

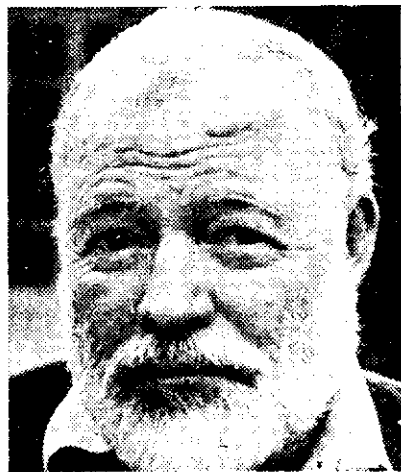
Sitting Ducks in Modern Fiction

THE VANISHING HERO, by Sean O'Faolain; Eyre and Spottiswoode, English price 21/-.
CATASTROPHE AND IMAGINATION, by John McCormick; Longmans, English price 25/-.

(Reviewed by Anton Vogt)

ANY widely-read novel becomes part of the history of its time: part of current gossip, a reflection of private mores publicly mirrored, the excuse for innumerable articles, and perhaps for books of criticism. We live in an age of books about books, and fiction gets its full share. The most common complaint is that fiction is dying, but the maggots on the carcass are uncommonly active. For every indifferent novel there are ten good critics.

Sean O'Faolain writes brilliantly of the literary heroes and heroines of the '20s and '30s: Huxley, Waugh, Greene, Faulkner, Hemingway, Elizabeth Bowen, Virginia Woolf, and Joyce. His chief argument is that (with the exception of Hemingway) they had no heroes or heroines. Indeed, they could not have, because they had no "sustained view of the good life." So here we come again to the peevish quarrel. The moderns fail, because they are "groping, puzzled, cross, mocking, frustrated, isolated . . ." whereas in the classical tradition authors



ERNEST HEMINGWAY
"His Hero is brainless"

saw life whole. O'Faolain demands faith in life, as a *sine qua non* of greatness in art; and he is probably right. He is not prepared to admit the validity of explorations made without compass.

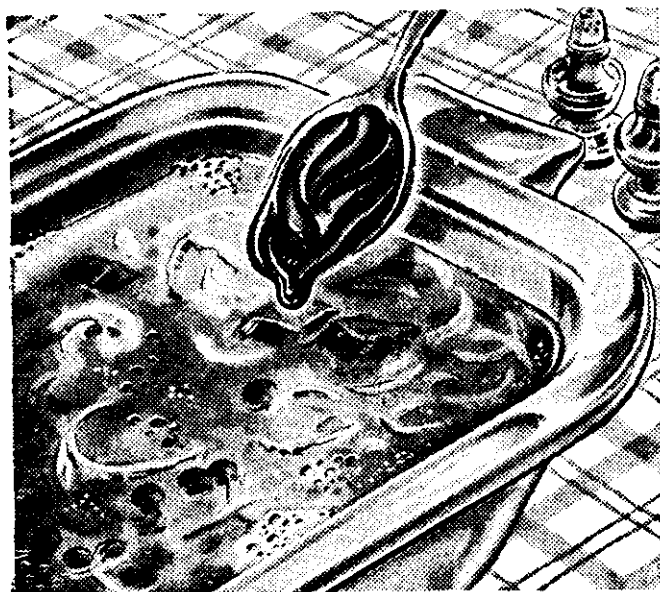
Some of his butts are sitting ducks. Aldous Huxley becomes a nasty little

man, full of wormwood under the smart-alec polish. Waugh, a writer of "purely brainless genius," seduces himself into an untenable position; and after producing a handful of brilliant satires becomes the apologist of a Catholic Public Schoolism, which O'Faolain cannot recognise as Catholic, and only snobs can accept as Public School. Greene, with cloven pen, "carries a pit of eternity around with him, into which he jumps regularly by appointment." (I quote Denis Glover, speaking of a New Zealand poet). Faulkner has "more genius than talent." Virginia Woolf is Narcissa. Joyce is Lucifer; his detachment an illusion, or delusion; the "most striking thing in all his work . . . the impression he conveys of a nature torn between a painful sense of shame and an almost diabolical pride." (O'Faolain does not deny that both may be actual. He is thoroughly Irish in his discontent, superbly English in his own prose style.) Of his odd man out, Hemingway, he writes: "He is the only modern writer of real distinction for whom the Hero does in some form still live. The price he pays for this is that his Hero . . . is brainless, has no past, no traditions and no memories."

John McCormick writes an altogether different, typically American kind of

book: an omnibus volume, dotted with footnotes and carefully indexed, setting out to prove that the novel is still very much alive, in spite of Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, John Steinbeck and Herman Wouk. He is the new literary hero: the man who has read literally Every Important or Near-Important Novel, and filed his findings for a seminar embracing literature, philosophy and politics. O'Faolain is for every intelligent reader. McCormick is for the student of trends. But all this is not to say that, though often tiresome, he is not illuminating: over a sprawling canvas there are sharp and witty judgments. ("The novel as obsession" disposes of Lawrence, "The Caine Mutiny places Wouk at the head of the other plutocrats of the American novel. . . ." "In Emily Bronte's work, we do not find 'real' people; we find instead Jungian libido. . .") McCormick is, however, essentially serious. He is dedicated to the proposition that only the best will do, even if he seldom finds it. Boldly, he names some modern novels which "might still be read a century from now." From America he chooses Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Light In August*, and Ellison's *Invisible Man*; from England, Forster's *A Passage to India*, Warner's *The Aerodrome*, Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, Anthony West's *One Dark Night*, Rosamund Lehmann's *The Echoing Grove*, and P. H. Newby's *The Re-*

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