

# Books of The Times <sup>25, 15</sup>

By ORVILLE PRESCOTT

WHEN Christine Arnothy's "I Am Fifteen—And I Don't Want to Die" was published in this country last April many readers welcomed it with a delighted sense of discovery. Here in a few pages was one of the most graphic and pitiful accounts of the horrors of war as experienced by civilians yet written. And here also was a first book by a young

writer of remarkable talent that promised much for future booms. Miss Arnothy was only 15 years old when she endured the siege of Budapest in 1944, but she did not escape from Hungary until five years later. By that time she was old enough to understand the nature of life under the Communist terror and to study its functioning with precocious maturity of judgment. Her second book, "God Is Late"



Christine Arnothy

is a novel about what she saw. It has a tragic topical relevance because it is a short and brilliant description of the conditions that drove the Hungarians to their heroic revolt.

As social reporting in terms of individual lives "God Is Late" is excellent. But it is more than that. It is also a technically adroit work of fiction that brings a half dozen major characters to vivid life. And it is a singularly austere, almost a harsh, novel because Miss Arnothy has deliberately chosen the hard way.

## Unsparring in Characterization

It would have been easy for her to arouse pity for the plight of admirable and sympathetic people. Instead, she has written about a group of weak, petty, frivolous and spiteful people. None of her characters is likable, but all are so human—so real and so interesting that one becomes absorbed in their tragic stories.

In Budapest in 1945 Janos Tasnady and his beautiful wife, Gaby, lived in continuous suspense. Janos had joined the Communist party in 1945. He was an orchestra conductor, composer and director of a theatre that was about to receive an official subsidy. But Janos, first cousin had been Secretary of State during the Nazi regime and Janos had pestered him for an appointment as director of the city opera. Would he be found out? Would Gaby's beauty

persuade the commissar from the Ministry of National Security to expedite the subsidy? Gaby was so self-centered, so indifferent to everything save her appearance, clothes and comfort, that she didn't seem to understand the risks they ran. Neither, of course, did Janos' malicious old mother, who hated Gaby and spent her time eavesdropping and gossiping.

With so much at stake Gaby didn't dare refuse to become the commissar's mistress and Janos did his unconvincing best to act as if he didn't know. Gaby thought that she had solved all their problems, but not for long—not after the commissar presented to them their Nazi cousin's furniture a few days after his execution. Worse was to come as fear and suspicion and insecurity increased. Who was an informer—may be your own brother-in-law? Would Janos' "Joyful Symphony" composed in praise of the regime protect him? Or would the secret police come for them in the night as they were coming for so many others?

## Terror Shaping Family Fates

Gaby thought that her sister Anna and her family who lived in the country were lucky. At least they had land and plenty of food. But the commissars came and forced Anna's husband, Sandor, to donate his land to the state. Their elder daughter was involved in a love affair with a former officer, obviously a suspicious character in the new Hungary. Their younger daughter was enthusiastically swallowing the official propaganda and panted to serve the Communist cause. And Anna treated Sandor with the same irritable contempt that Gaby felt for Janos.

What eventually happened to the two families will not be revealed here. It must be enough to say that Christine Arnothy is an artist in fiction who can write of a small part of the world's agony with cool restraint and an almost objective detachment. Knowing the tragic fate of her unhappy country, she has refused to soften the grim truth of her novel.

But, having chosen to write an intimate and sardonic study of fallible characters enduring pressures beyond their strength to bear, she has not piled up horrors or indulged in violent denunciations. Neither the sickening atrocities nor the political theorizings that distinguish so many books about life under Communist terror are to be found in "God Is Late." The focus of attention here is entirely personal—on the thoughts and speech and behavior of a small group of persons overwhelmed by the mightiest force for evil the world has known.

"God Is Late" is a convincing demonstration that Christine Arnothy is one of the most interesting young writers in Europe.