

NEW FICTION

FULL CIRCLE

H. E. BATES: *The Feast of July*. 223pp.
Michael Joseph. 10s. 6d.

DOROTHY CHARQUES: *The Valley*. 286pp.
John Murray. 10s. 6d.

In *The Feast of July* Mr. Bates takes a classically tragic theme, but treats it with such romantic lightness that the whole sad story reads like a fairy-tale. The plot itself is worthy of Hardy at his most implacable.

A young chambermaid at the turn of the century is seduced by a travelling salesman from the neighbouring town. Turned out into the snow, she suffers a miscarriage and in her shame and agony vows vengeance on her betrayer. Ill in mind and body, she is rescued by a family of shoemakers whose three sons fall in love with her, and through their devotion they restore her faith in life and, in particular, in men. But the shadow of the seducer can only finally be exorcised by his death, which, equally inexorably, must be brought about at the hand of her true lover. By all ordinary canons, this is the stuff of tragedy. But Mr. Bates's characters are as light as air, and when the blows of fate fall, instead of shattered flesh and blood there is only the sad flutter of autumn leaves caught in the first chill wind of winter. We do not feel involved in these events because the characters belong to another world and possess powers we do not understand. From true tragedy there is no escape; from Mr. Bates's tragedy there is the escape of fantasy and even sentiment. Since, however, his particular world is constructed with a poet's imagination and described with rare beauty the reader is strangely moved by its inhabitants' misfortunes, but it is the emotion of wonder rather than awe. But better, by far, Mr. Bates's ghostlike creations than the work of the great majority of his contemporaries.

Mrs. Charques, a writer of proved quality, is at her best in this latest novel when describing the relationships of her central characters—a husband and wife who, out of boredom, agree to take a year's leave of absence from each other. The reasons for the separation are described with fascinating insight. The long chapters, however, when the husband searches for peace on his own, first in a remote and very unusual corner of Warwickshire and then on an even more remote Pacific island, are less convincing.

Criticisms of all important new books, together with notices of a widely selected list of current publications, will be found in "The Times Literary Supplement," published every Friday at 6d.