

It Seems To Me

BY PETER SIMPLE

Honouring a Writer

I think that the public of Jamaica should appreciate the signal honour that has been done to Mr. Victor Reid. His name is not widely known in Jamaica, except among a small coterie of writers. He has sat quietly, as all real artists must sit, putting on to paper the pattern that his imagination has traced. To write a novel is a long and lonely task. The world in which the imagined characters live becomes more real than the physical earth, and the writer is divorced from the reality of daily life. Writers are usually irritable men, and with reason; they remain for long hours shut up within themselves, in an agony of concentration. Such self-centred immolation is necessary to their labours; it removes them from their immediate sphere. But when the endless work of the day is over, the writer has had a tremendous emotional experience, which exhausts and enervates him. The mere act of writing or typing thousands of words is something in itself; the mental strain is greater. It is amazing, when one knows the inertia that has to be overcome before a start is made, the labour that has to be performed in order to complete the day's toll of words, that so many writers complete the self-imposed task. The average work of fiction runs from eighty thousand to a hundred and twenty thousand words. Fluent writers can complete a novel in a matter of months; a serious artist may take a year or two or three. And this strange breed of martyrs undergoes this anguish for the sheer love of the work; for few authors ever see their books in print, and fewer make much more than enough out of many months of agonised drudgery to pay the typist's bill.

Why, then, does a writer continue to write? The answer is that he is obliged to do so. He is bound to obey the compulsion of his nature. Behind his need for self-expression in the medium which he has chosen — or, more correctly, which has chosen him — are other motives: ambition, possibly, the desire to see himself in print and thus satisfy his ego, perhaps only the need, as real and as acute as hunger, to communicate. Every genuine creative artist desires an audience, even if it is only of one understanding person. And one may cynically add that few who make the attempt ever achieve more than the attention of an admiring circle of friends.

Victor Reid has had some amazing good luck. His novel has not yet been published in book form; I am not sure that it has been offered to a publisher. But he has had the remarkable good fortune to meet someone who recognises his talent, and, furthermore, has the desire and the ability to publish it to the world. Thus, he finds himself famous, within the limited sphere of a literary magazine. He has been given great prominence in "Life and Letters"; a large portion of Mr. Robert Herring's editorial in the March issue is devoted to his work. He is likely to achieve publication for his novel in book form as the result of the recognition he has already received.

Personally, I cannot, as bidden by Mr. Herring, judge the quality of the entire book from this extract. I need the whole canvas in order to estimate the atmosphere, the form, the design and the achievement of the picture. But that the writing has quality there is no doubt. It is written in a queer idiom. Mr. Herring seems to think that it is the genuine dialect of the native Jamaican. It is not. It is his speech and his manner of speaking highly formalised, so that it is recognisable but stylised. I will give you a sample. The book is written in the first person, and spans a considerable period of time in the life history of a man old in 1944.

"An old man now, me. Many years are a-bank the flame that was John Campbell. And down the passage of them years, many doors ha' opened. Some of them ha' let in rich barbecues of joyousness, with good things covering the bottom of the pot of life, and ha' no thorns there for give you pain. Others have opened into butteries of hell, and me soul ha' been scarred with the fires".

This is not Jamaican as Jamaican is spoken. Mr. Reid has wisely eschewed dialect, which would be incomprehensible outside his own country, and has worked out a formula of his own, based upon the argot of the country, but not that argot itself. It is Jamaican transmuted through the poet's crucible. Does it convey an authentic idea of Jamaican, translate the imagined creature into flesh and blood and spirit? I do not know; an extract, however generous, cannot answer the question. But without doubt this is an original and genuine act of creation, and if Mr. Reid is lucky to find so enthusiastic a sponsor Mr. Herring is no less fortunate in his rendezvous with one of the few creative prose writers in Jamaica to-day or any day.

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