Criticism of “Send Me Orchids”

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Criticism of “Send Me Orchids”

By Eric Knight

This is, in many ways, one of the best stories that I’ve received through the class. For it is an attempt at a clear-eyed picture of a phase of life—or one person in it.

Usually people in college can’t write fiction about university life, because they are too immersed in its youthfulness to get any mature attitude toward that life. But here is a very fine picture of a girl in college, who has distinct dimensions. She is a pest, a cheat to herself, obnoxious, and yet somehow very pathetic in her emptiness. And, what is more, she is a close enough parallel to reality to be an artistic credibility.

But to reveal one character is more of a sketch—a character sketch—than a short story. That is a definition and not necessarily a drawback.

You do several things that make for weakness.

For instance, you fall into the old trap of ducking your own self-proposed problem. You have the girl about to tell a story. You give her actual words as she starts talking of it. Then you get out from under and say to the reader that she’s told the story at great length. That’s cheating. Subconsciously the reader also wants to hear that story, and you’ve fooled him. It is something like the motion picture where the hero is a painter, and is working on what is always known as his “masterpiece.” Other characters come in and stand before the picture and rave over it. All through the film, all we ever see is the back of the canvas, with people yapping before it and admiring it as the painter dabs at it. It goes on ad nauseum, until spiritually tortured, we almost kill ourselves with a repressed desire to reach out to the screen and turn the canvas round so that we, too, can see this miraculous canvas.

You must work on dialog. You have it all right as to color and words, but the technique of putting it down so that the reader will know who is talking is important.

Most of all, you must make Paulina perfectly clear always. I like her drifting off about the Annapolis boy; I like her defense about her father. I want to feel truly the tragedy of a girl pre-
serving her front in a harsh society and fighting tooth and nail not to suffer the shame of having no man on the campus ready to take her.

Your ending is good—it snaps off at the right place. There are dozens of things in this story that are “right.” They are “right” in the literary way that is so instantly recognized and is so tremendously hard to explain. It is almost a “writing sense” that makes us put in the right phrases at the right places. That’s where you go well.

So write a thing from your innate senses; but edit it from your cold brain.

A Review of Don Jackson’s “Archer Pilgrim”

TO MANY persons in American literature Don Jackson’s “Archer Pilgrim,” published late in April, may be a “white hope.” For nearly ten years now there have been voices in the wilderness crying out for a new realism in American literature, one which encompasses something of life beside the sordid, bleak and hopeless.

Other “voices” have anticipated a new literature, to come, they thought, from the Middlewest.

“Archer Pilgrim” is the answer to both these groups. It is, in the first place, a serious attempt at presenting farm life in all its aspects, realistically and beautifully. And it is notably successful in that attempt.

The first section, dealing with nine-year-old Arch, contains some of the best writing in the book. This sensitive little boy, whose love for farming is discouraged by his parents and laughed at by his best friend Grover, who plans to be an engineer, is one of the finest children’s characterizations I have ever read, and one of the most touching.

The second section, dealing with Arch’s failure at college, after he had been forced to attend against his will, of his “success” as a small town garage operator, and of his failure at marriage, is probably less good. The character of Marian, the wife, is less well-done than the others, and is one of the few indications that this is a first novel.

Jackson’s style is restrained, not the lush, wild sort we have been accustomed to from young writers. He has something to say. And he says it.

—Jean Ross