

Fiction

SUCH DARLING DODOS

H. E. BATES: *When the Green Woods Laugh*. 158pp. Michael Joseph. 12s. 6d.

MAZO DE LA ROCHE: *Morning at Jalna*. 263pp. Macmillan. 15s.

As Trollope discovered, the surest way of stabilizing the financial insecurity of being a novelist is to write a lot of novels about the same characters; readers who were in at the beginning are tempted to pursue their fictional acquaintances, newcomers soon feel they must catch up on Baresshire. The difficulty is, of course, to begin with suitable characters, for nothing is more stale than idiosyncrasy watered down to make it go farther, particularly if it started off as a gimmick.

Two years ago—or was it even less?—Mr. Bates struck lucky, with his rumbustious rusties in *The Darling Buds of May*. Pop and Ma and their sprawling brood of little Larkins, living off scrap deals in Rabelaisian luxury, reminded us that the good things of life today include not only chromium cocktail cabinets and television in every room but also sun on the strawberry fields and rolls in the hay. Their victory over prissy bureaucracy reassured the secret fear in our welfare state hearts that never having it so good might be a trap, stifling primitive lusts and bonhomie. Then the Larkins were sent on holiday abroad, decided that roast beef and beer were much jollier than frogs' legs—and already one guessed too soon how Pop would lick his chops over the "perfick" sunnanned limbs on Brittany beaches.

It is therefore with a sense of satiety that one opens *When the Green Woods Laugh* to find Pop, on page one, drooling over Ma's pink shoulder straps under the almost transparent sleeveless sky-blue dress "with a low loose neckline", as she prepares maids-of-honour and roast lamb one sizzling Kentish Sunday. The Larkins are now very rich, and in chapter two sell a baronial mansion to an innocent cheerless stockbroker for

£17,000. So Ma gets her heated swimming pool and the Jerebohms invite the Larkins to a meagre county dinner. Most of the book, as before, is occupied with luscious, benevolent orgies of one kind or other, but Pop overdoes a muddy rescue embrace and appears on a charge of indecent assault. He rolls through his own defence (of course) by discrediting the morals of the ladylike chief witness. Possibly to many readers this is good clean fun, perhaps the restoration of bucolic phrases and earthy gestures is welcomed, like a music-hall joke, because it is familiar. But to anyone who respected Mr. Bates's talent as a serious novelist or his spontaneous Uncle Silas humour, the Larkin interlude is disturbing and sad—a crude travesty of the whole pastoral tradition.

There is nothing to make one squeamish about Miss de la Roche's seventeenth instalment of the Whiteoak family saga—unless one cares about literature. The sands have run a little dry, perhaps, to send us back to the Civil War generation, with Augusta still an independent young miss and Ernest beginning on his plausible falsehoods. The plot revolves round a Southern States couple who charm the Whiteoak children but shock poor Philip by misusing hospitality for political ends. As light relief there are Tite and Belle, the Sinclairs' coloured servants, who philosophize with Larkin-like directness on the question of slavery.

Many young and romantic readers will be thrilled by the oddly hysterical formality which is the author's dialogue style—"What have I done", cried Adeline, "that I should have brought such young vipers into the world!"—and reassured by the domesticity of the narrative. The Jalna marathon has, indeed, moved outside the range of literary criteria.