

A devilishly good read from a Christian pen

THE first thing to be said about this novel is that it is a rattling good read; one really does want to know what is

THE SOUBANE STRATAGEM by Norman Jetmundsen, Jr (John Hunt Publishing)

going to happen next, in the novel's main plot and also in the love interest. Let me not give away the ending but say that there are some good and unexpected twists. It is, too, that very rare thing nowadays - a Christian novel. Its fine intentions shine like a good deed in a naughty world and this light is not to be placed under a bushel. It is a novel that wants to make people better - and what is wrong with that?

The author, Norman Jetmundsen Jr, as with a number of Americans, fell in

love with the works of C. S. Lewis when studying at Oxford at Lewis's own College, Magdalen. The novel, in fact, takes off from Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*. In *Screwtape*, Lewis created the devil Screwtape who writes letters of advice to his young nephew, Wormwood, about how to deal with human beings. Jetmundsen actually refers directly to Lewis and *Screwtape* but creates his own devil Soulbane. This devil writes a long report about the present state of the world and it does not make very pleasant reading, though it is, no doubt, accurate enough. The picture painted is a world where it is absurdly easy for devils to capture souls since human beings, including those in the Churches, have not only given up the battle but seem unaware that there is a battle at all. This report, ironic though it be, is, in a way, the heart of the book. In some ways it is rather laboured, written from the

author's American evangelical point of view. However, it is not overdone and it is set into a background more like a thriller where the hero labours to discover the whereabouts of the report and travels to Malta and to the United States.

This is really an Oxford novel, though, and the author plainly loved his time at Magdalen. He cannot resist being didactic, even about small matters, and has to explain, for example, the origins of the words *mardi gras*. He insists on giving us unnecessary information about his beloved town, even when he makes mistakes, as when he tells us that the architect of the Radcliffe Camera was Sir Christopher Wren - it was, in fact, designed by James Gibbs. Some of his Oxford argot is also slightly wrong; no one at Oxford refers to Christ Church *College* and a student there is what elsewhere is called a don not an undergraduate.

However, none of this detracts from the enjoyment of what is a very good novel.

It is difficult nowadays to know what to recommend to young people to read - they are often not ready for the great classics and one could not suggest to them the pornography that constitutes most modern novels. After suggesting the novels of Evelyn Waugh, which still go down well, you could do a lot worse than ask them to read *The Soulbane Stratagem*. Better still, give them first a copy of *The Screwtape Letters*, the "sole begotter" of the novel. The writer is not a Catholic, but any young Catholic would benefit from the wholesome message of the book and would find it difficult to put down.

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