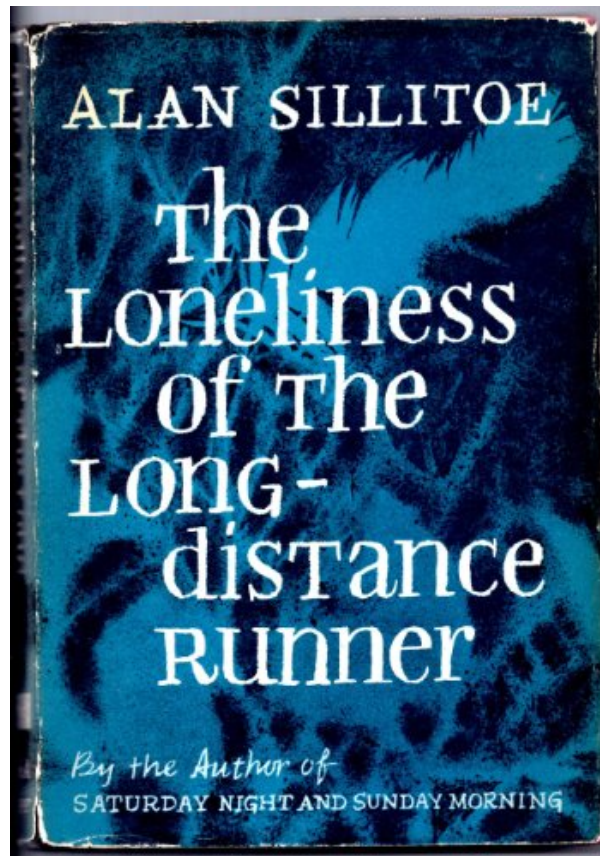
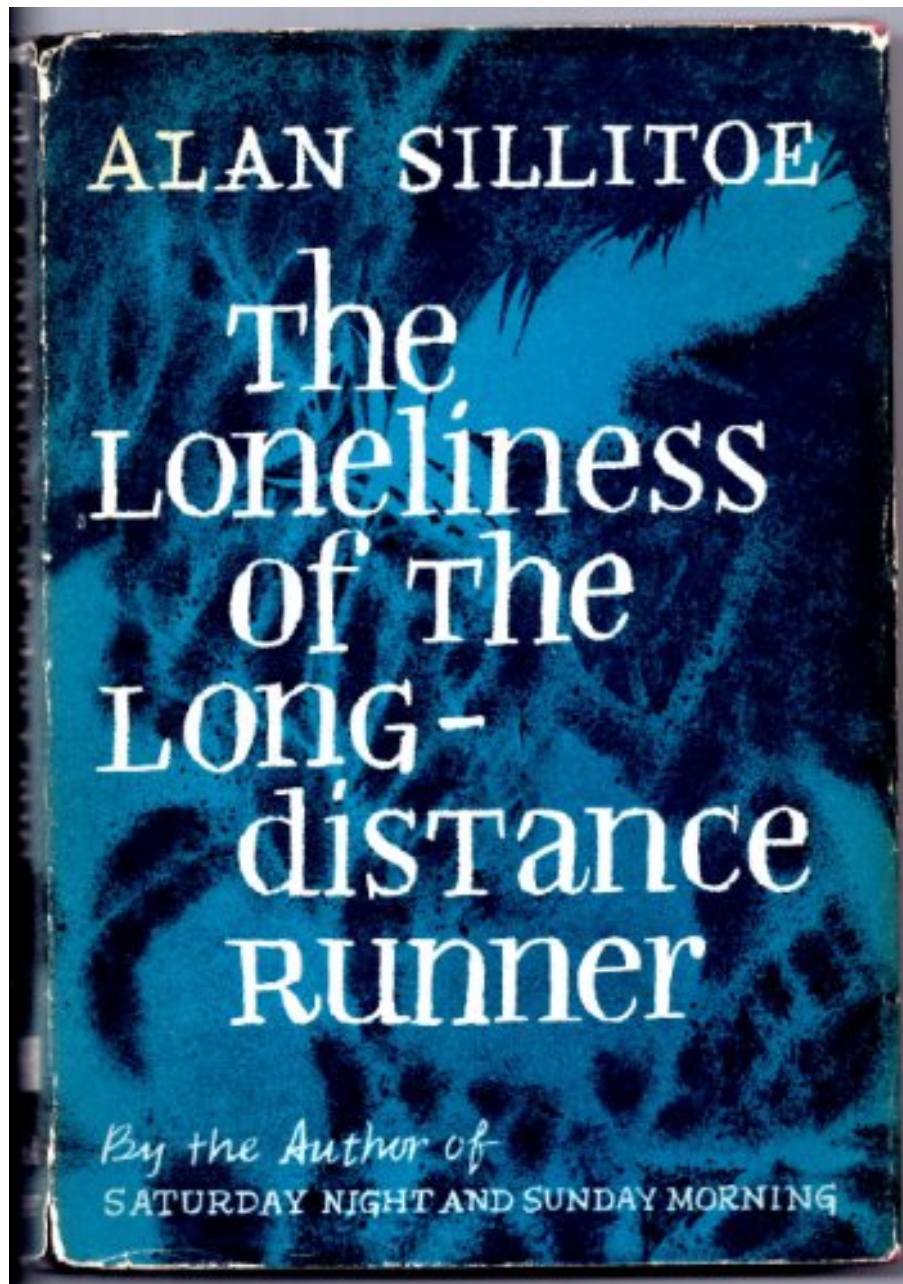


