary gap between experience and writing. A novelist who tries to be topical may succeed only in reporting what he sees; and reporting, although close to literature when it is skilfully done, is not fiction. The novelist's material has to be digested; and it will generally come from events, directly experienced or closely observed, which have moved him deeply.

Like everybody else, writers cannot always choose their backgrounds or the people who most strongly influence them. They must write of what they know, whether it be the streets of Wellington or a timber settlement in the north. The bustling years of expansion through which we are now passing will be reflected in writing, though possibly not until the phase is ended; and it will be found then that the best novels are those rooted in human situations. People do not change much: they merely, in this country, become more numerous, thereby providing that greater variety of behaviour which sustains a growing literature—and perhaps, too, an increasing toleration of those who produce it.

N.Z. LISTENER, FEBRUARY 18, 1955.