

Book Review

from

The Christian Century

407 SOUTH DEARBORN STREET
CHICAGO 5, ILLINOIS

THE ATTACHED CLIPPING
is from the issue of
OCT 6 1965

D

Two of the Best

DARK GHETTO. By Kenneth B. Clark.
Harper & Row, \$4.95.

WHO SPEAKS FOR THE NEGRO? By Robert Penn Warren. Random House, \$5.95.

† FROM the seemingly endless stream of books on racial issues I have plucked these two as representative of the best published in 1965. Despite their differing styles these two works belong together in one review because the authors—one a northern Negro and the other a southern-born white—both use data dug directly from the lives of the people, write compassionately and sometimes fervently from inside the problem and yet—with some exceptions—are soundly objective in prescribing solutions.

No one in the United States is better qualified than Kenneth B. Clark to write about the agony, the corroding injustices and the social dynamics of the ghetto. Since 1942 a professor of psychology at the College of the City of New York, Dr. Clark is able to diagnose the pathology of the ghetto not only with theoretical accuracy but also out of his personal involvement in Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited (Har-you). Clark knows the ghetto: "its inconsistencies, its contradictions, its paradoxes, its ironies, its comic and its tragic face, its cruel and its self-destructive forces, and its desperate surge for life. And above all . . . its humanity." And with sometimes shocking, always powerful language he takes the outsider into the ghetto and there baptizes him in the shame and glory, the despair and hope in which the people are immersed. It was my privilege to read this book both before and after the riots in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Springfield, Massachusetts. What happened in these cities would not have happened if the white lords of Negro ghettos had read and heeded Clark's compelling analysis.

Dark Ghetto is packed with so many helpful psychological insights and such a wealth of valuable sociological data that specific comment seems impertinent. Nevertheless I must mention as particularly valuable to me the author's description of the debilitating role of patriarchy in Negro ghettos and the consequent distortion of the masculine image, his revealing comparison and contrast of the philosophies and pro-

grams of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Nationalists, his analysis of the tensions existing between middle class and lower class Negroes, his forceful use of the personal testimony of addicts in depicting the "menacing and insidious problem of drug addiction." Clark is at his best—though there is not a dull page—when he exposes the psychological subtleties buried in sociological facts.

The white reader of *Dark Ghetto*

and the tensions existing between middle class and lower class Negroes, his forceful use of the personal testimony of addicts in depicting the "menacing and insidious problem of drug addiction." Clark is at his best—though there is not a dull page—when he exposes the psychological subtleties buried in sociological facts.

The white reader of *Dark Ghetto* should deliberately slow down the pace of his reading when he comes to those passages in which Clark turns the white liberal inside out. For he will see coming toward him in these pages one "who struggles to reconcile his affirmation of racial justice with his visceral racism." The encounter is not pleasant but painful, like catching a glimpse of one's real self in an unexpected mirror.

The weakness of this book—if it can be said to have one—is coherent with its strength. Let me illustrate. The author states that the ghetto is governed by two rules: "One basic rule is to present to the hostile white world a single voice of protest and rebellion. . . . Another basic rule is that no issue can take precedence over the basic issue of race and, specifically, of racial oppres-

sion." As a psychologist and a sociologist Clark knows the fallacy of these rules. He knows the need for reason, logic, objectivity, the middle ground, the balanced view. He writes powerfully, helpfully, convincingly because, whatever his own personal circumstances, he remains spiritually a prisoner of the ghetto, of its rules and of the fallacy of those rules. He can speak to us because—as Gunnar Myrdal puts it in the foreword—he knows "how it feels to be enclosed in segregation." I would not, feeling immensely indebted to Clark, have it otherwise. I would ask of him and of Negroes to whom "liberal" has become a bad word that they remember one fact. The white man cannot become a Negro. He, too, is the prisoner of a racial ghetto and will not be able to escape entirely from the rules and fallacies of his ghetto's mentality. From my reading of *Dark Ghetto* I would trust Clark—even where I disagree with him in minor part—to understand this dilemma as well as it can be understood by Negro or white.

Robert Penn Warren spent many days and many miles putting a tape-recorder before numerous Negroes in the eastern and southeastern parts of the United States and letting them

speak for themselves. What they said he captured and faithfully transcribed. If you want to know what the Negro thinks (make it plural to be more accurate) this book tells you as well as words can do it. As Warren says, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* is not a Who's Who of the Negro revolution; yet there are few Negro leaders in any field who are not quoted here. And between the great and the near-great, the famous and the well known appear the obscure little people relating "the short and simple annals of the poor." Warren serves as the amanuensis for Negroes as they write their daily journal.

Of course, he does more than that. Through what would otherwise be disjointed dialogues he shoots two threads of continuity. Warren keeps asking the same basic questions over and over as he moves from one interviewee to another, and he gets a surprising variety of answers. And he ties the interviews together with snatches of history and biography and with sometimes short, sometimes long analyses of historical and current events. This is a delightfully intriguing and effective if not novel device. Put all of this together and you have in the end—however smoothly and interestingly it reads—not merely a literary work but a profound psychological and sociological treatise. I hazard the guess that if one knew nothing at all about the racial problem in the United States, a study of this book in its entirety would bring him up to date.

Two good books on the racial struggle—two of the best.

KYLE HASELDEN.