

Arcadia and Gib

H. E. BATES:
A Little of What You Fancy
215pp. Michael Joseph. 25s.

JOHN MASTERS:
The Rock
396pp. Michael Joseph. £2 2s.

For many whose admiration for Mr. Bates's great gifts as a novelist goes back to the distant days of *Spella Ito* and *A House of Women*, his recent Larkin moods have been hard to take. But the faithful can at any rate derive some small degree of comfort from *A Little of What You Fancy*, the fifth and latest in the series which suffers far less than the others from slap-and-tickle exuberance. The story is kept fairly simple. Pop Larkin, after some strenuous early morning love-making, gets a coronary attack. He is nursed out of it by two professional ladies, the first ogreish, the second luscious in the too-familiar late-Batesian manner. Ma too takes a hand and wonderfully fails to kill by kindness. Whilst the convalescence goes on, young Primrose Larkin cajoles the local curate into seducing her and quotes Donne to him while he is actually at it, presumably in order that he can feel himself still in crosshairs touch with the Church of England. A Man from the Ministry tries to drive a road through Pop's scraggyard but is defeated by the aristocratic and lecherous Sir John who sees the Larkin way of life as "part of the answer to a mad world".

The high midsummer pomp of tree and flower are evoked with Mr. Bates's usual skill and gusto.

Throughout all these five books he has been longing for an Arcadia which never was but which now seems more impossibly out of reach than ever before in man's history. In this one, just now and then, he succeeds in injecting a genuine ache into his fantasies.

The Rock consists of a potted history of the more famous of Hercules's Pillars from the time of Neanderthal Man to 1967, when Britain jibbed at the United Nations' directive that Gibraltar should be returned to Spain. The narrative is lucid, and never flags. Inevitably there have to be short cuts and snap judgments. It isn't, for example, wholly misleading to talk of "the unscrupulous and ambitious Louis XIV"; but all the same the description clamours for the many qualifications Mr. Masters hasn't room for. There can, however, be no doubt that he succeeds in his main objective, a very difficult one—that of conveying the idea of a single, cumulative process: the book might so easily have become a haphazard conglomeration of changes and chances.

The onward march of history is alleviated by fictional interludes, some of them quite lengthy. These are on the whole less happy. None the less they never fall below a level of brisk, professional competence, and they do improve as time goes on. Mr. Masters writes much more persuasively of Chaddock and his sappers, busy tunnelling the Rock during Hitler's war, than he does of the prehistoric occupants of those same caves, hunting, coupling, slaying and grunting out their basic English forty thousand years ago.