

Out Of The Norwegian Mists...

Norwegian author Knut Hamsun won the Nobel Prize in 1920, but his books were allowed to go out of print here after stories reached England of his wartime collaboration with the occupying Germans. Five of his novels have now been reissued to wide acclaim. Robert Temple looks at the writer who has been celebrated by other writers in numerous tributes.

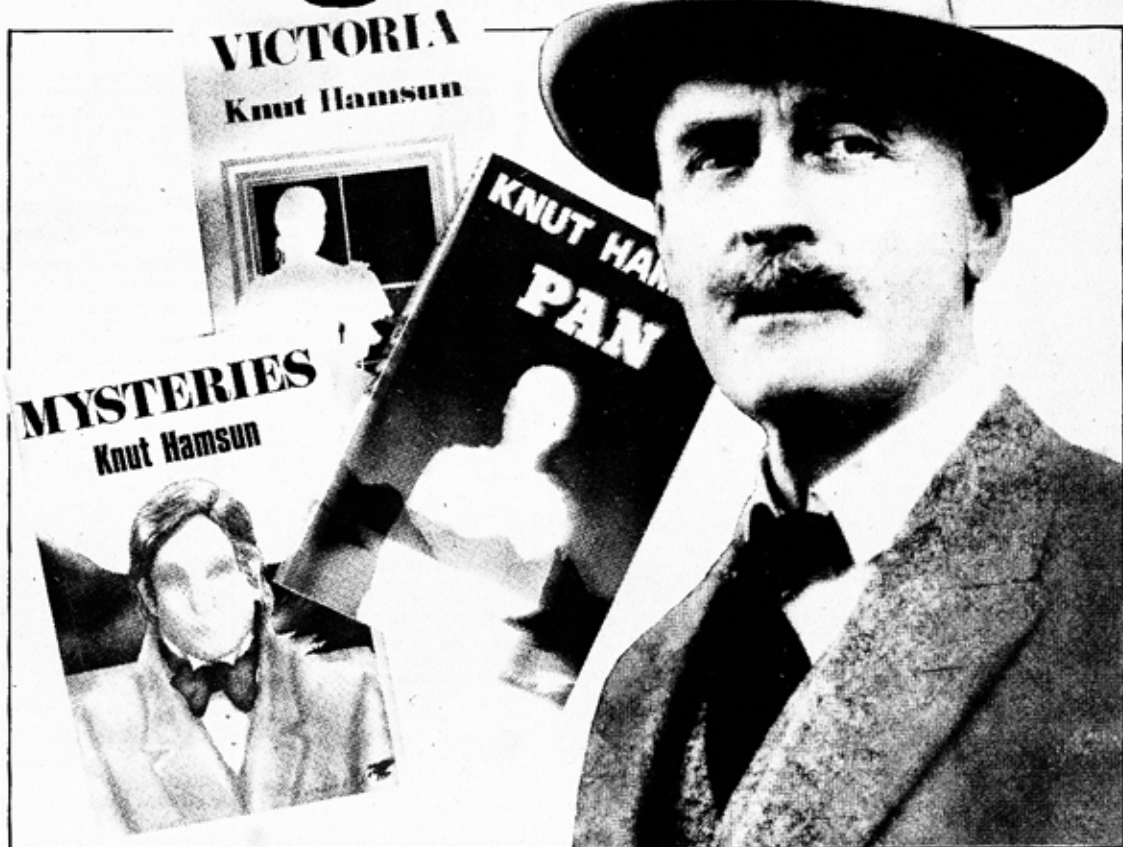
Isaac Bashevis Singer has written: 'They were all Hamsun's disciples . . . The whole modern school of fiction in the twentieth century stems from Hamsun . . .'. Thomas Mann has said: 'Never has the Nobel Prize been awarded to one worthier of it.' And Henry Miller: 'Hamsun is the author I deliberately tried to imitate, obviously without success.' The list is endless and includes Schnitzler, Hemingway, Zweig, Scott Fitzgerald, Agnon, and Hamsun's most passionate advocates in England today, Arthur Koestler and Rebecca West.

From 1920 until World War II, Hamsun was quite popular in England. Then a photograph of him shaking hands with Hitler, upon the latter's arrival in Norway, was circulated by the Nazi propaganda machine and lost the writer, then in his eighties, his admirers. Hamsun lived quietly on his farm and did not apparently push the Nazi cause, but it seems clear he had welcomed the German army as a means of ridding Norway of the liberal intellectual cliques which he had despised all his life with his customary vehemence.

