Balancing the Books

The Simpler the Better

By Father John S. Kennedy

BROOKS ATKINSON

There are two kinds of stories in the latest collection of short fiction by Sean O'Faolain, "The Talking Trees" (Atlantic-Little, Brown. $6.95). One kind is simple; the other, complex. The simple stories are far more impressive than the complex.

The first story in the collection is of the simple sort. Called "The Planets of the Years," it tells of a young Irishwoman recently married to an Irishman who is a visiting lecturer at Harvard. She is alone and lonely in the big house in Cambridge which has been loaned to the couple. On a dreary, rather menacing day in winter, she has a pair of callers, an old Irishwoman who years earlier had been a servant in this house, and the old woman's niece.

Nothing much happens. But a mood is created, and feelings are released. An effect is subtly yet surely achieved. What the narrator experiences is shared by e v e r y sensitive reader.

In contrast, there is the elaborate contrivance of stories like "Brainsy" and "Of Sanctity and Whiskey." Both of these are laid in the desolate Irish town of Coonlahan, and center in a school conducted by religious brothers.

In "Brainsy," an alcoholic failure takes a teaching post in the school when all other employment eludes him. There he meets again a schoolmate of years ago. The schoolmate, who was once his closest friend, is now a religious brother and quite unrecognizable. The two have always taken contrasting attitudes, and such still proves to be the case.

In "Of Sanctity and Whiskey," another alcoholic, but this time a modestly successful painter, comes to Coonlahan to do the portrait of the brother who is headmaster. The artist once attended the school, and has unpleasant memories of the brother, who seems at first not to remember him. The portrait is to be a permanent tribute to the headmaster, but the artist turns it into his own revenge upon the man.

These pieces have many clever touches, and Mr. O'Faolain can never be charged with sloppy work. He puts the parts neatly together, and makes the whole thing move like clockwork. But such admiration as is evoked is for mechanical craftsmanship. Emotion is missing, feelings are not stirred.

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Brooks Atkinson was drama critic for the New York Times for 30 years (1925-1955). He was respected as a perceptive and honest evaluator of the Broadway stage. In the years since his retirement, the Times has had but one drama critic of comparable stature, Walter Kerr, and at present the kind of daily criticism which Mr. Atkinson provided is completely lacking.

Now there c o m e s from Brooks Atkinson a big book called "Broadway" (Macmillan. $12.50), which covers the New York theater in the 70 years between the beginning of the century and the present.

It will delight any one interested in the theater, for it is living history. Not only does it supply us with information; it shows trends, charts developments. Also, it categorizes and pronounces judgment. Still again, it provides a succession of speaking likenesses of players, directors, producers, theatres, not to forget playwrights and critics.

And of course it is crisply written, with wit and pervasive charm. Mr. Atkinson always had high standards and admirable taste, but he was never fierce. He could tellingly dismiss inferior work without savaging it or its perpetrators. It is pleasant indeed to be hearing from him again.

Henri Charriere's "Papillon" (Morrow. $8.95) is evidently not destined to repeat in the United States the sensational success which it has had in Europe. There, in translation after translation and country after country, it has sold prodigiously. But here, despite much ballyhoo, it is yet to command much interest.

It purports to be the autobiography of a man unjustly condemned to a French penal colony in this hemisphere in 1931. He says that he made a series of nine escapes, only to be repeatedly recaptured, until, in 1945, he got successfully away and established himself in Venezuela.

The book is an account of the horrors of the penal settlements, the ingenious devices by which escape was effected, the rigors of existence for a man fleeing his hunters, and the rewards of the new life he finally managed to make for himself.

Mr. Charriere's veracity has been seriously contested. Books have been written to prove the impossibility of many of his claims. Even without the evidence which his challengers offer, the discriminating reader concludes, on the internal evidence of the book, that much of it is fabricated.

The style is crude, the manner coarse. Mr. Charriere protests too much and too loudly.

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A book which won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award a few months ago is now available in paperback, and is a great bargain at $1.95. I mean T. Harry Williams' exhaustive but always lively biography, "Huey Long" (Bantam Books). Long has been dead for 35 years, but his career is still highly instructive for anyone concerned about American political life, and Mr. Williams has provided a masterly, as well as entertaining, recreation of it.

Downtowners Give For School Party

The children at St. Bridget's school had a party Dec. 21, courtesy of a loyal alumnus and many anonymous customers of the store where he works.

It was the eighth consecutive Christmas party provisioned by Neil Trama of the class of 1942, out of funds contributed at Heath Drugs, 141 South Clinton. Repeaters among the donors include a man who makes himself known as a 1901 graduate of St. Bridget's.

The money usually amounts to $400 to $500, Trama says so that there is enough left for other celebrations through the year.