

New Fiction

LAWRENCE DURRELL: *Clea*. 287pp. Faber and Faber. 16s.
 IRWIN SHAW: *Two Weeks in Another Town*. 414pp. Cape. 18s.
 SID CHAPLIN: *The Big Room*. 222pp. Eyre and Spottiswoode. 16s.
 NADINE GORDIMER: *Friday's Footprint*. 236pp. Gollancz. 16s.
 H. E. BATES: *An Aspidistra in Babylon*. 239pp. Michael Joseph. 13s. 6d.

Clea completes Mr. Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet. It advances and resolves the story of which *Justine*, *Balthazar* and *Mountolive* have already lit up different aspects. The narrator, Darley, returns to the city of Alexandria in time of war to find all changed, falls in love with Clea and begins the writing of his work.

The plot keeps the characters in motion (as they do it) but is too complex by the extent of three previous volumes, and a myriad explanations, to be outlined here. Justine, the sumptuous, agonized woman of society, has withdrawn and diminished; but Purswarden, the astringent, joking poet-novelist, makes a lengthy posthumous reappearance through his notebooks. Dr. Balthazar bids us an enigmatic farewell; we have glimpses of Mountolive, the British Ambassador; Clea herself blossoms in the narrator's love.

Mr. Durrell's supple and enchanting style creates landscape, atmosphere, and mood; coins images; and indulges in aphorisms that are more perceptive about people and their affections than about intellectual problems. He offers drama and sensation, even horror. The story runs more smoothly than in the first two novels of the sequence, but no less deeply. His high romantic tone sometimes lets him—and us—down; and in every sense he often does not know when to stop. He takes both art and sexual love with a seriousness that is not altogether English and may not be forgiven until his work passes into our literature—if it does. If it does not his quadripartite novel remains one of the richest failures of our time.

Mr. Irwin Shaw's other town is Rome—the Rome of Cinecitta and apartments on the Circus Maximus, the luxurious and glamorous Rome of film moguls that, in turn, awaits its transformation into the shadow world of the screen. Jack Andrus has come to it from Paris and the world of NATO where, as his small son puts it, he "works at keeping the world from having another war." He has come on what at first appears a trifling mission, to dub in a part of a film which an old friend of his, Maurice Delaney, is directing there. For Jack Andrus had previously been James Royal, a film star who in the far-off pre-war days had made a number of very successful films with this same Delaney. The job sounds simple and Jack remains unwarned by the fact that he is being offered 5,000 dollars to do it.

He is soon, however, disillusioned when he finds himself involved in the schemes of Delaney, now aging and failing, to secure a contract for a further three films from an American oil millionaire. He further complicates matters himself by getting into an affair with an Italian girl who turns out to have a younger American boy friend—a youth precariously balanced between genius and homicidal mania, called Bresach. Bresach, in his eager and ruth-

less, youthful idealism, sounds the proper antiphon to the kindly and despairing middle-aged wisdom of Jack, and the book develops into a spare but strenuously argued colloquy between the comparative merits of innocence and experience and an even closer comparison between their opposing vices. As Mr. Shaw's tale unfolds a very remarkable impression of depth is created. His characters have all the unexpectedness of real life and surprise follows surprise with an organic and full-blooded richness. Yet, never for a moment does his story become formless. A disciplined pattern underlies his manipulation of his arbitrary and undisciplined characters and the result is a long but deeply satisfying novel.

After the intensity of Mr. Shaw's Rome it is almost a relief to turn to the claustrophobic domesticity of Mr. Chaplin's new work. *The Big Room* is exactly what it purports to be—a big room. And in this room there lives a whole family, headed by "Grandpa Noah," a formidable old cripple who dominates his two sons, their wives, his own mistress and her son. The only person in the room who is a match for him is the narrator, his grand-daughter—and she is his most ardent ally. Suddenly the Italian wife of his elder son wins £75,000 in a football pool and, for a moment, the close-knit pattern of family life is put in jeopardy; but the alliance of the cunning old man and his knowing adolescent grand-daughter is too much for even this conspiracy of sex and money.

Just because it is short the short story presents unusual temptations to oversimplify and so to sentimentalize experience: it is therefore strange that only in her longest story in *Friday's Footprint* does Miss Nadine Gordimer fall into this trap. For the most part her stories are fragile but exceedingly complex expressions of a fundamentally pessimistic intuition about human nature. It says a great deal for her skill that she can express this successfully against a background of South Africa where more gross problems occupy the foreground of most people's minds. These little tales, sad and modest as they are, have been shaped so carefully and with so much love that they may well survive after the shouts of more vociferous voices have been blanketed and extinguished by the passing of the years.

Mr. Bates, on the other hand, seldom rises above the level of the anecdote—the anecdote, it is true, inflated and particularized by the laborious creation of atmosphere, but the anecdote all the same. The first of the novellas in *An Aspidistra in Babylon* is the least successful, a shabby piece about a shabby love affair. The second is probably the best and certainly the most amusing, a wan little tale about the holiday in Italy of two middle-aged English people, a major and a spinster.