Review

THE RIVER GETS WIDER

by R.L. Gordon, Crowell, New York, 1974, 234 pp.

CAMERON HARVEY*

I happened across this novel while browsing in a bookstore recently; it was substantially reduced in price for quick sale, fortunately for me as I doubt that otherwise I would have come to read it. I suppose that my reading experience would not, in the final analysis, have been much the poorer if it did not include this title, but nonetheless it did provide me with an enjoyable read.

The book is about a very sinister and selfish megalomaniac by the name of John Andrews who rises through various and sundry ploys (such as, setting a fatal fire at his school in order to enable him to attempt a dramatic rescue, literally buying a political nomination, and cultivating the right people) to become Minister of Justice of Canada and who ultimately stands trial for the murder of his wife. The dust jacket states that the book is "reminiscent of *The Late George Apley* and the writings of Louis Auchincloss". I do not know about that, but I can say that the book reminds me of E.B. Jolliffe's recent book, *The First Hundred*; that is to say, ignoring the writing styles, both are biographical novels in a Canadian setting which climax in a trial centering on the main character.

In some respects the book is perplexing. John Andrews, it seemed to me, is sketched in the early chapters in terms that make him far larger than life; the book in these chapters reads like a fairly tale, and caused me to wonder whether I was reading a book intended by the author for primarily teenage — rather than adult consumption. This same quality in the first half of the book resulted in my noting, for purposes of writing this review, that although the book was biographical in nature it struck me as being rather thin in the development of the character of John Andrews.

For me, the second half of the book made the time spent with the book worthwhile and probably Chapter 14, which contains Sue's contribution was the turning point; with this reflection, by a daughter, I was able to muse that at last the author was hitting his target. Perhaps I should mention that the format of the first

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half of the book is fairly unusual; the author develops the story and the several facets of John Andrews' make-up via a series of recollections by various people involved in Andrews' life, including members of his family, peers, and minions, all, of course, who saw him from different points of view. The format of the last half of the book is narration in the third person and by Andrews' defense counsel.

The author very skillfully builds the suspense with repeated oblique references to "that awful night", and by barely referring, without further elaboration, to one or two events, such as the meeting with Mrs. Carson at the end of Chapter 20. The climax is, as I mentioned earlier, John Andrews' murder trial. Without giving away the ending, I can say, as the defense counsel himself privately admits, that I was unable to come to any conclusion as to who had killed Mrs. Andrews; the crown's case and John Andrews' defense are equally convincing. As well, it might have been either Bertha Williams or Tom Collis who had killed Mrs. Andrews, or maybe she took her own life? To some readers such a state of affairs would mean that the book was not well written; however, to me this was a strength in the book and I was delighted with the author for so successfully putting me in such a quandary. I wonder whether the author in his own mind has a definite explanation of Mrs. Andrews' death?

There are two or three pecadilloes in the book that I cannot resist mentioning in passing. In the chapters dealing with the examination of certain of the witnesses at John Andrews' trial, I noted a few leading questions in a couple of the examinations in chief; also the author has the defense counsel summing up last, when in reality the defense speaks first if it introduces evidence. As a person who has been involved with admissions to the Faculty of Law at the University of Manitoba for a number of years and who has dealt with prospective applicants who felt that they had to leave the Province to receive an adequate education, I could not help but be amused with one of the defense lawyers, Greg Thorkelson, who is described as being "originally from Gimli, Manitoba, [and] a graduate of Toronto and Harvard".

I have often thought that, similar to duplicate bridge competitions, it would be interesting to see what several authors could do with a given outline of facts and cast of characters. It may well be that a John O'Hara, a Hugh Garner, or, if you prefer, a Louis Auchincloss, or a John P. Marquand, might have written this book better, but at least R.L. Gordon must be given full marks for his ideas and the scenario and the Thomas Y. Crowell Company should be commended for publishing this entertaining Canadian book.