

A nasty piece of work

by LORNA SAGE

NOVELS

HELEN WYKHAM'S Ribstone Pippins is not a nice book; its energies are of the cackling, demonic variety, and its author has scant enough regard for the fictional decencies to name her horrid adolescent heroine after herself. One can see why—Helen Wykham is a marvellous name for her purposes, it sounds like the shy, sly governesses in nineteenth-century romances who (like Jane Eyre) are bursting with malicious humour and emotional greed. This heroine is disgracefully privileged and well fed, but otherwise the role fits—the unnoticed spectator (in this instance, voyeur) of other people's elaborate entanglements, left to stew frustratedly in her own juices until she conjures herself an identity and a dark lover out of the mess. Plain, plump Helen, who lives in her head, fumbles when spoken to, and reads detective stories in the lavatory to escape the last waltz, proves to be a more devious hater and a more perverse and versatile lover than anyone, in the end.

The fire-and-ice of romance would pall, though (dissolve into brimstone and treacle), were it not for the weird comedy of the world presented to Helen's rapacious consciousness. The whole breathless intrigue takes place at a protracted house party in the Dublin mountains, among the drunken, inbred Catholic gentry, and that affords opportunities for some grand caricatures that probably aren't:—

But if the boy doesn't breed he's the last of that line, and we ought to get out of it. Heir is only a second cousin, and they've married out now for two generations. No sign of the sickness but they're soft in the head, not like the boy at all. He's bright enough, God knows. And could woo Gabriel with his music, like his uncle—the one that went under the 7.47 for Rugby at Tring cutting. Wrote psalm settings. S.J., of course, like Francis will be.

Miss Wykham tempers the emotional storms, the gross and lyrical things, with bitchy asides ('he looked like a forgotten martyr in the worst period for stained glass') which remind us sharply that indulging oneself is no reason for indulging other people. Not a nice book. Helen Wykham is one of those girls who are made of slugs and snails and puppy dogs' tails. And don't grow out of it, thank heaven. 'Ribstone Pippins' has some wilfully turgid passages, but it's clever and urgent and uncompromisingly individual—the way first novels ought to be, and so seldom are.

RIBSTONE PIPPINS by Helen Wykham (Allen Figgis/Caldor and Boyars £2.50)

THE RAIN FOREST by Olivia Manning (Heinemann £2.50)

POST OFFICE by Charles Bukowski (London Magazine Editions £2.50)

NECESSARY OBJECTS by Lois Gould (Cassell £2.50)



Helen Wykham:
'Uncompromisingly individual.'

Olivia Manning writes for the grown-ups. The Rain Forest is about weary, inhibited people whose passions seem to have flowed away into small, obscure channels and evaporated—Government officials and their wives rigid with inertia in an island remnant of the Empire. Their tenure is nearly at an end; unable to stay or go with conviction, they live in a misty limbo, punctuating the days with ritual irritations and petty squabbles. New comers—the youngish couple at the centre of the story—have no place in this, and recoil from it, yet their desultory adventures outside the pale, among the motley, much-divided islanders, make them, too, feel enervated and powerless. No one belongs: the Arabs came as traders, the Africans as slaves, the Indians as shopkeepers, the British as colonial administrators. They are all kinds of parasite, distorted into queer, corrupt, fungoid shapes whose growing and dying seem indistinguishable.

Miss Manning is a nervous, exact, intimate writer and she traces the processes of decay

in such detail that the final violence comes as a shock, though you've watched it happening all along. The setting is garish, but the colour is there to show up the drabness, the minute moods and stages of defeat. Her central characters are the sort who just miss farce or tragedy, people doomed to survive and understand, at least a little. They're confused, sensitive, rather charmless, and she likes them for precisely that lack of heroism. It's their irremediable greyness which allows her to be so wryly discerning.

Such painful attention to the workings of time is not Charles Bukowski's style. Post Office is in the innocent tradition of the picaresque, cunning, relentlessly joky, sad without being any the wiser. More particularly, it's reminiscent of J. P. Donleavy's ranting pace, though with less whimsy and less real desperation. The hero, Hank Chinaski, props his daytime lives of girls and drink and gambling on his various jobs for the Los Angeles Post Office, whose stiff reasonless routine provides a still point in the flux; and true to picaresque form, the only thing he learns in those 11 years with the US Mail is that it's the job (not the wine or the horses or the girls) that is his secret vice, and must stop.

Mr Bukowski, like his hero, seems to have a chronically episodic sensibility; though he writes a lot, this is his only novel so far, perhaps because he cannot bear to come back to things and pick up the threads. As Hank laments '... it wasn't the same, it never is—there was space between us, things had happened. I watched her walk to the bathroom, saw the wrinkles and folds under the cheeks of her ass ... it was sad, it was sad, it was sad.' But he's a practised mover-on.

Some patience you have to have, however. Lois Gould's Necessary Objects is so triumphantly dismissive about its quartet of silly, greedy women that they are hardly given a chance to exist at all. The wit echoes round the empty spaces, and comes out snappy, vicious and depressing. It's not a question of being kind, or loving your characters, but of finding them, at the least, interesting. Miss Wykham manages this, even at her nastiest, and with good reason: without the interest in those others, self-assertion simply doesn't work. Miss Gould seems talented, but she hasn't yet found anything to sharpen that talent on, and make it articulate.