Whether Hamsun was merely a misled octogenarian cleverly used by the Nazis is unclear. But it does not appear that he was a genuine fascist, for he had formerly held opinions best described as 'radical aristocratic'. He advocated an 'aristocracy of the mind' linked in no way to money or social position and had often defended persecuted anarchists, which will surprise none of his readers. Hamsun may be the only major writer of the last hundred years who genuinely owed nothing — not even a square meal when he was starving — to the middle classes.

The Novels

'Cultural Life in Modern America' is one of the most hilarious works of satire written in any language since Jonathan Swift. Hamsun lived and worked in America for ten years as a young man and returned to Norway to publish, in 1889, this outrageous first book. His devastating wit made mincemeat of the materialistic Yankee society: ' . . . freedom in America is not always voluntary but often compulsory, a freedom dictated by law. Congress sits and makes laws governing how free the individual is obliged to be . . . By undermining all individual



yearning for freedom (in the sense of non-conformity) in its citizens, America has finally managed to create that horde of fanatic freedom automatons which make up American democracy.' Hamsun's work is, if anything, more relevant to the present than to the 1880s, although the pedantic introduction and inane notes in this 'scholarly' publication are best ignored. I pity the American who has not read this book.

'Hunger' has been made into a successful film by the Danish director Henning Carlsen, with the Swedish actor Per Oscarsson playing the part of the starving Hamsun. Many years of personal starvation lay behind Hamsun's horrifying subjective account of a young intellectual dying of hunger in a modern city. This is one of the most disturbing novels in existence. The accuracy of its account is so total, so uncompromising, that many readers might find it simply unbelievable. But anyone who has been without a penny and without food for some weeks in a city will need no further evidence of the book's veracity than Hamsun's aside: 'If one only had something to eat, just a little, on such a clear day.'

'Mysteries' is an early and yet not altogether satisfactory novel. The story of an arrogant, Nietzschean intellectual upsetting a provincial town is barely saved by the author's brilliance and

innocence from falling into the category of needless unpleasantness. One can literally say that it is redeemed by a single page: the last chapter is less than a page in length, and yet it manages to transform the entire story in one last violent wrench of the kaleidoscope. Suddenly we are allowed the true perspective, in the last few sentences, which cast that strange pallor of a sunset over objects we had thought familiar. Are they real? Now the hero's madness (which only by chapter nine do we realise is madness rather than eccentricity) is seen as an insane — but insanely truthful — form of awareness. In a few words Hamsun retrieves a concealed armature which underlies his entire tale — a shape which has supplied each tiny vagary with its own concealed and informing logic. The reader is left breathless and wondering if the whole hazardous business, skirting the rim of ruin, had not best been left unattempted, for its success was by the most anxious and narrow of margins.

'Pan' is the best known of Hamsun's books in English, as it enjoyed a considerable vogue on American university campuses in the early 1960s. It is wryly dedicated to Nagel, the fictional hero of 'Mysteries', but far surpasses that earlier work in every way, including conciseness. 'Mysteries' rambles; 'Pan' never does. 'Pan' is

haunting, unforgettable. It infuses itself into the brain like an acid decoction of dew from the locks of the goat-god himself. Was the author indeed bewitched when he wrote this book? It is the work of a demented angel, full of agony and of visions.

'Victoria' is so short and so simple that any child could read it. And yet it conveys passion so intense that it seems as if the paper on which the book is printed might burst into flames. This love story has been described by W W Worster as 'the swan-song of Hamsun's subjective period . . . (Its) effect is that of something straining towards an impossible realisation; a beating of wings in the void, a striving for utterance of things beyond speech.'

With a growing following and two more novels due for English publication this year (Souvenir Press), Hamsun's reputation may again match the scale of his influence.

'Cultural Life in Modern America' (1889), Harvard University Press, £5.00.
'Hunger' (1890), Duckworth, £3.45.
'Mysteries' (1893), Souvenir Press, £3.00.
'Pan' (1894), Artemis Press, Horsham, Sussex, £1.95 hardback; Souvenir Press, £1.25 paperback.
'Victoria' (1898), Souvenir Press, £2.50.