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Sillitoe's portrayal of the mind of an incorrigible rebel, and other stories.

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Most helpful customer reviews

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Exceptionally well written, evocative stories...

By Nelson Aspen

I purchased a well worn, musty smelling paperback edition of this book published in 1967 and thoroughly enjoyed the wonderful writing as well as the tactile sensation of thumbing my way through the cherished, yellowed pages. Brilliantly executed "tales of working class life and morals" are great to read--but none better than Chapter One about the Runner in the title. So well done, in fact, that my interest in the other stories quickly waned.

For reading pleasure, I highly recommend this collection. For runners, especially, Chapter One is worth the purchase price. Now I'm eager to see the Tom Courtenay movie version, which is apparently excellent, too.

12 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

"Yes I cry, but neither of us did anything about it, and that's the trouble".

By J C E Hitchcock

Alan Sillitoe was one of a number of young writers who emerged in the late fifties and sixties and who have become known as the "kitchen sink" school. (Other members of the group included the novelists Stan Barstow, John Braine, David Storey and Barry Hines and playwrights such as John Osborne and Shelagh Delaney). Their work was distinguished by a social-realist concentration of working-class life, often with a provincial setting.

This collection of short stories was published in 1959, a year after "Saturday Night and Sunday Morning", Sillitoe's first novel. All the stories are set, or partly set, in the author's home town of Nottingham. The title story is both the best-known in the collection and the longest. It takes the form of a first-person monologue by Smith (we never learn his first name), a teenager from a working-class Nottingham home who is sent to Borstal after being convicted of robbing a bakery. (A "Borstal", named after the Kentish village in which the

first such institution was situated, was at this period a special prison for young offenders).

While in Borstal, Smith discovers a talent for long-distance running, and this brings him to the notice of the Governor, who takes a keen interest in sport as a means of rehabilitating young offenders, and he is entered in a cross-country race against other Borstals. (The Governor believes that for one of his inmates to win the race would bring prestige to his institution). Smith has a real talent for the sport and could easily have won the race, but quite deliberately chooses to lose it, stopping running just short of the finishing line to allow another runner to pass him. He does so as a deliberate gesture of contempt for the Governor and for the whole of the Establishment which he despises.

Sillitoe never expressly passes judgement on Smith's attitude to life, and some have certainly seen him as an admirable character, a working-class hero standing up to the System. In my view, however, Sillitoe simply allows Smith to condemn himself out of his own mouth; certainly, the author is critical of the British class system, but it seems to me that one of his criticisms is that it encourages distorted attitudes like Smith's, whose anti-Establishment stance is essentially an ideological justification for his own selfishness and criminality. One of the most striking aspects of his lengthy diatribe is that he never considers anyone other than himself; he certainly does not spare a thought for the baker he has robbed or for his other victims. His only friend is Mike, another delinquent youth who helps him carry out the robbery; they can think of nothing to do with their loot except to travel to the nearest seaside resort and spend it on gambling machines and cheap tarts. The "loneliness" of the title may refer to Smith's self-centredness; it is perhaps symbolic that he excels at a purely individual sport rather than those like football or rugby which demand teamwork and co-operation.

Loneliness and alienation are the themes of a number of the other stories in this volume. In "Uncle Ernest" a solitary, ageing and embittered veteran of World War I befriends two young girls who briefly bring a sense of meaning into his life, before he is warned off by the police, who suspect his motives. (Hysteria about paedophilia is clearly nothing new). "On Saturday Afternoon" tells the story of a young boy who witnesses a quiet, reclusive neighbour attempting to kill himself. In "Mr Raynor the Schoolteacher" the title character seems unable to form relationships with women except at a distance; his main preoccupation, which distracts him from his classes, is gazing from afar at the girls who work in the shop across the road from his classroom.

