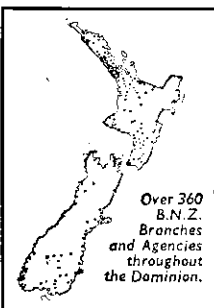




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Books

FINISH US IF YOU CAN

DAWN IN ANDROMEDA, by E. C. Large; Jonathan Cape, English price 15/-. *THE DEATH OF GRASS*, by John Christopher; Michael Joseph, English price 10/6. *ESCAPEMENT*, by Charles Eric Maine; Hodder and Stoughton, English price 12/6. *THE TWENTY-SEVENTH DAY*, by John Mantley; Michael Joseph, English price 12/6.

(Reviewed by Denis Glover)

DAWN IN ANDROMEDA starts off with a chatty little dialogue between God and Mother Nature, to whom he is apparently married. It's a scandalous not to say blasphemous piece of writing, reminiscent of the common-room to which Mr Large obviously belongs. The fact is, God doesn't go much on the species He has turned out after His own image. He rather thinks it was a mistake. He wants to start again with a handful of "healthy ones without the worst kinds of liars" (Oxford and Cambridge are out), and he intends to dump them on the fifth planet of sun No. 17,507, in the galaxy of Andromeda. They won't have any superfluous recollections, and they will arrive, five men and five women, Mother Nature naked. It is Mr Large's God's pious ambition that, starting from scratch (ha!) they will furnish him with a seven-valve all-wave superhet inside a generation. From which it is another fair deduction that Mr Large is on the science side of the commonroom and does not conduct the divinity classes.

For the rest, it's a fascinating book. Not without scratches they do start from scratch (disposing of the politician and the priest who have wangled their way into the Ten), and page by page go on from one technical discovery to another. All pragmatism and pure brilliance, rather beyond the beachcomber type like me. But the human story of the Pioneers is well told—as inevitably as Mendel's law the politician and the priest break through in the first generation. The superhet is, of course, built in the end, but there is no mention of an NBS being set up, nor if God was pleased with the results. ("The programmes from the earth," He remarks plaintively, "have been getting hellishly dreary lately.")

These novelists are always cooking up some new and horrible way of finishing off the world (and all their potential readers with it). In *The Death of Grass* John Christopher infects all the pasture land of the world with Chung-Li virus, which is pretty serious when people see no hope of survival save in pigs and potatoes. When the rioting starts the hero and his family take off from London to a defensible family valley in the Highlands. It's a stark *saute qui peut* business getting there, with the rifle the final arbitrament, but the commando in all of us wins out. Beating off attacks

right and left, we gain the valley, hold the defences ("you don't throw away a good weapon"), and settle in. One of the boys is going to see us get the better of this Chung-Li stuff, and the other announces, "There's a city to be built." Ah, well, let's leave it to the younger generation.

Charles Eric Maine has come down to earth. This time spaceways are

out. Eventually on Hollywood's doorstep we get an inventor's brain-impulse recorder, unscrupulously collared to pervert the world in the name of entertainment. You don't just go to the pictures any more—they deep-freeze you (more or less), pop you in a theatre filled (more or less) with filing cabinet drawers, and for months or years you can enjoy the most delightful sensations until you are unplugged again. You see, it's too tough, this being alive. We are invited to escape into Unlife, where we can plug in to the girl friend's reality-tone and know everything, yes, everything, because we are her. "She's unlife. She's making you emote." Yes, indeed! But when unlife becomes as real as life a certain amount of confusion is likely to set in. Our hero inventor sorts it out in the end. He hooks up the Hollywood exploiter to his own circuit, together with a hundred million dreamers each in his own little drawer, turns on a screaming-horror spool of psycho-impulses, and continues grimly, "That's the pay-off, Zakon. You're going to emote as you never emoted before." We end with a life kiss, "a transient contact of cold, dry lips," while the hero and heroine emote before a real life trial for the murder of unlife.

These chaps in outer space can apparently get very chivalrous in a comforting medieval way. They want the earth, because their own galaxies are having a power shortage or something. In *The Twenty-seventh Day* they won't take the old planet from us if we're decent-minded bodies enough to deserve to have it ourselves. By instantaneous transportation (still rather beyond the New Zealand Rail and Road Services) five random humans are told by the spacemaster that the pinhead bombs they are each given won't be any good after 27 days. But in that time, if they divulge the secret to their respective governments or power politicians, then pouf! everyone's a dead 'un with an unharmed world ready for the step-in spacemen. Only the five who have this cigarette-case weapon can open it (it blunts the tools of Soviet technics, but the owner only has to think, "Open!" and it does. Then you whisper to the bomb, "Latitude so-and-so, longitude so-and-so," and the deed is done). Now you'd think five people even if they do include a couple of women would keep the secret like grim death. And they try to. But this is where the out-men are Machiavellian in their medieval chivalry—they promptly cause to be published the names of the five. That's where the fun starts. The U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. both want to get a box open so they can talk turkey to one another within the 27 days. But we're still here, aren't we?

Parking Metres

GAMMA FROM HEAVEN

MYSELF when young did raptly read
Adventure stories by the screed
Where virtue triumphed, though only just—
And thieves and redskins bit the dust.

Now science fiction is the craze,
And in these radioactive days
It is as much as you can do
To stop the dust from biting you. —R.G.P.

N.Z. LISTENER, MARCH 15, 1957.