

Scriptwriter Turns Novelist

THE Auckland scriptwriter Arthur E. Jones is fast finding fame (although he denies the fortune) in a new field—as a successful thriller writer. His first book, *You Know the Way It Is*, published by Hutchinsons, has already been chosen by the Auckland Star and the Melbourne Sun News Pictorial for serialisation, and the London reviews have all praised it highly.

The other day, we asked him to tell us all about it. When we saw him, he was deep in a script for *Their Guided Years*, a series of educational programmes he is doing for IYA, and very far removed from the mystery and violence of thriller writing, and he told us that his novel writing happened almost by accident. He wrote the popu-

lar *Johnny April* stories which the ZBs broadcast a short while back, and it was the success of these that prompted him to try a novel. *Johnny April*, moreover, also played throughout Australia on the ABC network, and was translated into Dutch, playing from the AVRO stations. In Holland *Johnny* was played by one of their leading stage actors, Guus Hermus, although for the benefit of Dutch listeners, *Johnny's* surname was changed to Perikel.

"With this wide publicity," Mr. Jones says, "I thought *Johnny April* might go down well with readers, so I started a novel. I thought it might take about three months to write. In fact, it took six weeks, and the first publisher I sent it to accepted it. The book was half printed when trouble arose, and it looked very much as if my novel-writing

career had taken a sad tumble. The main character of the book, of course, was *Johnny April*, and out of the blue came a letter from Hutchinsons pointing out that there was an American, by the name of Mike Roscoe, who had already written two or three thrillers with a *Johnny April* hero! The coincidence was amazing, but there it was. My name *Johnny April* had actually been chosen by William Austin, who created the character on the air, so we had proof here that the name had not been filched from Mike Roscoe. But convincing the publishers was another matter. However, I did convince them, and subject to the name being changed completely they were willing to proceed. Thus Felix Holliday was born, and while I lost all publicity for *Johnny*, I am hoping that no one has yet conceived a second Felix."

We asked Mr. Jones if he intended putting Felix on the air, and he said that he had already written a thriller serial of eight half-hour instalments which was at present in the Wellington studios for production, and that William Austin would be playing the part of Felix Holliday.

Mr. Jones says his second novel has already been accepted, and should be appearing in a few months, while his third has just been completed.

"Fortunately," he says, "the radio publicity has not all been lost. *Johnny Perikel* is still flourishing in Holland, and my first book is now being translated into Dutch."

Before he went back to his *Guided Years* we asked Mr. Jones if he had any simple recipe for thriller writing.

"None at all," he said. "I think novel writing is seventy per cent hard work, and the rest conceit that anybody will want to read it. The actual writing is easy, and I have no plan when I start. That's probably why I get bogged down sometimes, and I could cheerfully murder Felix and the rest of his cronies. However, something always turns up, and takes me a bit nearer the end of the 80,000 words that comprise a Felix Holliday thriller. I have no illusions about literary values, and I write too fast for meticulous editing. Perhaps the biggest thing in my favour is having an uncomplaining wife. One who will spend her evenings without talking while her husband pounds away—and provide him with coffee at intervals."

For the future, Mr. Jones has no great plans. "It takes time to develop a character, and for it to become known, and the thriller field is very crowded. It's too early yet to know how sales are going overseas, but at least the publishers are enthusiastic, and so are the critics. It's a good start. You know the way it is."

We left Mr. Jones with his *Guided Years*. He was frowning over his typewriter, and this time there was nobody to provide the coffee.

A call on William Austin at the NZBS Production Studios in Wellington produced the news that the Felix Holliday series *Danger in Disguise* was scheduled for early production.

Mr. Austin said that when he heard that *Johnny April* was also a character in Mike Roscoe's thrillers, he too found it very hard to believe. "If I was an avid thriller story reader, it would be quite possible that I had come across Mike Roscoe's books," he said, "but the fact is that I never read detective stories.



Spencer Digby photograph

WILLIAM AUSTIN

"Smooth, relaxed narrative for radio"

We reached the name of April by going through the calendar; it's short and has a lilt about it. It's quite possible that this American writer did the same thing. And the *Johnny* part of it, of course, has a long lineage: *Johnny Eager*, *Johnny O'Clock*, and the rest of them."

We asked Mr. Austin what he thought about the character of Felix Holliday. "Well, the name may be changed but it's the same character. The part of April (or Holliday) makes smooth, flowing, relaxed narrative for radio. He's a bit of a mystery man, sophisticated, but with a bit of a swagger thrown in. We tried to suggest that by the theme tune chosen for the *Johnny April* stories, 'Penguin at the Waldorf.'"

*You Know the Way It Is** is a thriller in what is now a traditional form—with a liberal leavening of blondes and bashers. Felix Holliday (profession unstated), though a quiet-loving man, just can't seem to stop trouble coming his way. But when it comes, there is always compensation in the form of a blonde or two with whom bachelor Felix gets resignedly involved.

The locale of this novel could be almost anywhere in the English-speaking world; detective fiction having over the years built up its own milieu, as enigmatic as anything that Kafka created. We have a bay, and a series of towns; beach cottages, and night-clubs of the Austral-Anglo-American variety; tussocky grass, sandhills, a Quarry Road; the Drive, the Avenue. This purposeful and fitting vagueness in geography is possibly a far better idea than that followed in the recent novel by Ken Sandford, *Dead Reckoning* (incidentally, advertised with yet another New Zealand thriller on the dust-jacket of *You Know the Way It Is*), where sedate Coromandel and points north are terrorised by a gang of mobster-spies that could have come straight from Omsk.

As a postscript to this story, at the time of going to press we have just heard that Mr. Jones has signed a contract with an Italian publishing house for *You Know the Way It Is*. It looks as if Felix Holliday is fast becoming a world traveller.

**YOU KNOW THE WAY IT IS*, by Arthur E. Jones; Hutchinson and Co., English price 10/6.



★ ARTHUR JONES began work in journalism as a free lance contributing to a variety of British periodicals. Eventually he found a niche in Fleet Street as a feature writer with the Associated Press. Eight years ago he left London for Hollywood, but finding himself running short of dollars he came on to New Zealand. When Arthur landed in Auckland with his wife and two children he had no job to go to, and no place to live; but he did have a letter of introduction to the Mayor, who arranged for him a meeting with John Griffiths, manager of 12B. The next three months were spent in adapting the classics for radio. Then he was appointed full-time scriptwriter at IYA.

THE AUTHOR

Arthur Jones has written two serial programmes that have been very popular here—the "*Johnny April*" stories and a ZB Women's Hour feature, "*Meet the Mansons*." His biggest assignment, though, was compiling the commentaries on the British Empire Games held in Auckland in 1950. These commentaries were spoken by William Austin and beamed to South Africa. He has also written for the NZBS a large number of social documentary programmes.