

Drunk on a doctor, treated by drink

A Guard Within

By Sarah Ferguson. 196 pp. New York: Pantheon Books. \$6.95.

Escape From Custody

A Study of Alcoholism and Institutional Dependency as Reflected in the Life Record of a Homeless Man. By Robert Straus. 388 pp. New York: Harper & Row. \$15.

By JOSEPH McELROY

What do we deny ourselves by not wrecking our lives? Could I wreck mine if I wanted to? Could I want to?

I heard a heroin addict, a Vietnam veteran, tell about his 8-year-old prostitute in Saigon. They used to make love in a crib. The relationship as he saw it was beautiful and curious, and in his account there was an awed and precise attention one could not dismiss. God knows what tender damage the child sustained, and with what willingness and pleasure. But in his own meditative, driven way he was interesting quite apart from his official status as a sick man, a problem for therapy.

That man had found what he may not quite have known he was looking for. The heroin came later when he got back to the States. Maybe he's been cured. Maybe he was "undersocialized," as the books say, and maybe he has learned to depend upon a group for a sense of his own value; learned to depend on a place, or himself, or another person, or on work.

Distinctions among degrees and kinds of dependency can seem less and less clear. I look at one of the two books on my table and think that while anyone can become dependent upon a psychiatrist, it's another thing to be so totally, obsessively, fixately, projectively and sexually in love with the doctor that there are no other relationships that matter. And I look at the other book -- somehow appropriately a huge bulk of several hundred galley pages -- and think that any fool can see the difference between a homeless haberdashery's miserable life in and out of institutions and, say, that of a hard-drinking \$40,000-a-year commuter going home to his country club.

Yet questions of comparative

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health, as of chance and choice, become ambiguous. Also, while one would not dispute the need to try to cure hard-drug addiction, or alcoholism, or an irresistible lust for children, one may wish to see dependency in other ways as well.

One thing is certain. It helps if the victim can write. The experience may then find intensities clearer than life. Indeed, some such accounts may move beyond official issues of diagnosis and cure into an existence one might call esthetic.

Sarah Ferguson and "Frank Moore" could hardly be more different in their lives. Her sensitive, self-conscious prose in "A Guard Within" seems almost too appropriate to the external facts of her identity--the Klinik in Zurich, the house in Scotland, the flat in London, and for the brief time they had together, her psychiatrist, to whom she gave the Corot, Casals and Thibaud recording of Schubert's Trio in B flat major and to whom (with an epigraph from Rilke) she addresses this desperate love diary as if, to draw her doctor back from his grave.

In another world of New England and upper New York State jails, state hospitals, saloons, bus-stops, railroad sidings, bitter windy highways not to be found in Whitman, and dark doorways where you can flop until the town cop hauls you in--is "Frank Moore." His long, repetitive life is the substance of a long, cumbersome but profound book, "Escape From Custody," by his friend and correspondent, Dr. Robert Straus.

Both the woman and the man were dependent on doctors and hospitals. And if the title of each book refers to an achievement of freedom, each freedom seems often to have been an escape only into a deeper life within the original dependency.

That this should be so in "A Guard Within" is not surprising. Often the woman's absorption in the older man finds the form of its veering cadences and images of despair and devotion and exhibitionistic possessiveness in the very form of the writing. Thus the sickness of need comes to be entangled in the skill with which Sarah Ferguson evokes it.

Her presence presses upon the reader. There is the authoritarian father, abortion, divorce, the adopted child for whom she tries vainly to make room in herself. And there is a sense of precious time passing like the objects her acute eye passes in the doctor's flat (the palm tree in a blue and white pot, the piano, the fair hair twined in the gold back of an enamel frame she gave him, containing a miniature of her mother who died when Sarah was 3). They talk of the prospect of his death; he visits her; the relation at some points seems almost to have been an end in itself for him too. He is the "you" of the book, but like certain emotional effects whose actual causes the author fails to make clear, he remains somehow unembodied.

