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BOOKS OF THE

NEW FICTION

There are Thieves and Thieves

By H. E. BATES

Thieves Like Us. By Edward Anderson. (Heinemann. 7s. 6d.)
The Girl Who Wanted Experience. By Leo Shippey. (Harrap. 7s. 6d.)
Perry's Cows. By Margaret Hes. (Collingridge. 7s. 6d.)

As Strindberg pointed out, there are crimes and crimes. Similarly, as Mr. Anderson is not the first to point out, there are thieves and thieves. Thus his two-edged title, "There's Law Us," and his emphasis throughout his story on the fact that there are thieves other than those who rob banks and shoot to kill. This emphasis is subtle, however, and Mr. Anderson is too good a writer to hang out placards saying, "To the Moral."

The result is that his story is a good story, first and always. It is also a very tough story, and as I need hardly say, American. It deals primarily with the lives of three escaped convicts, Elmo (Three-Toed) Mobley, T. W. (Tommy Gun) Masfield, and Bowtie A. Bowers, of whom Bowers is wanted for murder. These men break jail by stealing a car, which they abandon after a puncture; they then steal another car at the point of a gun, subsequently abandon that, and continue their escape by the same methods until they find an easy small-town bank to rob. Having robbed a bank, they buy another car in order to rob another bank in order to buy two cars in order to make bank-robbing even easier.

Bowers is the chief figure, and it is through his eyes, principally, that Mr. Anderson shows us the hectic career of these three thieves, with their odd combination of cruelty and sentimentality, unscrupulousness and honour, toughness and touchiness, their love of big cars and flashy clothes, and, in the case of Bowers, a capacity for devotion to a decent woman. One by one these men are shot down, until finally Bowers is trapped by information "tipped" by a lawyer in whom he had put the whole of his confidence.

This Writing for the Films . . .

In telling all this Mr. Anderson has done his best to be very tough, very original, and to avoid sentimentality at all costs. As a stylist he reveals a commendable love of plain statement combined with a curious passion for crackling images ("A plummeting meteor fragment streaked the heavens"), which are often far-fetched. He displays very little humour, and, like many another American trying hard to avoid sentimentality, often succeeds only in crashing straight into it. But he has virility, intelligence, a nice ear for conversation, and his story moves like a 40 h.p. car pursued by the law.

One of the things against Mr. Anderson is that the films have been there before him. Mr. Anderson is, I think, too good a writer to work with his eye on Hollywood, but the fact remains that Hollywood is churning out the filmic counterpart to his novel, and churning it out well, at the rate of scores a year. The same is true of Mr. Leo Shippey's "The Girl Who Wanted Experience," but with the simple difference that when Mr. Anderson is (I hope) innocent, Mr. Shippey is guilty. To me it seems clear that his novel has been cleverly and carefully worked out, in setting, action and character, and indeed on all points from A to Z, to drop straight into the Hollywood pigeon-hole. The scene is one of those small American towns where the Leaders of Local Gossip have faces like cats, and where the Sensitive Young Artist (this time a musician) finds it hard to get sympathy except from the Darling Young Girl, who flies in the face of the gossip. There is also a Judge who Has Seen Something of the World and who goes round acting the wise confidant to whoever happens to want a wise confidant at the moment.

Some Wit and Some Cows

Any ardent film-goer could competently cast all of these characters for himself. The story has love, humour, a little shrewd satire, and all it really needs to make it a Big Thing is Drama. So Mr. Leo Shippey obligingly gets one of his characters murdered. This gives us not only Drama but a Problem, and, of course, a Court-scene, which in turn affords a great opportunity for a Dramatic Turn of Events. All is nicely worked out, with the suspicion properly fixed on the Sensitive Young Artist, and in the end we can all go home, I take it, feeling better. Personally I feel much worse, since it irritates me to see the talents of a writer as good as Mr. Shippey wasted on a dolled-up plot like this. For if he writes with an occasional loose sloppiness, Mr. Shippey has a shrewd turn of wit, and it seems likely that he could, if he would, write a real piece of satire on the small American town. As it is his mixture of sentimentality and satire leaves me very cold, and the best thing in the book is the way the local pastor wins 10,000 dollars on a horse and says he did it for the Lord, but for some reason this has little or no connection with anything else in the book.

"Perry's Cows" is a story of the English countryside, and like too many stories of the English countryside it seems too carefully based on local observation. It has the air of being made up from week-end note-books. The life in it is seen from the outside, as though of an interested and slightly amused observer. Perry, its main character, is a man who keeps cows, sells milk for a living, and is a post-master at being infernally rude to everybody.

His cows get him into a good deal of trouble, and through the behaviour of the cows we are able to watch the behaviour of Perry and his neighbours. Throughout the book Perry remains loud, independent, genuine and undefeated, and what strength the book has derives from him.

WORLD-MAKERS AND SHAKERS

We wish length and luck to the new series of even shorter short biographies which the Hogarth Press are bringing out under the name of "World-Makers and World-Shakers." They cost eightpence each, and the first to hand are "DARWIN" by L. B. Pekin, "MAZZINI, GARIBOLDI AND CAVOUR" (all together) by Marjorie Strachey, "SOCRATES" by Naomi Mitchison and R. H. S. Crossman, and "JOAN OF ARC" by V. Sackville-West. They are simply written, admirable books for intelligent children. Our only criticism is that each book looks ugly and dull when stripped of its gay jacket, and while the print is clear enough, the typography and format are commonplace and ungraceful.

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