

Book reviews

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Giovanni's Room

by James Baldwin, Dial Press, New York.

I usually avoid reading the reviews of any books I might want to read, until after I've read the books themselves. No doubt, I miss knowing about some of the good books; but at least good books cannot be spoiled for me by unsympathetic or jaded reviewers. So seldom is a book with a predominantly homosexual theme mentioned in the few magazines I see, that I read a couple of reviews of GIOVANNI'S ROOM by James Baldwin. I knew that I wanted to have the book, but I put off reading it because I feared disappointment. Last night I read the book in a sitting — a long one but I'd gladly have sat until morning.

Baldwin is a writer of first rate talent. His reputation rests on GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN which I want to read, and on NOTES OF A NATIVE SON which is the finest essay, the most passionate *credo*, I've ever read. GIOVANNI'S ROOM will not be a best-seller, but it is one of the best books with the homosexual them that I've read. It does not have the delicacy of Maxwell's THE FOLDED LEAF nor the engrossing story of Baxter's LOOK DOWN IN MERCY; nor does it skim the surface as do a host of meritorious works from Vidal and Jackson to Isherwood and Merrick. It has the honesty of the best of James (Barr) Fugaté and the sensitivity of Mary Renault.

Baldwin employs no tricks of sensationalism; he explores the sensual without exposing the erotic possibilities of his situations. If his characters are abstractions, proto-types, they are in the sense that the *dramatis personae* of Greek tragedies need flesh and blood actors to give them bodies. It is the reader who will have to give life to Baldwin's men; and of course the homosexual reader will be best equipped for the role. Only the three women with speaking parts emerge with a reality of their own. The men act out their destiny with an inevitability that marks all tragic drama. The book falls short of being *great* tragedy because Baldwin is unable to maintain the ironic detachment needed for such writing. There is no indication that Baldwin is himself homosexual; but neither is there any that he is an American Negro, albeit expatriate. So great is his technical skill that one suspects an intuitive quality which must be a part of every writer's bag of tricks.

I have re-read the reviews which distressed me. Of course, they are right, but somehow they seem to miss something; perhaps it is what I have put into the book, reading it: myself, my friends, acquaintances, and enemies in roles and situations that have been or could have been.

Dick Tyner.

A Way of Life

by Peter Wildeblood

18 sh., Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London.

A WAY OF LIFE is one of those rare books in which the realism of a documentary report is combined with the imaginative intensity usually found only in the novel. In this, his second book, Peter Wildeblood has taken as his theme the «No-Man's Land» which exists between crime and respectability. It is a territory which has been explored by no other writer, and the characters who inhabit it are instantly recognisable as real people, although their counterparts are not to be found anywhere else in contemporary literature.

In AGAINST THE LAW, Mr. Wildeblood put the case for a change in the legal attitude towards homosexuality, basing his arguments on his own experience of prosecution and imprisonment. In his new book, he examines this problem in greater detail, and concludes that the state of the law is not the only factor that prevents homosexuals from playing their full part in the life of the community. He believes that concessions must be made on both sides; by the homosexual himself, no less than by men and women of normal instincts. To illustrate this point, he presents a series of frank and sometimes moving portraits of sexual misfits, examining their individual difficulties in finding a way of life in which their own needs may be reconciled with those of the society in which they live.

Mr. Wildeblood's first book showed that he was a writer of distinctive quality; A WAY OF LIFE is a merciless exposure of social attitudes, written with the same astringent candour and warm humanity that made AGAINST THE LAW one of the most widely-praised books of 1955.

Anglo-Saxon Attitudes

by Angus Wilson

15sh, Secker & Warburg, London.

The weakness of «Hemlock and After», Angus Wilson's first novel was the central character, a broken creature; in his second novel «Anglo-Saxon Attitudes» I think Mr. Wilson has found an entirely credible as well as weak-strong and likeable hero or Hamlet-Oedipus with a genuinely horrible wife, period mistress, and three rather less convincing children. One of these, the clay-footed demagogue John Middleton, is a secret homosexual and through him we enter Mr. Wilson's inevitable rogues' gallery. The young Irish boy (malicious hysteric) is very well observed, languid «Vin» Salad a paler version of «Ron» in «Hemlock and After», and there are the usual comic «chars» found in attendance on homosexual households. But John Middleton is himself unconvincing: his character does not seem to me to explain his homosexuality and I consider that he is the weakest figure in the book.

(From «The Sundry Times»).

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