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# The Setting Is Topical, The Problem Ancient

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Book Editor

**THE MERMAIDS.** By Eva Boros. Farrar, Straus and Cudahy. \$3.50.

THE SETTING of this remarkable little novel—smiling pre-war Budapest—adds to its intrinsic merits an extrinsic poignance and a topicality which may increase its circulation beyond the usual expectation for a first novel by an unknown author.

If so, the ill wind out of Hungary will have blown some good, for this book merits attention. Its real virtue, however, is the very opposite of timeliness; the timeless entanglement of life and death, described in fresh and original language, is what sets Miss Boros' work apart from here-today - and - gone - tomorrow fiction.

Aladar Brankovics, 36, successful in business yet disappointed in life, picks up "the peroxide blonde . . . a little common and very pretty" along the Danube one summer night. He hopes for the worst—yet when he learns that the hair dye and makeup mask not cheapness but illness, he is even more strongly and inexplicably drawn to Lalla Piroia.

Aladar's pursuit of a phantom love, for motives which he comes to understand only after he has failed, is the slender story around which the delicate structure of this novel is built. The settings and characters, and the author's

skill in rendering them, are, however, the more important ingredients in a notable literary achievement.

Evocation of a European tuberculosis sanitarium must inevitably call up memories of "The Magic Mountain," something of a risk for any novel to face. Although technically the very opposite of Mann's great work, Miss Boros' fiction does not suffer by this trying comparison. Condensing where Mann expanded, suggesting where Mann spelled out, she has almost as much of consequence to leave with us in the end.

In fact, not the least interest of this novel lies in its demonstration that when something important is to be said in fiction, the method of saying matters less than the speaker's absolute grounding in a kind of knowledge which speaks not to the mind but the heart.