If he had known his death was so near, would he have let her give up everything to him? She says he risked this intimacy because he had to, but we have to guess the truth from what she thinks she means and from what she seems to half-hope. Like a good novelist, she prepares us so honestly yet quietly for the death that when it comes it is unexpectedly upsetting. The healthy, happy homeopath with whom she is staying near her doctor's country house at the time of his sudden death says, "No person should depend on another. It is against the law of God and nature." Others see the event as, for her, an extreme example of "broken transference." Her book, however, makes good on its main idea, and if she herself is as lost as Paul Morel at the end of "Sons and Lovers," the experience emerges as an overwhelming discovery in itself, to be overwhelmingly felt. And this may be better than any understanding from the brink or the outside.

Moving from "A Guard Within" to "Escape From Custody" is a little like moving from Virginia Woolf to Theodore Dreiser. And in many of Frank Moore's letters, with their jargon and their tired metaphors, I was reminded ironically of words Virginia Woolf quotes one of her friends as saying about another: "when [she] lets her style get on top of her, one thinks only of that; when she uses clichés, one thinks what she means." Frank Moore called himself prolix, and he was right. But the posthumous freedom of speech Dr. Straus has given this remarkable derelict reveals a life.

Straus's own main theme is not so much Frank Moore's 35 years of alcoholism as what the drinking was associated with, a gradually established pattern of living in institutions where one's needs are provided for by others. The drinking is a parallel escape, but Straus argues that in most homeless alcoholic men of this category the institutional syndrome precedes the drinking. Often the drinking is a means of getting put away again. When the institution (and passivity, and trouble coping with others) gets too much, these men arrange to be released and go right back on the booze. This is all interesting enough, as are Straus's comments, for example, on the strategies of skid-row drinking, or the differences between "total institutions" (prisons, jails, hospitals) and institutional "settings" like Army, Navy, Merchant Marine, lumber camp and shelter programs, to name those that Frank Moore had experience of. But primarily in this book Straus has given Frank Moore a chance to come forth.

They met in 1945 at the Salvation Army Men's Service Center in New Haven. Frank was the 13th man Straus interviewed. In the course of quoting articles on alcoholism and Schopenhauer on pleasure and pain, Frank said, "I've read everything--thought about it all." Pedantic, gran-

diose, resourceful, humble, resentful, fundamentally friendly, largely self-taught, evasive on certain events of the past (a dishonorable discharge, a stretch in Alcatraz), argumentative and, in the 322 letters included in the book, pathetically well-informed on many topics--Frank Moore is an American ordeal, primary material.

Ken Kesey in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" did better with the mental hospital--particularly the parasitic manipulation of inmates by the staff who are dependency cases themselves. Still, through this immense, often drab document Frank Moore's account of the waste in these places, the boredom, the lack of encouragement, has a sober continuity as real as a Fred Wiseman film or a Berenice Abbott photograph of old-law tenements in Manhattan.

Unless we watch the dates of the letters we may forget that Frank disappears from Straus's record for weeks and months at a time. The gaps are as much a part of the implacable process of his later life as are the itemized banders, bed tickets, meal tickets, "descriptions of existing conditions," the prolegomena for various "Moore Utopias," the endless glimpses of rooming-house windows that don't open, the fugitive can of soap in the station house, the roll of toilet paper and stub of pencil.

"If a person were to write of his accomplishments during a lifetime, it could be written on a cigarette paper. If he were to write of his opinions, prejudices, & the vagaries of his mind, the world could not supply a single individual with sufficient paper."

Fancy phrases lugubrious as the identifications with Hamlet, Jaques, Napoleon and others mingle with painful generalization and the most plain details of the American life around Frank Moore. Through it all--a beginning he could never escape--is the terrible tale of his childhood. His father a suicide two weeks after Frank was born. His mother's departure the next year. Her later return and the lifelong hostility between them. The stern grandfather who brought Frank up to be successful. The school kids who kidded him because of his father's suicide. Frank's early departure for the Navy -- not so much an initiative as a defiant separation inspired by lack of support.

But no account of causes can evoke the fullness of Frank Moore's later life salvaged in a real sense by the man Bob Straus, who had little luck in changing Frank. That life resists summary. And like his identification documents apparently lost when Frank had to move--including the proof he particularly prized that a medical school had accepted his body--his life was not lost. Not even while he lived it. Nor afterward, for those who may read this book and, from a safe distance, reflect blankly upon the fact that their American lack has been better. El