Even when Sillitoe's characters are able to form relationships they are often doomed to failure, leaving those characters even lonelier than before. The title character of "The Disgrace of Jim Scarfedale" is caught between the demands of his domineering, over-protective mother and those of his equally demanding wife, a middle-class Socialist for whom her preconceived ideas about working-class life turn out to be more congenial than the reality; after the inevitable breakdown of his marriage he ends up being arrested for indecently exposing himself to young girls.

"The Match" contrasts two married couples, a happily-married pair of newlyweds and the couple next door, trapped in a loveless and violent relationship; the title refers to the fact that the husband comes home and physically abuses his wife after watching his football team lose a game. Yet we cannot help feeling that once Mr and Mrs Lennox may have been as much in love as their neighbours, and cannot help wondering what the future might hold for young Fred and Ruby. "The Fishing Boat Picture" tells the story of a long-estranged middle-aged couple who have a chance of reconciliation yet fail to take it. "Yes I cry, but neither of us did anything about it, and that's the trouble".

A number of the stories are told from the perspective of a child and are set during Sillitoe's own childhood in the 1930s and 1940s. This allows him to draw on memories of hardship during the war and the depression,

although the child's viewpoint enables him to bring a lighter touch to these stories, such as "Noah's Ark" or "The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller". Even in "One Saturday Afternoon", with its subject-matter of suicide, Sillitoe is able to derive a certain amount of grim humour.

In many ways these stories reminded me of those written by Sillitoe's exact contemporary Stan Barstow (both were born in 1928), another chronicler of working-class life although in his case from the neighbouring county of Yorkshire rather than Nottinghamshire. Yet even though they describe similar social milieus there is, I think, a difference between them which explains why Sillitoe, unlike Barstow, is often numbered among the fifties literary grouping known as the Angry Young Men. Barstow's characters, including his most famous Vic Brown, often react to hardship or misfortune with stoicism and resilience; Vic even has ambitions to better himself socially, something which the likes of Uncle Ernest or Jim Scarfedale would regard as incomprehensible and Smith would regard as a sell-out to the System. The tone of Sillitoe's stories is more often a bleak, if sometimes defiant, anger and bitterness, occasionally relived by sardonic humour. Yet it is this very bleakness which gives them much of their emotional power.

42 of 43 people found the following review helpful.

Several standouts

By Tyler Smith

This is Sillitoe's best-known work, a collection of stories presumably drawn in large part from his working class life in Great Britain. The book's emphasis on gritty realism will not be everyone's cup of tea -- no pun intended -- but I found his prose clean, powerful and nearly free of sentimentality.

Sillitoe's sympathy for the working class is best demonstrated in the title story, narrated by a teen resident of a reform school whose voice vibrates with rebellion. The youth shows a keen awareness of his position within England's rigid class structure and has made a conscious decision to resist those whom he says have "the whip hand" over him. Sillitoe reveals the motivation for his protagonist's attitude in an understated but memorable scene in which the youth remembers finding his laborer father dead, blood spilled out of his consumptive body. The reader sees the boy's perception that his father's life has been used up by the system. In the story's surprising final turn, the youth -- who has become a champion runner for his school -- attempts in his own way to turn the tables on that system.

The book contains several other strong stories. "The Fishing-Boat Picture" is the bittersweet memoir of a failed marriage; it effectively dramatizes the sense of lost opportunity we feel when our most important human connections are broken. "Mr Raynor the School-Teacher" brings to life the stultifying atmosphere of a London public school classroom presided over by a jaded teacher whose only ambition is to keep his rebellious charges at bay so that he can drift in reverie. "The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller" has the feeling of a memoir. The narrator describes his hardscrabble youth and subsequent escape from his environment. Frankie Buller is the symbol of the ruined youth he left behind: a boy who was once a giant among his playmates who has grown older without ever progressing spiritually or creatively. The narrator would never wish to be a Frankie Buller, but his words are permeated with the guilty tone of the survivor.

Not all of the stories succeed as admirably as these. Still, at his best, Sillitoe crafts the claustrophobic environments of his stories, often in the service of social criticism. His characters may long to escape the grays and blacks of their worlds, but the stories themselves offer no such escape for the reader.

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