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8.52

BOOKS

Ruth Park's New Novel

A POWER OF ROSES, by Ruth Park; Angus and Robertson. Australian price, 16/-.

(Reviewed by A.M.)

IN her latest novel Ruth Park returns from our King Country, where she was born and educated, to Sydney's slums, which supplied the material for her first two books. Bearing in mind that I do not know Sydney (which she knows well) I should say *A Power of Roses* is a distinctly better book than *The Witch's Thorn*. It may be that it is a harder task to depict the small and relatively isolated community of Te Kano than the crowded, far more varied and yeasty life in a corner of a great city.

As in *Harp of the South*, there is poverty and squalor, advanced realism repellent to many tastes, and cheerfulness and other virtues breaking through the murk. *A Power of Roses*, however, shows a substantial development of Ruth Park's powers. It has a better plot; the characters are more diverse and seen more clearly; and generally there is a finer sense of selection. She is still much occupied with the study of children. Bethell, the central figure in *The Witch's Thorn*, is more or less a helpless victim of circumstances. Miriam, "heroine" of the new novel, stronger in years and character, living near the bread-line with her old pensioner uncle, fights shrewdly and passionately to make a world for herself in the muddle of want, dirt, and human and material decrepitude. The good fortune she deserves comes to her when she is in sight of womaphood. She is a remarkable creation.

Round this practical and imaginative child flows and ebbs a turbid tide of villainy, sickness, eccentricity, the pathos, horrible at times, of pensioners trying to spin their money out, and charity in its wider sense. The problem presented by lonely old folks, which is now being forced on New Zealand attention by revelation of facts is illuminated by Ruth Park's imaginative art.

The vitality of her people is impressive, and perhaps it is stronger here than before. She is still inclined to be lush in style at times, but with what verve and colour she writes! She has a wonderful gift of spot-lighting a situation with a phrase or two, and calling up beauty in the drabest surroundings. An old man in a tenement lights the stove for a breakfast cup of tea, without the necessary penny to re-start the meter. "Out of the grease-clogged jets sprang the slim blue arms of the gas, like the petals of a dahlia. . . Suddenly with a feeble whistle the gas sank down, down, then flung up its arms in despair and disappeared down the pipe." I re-read many of her passages to savour their tartness or sweetness. And the great Harbour Bridge, overarching the human warren, is powerfully brought to bear on the tale.

Ruth Park has written four novels, and has established herself in Australia, New Zealand, Britain, and the United States. Roughly speaking, all of them are about submerged sections of humanity. Will she be content to go on in-



RUTH PARK

"The vitality of her people is impressive"

definitely working in this field, or will she adventure into something wider, and perhaps sunnier?

THE GOOD SOLDIER

SOLDIERS AND SOLDIERING, by Field Marshal Earl Wavell; Jonathan Cape. English price, 8/6.

WHEN Wavell some 50 years ago decided to become a soldier, the headmaster of Winchester wrote to his father expressing his regret. "I do not think," he wrote, "that you need take this extreme step, since I believe that your son has sufficient brains to make his way in other walks of life." This small book of 174 pages would itself have justified his headmaster's confidence even had he known nothing of his pupil's outstanding military career.

Compiled by Wavell's son, *Soldiers and Soldiering* is a collection of essays, articles, lectures, and reviews written between 1930 and 1950, the last written during the illness shortly before his death. The essays cover such topics as the good general and the good soldier, the relationship between the soldier and the politician, night attacks, co-operation with one's allies, and an appreciation of military genius as illustrated by the great commanders of history and their battles; among the books reviewed are Desmond Young's *Rommel* and Field Marshal Montgomery's story of the invasion of Europe. All show Wavell's wide knowledge of military history—ancient, Biblical and modern. They show also his humanity and sound common sense, an alert mind ready with anecdote and homely analogy from sport and everyday life to make his points sharp and clear. His writing was always as concise and soldierly as his clipped military moustache.

—W.A.G.

SHELLEY'S MARY

MY BEST MARY, The Selected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, edited by Muriel Spark and Derek Stanford; Wingate. English price, 15/-.

THIS is a popular edition of the letters of Mary Shelley, and altogether it seems a somewhat dubious enterprise. The letters of figures of the past are worth publishing only on two grounds. Either they are worth reading for themselves, like the letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle or Richard Steele or Lady Mary Wortley Montagu; or they are worth publishing for the information they contain about the writer or his associates or the life of his times. If a man is a good letter writer, be he a major or minor figure, a popular edition with the

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