

*Seven days at the Silbersteins* by Etienne Leroux, translated by Charles Eglinton. W. H. Allen, 21s

*Watcher in the Park* by Marianne Sinclair. Jonathan Cape, 22s 6d

*Andy* by Geoffrey Dutton. Collins, 25s

"No such farm as Welgevonden exists. All the characters are imaginary. The events are improbable": so we are told at the beginning of *Seven days at the Silbersteins*. Well, surface improbability has long been a mirror for deeper and denser truths, and in any case the surface events of the story are almost balletic, patterns rather than happenings.

This is an extraordinary book, extraordinarily translated from the Afrikaans. Translation of comedy, especially of comedy as "atmospheric," as allusive as this, is something that seems almost impossible: for if the world it evokes is Afrikaans, and deeply, basically so, then to evoke that same world in English is more than you can normally expect of language. But here the translator, Charles Eglinton, has somehow managed to do it. He is a poet, and perhaps he simply put one poem into another—certainly the book reads like an entirely autonomous work, owing nothing to an original other.

The seven days are preliminary to a wedding. A rich young man, a rich girl, an arranged and suitable mating in a setting of scarcely imaginable splendour and self-containment: these are merely the glittering outside people and place, the recognisable symbols of events much deeper in memory and consciousness. Realism is irrelevant: what one has is the sense of an atmosphere, a way of life, breathed and accepted and lived in; what one feels, almost on the skin, is its physical detail, warmth, luxury, flavours, clothes; also danger and wildness, the enormous outside pressing in upon its festivities. Most South African writing has, inevitably, a whiff of polemics about it, of the literary tract. This one goes beyond and outside such things, into the more dangerous parts of the mind.

It can be read at all sorts of levels, lightly or darkly. It is comedy of intense seriousness, about the most central parts of life, obliquely and shimmeringly observed.

Marianne Sinclair's *Watcher in the Park* is a beautifully observed and staidly described account of the relationship between a ten-year-old called Pamela and a grubby, inadequate man called Fritz. Nothing much, in the legal sense, happens between them; nothing like what Pamela tells the police and half comes to believe herself. He gives her

cakes and Kit-Kats and money, takes her to his flat for playful and finally slightly vicious scuffles in which she is rather more the leader than he is, and ends in prison for it; and Pamela, the practised, pathological liar, goes back to the park in a new dress, and new men sit on Fritz's bench there.

There is no disgust about this very plain narrative, and little explanation or comment. Everything about it is unadorned and satisfactory: we learn about the lives of two twisted people, the minds of two outcasts. They come together as aggressor and victim because their neuroses interlock perfectly; for a short time they make a small world, in which everything suits their purposes. But we know enough about paedophilia these days to know that the child is often accomplice as well as victim, her attacker often victim as well, as aggressor, and victim as much of the child as of his own temperament. And in this story it is Pamela, healthy-looking and

touching and credible, who is in fact the aggressor, and Fritz, with his nasty record and lurid looks and his unformed, absurd desires, who is her victim, finally caught and banished from the society that has always, in every way that counts, excluded him.

The hero of *Andy* at first sight looks like an adult's Australian Biggles, with girls and four-letter words to take his adventures out of the schoolboy class (there's a whiff of the *Boys' Own Paper* about the jacket, even). But there's no more to him than that. Andy loves flying and hates authority; the first makes him a superb pilot, the second keeps landing him in trouble. Tying the various adventures together is his time in a detention camp during the war, for servicemen who have barked their shins against the rules. Andy and his friend the long-suffering, much-led-astray Ian are anything but stage-Aussies; but a randy, youthful, open-aired Australia comes across.