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uary 24, 1945 The New Statesman and Nation, February 24, 1945

## BOOKS IN GENERAL

PRE-FABRICATED ships, pre-fabricated houses—why not pre-fabricated literature? The question will be more alarming to readers than it is to writers. Plot-lifting, plagiarism and borrowing are common professional practice. Chaucer takes what he likes from Boccaccio, Shakespeare from Holinghad: the irreproachable George From Holinshed; the irreproachable George Bliot picks up the central episode of *The Heart of Midlothian* and lowers it into the middle of Adam Bede. The creative faculty feeds on excitement and when there is a dearth of personal discovery of the control of the adventure in a writer's life, professional larceny is equally stimulating. There have been novelists like the Abbé Prévost who made larceny their occupation, for his novels flow, as by a conveyor-belt, straight from English fiction into the French. may be objected that this is not true fabrication, but a kind of second-hand dealing. We know of famous writers like Dumas who "Put their work out"; is it not possible for a hovelist to "take work in," to be a kind of search! assembly plant where the parts are delivered and where all he has to do is to put them together? It is possible. It has been possible since 1928.
An American, Mr. William Wallace Cook, pub-An American, Mr. William Wallace Cook, published in that year a book called Plotto which set him up as the Kaiser or Ford of novel production. Mr. Cook was convinced that if you had the desire to write, you had the capacity to los so. Genius was the infinite capacity for taking pains; by taking pains—or rather by allowing Mr. Cook to take the pains for you—you might go a long way towards genius. "I could write a novel easily only I can never think of a plot "—Mr. Cook heard this familiar compaint and can then it touched the heart of the of a plot"—Mr. Cook heard this familiar complaint and saw that it touched the heart of the problem. With wonderful industry, he examined all the plots of fiction, classified them, indexed them, and created an intricate system of cross-reference by which one can build up the plots of any number of novels in the course of an evening. This plurality is, of course, unhappy. Embarrassment of choice is the weakness of Plotto—as he called his system—for we mean that we can think of only too many plots, when we say we can think of none. But Mr. Cook's principles were sound and they were not to be followed in any ignoble, mechanic or predatory

The Soul, with its human faculties which put it in immediate touch with the Universe, is a Divine Instrument, an Acolian Harp which is not played upon by the Winds of Chance, but by all the Winds of Destiny, that blow from the four quarters of Human Nature; and this music of the Soul is a Divine Harmony which the Creative Inagination, alone of the human faculties, interprets in Creative Art.

followed in any ignoble, mechanic or predatory

That could hardly be more handsome. achievement was to grasp the Aeolian

Harp and convert it into a pianola.
What is it that human beings chiefly desire? What is it that human beings check, the happiness, of course. But what kinds of happiness, of course and be covered in one and the happiness. Many more than can be covered in one work. dess? Many more than can be covered in one volume; a single factory cannot turn out every-laing. Mr. Cook decided that he must deal with only three kinds of happiness: happiness in lave, happiness in marriage, happiness through the success of an enterprise. A large body of faction would be comprehended in this choice. All commercial fiction would be included in it. Then he decided that the course of a good story may be defined in four words: Purpose, Obstacle Then he decided that the course of a good story may be defined in four words: Purpose, Obstacle leading to Conflict, and the Outcome. Hamlet have the purpose of avenging his father's death; he obstacle is his irresolution, conflicts with others ensue and all ends in dramatic misery. Mr. Cook's next step was to pick out a number of what he called masterplots. In each master-Mr. Cook's next step was to pick out a number of what he called masterplots. In each masterplot a protagonist is defined in general terms. In column A for example, we find No. 4, "an terring person"; in column B it is suggested "he falls into misfortune through mistaken ludgment"; in column C "he undertakes a

role that leads to catastrophe." What kind of misfortune? Look up the key figure 21, and again there is a general definition. Let us take the one called Transgression. The key number is 1295 and here the choice opens out. He can strike gold and not tell his partner; he can be an other than the extended that the exten outlaw; he can try to trick someone out of an estate; he can commit a crime, but a certain object, X, will continually remind him of it; object, X, will continually remind him of it; he can discover his employer is a fugitive from justice; he can be "a minister of the gospel who errs secretly on the human side." Further key numbers follow. The Minister A (see 68) may have "wronged B the woman he loved, but secretly, and A craftily retains his own high place in society, leaving B to bear the heartache and shame alone." Continuing our investigations, we can arrive indifferently at the place and share and sname aone. Comming our investigations, we can arrive indifferently at the plot and characters of "She was poor but she was honest" or the plot of *The Scarlet Letter*.

That is, as Mr. Cook saw, the snag. *Plotto* 

That is, as Mr. Cook saw, the snag. Plotto can provide you with everything except the things that make a writer. It can do everything but make you write. On the other hand, a novelist will and ought to stoop to anything. Henry James advised us always to be ready for "the germ" and Plotto is a veritable hospital of germs. It is a warehouse of bacilli. No. 9 is "a person suffering from adverse conditions is "a person suffering from adverse conditions and seeking to remedy them." He turns from 'a hoodlum into a gentleman overnight." buys a dress suit. Is his adversity due to weak-ness of character? Alas, he makes that ancient inevitable mistake: he "forms a platonic friend-Or is environment the trouble? ship." Or is environment the trouble? "He lives in a strange community which is ruled by an idol of Fear; or he seeks a community ruled by Fear, but finds it difficult to develop sufficient courage to accomplish his purpose." (Here is a parallel to the plot of Stevenson's The Suicide Club). At the end of three pages of suggestion I find this irresistible one. "A, impersonating a box is subject to the reach results for hele productions." boy, is subject to the rough pranks of male companions who do not suspect her true sex." Let us follow her, noting the reference numbers: "B in male attire is suddenly revealed to A,

the man she loves, in her true sex (220), (244), (264), (359). She had disguised herself in order to be near him." Alas, consult No. 220: (264), (359). She had disguised herself in order to be near him." Alas, consult No. 220: A's friends warn him against B. He resists her because all this dressing up indicates that she is "morally inferior." From this point many encouraging paths diverge. One is surprising: A, in order to guard himself against marriage, gives out that he has an invalid wife. To make his pretence convincing he buys the wax model of a sick woman and sits her in a chair by his window for everyone to see!

by his window for everyone to see!

