

Leaves in the wind

THE UNFORTUNATES
 BY B. S. JOHNSON

(Panther in association with
 Secker & Warburg 21s)

Close the door, the cupboard and the window tightly, throw the 25 unbound random sections of Mr. Johnson's new novel high into the air, and when the blossom has settled, sit down in the middle and (according to the publisher's instructions) pluck the first haphazard fruit. This paperchase game, and the small, unexpectedly sad novel which emerges, is both absorbing and provoking.

Two sections marked "First" and "Last" give the simple key: a London reporter has gone to cover a football match in a Midlands city; but as he walks from the station—"brown glazed tiles, the decorative hammerbeams supporting nothing, above"—every detail begins to spring a chaos of memories. As he windowshops, drinks, eats miserable ham on a municipal bench, and writes up the shapeless game (ah!), memories of Tony—an intense intellectual love of his graduate days, now dead from cancer—sweep back a quicker, brighter time of books, girls, pints, hitch-hiking.

Reconstructing the story thus, is the first provocation: even though the sections come as randomly as the memories are supposed to, yet your mind effortlessly creates its own order—the course of Tony's disease, the familiar discussions, the feminine geography—all rattling into place with electric, fascinating speed.

This movement between random

and order, past and present, is both the method and the theme of the novel. Tony is the critic (a thesis on Boswell, a mind "ordered like documents in the Public Records Office") who helped the young writer to organize and refine his first sprawling novels. As this book is strongly autobiographical, Mr. Johnson's earlier novels do actually get involved here, and you are provoked (again) into rereading sections of *Travelling People* (1963, funny and optimistic, dedicated, one notices with a jerk, "to Tony and June") and *Trawl* (1966).

So the net of *The Unfortunates* widens. One is made aware of the terrifying *relativity* of experience: that which comes before depends so much on what comes after. Characteristically, it leads Mr. Johnson to shy from the relativity of language, stalling at similes and metaphors like a thoroughbred before doubtful hedges. He can still explore this comically: his original football report is murdered by later sub-editing.

With the paperchase device, and his fast-running, scrupulously honest prose, he succeeds marvelously in bringing the very process of experience and recall to the reader's attention. But this technical self-absorption—for both author and reader—is finally at the expense of the reality of other lives: Tony and June, Wendy and Ginnie, blow away like loose leaves in the wind, and the delicate hammerbeams still support nothing above. I'm not sure yet if it is a failure of art, or life.