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BOOKS READERS LIKE BEST

By William D. Patterson

Paton

A continuing survey is made among readers of The Saturday Review to ascertain what books they are reading and which they like best. The object of the survey is not to discover what books are best-sellers but to learn what books are actually being enjoyed by readers, and why. The column below is based on the results of a comprehensive poll conducted among discriminating readers throughout the country.

—The Editors

Out of South Africa has come another notable novel by Alan Paton, the shy, withdrawn, inseeing man who has looked into the hearts of his countrymen, both black and white, and distilled literature out of what he has observed there.

"Too Late the Phalarope" is his second book, and it has all the tragic power and eloquence of his memorable first novel, "Cry, the Beloved Country." Five years in the writing, Paton's new book was well worth waiting for, and this week it soared to the top of The Saturday Review's list of books being most widely read and enjoyed from coast to coast. Other best-readers were:

"Annapurna," by Maurice Herzog (Dutton). A true and thrilling account of the French conquest of the second highest peak ever scaled by men.

"Jefferson Selleck," by Carl Jonas (Little, Brown). A modern novel of a businessman's life and the values he has lived by, pathetic, searching and tender.

"Westward the Sun," by Geoffrey Cotterell (Lippincott). A witty novel of manners, British and American, that is full of chuckles and barbed comment.

"East of Eden," by John Steinbeck (Viking). One of our finest authors has written a powerful, panoramic novel of the American scene.

"The Devils of Loudun," by Aldous Huxley (Harper). The fantastic history of the martyrdom of a 17th-century French Jesuit priest and the events that grew out of it.

"A Man Called Peter," by Catherine Marshall (McGraw-Hill). The biography of a great modern minister, told with frankness and affection by his wife.

Because he regards the Negro as a fellow human being, Alan Paton is himself viewed with ~~dislike~~ and open hostility by the Afrikaners of South Africa. Yet in his new novel he has probed deeper and more sympathetically into the minds of these stout, stubborn descendants of the original Dutch settlers than any Afrikaner author has done. It is ironic that Paton, through the evocative, understanding power of his pen, should give American readers their clearest insight yet into the life values of the modern Boer, an insight that is as noble and generous as it is tragic and disheartening.

(MORE)

"Too Late the Phalarope" is an intense, compelling exploration of a single family, searching their innermost being to find the roots of the thoughts and attitudes that finally drove them to self-destruction.

At the heart of the book is Pieter Van Vlaanderen, son of the leading family of a small Transvaal town. Football hero and police lieutenant, a handsome, sensitive, complex young man, Pieter is both the maker and the victim of the tragedy which from the very first page of Paton's novel tolls like a knell over the little world of his family and town. The story is simple, the ending foreordained, yet it is told with great suspense, holding the reader relentlessly in its grip until the inexorable end.

Pieter, son of a stern father and gentle mother, is the idol of the town, and yet is at war within himself. Gripped by powerful sexual urges, sensitive to beauty, but restrained by the rigid, austere code of his father, Pieter finally is tempted by and succumbs to a sultry young Negress. In South Africa this is the unforgivable sin. To the Afrikaner it is a desecration of the flesh and blood of one of God's chosen peoples to be intimate with a soulless member of the black race. The most loathsome of all sins and crimes is miscegenation.

The despair and shame and terror of Pieter when he faces his sin in the secrecy of his home are as moving to the reader as they are shattering to young Van Vlaanderen. He has not been discovered, so he tries to avoid the Negress, but he succumbs again and again until finally they are found out. From here on the story rolls with unbearable poignancy to its tragic end.

Written in the Biblical rhythms with which the rigid, church-going Boers speak, Paton's novel is a thing of great stylistic beauty. It has the resonant, sonorous tones necessary to tragedy, yet it moves with grace at all times.

Paton is one of the few living authors writing at the level of literature today, and this second novel, like the first, leaves the reader profoundly stirred by the experience shared with the author, and anxious to see the next work from the pen of this strange man.

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THE AUTHOR

Born in 1903 in Natal, South Africa, Alan Paton has divided his life between service and writing. He has taught at college, supervised a reformatory for African delinquents and lectured widely on penal reform.

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ALAN PATON

At the reformatory he introduced many improvements. It was said of him that he "pulled up the barbed wire fence and planted geraniums."

(MORE)

Both he and his wife feel a responsibility to "give" themselves at regular intervals to public service. They are now working at a sanatorium and settlement in Botha's Hill, Natal, to help Africans who have been ill with TB to return to normal life. They are also working in the Liberal Party **with the aim** of achieving more enlightened race relations in South Africa.

Paton writes only when an idea obsesses him, and then he stops everything else until the book is finished. He brooded for five years before the theme and form of "Too Late the Phalarope" finally crystallized and compelled him to write it. His next book will come on no schedule, but only when he has been "seized" by it.

—W.D.P.

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