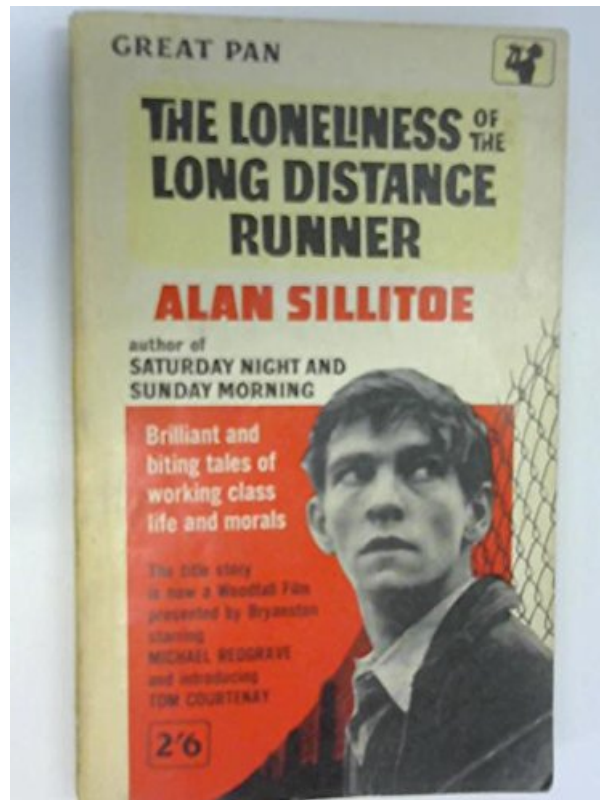
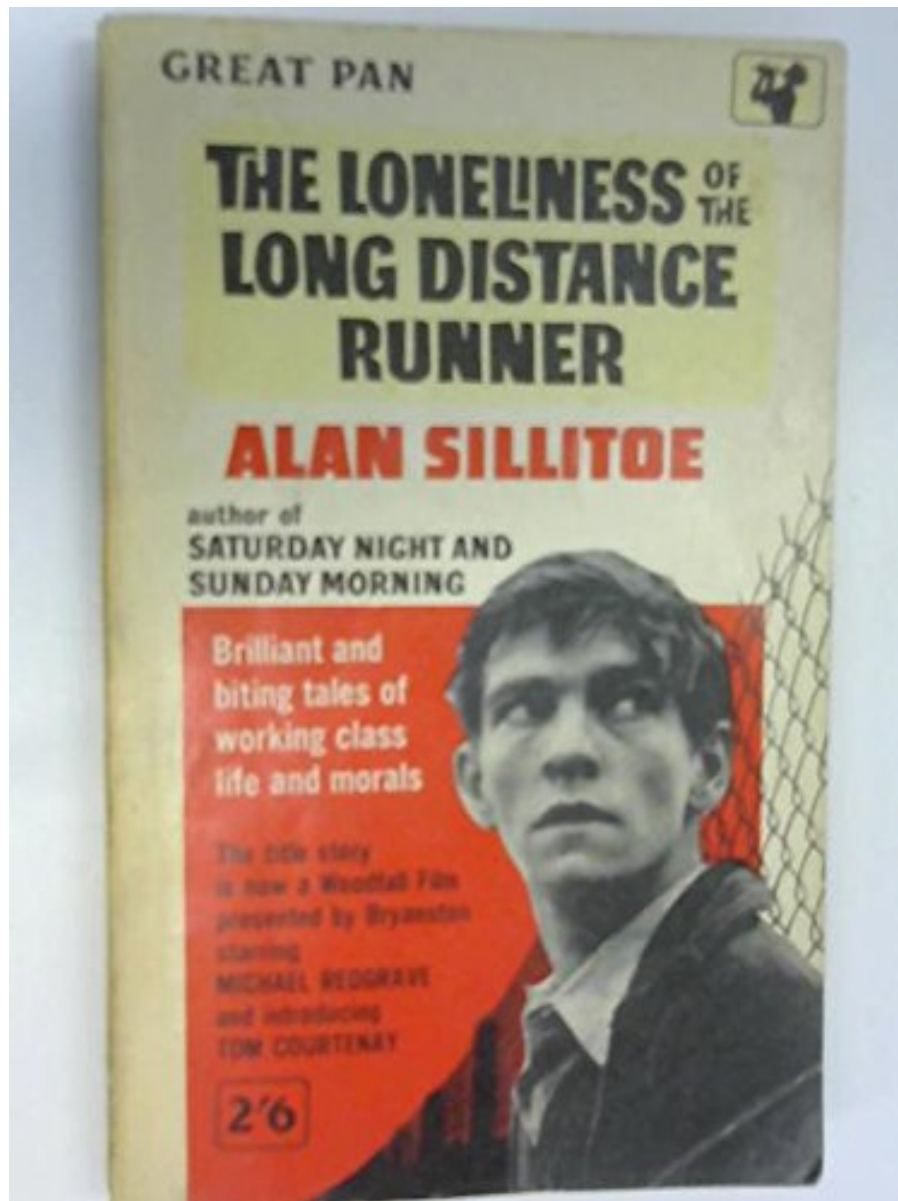


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"It was marvellous what fourpence would do"

By R. M. Peterson

That is the thought of ten-year-old Colin as he accompanies his cousin Bert to the Goose Fair, a traveling carnival. "If it's on'y a penny a ride then we've got two goes each," he calculates. But he also is plagued by guilt, because if he instead used the fourpence to buy ten Woodbine cigarettes and gave them to his father, then his father would not brood and abuse his mother that night. But Bert prevails on Colin to contribute the fourpence as their stake for an evening of fun. Then, by stealing, begging, cheating, and sneaking onto rides, they manage to extend their stay at Goose Fair for hours, until the merry-go-round operator sets a trap and pitches Colin from the spinning roundabout.

That's one of the nine stories of working class life in the 1930's in northern England, much of which is based on Alan Sillitoe's boyhood in Nottingham, England. But for the lowest class of English society, the precise location is irrelevant: "[E]very city's the same when you come to weigh it up: the same hostels full of thieves all out to snatch your last bob if you give them half the chance; the same factories full of work, if you're lucky; the same mildewed backyards and houses full of silverfish and black-clocks when you suddenly switch on the light at night."

It's a bleak and bitter existence. Still, many of the characters have a sense of honor and dignity -- only it's not the honor of the upper classes of England, or as one of them calls the nation, "the poxetten land of hope and glory". World War II is approaching, but the "war" Sillitoe's folks are more preoccupied with is the class war between the haves and the have nots, or the "In-law blokes" versus the "Out-law blokes". As for that World War, this is what Colin and Bert sing on their way home in the dark from the Goose Fair:

"We don't want to fight in a Tory war
Die like the lads before
Drown in the mud and gore
We want to go to work."

THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG-DISTANCE RUNNER is a powerful collection of stories. The title story is the best known, owing largely to the 1962 film of the same name, directed by Tony Richardson and starring Tom Courtenay and Michael Redgrave. While it's a very good story, I liked four other stories even more, one of them being "Noah's Ark", the story of Colin and Bert at Goose Fair. If the collection were limited to those five stories, my Amazon assessment would be a solid five stars. But the remaining four stories are less worthy, although I thought only one of them to be less than ordinary (one in which Sillitoe is far too heavy-handed in his indictment of conventional authority). Still, along with Sillitoe's novel "Saturday Night and Sunday Morning", LONG-DISTANCE RUNNER deserves a lasting place in English literature of the working and lower classes.

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