

Nathalie Colby's New Novel Is a Caustic Social Study

BLACK STREAM. By Nathalie Sedgwick Colby. 314 pp. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$2.50.

MRS. COLBY is already spoken of admiringly as the author of "Green Forest" not the finest, but possibly the most brilliant first novel of the year. Here was a novel which, among other things, could use the most modern devices in fiction technique, and exhaust their psychological possibilities without for an instant lessening its narrative intensity as a story. The familiar setting of an Atlantic liner, the familiar types aboard it, came to life again under Mrs. Colby's fresh and penetrating survey.

In "Black Stream" she chooses a familiar setting once more, a Mrs. Wharton setting. "Black Stream" is a story of rich New Yorkers, a social tangle of lives centring about two families who live across the street from one another. Mrs. Colby, who needed only a week as the time elapsing in "Green Forest" has improved upon herself in "Black Stream" and made everything take place within 24 hours. It is a critical 24 hours in the lives of these people: a tremendous piling up of happenings.

These people themselves are an assortment. There is Dr. Farraday, a brilliant scientist, a great man, whose dreams and hopes have foundered on the rock of family demands and social aspirations. There is his wife Emmy, who is stupid, who is selfish, who is worldly and who is weak. There is his daughter Agatha, shrewd enough in her way, but at the moment com-

pletely absorbed in trying to marry a Russian refugee prince. There is his second daughter Mary Ellen, a lovable and intelligent girl who sympathizes with her father. There is his son Penny, deeply in love with Enid Brazee across the street, but so generally incompetent that he most of the time needs his mother's and older sister's help. And there is Dr. Farraday's assistant, Miss Mapes, indefatigable, beautiful, where he is concerned impassioned—who works with him in his laboratory.

Across the street are the three Brazees—Jim Brazee, a great gambler in Wall Street, whom wealth and society have turned into something inscrutable and indifferent; Madeline, the wife who loves him while she dabbles in young musicians and pushes upward socially; and his daughter Enid, hopelessly in love with a married man she had had an affair with, and loved in turn by Penny Farraday.

Such are the characters for this day of breathless events—a day focused upon Agatha Farraday's debut party of the evening. All these characters meet with crises. Penny succeeds in marrying the overwrought Enid; Dr. Farraday succeeds, finally, in his great experiment; Miss Mapes is discovered to have been the mistress of one of Penny's friends in Paris during the war; Dr. Farraday has an almost fatal breakdown and avows his love to Miss Mapes, who is later ordered out of the house by his wife; Jim Brazee's fortune goes to smash in Wall Street and he commits suicide. Yet all this happens to people

with whose thoughts and emotions we are in close communication.

Compared with "Green Forest" this is structurally a better book. The story in "Black Stream" is better concentrated, the characters are more genuinely interrelated, so that everything is more integral and less accidental in form. But this tightening of the bolts has its defects. Mrs. Colby has had to characterize a number of important people, she has had to place them (as in "Green Forest" she did not) in many basic and significant relationships with one another, and she has had to make a day in their lives a convincing expression of their lives. That is not easy to do with so many people, even granting the utility of flashbacks; and to do it Mrs. Colby has been forced to make her people pointed portraits done with sharp strokes on a canvas rather than human beings in the fluid maze of life. Her people, consequently, are recognizable in essentials from the start.

If comparison was inevitable between "Mrs. Dalloway" and "Green Forest" it is even more so between "Mrs. Dalloway" and "Black Stream." Mrs. Colby has no character in her new book suggesting Mrs. Dalloway, but more so than in "Green Forest" she has employed all of Virginia Woolf's conventions—the time-element of a single day, the focus upon an evening party, the same kind of narrative flow. And it is easy to see why "Mrs. Dalloway" is more successful. Mrs. Woolf is a more sensitive artist. But, leaving that aside, Mrs. Woolf devotes herself

to one person, and Clarissa Dalloway's whole past is summed up in a beautifully patterned story of one woman's life. Mrs. Colby tries in the space of a day, to give us the life of eight or ten characters. She lacks space for doing it. And so she carries the technique of "Mrs. Dalloway" beyond its natural limits, and encroaches without necessity upon the technique of the theatre.

These objections registered, one can only reiterate Mrs. Colby's poised and unusual talents. She has a fine gift of phrase, a fine perception of human nature, a fine artistic hardness. She has developed, too, more sense of feeling for her characters. In "Black Stream" she makes the society novel more biting than Mrs. Wharton does because, while she does not understand the mind of society so well, she perceives its underlying dangers better. The pathos of a Lily Bart, the ironic denial of a Newland Archer and a Countess Olenka cease to count, fundamentally, beside the tragedy of a Dr. Farraday, who must give up his heart's desires and a great career to keep his family in the social register. Not that Mrs. Colby does so unforgettably by him as Mrs. Wharton does by her creations. His tragedy is often neglected for a picture of its contributing causes—for too extensive a picture of them. Yet it is a picture which establishes Mrs. Colby as a novelist of brilliant potentialities. She has it in her to tear people devastatingly apart, and some day perhaps she will do so with a touch of greatness.

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