

Daily Life, Daily Terror In Red, Post-War Hungary

GOD IS LATE.

By Christine Arnothy. Translated
by Anne Green. 191 pp. New York:
E. P. Dutton and Company. \$3.50.

Reviewed by
VIRGILIA PETERSON

YOUNG Christine Arnothy who last year wrote the tale of the war-time siege of Budapest and of her own escape to the West in "I Am Fifteen—and I Don't Want To Die," has now written in her first novel an unpretentious, but subtly excoriating account of a handful of middle-class people trying to keep afloat in the treacherous waters of the Hungarian Communist regime in the first years after the war. Today, when people all over the world are pronouncing the name of Hungary with the passionate accents of terror and awe, Miss Arnothy's little book could scarcely be more opportune.

"God is late," says a girl in the story, the father of whose unborn child has just been swallowed up in a local prison. "He has left us by ourselves for a while. Perhaps He'll come back to us."

No doubt, the devout Christian should eschew such thoughts; but it is surely asking the extraordinary of ordinary people to expect them to trust Transcendent Mercy when mercilessness rules the day.

Miss Arnothy's chief protagonists are two Hungarian couples: Janos, an orchestra conductor who obtains from the Communists the directorship of a Budapest theater, and his wife, the artificially blonde, pleasure-loving Gaby; and Gaby's dark, intense sister Anna with her husband Sandor, a village notary. Neither sister loves

her husband; nor do they love each other. Their dreams, frustrations, and small cruelties, together with the thwarted ambitions of their husbands, would probably not have lent these characters enough stature to trouble readers, had they not been living in revolutionary times. It is because of Communism, and its methods of driving them headlong into destruction, that their lives acquire such terrible importance in this book.

Gaby and Janos and his fat, spiteful mother in the city, Anna and Sandor and their two vulnerable daughters in the country inhabit the same climate, the climate of fear, the climate that pervades all the lands behind the Iron Curtain. Have they enough food for breakfast? Perhaps, but all night they have lain sleepless with the light on, fearing their dreams no less than their waking thoughts. Are they going to a village dance, or to the opera? Perhaps, but they will not enjoy themselves. If their clothes are too good; if they drink too much wine; if their voices do not ring authentically when they toast the new "Republic"; if they do not fawn enough or fawn too much upon officials; if they fail to offer their land to the State before the State comes to claim it; if they walk by night in the woods and whisper; if they dawdle by day in the cafés; if they exchange—across a crowded room—an understanding glance; even if, as in the case of Gaby, they betray

"It would be better so," Janos answers, very low, "far better than living the way we do now."

their husbands to a big wheel in the party for the sake of survival—any one of these mistakes, trivial or great, may be their last.

"It's idiotic," Janos remarks in the privacy of his kitchen "to imagine that we're still living in Hungary. This country is part of great, big Russia . . . and the rest of Europe will be part of it too."

"Yes," she replies, "lots of people think there'll be war."

"What would happen if one of those horrible bombs were thrown on us?" asks Mamma.

What is unusual about Miss Arnothy's book is the way she contrasts the triviality of daily life with the terror that hangs over it. That the characters in "God Is Late" have no heroic mold, but on the contrary are the only too obviously recognizable children of Adam and Eve gives the book just the twist it needs to convince us. In "God Is Late," the picture of corruption and degradation, artificially and consciously brought about by a system designed for that sole purpose, is more frightening, more sinister than any anti-Communist tract—no matter how explicit—could hope to be.

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Books

7/24/57

Wash Post 3/13/57

IS THERE a little of the hero hidden in every man? Or is the heroic act an impossibility for some of us? **GOD IS LATE** by Christine Arnothy (Dutton) is not a novel of heroes. Miss Arnothy, who wrote "I Am Fifteen—And I Don't Want to Die," was in Budapest during the Nazi occupation, must know her own countrymen, their weakness and their strength.

In this tragic story of the Russian occupation, she tells only of their weakness. Yet Hungary's subsequent fight for freedom shouts of courage.

The reactions of the people in this story are very human and understandable; none of them is a convinced Communist and yet none dares to confide his doubts. This is a book well worth reading, concerned as it is with the dignity of men, which concerns us all.

