

BOOK RECORD

Conducted by ANTAR

"Stand, Fight, Fall Alone"

Woman Novelist who
Expresses a Philosophy
in Fine Book

LAST week I wrote an article which I have long been aching to write—an embittered protest against the modern novelists who tell us about "the familiar things, the things we know," concentrating upon the faithful reproduction of everyday littlenesses and ignoring the broad, free lands of imaginative creation.

Now, so soon after my protest, I find it my ironic duty to give unstinted praise to a book entirely preoccupied with everyday—a book of which the theme is futility. Miss Joanna Cannon's "Princes in the Land."

Frankly, I am ashamed to admit that Miss Cannon is unknown to me at first hand, although I learn by the dust cover of "Princes in the Land" that it is the latest of an output of 16 novels, some with titles vaguely familiar. I can only suppose that Miss Cannon's reputation lags behind her merits—this new work at least shows her as too uncompromisingly clear-sighted and too subtle to be widely popular.

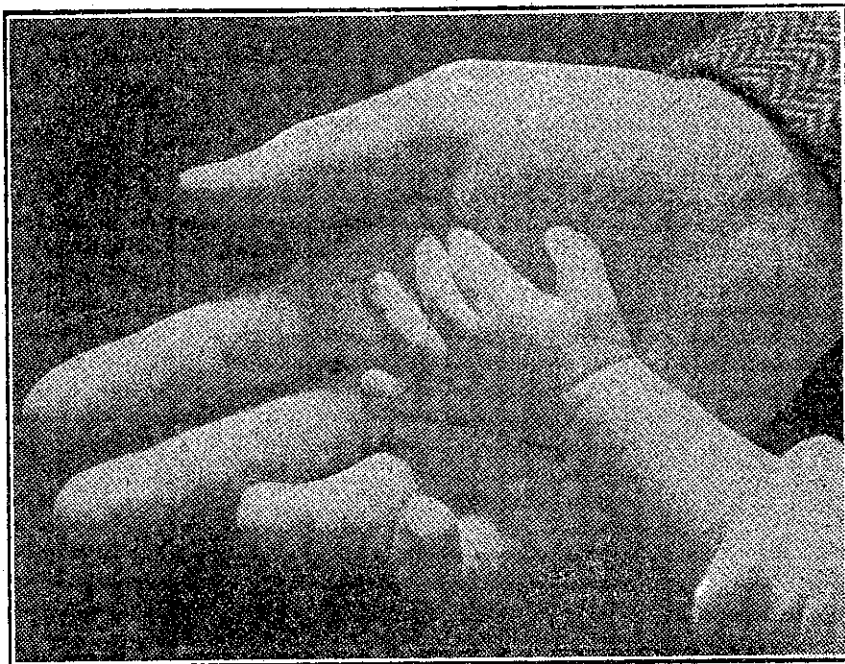
She has, too, an unusual technique in that she omits what we are accustomed to hear at long length, and dwells upon what is generally glossed over. For instance, in "Princes in the Land" the romantic part of the heroine's marriage is dismissed in a couple of lines, but eight pages are given to a memorable description of her reactions when the dentist tells her she must have her bottom teeth out.

Jane Austen Touches

I BELIEVE that had Jane Austen been an emancipated young woman in this confused twentieth century, she might easily have written a "Princes in the Land." The book has more than Jane Austen's skill in the use of detail, all her shrewd observation of manners and her even style, much of her subtle humour—although Miss Cannon's brand is less constant and at the same time less esoteric than the older writer's.

One thing Miss Cannon has on her own—a provoking quality that is essentially topical, the power to make readers "think in" all the gaps and omissions in her story, simply because it could so easily be their own. "Princes in the Land" is a haunting book, and I don't think any mothers or any children of mothers can read it and lightly forget.

For Patricia Crispin is typical of



... Instead of your fathers you shall have children, whom you shall make princes in the land.—Ecclesiasticus.

every well-intentioned mother. Born of an aristocratic family at a time when aristocracy was beginning to be unimportant, she grew up a wild tomboy with a generous and stubborn spirit. She married a working student, son of working parents, and brought up her three children in an atmosphere of constant struggle and hardship. Some measure of security came when Hugh Lind say was appointed a professor of English at Oxford and Patricia settled down to be happy in the lives of her children. Instead, she was to see them, one by one, go their own ways heedless of her, until at the last she formed her own philosophy and set free that independent tomboy spirit which had ruled her in youth and which had for years been locked from sight by the responsibilities of marriage and family.

"Keep Your Soul"

SUCH a story, told with the implications that Miss Cannon puts upon it, is weighty with meanings. First, there is the question of marriage between class and class. Hugh and Patricia were lovers with youth's generous faiths in common: as the years passed their love changed into friendship, but a friendship without any comradesly understanding of ideals. Would the marriage have been a more real union had the two come from similar backgrounds, with tastes in common? Would the marriage of Patricia's son have been successful had he married within his own class? Miss Cannon hints the chances are stronger when like class marries like, yet that is not the whole or even the important answer to her book.

The important answer is that all men and women walk life alone—"stand, fight, fall alone. . . You had to be lonely to keep your soul," decided Patricia.

BEFORE she found this stoical solution to her puzzle of life, she had depended first upon her husband. Then, when he gave no comfort, she turned like so many mothers to the children for whom she had worked and suffered all these years. In them she hoped to see her dreams fulfilled and all done that she had been unable to do. For Patricia had not yet learnt that no child ever willingly runs in the groove its parents mark out for it: that it is the cream of bitterness that the more honestly liberal the upbringing, the wider must the divergence be between the parent's and the child's paths. Only children in whom individuality has been repressed can be unhappily suborned.

Perhaps many will find barrenness in Patricia's philosophy. Just as Hugh's theory of life's unimportance may seem too remote. Yet others will find, as I did, a certain hard consolation in an attitude to life which, inconclusive and even defeatist as it may be, is at least workable and asks for little. Patricia, looking back, summarised it nearly: "She was 46. . . she'd done most things. But what did it matter? Life was a parenthesis, a muddled phrase too often annotated. Why worry over it? Read on, read on."

Undoubtedly, "Princes in the Land" is a book you must read—the best of its type in several years. Not only does it ask a question that, in some form or other, every one of us must answer; but also, for those who still prize literary worth, it is written in prose that is clear and strong, often with a cadence as beautiful as poetry or good music.

"Princes in the Land," by Joanna Cannon (Gollancz, London). Our copy from the publishers.

(More book reviews over page).