

BOOK REVIEWS—cont.

the worse a criminal the more will he dislike other prisoners. Is this a manifestation of the same sort of thing? It has become fashionable to speak of the criminal sub-culture as though it were a group of psychiatrically normal individuals but with a different set of norms from the conventionally acceptable. But one may hypothesise from this book that these individuals *are* different quite apart from the norms they embrace, they are different in that the bonds of cohesion between them are much less strong than in the despised respectable society. It may be simply a matter of degree but where it comes to such qualities as heartlessness and selfishness matters of degree are important. At any rate, the writer suggests that prostitutes turn to pones, and perhaps to lesbianism, precisely because they live in a society where there is a paucity of adequate human relationships. One may well think from this book that the explanatory value of the concept of criminal sub-culture is somewhat overdone. The book suggests a useful hypothesis of a more psychological nature.

Perhaps the most serious fault of the book is the rather conventionalised attack on the conventional—the “are you all that much better than us” kind of argument. But it is notably free both from self-pity and self-castigation, and because this is so, the author’s determination to make a new life is the more impressive. The end of the book shows that her insights are still very limited, but we are moved because there are no facile and maudlin promises and because she shows such an intelligent awareness of the grim

difficulties in re-orientating herself.
BERNARD MARCUS.

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**THE LONELINESS OF THE
LONG-DISTANCE RUNNER**

Alan Sillitoe.

W. H. Allen. 1959. pp.176. 12s. 6d.

THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG-DISTANCE RUNNER is, according to the publishers, “a minor masterpiece”. “An ambitious tale”, runs the blurb, “about a boy in Borstal who, set to run in a race, seizes a magnificent and foolproof opportunity to show his defiance of authority. It is perhaps as profound a study of the rebel mind as has ever been written”. It is to be hoped that this will not deter too many readers who may view the prospect of a profound study of the rebel mind somewhat dispiritedly. For the long title-story in this volume of short stories is worth more than most of the profound studies that have been written.

It does not matter that there is no such thing as the Borstal Blue Ribbon Prize Club for Long Distance Running (All England); nor that “the Borstal Boys Brass Band in blue uniforms” is a non-existent company of musicians. Borstals like Gunthorpe, Hucknall and Aylesham with their sports masters and different coloured blazers may belong to the future of course. But however that may be the nameless hero of Alan Sillitoe’s story belongs very much to the present; and most of us pot-bellied, pop-eyed, chinless, stupid, tash-twitching characters—I borrow the epithets which the hero applies to his “doddering bastard of a governor”—most of us will recognise him. And although little that we are told about him will come to us with the force of a revelation it must

BOOK REVIEWS—cont.

be admitted that the portrait is drawn with considerable insight and literary skill. The voice is caught authentically:

"And if I had the whip-hand . . . all the cops, governors, posh whores, penpushers, army officers, Members of Parliament . . . I'd stick them up against a wall and let them have it . . ."

"I only want a bit of my own back on the in-laws and pot-bellies . . ."

"You should think about nobody and go your own way . . ."

The background too:

"Night after night we sat in front of the telly with a ham sandwich in one hand, a bar of chocolate in the other, and a bottle of lemonade between our boots, while mam was with some fancy-man upstairs on the new bed she'd ordered, and I'd never known a family as happy as ours was in that couple of months . . ."

And:

. . . three of my cousins, all about the same age, who later went to different Borstals, and then to different regiments, from which they soon deserted, and then to different gaols where they still are as far as I know".

The prose, colloquial, easy and idiomatic, may not appeal to everyone but it cannot be denied that Sillitoe achieves some extraordinary effects with it; for example a rough elegiac passage on the death of the narrator's father which is the more moving for its brevity and the absence of conventional obituary sentiment. Thus if we are not presented with new information nor the results of profound researches we are made to look again at familiar facts in a new light, and provided with food for

thought. Mr. Sillitoe prompts the reflection that in some cases we have to deal with aberration much more fundamental than loyalties which just happen to be misdirected standards which are slightly different from ours, values which, are socially unacceptable to-day. Consider for example that first quotation. It is not without significance that few, even amongst those least sympathetic to criminals, would urge such indiscriminate ruthlessness in dealing with *them*. Indeed in the passages quoted and others in the story, is expressed an anarchic amorality, a nihilism coupled with crude sophistication that no bluff appeals to "play ball with us" and "we'll play ball with you" are going to touch. ("Honest to God" says the hero, "you'd have thought it was going to be one long tennis match".) The same tough unregenerate spirit can be found in Frank Norman's *Bang to Rights*; another indispensable text for those who work in this field. In the first two decades of this century the new borstal institutions attempted to deal with this problem by means of regimes based on military conceptions of authority and discipline, with obedience enforced by close control and supervision. And no doubt some acquired what Paterson called "those decorative habits which shine so conspicuously under a system of control". It is questionable whether much more was achieved. Mr. Sillitoe's work may make us question whether the public school model subsequently adopted was really very much more appropriate; although it can be said that it enabled us to break down the original paramilitary structures and made possible development and experiment which is still proceeding.

BOOK REVIEWS—*cont.*

Mr. Sillitoe himself neither asks nor attempts to answer such questions as these. He merely draws his portrait without special pleading or any kind of tendentiousness; and leaves us to draw our own conclusions.

I should add that the title-story on which, for obvious reasons, I have concentrated here, constitutes but one third of a book which is consistently readable and contains eight other stories on more or less related themes.

G. HAWKINS.

YOURS BY CHOICE

Jean Rowe
Mills & Boon Ltd. 1960. pp.148. 15s. 0d.

"A GUIDE for adoptive parents", is the sub-title of this book. If, like Josephine Baker, the famous coloured singer, you have just adopted your eleventh child you will not need to read it. If you are about to adopt a child or are just beginning to think about adoption, you should regard 15s. 0d. as part of the expenses; buy the book and read it. It is very readable. Miss Rowe writes in an easy, straightforward manner and does not generalise. She answers all the questions which adoptive parents should ask and she puts a number of very practical questions to prospective adopters: for example, "Have you taken the trouble to find out whether you really like having children about the house when they are naughty as well as when they are good?"

The legal adoption of children is still something rather new in our society, Miss Rowe reminds us. The first Adoption Law was passed in 1926. In some continental countries there is as yet

no provision for legal adoption. In this country there are far more people wanting to adopt babies than there are babies for adoption. The process can be lengthy, difficult and disappointing. The author deals with the reasons why people want to adopt children, the alternatives to adoption, qualifications for adoption and the legal requirements very clearly. She tells you just how to set about the business and what to expect. Her chapter on questions of heredity is frank and helpful. There are practical hints on bringing your child home, the ways in which adopted children may require special handling and telling about adoption.

Without any touch of whimsy Miss Rowe describes most skilfully how babies, small children and adolescents feel about adoption. Dr. D. W. Winnicott has said: "Adoptive parents have a need to be aware of what child development is about, much more so than parents who are caring for their own children". Miss Rowe has contrived to put into her book a great deal of sound, practical advice and insight into a child's needs which will make it of value to parents of children, adopted or their own. The final chapter on adopted children in adolescence is full of understanding and should be of value to anyone working with young people.

This book fills a gap. It is not a text book for social workers but a guide book; well written and attractively produced. It will be of use to those who have to advise people about adoption as well as to those who are about to adopt or who, like the reviewer, are learning what it means to be an adoptive parent.

DERMOT GRUBB