

Getting on our nerves

By Emanuel Litvinoff

Formula for Death. By Fernand Gigon. Wingate. 15s.

A few centuries from now (if one can be permitted the optimism) it is doubtful if people will see very much difference between Buchenwald and Hiroshima: Mr Gigon's horror document and the transcripts of the Nuremberg Trials will offer equal testimony of the inhumanity of twentieth-century man. The cruellest age in history, men will probably conclude. The most foolish age, too, no doubt, in spite of its astonishing scientific technology.

I suppose, therefore, that books like "Formula for Death" are inevitable as records of all that is most revolting in our culture. The photographs of burned and disfigured victims take their place beside those others of walking cadavers and mountains of corpses that have made our waking lives as nightmarish as any dream, and here are case-histories to add to other case-histories that paralyse the imagination of all of us who have lived more gently than our afflicted neighbours. But it is only right to ask if books of this kind, published in this way, are strictly necessary. There is no doubt that the author and the publishers are sincerely anxious that public opinion should be shocked into an awareness of the consequences of nuclear warfare. "Make no mistake about it," the book-jacket declares, "'Formula for Death' is one of the most frightening documents, if only by implication, which has ever been published. . . ." But, we are told, it is our duty to have

this knowledge implanted firmly in our minds.

Perhaps so. Perhaps we have become so numb and conditioned to horror that we can only react if the voltage is boosted, and boosted it is from the moment one picks up this book and stares at the poor maimed face of a young Japanese girl on the cover. Of course, the shock is effective, but one immediately begins to question the value of the technique. The deliberate invocation of horror is so endemic in popular culture that much public response has become debased, even diseased. Atrocities pictures and stories have a morbid appeal and there are people who seek them out as others seek out plain pornography.

A book of this kind is, in fact, an act of aggression against the reader. It deliberately sets out to excite an emotional reaction. It slugs us with facts that are already well known and plays upon the guilt and fear which haunts all but the more callous of us. It is productive of nothing but despair, because it confronts us with nothing but despair and is, therefore, in spite of the gravity of its theme, fundamentally frivolous.

The book would be justified if it produced new information or presented us with a reasoned attitude towards the facts already known. It would also be justified if it was stringently documentary, recording the case-histories of Japanese victims in medical detail, so that the specialist and the informed layman would be able to learn more precisely what effects radiation has on those exposed to it. Instead, the technique used here is that of the populariser. It makes a certain kind of propaganda against the continuation of H-bomb tests, but the point has been made more effectively without the insistent exploitation of those who have already been victims of these practices.