

AUTHOR ON A PEDESTAL

by DAVID HUGHES

A new collection of short stories by H. E. Bates, discussed rather than reviewed; Remarque's new novel appreciated for its brilliance and originality; Eileen Bassing's work commended; James Dillon White's 'panting, four-minute-mile thriller' praised; and a soft treading into a book for women.

H. E. BATES has reached the point in his career at which it becomes almost impertinent to review him. He is full and unshakably established, unlikely either to gain or lose readers, and only an impressive lapse in form would be capable of affecting his reputation. For the reviewer, the early delight of discovering his vital statistics as a writer is long past; the subsequent period of raising and carving his pedestal in the public square finished soon after the war; and even the spell of quibbling and picking holes which inevitably follows such an honour may be said to have ended. And now, what more is there to say, beyond recording the fact that H. E. Bates has published a new book of which the story can be summarised in the following fashion?

Only Uncle Silas

I am not, however, proposing to recount the story of his new work, *Sugar For The Horse*, because there is no story. There is only Uncle Silas. This quirkish, unreliable old figure, swaggering somewhat unsteadily through the years of Mr. Bates's prodigious output and sometimes vanishing unaccountably for longish periods, is what the publishers call "one of the great characters of present-day literature". This is certainly true; and it might even be true if contemporary fiction were rich in character-parts, boiling over with marvellous and sweet and unpredictable people who effervesced in the memory long after they were encountered between the covers of a book.

We recall emotions, moods, passages of writing, moments of tension, but never characters, never the people who say the correct improbable thing and act in the typical astonishing way. Uncle Silas haunts the gallery of such characters almost alone as a representative of our time. Mr. Bates puts him so simply, so effortlessly forward, without recourse to the gross exaggerations of language and distortions of vision on which Dickens relied, that one cannot help feeling surprised at the clearness as well as the vitality with which he emerges. Quietly, somewhat drunkenly, he dominates the page as soon as he enters it; when Uncle Silas is there, a firework is about to explode behind one's ear or an electric shock will tingle up one's arm.

No more need be said about this new book by Mr. Bates, except that Ardizzone drew the cosy evocative pictures and that the volume contains twelve new stories, all of

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Neal, who follows an English married couple back to this country though he is the adopted son of their American friends, never emerges as a real person no matter how conscientiously the author dwells on the strangeness of his nature. Miss Abercrombie herself is clear enough as to her intentions: 'Where four people move together they may fall into pairs, and remain equal, but three, as they align themselves first one way and then another, must make disparate groupings, must remain "two against one".' And perhaps to a mind more sympathetic than my own to involved relationships she may succeed in bringing her sum to life.

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which exercise the ingenuity, wit and alcoholic capacity of Uncle Silas until he is puffing and blowing with effort. He will be around again soon, however; it is fortunate for us that Mr. Bates cannot resist him.

All is by no means quiet a little east of the western front where Erich Maria Remarque has established a new territory for himself. We are in the Germany of the early twenties where ten-mark notes are used to light cigarettes and any ruse to evade the inconveniences of inflation is acceptable. The weather is generally bad, the action sombrely divides its time between funeral parlours, lunatic asylums, and brothels, and the world that the war shattered but did not destroy is slowly grinding to a halt. Through this grim scenery passes a young man with a lively fancy, a talent for composing bad poetry, a somewhat slick and teddy-boy exterior but a heart that is anxious, uncertain and frightened. He tells the slow reflective story in the first person and he insists on writing in the present tense, which for some reason seems a sure way of losing immediacy of impact. The book is designed on a large scale, ends suitably with a gleam of hope for the future and, rather surprisingly, contains a number of well-calculated passages of comedy that are very funny indeed. It is always a temptation to stop reading an author on the grounds that any subsequent work will prove inferior to the book that threw up his name in world-wide lights; but this time the feeling should be conquered. The translation by Denvers Ridley is most sympathetic.

Sensitive Writing

Also designed on a large scale, *Home Before Dark* is a novel that draws you into it as slowly and surely as a train moving out of a terminus. Miss Bassing's subject is a young married woman released into her awkward and embarrassed family from two years in a mental home, and the treatment the author accords so delicate a matter is both tender and serious. She shows how the girl, returning in hope, in love and in a precariously balanced condition of mind, is tipped over the edge again by a long process of unkindness and feeling lonely; and she shows by implication how little we can know, even at our most sympathetic, of the workings of other people's minds and the needs of their hearts. Her writing is sensitive, occasionally a little too dense in descriptive texture but always springing to life, tense and sinuous, when a crucial scene or moment confronts her heroine. This is a dark, serious and compassionate novel, which displays an insight both literary and scientific.

James Dillon White, after letting off steam with *Genevieve*, has now written a topical and "engaged" novel set in an island which is obviously Cyprus. From a combination of anger that British soldiers should be killed in hot-spots we are desperately trying to hold and a warm sympathy with the nationalists in such places, he has produced a panting, four-minute-mile thriller, neatly characterised and vigorously told. Almost every page is strained with tension, and one

has the feeling that the background of conflict is presented in a manner both authoritative and fair-minded. The story concerns an angry father who comes to the island to avenge the killing of his soldier son, who was starved to death by the nationalists. The trouble with these situations is that everyone—the army, the terrorists, the peasants, the avenger—is in the right, and Mr. White has therefore been able to produce a balanced conflict of sympathies in the reader, which is somewhat unusual in such a black-and-white hero-and-villain form as the thriller.

The Lily Pond is no novel for a man-to-read, and anything I say about it, however cautious, is liable to be unjust in its undertones. We are introduced to the close, rather unhealthy society of slightly eccentric people with too much time on their hands, in a small village on the Cornish coast. About their perceptions and trivial encounters there seems to me a touch of the lunatic, a gentle innocuous insanity which makes the story drift vaguely along like a ramble organised by a school for backward children. Mrs. Howis writes with a sort of tense sentimentality about natural beauties and a simplicity about people which is often touching. But let us say no more: this is positively a book for women, and in the act of reading it I felt as though I were trespassing on an unknowable world, the subtleties of which would always escape me.

Sugar for the Horse. H. E. Bates. Michael Joseph. 12s. 6d.

The Black Obelisk. Erich Maria Remarque. Hutchinson. 15s.

Home Before Dark. Eileen Bassing. Longmans. 16s.

Night on the Bare Mountain. James Dillon White. Heinemann. 15s.

The Lily Pond. Elaine Howis. Dent. 13s. 6d.

Jacket of the Month

Unfortunately the colour has not reproduced very well through our half-tone process, but the original, although only in two colours and black, has a liveliness which catches the eye immediately. The whole jacket is eminently suitable for a children's book — neither too whimsical nor too sophisticated.

