

Fiction. *The modern novelist's preoccupation with the mystery of time, whether it is static or fluid or mysteriously another dimension, is well illustrated in the fiction reviewed this week. J. B. Priestley has used time as a major factor in novels, stories, and plays. In his new novel, "Jenny Villiers," he reverts pleasantly to a well-worn fantasy that the past is always with us, and we can at moments see it about us. The posthumous book of the philosopher and mystic Osupensky, long awaited by his devotees, is surprisingly a brief work of fiction, which attempts to prove that it is futile for man to wish to turn back the hour-glass of his life. Even James Hilton's "Nothing So Strange" is concerned with time, for it becomes necessary to search into the lost past of an atomic scientist with a nervous breakdown. This week's novel voted most certain to succeed is H. E. Bates's "The Purple Plain," whose scene is a remote spot in ageless Burma where time for a moment is speeded up by the violent activity of war.*

The Egret and the Burning Plane

THE PURPLE PLAIN. By H. E. Bates.
Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1947.
308 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by HARRISON SMITH

AMONG contemporary English novelists H. E. Bates is one of the few who have mastered the art of writing popular novels that reveal the inner as well as the outer man, that display depths of emotion without pathos or sentimentality. For American readers this talent for writing fine prose that never appears stylized and descriptive passages that are often poetically graceful and colorful without appearing to be poetry, was first revealed in his romantic novel "Fair Stood the Wind for France." In "The Purple Plain" he has again returned to the war, but the scene is incredibly remote from the French countryside: a burning and arid plain in Burma, where there is a group of bombed temples, above a marble pavement littered with shattered figures of the gods, near a small airfield and a village hidden among tropical trees along a dark river. Over all, the blistering heat of the sun laden with impalpable dust scorches the small group of white men who guard the planes that are the only means of entry or escape, corrupts their natures, and fills them with a tired bitterness and hatred.

The English flyer commanding this remote outpost of fallen Empire, on whom the action of the narrative centers, is a man who had won decorations and citations for bravery in the early days of the war, though he alone knew that his heroism was false, the product of a reckless passion for death in battle. Grim and bitter, tortured by the heat and by his secret and apparently unattainable wish, he



—From the book jacket.

is taken for the first time by the medical officer to the village. The doctor, a hearty and merciful man, knows that Forrester is close to a nervous breakdown or to insanity. There in the dank stillness and quiet of a thatched house he meets a Burmese girl of twenty and her older sister, both educated in Rangoon University, who had fled from the Japanese occupation. Forrester's young wife had died in London on their wedding night, killed by a German bomb, and the sight of this peaceful and gentle girl with the pallor of a magnolia blossom calms his consuming anger.

It is difficult to describe a novel of this superior quality but with a theme so commonplace as that of the British or American soldier and the native girl without giving it an appearance of triteness. Indeed the events that take place might have been invented by any writer who knew something of the course of the war in Burma, had felt the burning heat, and had experienced that sympathy that sometimes springs up in the Westerner's heart at the first glimpse of what may

lie beneath the fragile beauty and grace of the cultured Oriental woman. This is a romance of action and suspense; it is not unduly contemplative nor sensuous, and the excitement it provides the reader is familiar enough to most war novels, the airplane crash that burns two men to death, the Japanese bombing raid on the village, the smashup that lands Forrester and two wounded companions in the interminable reaches of a stony plain riven by dry water-courses, the almost miraculous escape and return to the girl who has become all of life to him—all of these are in a sense part of the conventions of war fiction in which the scene is laid in Asia.

It is Mr. Bates's gift for creating flesh-and-blood characters, his evocation of the nuances of human behavior and feeling through accurate speech, his sharp sense for color and form and telling imagery, that set this book apart from other war novels.

