

Sunday Magazine

A Mixed Bag

A TIME TO BE HAPPY: By Nayantara Sahgal, (Sterling, Rs. 7)

FORBIDDEN BRIDE: By Promilla Kalhan (Sterling, Rs. 4)

THE CROCODILE'S LADY: By Manoj Das (Sterling, Rs. 5.50)

COMPULSION: By Veena Nagpal (Sterling, Rs. 7)

THE quality of Indian writing in English can be a matter of dispute, but there is no doubt about its growing quantity. Here are three new books, and a re-issue of Ms. Nayantara Sahgal's first novel (reproduced directly from the original American edition complete with the glossary and the note on printing. "This book was composed, printed, and bound by the Plimpton Press, Norwood, Massachusetts). The printing and get up of the other books are not very good, and the blurbs are poorly written, aiming only at sensationalism.

A Time to be Happy is notable for its descriptions of upper-class life in a past era, immediately before Independence—the untroubled, artistic Lucknow aristocrat, the annual summer excursion to the hills, and the monotonous life of the English club. Though the nameless narrator is rather shadowy (I had read almost 30 pages before I realised that it was a man!), the other characters are memorable: Sanad, a product of Western education in India, at home nowhere; his father Govind Narayan, the typical Lucknow landowner clinging to the privileges he has enjoyed in the past; Kunti Behan, the enthusiastic Congress worker who has a puritanical distrust of comfort and beauty; Weatherby, the Englishman who

has spent decades in India without getting to know the country or anything in it; or Sir Barilal Mathur, trying to be more English than the English. Ms. Sahgal has an admirable command of the language, but no story to tell; the novel is just a string of episodes. Remarks like, "The reader will forgive me if here, as in the past, I bring in a little of my own history" do not help. Her chief preoccupation is with the rootlessness of the Westernised Indian, personified by Sanad. But one must remember that this is Ms. Sahgal's first novel, and she has gone on to better novels like **Storm in Chandigarh**.

"Stunningly bold and pathetic" proclaims the cover of **Forbidden Bride**. The blurb-writer did not mean it, but the novel is indeed pathetic. It is a poorly written sermon on village improvement projects in the Punjab. "The villagers had risked their lives to reach milk and food to the jawans in their trenches not far away" is a representative sample of the book's style. It is not merely the language which is unsatisfactory; the thinking is also shallow.

Ms. Kalhan equates progress with girls using lipstick and wearing bellbottoms and leggings and marrying boys from the same village. Jasbir, who is in love with Sharan and cannot marry her because she is from the same village, dies in an accident. Their parents allow his sister Soni and Sharan's brother to marry and go away to Canada along with Sharan. There Sharan marries an Indian doctor and they collect money to visit the village and build a hospital named after Jasbir. Thus ends the depiction of the

"freshness, innocence and passion of youthful love".

Mr. Manoj Das is an excellent storyteller. A wide variety of short stories (published earlier in magazines and anthologies) have been collected in **The Crocodile's Lady**. Some of them, such as "Man Who Lifted a Mountain", "Operation Bride" and "The Last I Heard of Them" remind one of the traditional folk-tale. Other stories deal with current social conditions; "The Night the Tiger Came" is a good satirical sketch of the chief engineer and other officials in a small industrial colony, when they imagine that a tiger is stalking them. There is compassion behind the irony which shows the pretensions as well as the frustrations of petty officialdom. Mr. Das's stories dealing with children are particularly good. There is nothing self-conscious about his language. One is hardly aware that Mr. Das is writing in English and not in some other Indian language.

Compulsion by Ms. Veena Nagpal is a readable book to while away an afternoon, though it reminds one too much of **The Carpetbaggers** type of bestseller. It is the story of Chandu who rises to wealth by exploiting the corruption in society. The hero is made ruthless by circumstances, but has a softer side to his character as is shown in his love for Bina, the daughter of the honest Sajjan Singh who takes him into his house. **Compulsion** is much better than Ms. Nagpal's earlier novel, **Karmayogi**, a completely incredible account of a single honest man reforming the whole country.

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