Tit for tat; but it hardly makes a novel and this is our fault. Mr. Cook is an administrator and organiser, and people of that kind collapse and organiser, and people of that kind collapse if one does not take them seriously and au pied de la lettre. It is fatal to cheat, to drift from plot to plot or to add plot to plot in the manner of Dostoevsky. One must look up Mr. Cook's character symbols, one must build up incident. Chemical formulae like (1451b ch A to A7 and A8 to A), (1457 tr A and A9) must be resolved. Poor B, for example, is a stenographer who has never had a lover. She "feels this misfortune keenly." In this situation the best thing to do is to begin where you are, and so B falls in love with her employer; but it is hopeless. She gives it all up because she has to make a home for her cruel father, a widower who belongs to an unpleasant religious sect. To make things worse, her employer falls for a vampire who ruins him financially; and to crown her misery, her father calmly marries and throws her out of the house. What does poor B do now? There are several possibilities. She can resign herself fate. She can get another man-but to her fate. She can get another man—but how? By joining a better religious movement than her father's, by getting rescued in an accithan her father's, by getting resculed in an acci-dent. We reject these for a more exciting sug-gestion. One day she gets into the wrong room at an hotel and finds a man in it. He accuses her of being a thief; but later he reveals himself

Plotto is a ridiculous book. It is a funeral monument to commercial fiction; an elegy on the elaborate plots of the Victorian novel which owed their origin to serialisation and to the early association of the English novel with the drama in its most conventional and artificial phase. We were parting from European habit as early as Fielding; we rejected the course suggested by novelists like Richardson and still faintly visible in Thackcray. Where the French novel depends upon the surprise of moral or intellectual discovery, where the Russian novel depends upon the off-beat of real life, even in novels as elaborately plotted as Dostoevsky's are, the English novelist has depended upon stage machinery, the fantastic, the bizarre: the missing will, the unhonoured heir, the family secret. How far we moved from the European tradition may be judged by the isolation and unpopularity were parting from European habit as early may be judged by the isolation and unpopularity of Meredith, who stands out, freakish as French, in nineteenth century fiction. The English novel, one may safely say, is preoccupied with the novel, one may safely say, is preoccupied with the material fortunes of people first of all; and we no doubt owe this preoccupation to the phenomenal acquisitiveness of the English during the last 300 years. As that declines, the English novel turns nowadays to Continental models. Are they less artificial than our own? Yes—and yet the English reader will always suspect that yet the English reader will always suspect that the internal psychology of Flaubert or Proust is not less arbitrary than, shall we say, the external plot of Bleak House. The intellect has its tyrannous will, the sensibility its coincidences. Madame Bovary is the most arbitrary of all great novels; for it is based on the theory of total Bovarism. Life is obliged at all points to conform. The Egoist has some resemblance of type with Madame Bovary, and are we to say that the method of these novels is less arbitrary, less artificial, than the method of the arbitrary, less artificial, than the method of the English novelists who held that a novel must be

English novelists who held that a novel must be continually surprising, that an acknowledged child, a hidden crime, a forged will, must exist in every family chronicle!

Plotto is a game like "the character game" or "Monopoly." It has reduced the plot-novel to farce. Plotto did not really save the writer the trouble of thinking; it saved the chronic novel-reader the bother of reading. He need not get his dope from the library; he can make up his own. A more serious criticism of Plotto is that its scope is small and its field too well-worn. What we want is a guide to the plotless novel and is that its scope is small and its field too well-worn, What we want is a guide to the plotless novel and especially to the conventional plotless novel of mood and feeling. Here is an opportunity, Will Mr. Cook oblige us with a new book called, shall we say, Feelo? Many ideas suggest themselves. The classic young woman of the Russian novel, who stands at the window and indeed does nothing else, would be in it: "It is spring. I stand at my window. The sun is shining. Why is it (a) I am happy, (b) unhappy, (c) uncertain whether I am happy or unhappy?" "Is the mystery of life (a) soluble, (b) insoluble, (c) a mixture of both?" Or the analysis of love? "Why do I (a) feel pain when he kisses me, (b) not feel pain, (c) wish for more or less pain." And so on. Feelo would be an advance on Plotto, and Feelo would have the enormous resources of the Freudian case histories, with their ultra-Victorian plots, to draw upon. And that I winnesse is the operator of the feel. of the Freudian case histories, with their ultra-Victorian plots, to draw upon. And that I suppose is the answer to Mr. Cook. He is about fifty years behind the times. We do not reject him because he likes fantastic and elaborate plots; he has simply gone to the wrong period for them. Psychology has disclosed patterns which are as involved as the story of The Woman in White, as slick as anything by Edgar Wallace, as melodramatic as Tess of the d'Urbervilles. I hope Plotto will be published in England after the war, for it is hard to come by now; but even more I hope that Feelo will follow.

V. S. PRITCHETT

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