

NEW FICTION

WILLIAM COOPER: *Disquiet and Peace*. 323pp. Macmillan. 15s.
EVA BOROS: *The Mermaids*. 180pp. Rupert Hart-Davis. 13s. 6d.
HARRY BLOOM: *Episode*. 320pp. Collins. 13s. 6d.
PETER MATTHIESSEN: *Partisans*. 206pp. Secker and Warburg. 12s. 6d.
H. E. BATES: *The Sleepless Moon*. 383pp. Michael Joseph. 15s.

Mr. William Cooper has hitherto written successfully of the provinces and of the middle classes, but his outlook is of the broadest, and it leads him now to study in the same critical vein human behaviour as demonstrated by two young people living in aristocratic and political circles in the Edwardian era. Arnold is a serious-minded Liberal of 34, of whom great things have been expected for almost a little too long. Muriel, his wife, is the daughter of Lady Hartland, the fascinating, flighty leader of the dazzling "Hartland House set." The story opens in 1906 when the first Liberal Government for many years is about to be formed, and Arnold is hoping for a junior ministry.

Arnold and Muriel, though they are devoted to each other, are not happily married. They have no children, and Muriel is subject to recurrent bouts of depression and sleeplessness, from which she can only extricate herself by acts of wilfulness of increasing magnitude. As soon as she has done something really outrageous she recovers and becomes once more charming and natural. Arnold is therefore constantly having to choose between his wife and his career.

Artistically, there might have been some slight awkwardness in describing a political scene which though historic is still recent. The author avoids it by giving his two successive Liberal Prime Ministers fictitious names and a general likeness to their prototypes. Except that Arnold is offered a post in the Irish Office, events of the day are passed over, while the social climate is emphasized.

Mr. Cooper's evident purpose is to explain the forces of character which threaten this particular marriage. Arnold has inherited from his mother a suffocating devotion to the person he loves, and his wife's outbursts are her way of breaking free. The explanations are less satisfactory than the story itself, which is kept at an absorbing state of slightly mannered tension. Arnold's love for Muriel, though deep, does not in the event seem particularly stifling, and her pathological condition remains obscure. Mr. Cooper's characters, in fact, refuse to conform absolutely to his idea of them.

The Mermaids is a most attractive novel, though its setting is a sanatorium for consumptives in Hungary before the war. A young business man, who meets one of the patients by chance and falls in love with her, finds himself drawn inside the dream-like world of hospital life, where gaiety and melancholy are irrelevantly mingled, and where the past and the future are not stable points of reference. When the young man returns to his family for a normal, traditional Christmas, he finds that he has outgrown his youth, and is no longer at ease with them; but when he tries, in all tenderness, to force a settled future on the girl he loves, for she is nearly cured, she runs away, because she, too, cannot face that sort of reality. Miss Boros's touch is light and sensitive.

From the humanitarian point of view there probably cannot be too many novels about the colour question in Africa; there is some danger, however, that more discriminating readers will tire of this theme, which demands the drive of a Dickens or a Faulkner. *Episode* is an unusually polished and fair-minded first novel by a Johannesburg lawyer, Mr. Harry Bloom. He describes life in a native location on the outskirts of a small Transvaal town, and contrasts the idealism of an educated African political leader with the idealism of a white superintendent who is attempting to "govern" a small, artificially segregated group of people by time-honoured colonial methods intended for administration on a larger and more flexible scale. It takes a nasty riot, developed from small beginnings, to break through his unimaginative innocence and make him resign his post. Mr. Bloom has excellent intentions, but *Episode* is more a piece of special pleading than a potential work of art.

The allegorical thriller, in which serious-minded writers send their heroes into a highly coloured underworld, whence, after first-hand experience of vice and crime,

they emerge with a programme for better living, is becoming increasingly fashionable in America. *Partisans* starts promisingly in post-war Paris with an agency reporter trying to make contact with a Communist leader of Central European extraction and temporary American nationality who, it is rumoured, has been discredited by his party. Unfortunately Mr. Matthiessen tries to say too many things at once and falls between the stools of realism and idealism. Since the reporter must experience everything, including degradation, events become more and more improbable.

Mr. H. E. Bates's nostalgic enthusiasm for the Midlands does not always prevent them from seeming sodden and unkind; provincial life in the 1920s as portrayed in *The Sleepless Moon* is dispiriting, a positive squirrel's cage of repressed emotions and unfulfilled hopes. If, because it has a slightly manufactured air (Mr. Bates has, after all, done this kind of thing so very well before), this is a disappointing novel, nevertheless it is almost carried through by the author's experience and craftsmanship.

HIGH SPOTS

GASTON RÉBUFFAT: *Starlight and Storm*. Translated by Wilfrid Noyce and Sir John Hunt. 143pp. Dent. 18s.

PAUL BAUER: *The Siege of Nanga Parbat, 1856-1953*. Translated by R. W. Rickmers. 211pp. Rupert Hart-Davis. 25s.

RONALD CLARK: *Great Moments in Mountaineering*. 128pp. Phoenix House. 7s.

SIR EDMUND HILLARY AND GEORGE LOWE: *East of Everest*. 70pp. 48 plates. Hodder and Stoughton. 21s.

M. Rébuffat's stories of his Alpine climbs confirm, more surely than have most books hitherto available to the English reader, that there can be an identity of outlook between the "ironmongery" merchants, with their *pitons*, their hammers, and their *étriers*, and the leisured philosophers who have approached the mountains by other paths.

Gaston Rébuffat is a Chamonix guide, but his account of the six great North Faces of the Alps—the Grandes Jorasses, the Piz Badile, the Drus, the Matterhorn, the Cima Grande di Lavaredo, and the Eiger—is far more than another item in the list of guides' books that began with Zurbiggen's *From the Alps to the Andes*. At Rébuffat's level, and it is not often reached, the frontier between guide and amateur grows indistinct; for both hold these positions by accident; both are merged by their mutual love and understanding of the great problems that rock, snow, and ice can sometimes offer. In their translation Mr. Wilfrid Noyce and Sir John Hunt have retained the exaltation of the six rather desperate personal ventures with which the book deals.

Mr. Paul Bauer's account of the efforts made to climb Nanga Parbat, the mountain that claimed 31 lives before it was finally conquered, is a useful assessment of what has been done during the past century. It ranges from Adolf Schlagintweit's lonely survey, past Mummery's remarkable three-man attempt on the peak and the German expeditions of the 1930s to Mr. Hermann Buhl's astonishing success in 1953, on what must have been the most curiously run of all Himalayan expeditions.

Great Moments in Mountaineering is one of a series designed to describe great achievements in mountaineering, sport, flying, and other tests. Mr. Ronald Clark has made an admirable job of his *rechauffé* of 10 of the most memorable feats. He guides his readers up icy slopes to a world where the snow and ice is seen "rising in vast domes and high pinnacles," or where the great white glaciers gleam "faintly through the night like the battlements of phantom castles"—to the peak of Mont Blanc, or the Californian High Sierra, or, in his last chapter, to the summit of Everest.

Sir Edmund Hillary and another member of Sir John Hunt's Everest team, Mr. George Lowe, describe the New Zealand Alpine Club Himalayan Expedition to the Barun Valley in 1954. The narrative is well told and the photographs are excellent.