Flying Officer X

With this third volume H. E. Bates brings to an end, at least for the next decade or two, his autobiography. It is, in a sense, the most rewarding volume. Most writers, having rehearsed their childhood and early years, tend to splay out, like rivers, into deltas in which the early force is dissipated into sluggish channels overgrown with names. Mr Bates is almost unique in that, having at a very early age established for himself an artistic reputation as a short-story writer of superb craftsmanship with a facility for fashioning gems from the most ordinary-seeming of stones, he was picked out through the genius of David Garnett and others to work for the Air Ministry as the creative interpreter between the Royal Air Force and the outside world. It was one of the most brilliant bureaucratic gambles of all time. His pay, that of a Flying Officer, was the equivalent of what Somerset Maugham later made for his awards; but the facilities were immense, no less than to be at the centre of the struggle for the freedom of the West.

Perhaps no one could so have risen to the occasion (V. S. Pritchett, his nearest rival, did not respond either so immediately or so simply). But the assignment was one which might have daunted many. Mr Bates's instructions were that he must not go on any operations. He was luckily in his thirties and so he was an old man in the eyes of those he wrote about; and if he had gone on operations, he would have been a positive danger.

The short-story writer catches reality out of the corner of his eye. Bates went to Oakington, to Tangmere, and looked and listened for those fragments which set the imagination working. When he had been writing his short stories before the war for the *New Statesman* and elsewhere, he had put in metaphorical twiddly bits which his readers felt were Literature. In the RAF messes, meeting recent schoolboys who faced death and too often met it, Mr Bates knew twiddly bits were a sort of blasphemy, and he wrote simply, pictorially. Being grounded, he could

not help being humble before those who rose and so often fell. The stories which he wrote under the pseudonym "Flying Officer X" were so widely popular not merely because they provided a link between those in the air and those on the ground, but also because Mr Bates was an artist who was extending himself.

The Flying Officer X stories were first published in the *News Chronicle*. When the suggestion came that they should be produced in book form, Mr Bates asked that they should be issued by his own publisher, Jonathan Cape. Wren Howard, Jonathan Cape's partner, was frigid about publishing the Flying Officer X stories until he heard there was an un-limited paper ration for it, at which he suddenly became enthusiastic. He did not, however, give Mr Bates even a token gift, for a book which sold at first printing 100,000 copies. Since Mr Bates was married with four small children and had only a Flying Officer's pay, he was so disgusted that, when he wrote *Fair Stood the Wind for France*, which he was allowed to publish under his own name and for his own profit, he refused to allow Cape to exercise their non-enforceable option and gave the book to Michael Joseph, who became the publisher of all his subsequent books.

His identity was penetrated almost at once. The topicality of the stories and the size of the printing rocketed him from the obscurity of being an author known and cherished by the few to the affluence of international popularity. Despite the envy this provoked, his success was deserved. He had risen to the occasion offered by the Air Ministry; and when, towards the end of the war in Europe, he accepted the far more difficult posting to India and Burma, he profited by the experience and produced *The Purple Plain* and *The Jacaranda Tree*, in which he successfully handled stories of action in exotic settings.

His was in every sense a good war: despite ill-health, he served his country well, bringing a sense of participation which was not given by un-imaginative official communiqués; and at the same time he served his muse. He did not write propaganda. There may have been some self-

censorship in that he selected those aspects of experience which would make his points simply and powerfully, but he wrote from genuine emotion, not to persuade but to communicate.

Mr Bates's wartime experiences form the natural climax to his autobiographical trilogy. During these years, he achieved the full deployment of his powers. Not that he has not worked hard in the twenty-seven years of subsequent peace. He has written novels, short stories and novellas, including much of his finest work. His search for new forms

has been restless. Not everyone likes everything that he has written. (The Larkin family, for example, his "Chaucerian" creation, is as tiresome to his old admirers at it is delicious to a large public, untouched by the delicacy of his subtly poetic stories.) *The World in Ripeness* is his seventieth book; and among such a profusion there is something to appeal to everyone. The autobiography will be appreciated by everybody, because it is the straightforward and heartening story of a life humbly and consistently devoted to his art, to his family, to his country, and to his friends.

Mafia mia

Mario Puzo rates his bestseller, *The Godfather*, below his other novels, *The Dark Arena* (1955) and *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1965), and frankly admits that he wrote it primarily to make money. He needed to, being some $20,000 in debt, but once committed to the business of writing he clearly found scope in it for the skill which thirty years' experience of story-telling had given him.

The Godfather Papers contains reprinted and new pieces—articles, stories, reviews, anecdotes, memoirs, diary-entries—all written since 1965 with the exception of Mr Puzo's first published story (1950). They are understandably uneven in quality, but each has something to add to the portrait of the writer and his world. There is a good deal about Mr Puzo's passions, the chief of which is writing (and how good it is to find a writer who loves his craft and is proud of it), with gambling pretty high in the scale. There are some of his likes and dislikes, much about early days as a first-generation American Italian, and there is an objective, amusing but in some respects predictable account of the making of both the book and the film of *The Godfather*.

It is natural to be curious about the author of a work which has given pleasure to millions of people, and this frank, often pungent, miscellany probably gives a better idea than would a more studied autobiography, written when rationalization might have set in and the impressionism of these often fugitive pieces be overlaid.

What emerges is that Mr Puzo is above all a man who loves stories—the stringing of the George Mandel anecdotes through the present collection is a sign—and who loves even more the act and art of telling them. His imagination functions best when it is engaged in narrative. Nothing could be more indicative of the kind of author he is than the statement he makes about his Mafia book; he confesses that he wrote it "entirely from research. I never met a real honest-to-god gangster. I knew the gambling world pretty good, but that's all."

Understandably, one of his early loves in fiction was Rafael Sabatini.

Gerald Kingsland's *From the Whores of Montezuma* (151pp. Kingsland Lott. Paperback 40p) is an autobiographical account of a thirteen-month spell as Forward Observation Post signaller in the Korean War, written in a semi-fictional form and giving a painfully recognizable description of military life both in and behind the front line.