The four white men who have a part to play in the novel—Blore, ro-tund and irritatingly meticulous, the cheerful doctor, Carrington, the sensitive and courageous flyer whom Forrester carries on his back away from certain death—are all sharply delineated, as are the two sturdy women nurses who profess to hate all the men around them and the missionary with her dyed red hair and her shrill laughter edged with hysteria. He



seems to have a special quality of tenderness and feeling for the pallid and fragile natives who had been the victims of Japanese ambition and are now passively enduring a second foreign occupation, their town bombed and ruined, their pagodas shattered. In time they know that they will be left alone, that the current of life will flow as it always has, but now there is hidden fear that may send them at any time wandering with their household goods and their babies toward starvation and death. From the beginning of the story there is this secret apprehension, a sustained suspense at the heart of the novel. The native's passive fear, Carrington's special regard for death, the dangerous and arid landscape over which he must fly, give the reader a sense of constant danger in violent contrast to the static tranquility of jungle and desert plain and blazing heat.

The final third of the narrative is taken up with the crash of Forrester's

plane, his torturous escape through jagged rocks and jungle, carrying supporting his younger, wounded companion. At the last inch of exhaustion when all he wanted was to lie in darkness and to die, there comes the discovery that he will live. The surprising moment, which might have been banal enough, is given both beauty and force by the author's use of imagery. In the first chapter of the book he had watched a native child torturing a green and vibrant lizard and finally killing it, and dusting the feel of death from the rosy hands. Now at the end of life he sees a lizard running among the dry acacia twigs onto a flat rock a few yards in front of him. As he opens his eyes it dies protectively, eyes wonderfully bright, and its hands outstretched on the flat face of the rock.

But down in the valley he can see something that even beside the wonder of the bright living lizard was like a mirage. A white egret was walking daintily among the grass of the jungle. The thought of seeing a bird was so crazily wonderful that he staggered to his feet. And the egret as if disturbed by the sound he made seemed suddenly to fly. Then he saw it was an egret. He saw it was a small, umn of smoke. He saw it was a pearl gray as the feathers of the egret from a dry ring of grass. Beyond the fire was a narrow white road and between the road and the little fire he suddenly saw the movement of men.

When he had finally been carried back to the little shaded village where his Anna lived, the missionary woman told him at the door of the house that she was sleeping from the exhaustion of grief. "Go in and lie down and sleep with her," she said. "Nothing will be said in this house about that sort of sleep together."

It is a remarkable writer who can illuminate the darkest moments and arouse the reader's emotions by describing a lizard, an egret that turns into a column of smoke, and by the sentences spoken by a haggard, ravaged woman with hideously dyed hair. But H. E. Bates has long experience dealing with such situations and with nature as adjunct to man's deepest emotions. He has published besides his novels a dozen books of original short stories and two on English country life. It is that rare author whose work can be cut and chopped into sections serialized in the most popular magazines without loss to his prestige without a sentence altered. Now that the war is fading into the past he is able to devote his talent for narrative and for descriptive passages to enameled elegance and beauty in years of our qualified prose.



THE AUTHOR: Herbert Ernest Bates began his literary career at seventeen as an apprentice reporter on an English country newspaper but soon quit to clerk in a leather warehouse. It gave him more time for creative writing. His first novel, "The Two Sisters," was published in 1926, when he was twenty-one. Within ten years he produced ten books, most of them collections of the short stories which won him kudos as the "most talented and articulate" young author in that category, and certainly the most frequently anthologized in

Edward J. O'Brien's annual "Best British Short Stories." He has also written reviews and articles for most London newspapers, essays, a few plays, two volumes on English rural life, and several novels. Although devoid of "proletarian" slant, his works deal chiefly with simple country people and agricultural laborers. His best-known books here are "Spella Ho," "The Cruise of the Breadwinner," and "Fair Stood the Wind for France." The last-named, like the fiction pieces in "There's Something in the Air" (written under the pseudonym "Flying Officer X") and next month's Literary Guild selection "The Purple Plain," drew upon his experience as RAF Squadron Leader in World War II. It was his first novel to be passed by censor detailing French underground activities behind German lines. During hostilities the British Ministry of Information made numerous movies of his short stories. Currently being filmed is his long short story "The Bride Came to Evansford." Mr. Bates is credited with "an exceptional talent for worry," was born in Rushton, Northampton, lives now in Little Chart, Kent, with his wife, two sons, and two daughters. He writes mornings in (quoting friends) "the worst longhand in the world." His favorite recreations are gardening and, "like all English at this moment in history, eating and drinking."—R. G.