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Travels in Nihilon by Alan Sillitoe

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BOOK REVIEW

Travels In Nihilon. By Alan Sillitoe. Scribner's. Hard Cover. 254 pages. $6.95

Shades of Orwell and Huxley and Wylie and lesser lights too numerous to mention. Now it's Alan Sillitoe giving free rein to his imagination and plunging us into a world of the not too distant future.

Novelist, poet, travel-writer, children's book author, playwright - - Sillitoe is all of these, and with the publication of Travels In Nihilon we must list seer among his occupations. Best known for his Saturday Night And Sunday Morning and The Loneliness Of The Long-Distance Runner, stories about the individual at odds with society (and destined to become equally fine movies), he today offers a variation on the theme.

Travels In Nihilon is an experience. Wild, that is. So, if like Sillitoe's five tourists you are foolhardy, venture into the country of Nihilon and discover the wonders and pleasures -- and degradations and dangers -- awaiting one. Perhaps you'll want to contribute to the guidebook being compiled by Adam the poet, Richard the diplomat, Edgar the geologist, Jaquiline the secretary, and Smith the political observer.

Be not dismayed by the demands placed on you by everyone, for extortion is the Nihilist way of life. Trust in God -- and your driving skill -- to deliver you from the motorists who would force you off the road and thus do their bit for population control. Act nonchalant when flying without parachutes or steaming along without lifeboats, for Nihilists build things to last. Turn the other cheek when assaulted, for passions run high and moral standards are practically nonexistent.

Yes, Nihilon is a strange country. Would you believe that its wars are fought by old-age pensioners? That the parents of delinquent youths are penalized and given psychiatric help? That manufacturers must locate their plants in the suburbs so as to keep the core city free of pollution? That nihilism works?

According to Sillitoe, it doesn't work.

The author is as critical of nihilism as he is of capitalism and socialism. This despite Adam the poet's eloquent tribute, forged in the heat of battle over countless bottles of Nihilist beer:

"Nihilism scorches coffins,

So that the dead may wake
In fires of paradise:
Or waltz with dolphins
In vast halls of ice,
Or walk to vantage points and watch
The splendid fireworks from afar,
And talk, talk, talk,
Talk of the soul by the beat of the heart . . ."

The plot, what little there is of it, is but a catalogue of the adventures and misadventures of each of the five travelers as he approaches Nihilon City and a predetermined meeting with his collaborators. The focus is on their encounters with a variety of Nihilist citizens, and their reactions to the thoughts and opinions and behavior of a people one can curse but can't help but envy. Then, the tourists are caught up in the insurrection sweeping the country. They join the revolutionaries who would restore law and order and progress to Nihilon, and are gratified by the orgy of violence and destruction they are privileged to witness.

The grand finale is the much-contested launching of Nihilon's first space ship, and the copulation -- viewed by millions via a worldwide television hook-up -- of Adam and Jaquiline in space.

At book's end the five travelers together depart for their homeland, saddened by what they have seen of the New Nihilon established by their comrades-in-arms. President Nil has been deposed, and the population is no longer subjected to the total and compulsory freedom, the ultimate state of raw and naked slavery, which is nihilism.

But is the new regime, even though it extols honesty and efficiency, an improvement? Society is being cast on a new base, and those who are heard to disagree that this is so are spirited away in the middle of the day as an example to others. And there is talk of a Ministry of Cancer whose purpose it will be to propagate the principles embodied in the New Nihilon not only within the nation itself but also beyond its borders.

Sillitoe's is an altogether delightful satire which alternates between scathing indictments and outrageous puns, between sad commentary and slapstick humor. Everywhere apparent is the hand of the craftsman, for this young British writer is as adept at describing settings and instilling atmosphere or 'mood' as he is at delineating his characters.

Your Travels In Nihilon may not be the most rewarding of reading experiences, but you'll find it refreshing.

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