

# The Bunyip Stays Comeback

AND TRAVEL  
TOURS AND TRAVEL  
TRANS WORLD  
WORLD TRAVEL HERE  
present  
1937 TRANS WORLD  
AMERICA  
A New Era  
at D... ..

From time to time the mythical Australian monster, the bunyip, stirs in his swamps or mountain gullies. For a few weeks some little township is terrified by mysterious bellowing at night, by the tracks of some large beast discovered by day. Dogs howl. Cattle disappear. Men carry shotguns and women lock their bedroom doors.

WHEN it is discovered that the bunyip was just an outside wild dog, a mad bull or, in one case, a sea-going crocodile that had strayed too far south. The scare is over. But the legend of the bunyip persists. Some day he really will appear and ravage Recedy Creek or Upper Coolangabooloo. The bunyip of Australian literature is the mythical great Australian novel. From time to time we hear that it has appeared at last. Publishers hold a special corroboree. Rival novelists lock their doors and say their prayers. Critics reach for their shotguns. Very soon the excitement dies down as it is perceived that this is, after all, just another novel. Mr. Patrick White's publishers are therefore naturally cautious. "The Tree of Man," they say, has many of the qualities of the great novel.



PACKET WHITE

But the word has got around that Mr. White's book is, in fact, the genuine bunyip. For one thing it is very big. And at first sight it has all the earmarks which traditionally distinguish the great Australian novel. The pattern is all too familiar. It is a story of pioneering. It is a family saga. It contains a flood, a drought and a bushfire. It describes for our enjoyment the humours of life and character in a little bush community, with the conventional sympathetic treatment of the battlers on the land and the unsympathetic treatment of those who are rich enough not to have to battle. There is, of course, a comic Irishman. There is even the rescue of a beautiful girl from a burning homestead and there is the lonely woman in the bush at the mercy of the chance wayfarer—only he is a commercial traveller, this time, instead of the swaggie or bushranger of 50 years ago. All it lacks is the tale of the child lost in the bush. He is there, of course, but he has been changed into a boy lost in the floods. As a matter of fact, none of these things is of any importance and the book is not about them. I cannot tell why Mr. White should have chosen to dispense his novel in the old bunyip skin. What he is writing about has nothing essentially to do with Australia, or with pioneering, or with the pattern of country life. It is the story of the simple characters who impress us by

lives of a simple man and woman such as you could find anywhere in the world, in any walk of life and perhaps in any grade of society. Nothing much happens to them. They take up land in the bush many miles from Sydney and establish a reasonably prosperous dairyfarm. A little settlement grows up around them. They have two children. The boy turns out badly. The girl moves to the city, marries a solicitor and rises in the world. There are grandchildren. The man and his wife grow old and die.

### Portrait Of Two Lives

THERE is, in fact, no story, no plot in the ordinary sense. It is simply the portrait of two lives, the random pattern of life itself observed and imagined with passionate and tender concern and touched with a sense of the mystery of all living. It is this which redeems and explains Mr. White's massive depiction of the commonplace. In spite of some serious defects of manner, he really has, as his publishers claim, one essential of the great novelist: the ability to create real people and a real world for them to live in. He has what the Australian novel largely lacks, the power to present people who are important to us in themselves, chief

THE TREE OF MAN, by Patrick White.—Eyre and Spottiswoode, London. 22s 6d.

something out of the common order—in this case, integrity. Integrity is as rare and exciting a quality as genius or beauty and Mr. White can both depict it and show its secret cause with that touch of the tragic which must always attend the depiction of what is rare and great in human life. The book is hardly a novel for it has no action in the Aristotelian sense. It is none the worse for that, for it shows something more fundamental than mere plot is capable of revealing. For all that, it is not a successful book. Mr. White has three disastrous faults as a novelist: He knows too much, he tells too much and he talks too much. A novelist who knows too much about his characters, who gives the impression that every detail of their lives and thoughts is an open book to him is in danger of making them seem contrived. If he tells all he knows he is in danger of being tedious. It is the fallacy of the modern psychological novel that people become more real and vivid by being turned inside out. Mr. White has fallen right into this trap and, if his principal characters succeed at all, it is in spite of his irritating and persistent omniscience. But worse than this, he is the victim of his own ingenuity and loquacity. The novelist needs a plain style, a clear, easy stride, a good open texture of language to carry him to the end of his path.

### Pursuit Of A Delusion

SOMETIMES, when Mr. White forgets his darling artifices, he achieves this; but for the most part he tries to write a novel as though he were writing poetry, and lyric poetry at that. It is one of the delusions of our time that novels can be written in this way. The imagery, the devices of poetry are effective because they are wedded to metre. Practised in prose they look absurd and pretentious. It is also very tedious to have to read a prose lyric of 500 pages in which the sharp edge of poetic phrase, the flicker in prose they look absurd and pretentious. However delightful at first, it produces in time irritation, then torture and finally a numbness of the brain. Mr. White cannot describe a character drinking a cup of tea without making a poetic image of it: "Down through him wound the long ribbon of warm tea. He felt glad." He cannot simply say that a man was thirsty. It has to be: "... his ordinarily moist and thoughtful mouth, fixed in the white scales of thirst." As one might expect, all his golden words are spent long before he comes to passages of intense feeling and, trying to go one better, he achieves this sort of thing: "But his body was flooding her with tolerance. They

## BOOKS of the WEEK

flowed together in the darkness. The coasts of tenderness opened to admit their craft. Sleep swam out to meet them, from under the trees." It makes one pine for the old-fashioned row of asterisks. A great deal of the book is written in what I believe was once called "experimental prose." The sentence is abandoned as a unit; instead we have detached phrases masquerading as sentences or even as paragraphs. Most of the book has a jerky, staccato movement reminiscent of Hemingway, but even more of Hemingway's master and original, the immortal Mr. Alfred Jingle. When the author condescends to write an ordinary sentence it often turns out like this: "She was, after all, pretty or feverish; holding her neck high, which was too thin certainly, as she sat gathering crumbs with correct fingers." Or like this: "It was fortunate for Mrs. O'Dowd that life itself is higger-mugger. And transient. Breaking into small pieces, of which her eyes were for ever taking stock, and never seeing enough, most likely, they were restless and black." Well, I still hope to see the bunyip before I die. It might even be Mr. Patrick White who produces it; but not till he learns that, whatever life may be like, the English language is neither higger-mugger nor transient and that it is never safe to break it into small pieces as a means of writing a novel. When so few Australian novelists can write prose at all, it is a great pity to see Mr. White, who shows on every page some touch of the horn writer, deliberately choose as his medium this pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge.



Hammurabi, King of Babylon. Confucius, about 500 B.C. King Charles II of England.



A feudal monarch protects a tenant.



THESE light-hearted illustrations are among several hundred drawings in "Blood Royal," by Iain Moncreiffe and Don Pottinger (Nelson, London, 20s 9d). Although most of the drawings are humorous, this is a scholarly work and a worthy successor to the authors' "Simple Heraldry."