

New Novels

The Visitors. By MARY McMINNIES. *Collins*.
18s.

The Branding Iron. By PAUL-ANDRÉ LESORT.
Translated by ANTONIA WHITE. *Collins*.
10s. 6d.

The Darling Buds of May. By H. E. BATES.
Michael Joseph. 12s. 6d.

Amélie and Pierre. By HENRI TROYAT.
Translated by MARY V. DODGE. *Alvin
Redman*. 15s.

The Visitors is really far too long. Mrs McMinnies takes a quarter of a million words to tell a story which is slight and in some respects familiar. Milly, the wife of a British diplomat in Poland, discovers that shoe-polish and aspirin can buy their weight in gold on the black market. She trades in them; is found out; nearly ruins her husband's career; loses the American newspaperman she intended to seduce; and is seduced instead by the man who gets her husband's job. Right at the end Milly realises that the only person she loves is her husband, weeps because she feels she has lost him; then suddenly they make up, all is forgiven, and the ship sails away from Poland with Milly and Larry looking into each other's eyes. It was a mistake for Mrs McMinnies to compare Milly with Emma Bovary. Milly is a familiar heroine of the women's magazines: pretty, selfish, but with a heart of gold, no one is more upset than she when she discovers the mischief she has caused. She is a naughty girl, no more. *The Visitors* is written for women and will certainly be enjoyed by them. It has two overwhelmingly attractive features. The cautionary

of the pretty woman who sins and is made to suffer a little before returning to the path of virtue is one that can never fail. And then, the ugly, the awkward and the low are treated with cruel derision; this attitude, as the success of other women writers has shown, is well calculated to flatter the ugly, the awkward and the low who make up the mass audience.

The question remains: why a quarter of a million words? Mrs McMinnies tells her story in an old-fashioned way. Every action is accompanied by a detailed analysis, just so that we wouldn't miss the point. And when her characters talk, they talk; and she keeps on interrupting to explain. Also, a good half of *The Visitors* is simple reportage and could have been issued separately as *Cocktails in Cracow, Or Big Brother Watched Me*, divided into neat chapters: My Polish Servant, My Polish Teacher, The Day the Police Arrested Me, A Visit to a Polish Dressmaker, and so on. Mrs McMinnies is an excellent and witty reporter, and I found this part of her book most enjoyable. I wish she had written a straightforward account of her life in Poland. As it is, her reportage swamps her story, which is further weakened because the difference between fact and fiction is so noticeable. But the memory that remains and burns is one of length, unforgivable length.

The Branding Iron is mercifully short. It is in the form of a nine days' diary kept by a woman who intends to kill herself because she is choked by her husband's possessiveness. As she writes, telling herself things she ought to know, she realises that her suicide will be her husband's final triumph, that his selfishness and cruelty have driven her to despair, and that to revenge herself on him she must remain alive. The diary is a clever idea, but it is a distracting idea, and it also helps M. Lesort to avoid all the difficulties of telling a story. He is spared the effort of working out scenes, and can make do with the bald narration of very few incidents. This makes his story thin and a little unreal; just how thin one can see by comparing it with Maugham's *Mrs Craddock* which deals, though at a different level, with the same theme of marital disenchantment.

The Darling Buds of May has a splendid jacket — pink blossom garlanding a milky blue sky. Very suitable too: this is a modern pastoral, a bucolic frolic with a touch of the old Bates every now and then ('I've never been kissed among donkeys before'). The happy-go-lucky Larkin family have never heard of income tax and National Insurance. Pop and Ma can't sign their names, but they eat and drink extraordinarily well, own two television sets, a Rolls-Royce, and can buy a sixty-roomed Georgian mansion. It is never explained where they get the money. An inspector from the Inland Revenue comes, falls in love with the family and their way of life, abandons his E.I.R. briefcase and marries one of the daughters. She looks aristocratic and is a superb horsewoman. Mr Bates is 'identified with the great cause of cheering us all up', but he tries too hard. His characters laugh and talk too loudly; and I have seldom seen, outside a cookery book, so many descriptions of meals per chapter. This, doubtless, is zest and gusto. But Mr Bates behaves like a man trying to get drunk on lemonade. He had a fine idea, but he didn't bother to work it out.

Amélie and Pierre should be read by everyone who is still getting magazine rejection slips. It is 1915 and handsome Pierre, with his hairy chest and hairy stomach, is at the front. In Paris, Amélie, his wife, presides over her café, surrounded by comic laundresses who admire her beauty, her baby, and her virtue. Every sixty pages or so Amélie slips off to the front to sleep with Pierre. Virtue fortified, she returns. She insults a woman

who, too lazy to go to the front, has taken a lover in Paris; and refuses to let this woman touch Pierre's baby. Amélie's widowed father receives a shy proposal of marriage from his housekeeper. This drives Amélie to virtuous rage against man-hunters; a stinging letter puts the housekeeper in her place. Amélie continues to visit the front. But virtue has to be tested. A Spanish lodger tries to assault Amélie. Repelled, he confesses that her beauty made him lose his head, begs to be allowed to stay, a distant admirer. He stays. More visits to the front. Then Pierre is wounded and comes home to convalesce. He is too weak to make love. Amélie is considerate. 'The advice of the doctor came back to her: "Be patient. Don't torture him. Don't hurry him"'. In time Pierre can make it, and virtue is rewarded. On this obscene but virtuous note this shameless novel ends.

V. S. NAIPAUL

Before Methuselah

History Begins at Sumer. By S. N. KRAMER.
Thames & Hudson. 35s.

Ancient Semitic Civilisations. By SABATINO MOSCATI. *Elek.* 25s.

It is just a century since the honest doubters threw Lambeth and Oxford into turmoil, and put themselves out of the running for bishoprics, by questioning the 'evidences' of the Old Testament and the maths in Genesis. What would their persecutors have said to the present taste for books on the early civilisations of the Middle East — to railway bookstalls proffering Penguins full of documentary evidence that Adam's rib and Balaam's ass, Moses's basket and tales of resurrection are literary borrowings of a kind that began as soon as men could write — that is, with Sumer.

Professor Kramer is an American Sumerologist and at once admits that he is the narrowest of specialists. His speciality is an encyclopaedic knowledge of the tens of thousands of fragments of Sumerian writing which, by the hazards of competitive excavation, are now dispersed in museums and collections all over the world. Piecing the jigsaws is a life-work so absorbing that his book bases its whole account of Sumerian civilisation on this written material, and skips the more usual evidence based on descriptions of 'digs', art and architecture; in his absorption he hurries on with hardly a glance at his superb plates.

To conjure up Sumerian life from the scripts is, however, a rarer accomplishment, and, for the ordinary reader, no one has yet brought the Sumerians so near. By tradition, they are taken to be a dour people by comparison with the gay Egyptians blessed with a kindly river, benevolent gods and a jolly view of life and the after-life. In fact, the literature here reproduced suggests that even unpredictable rivers, capricious gods and a dreary underworld left the Sumerians with time to laugh, sing, tease and captivate, and to develop a social conscience that is close to that of the New Testament.

Professor Kramer's method of dealing with his subject discloses not only Sumer but the excitements and technicalities of his profession. He conveys the pleasures of the chase after fragments of a tablet or a story; he also invariably gives, first, his deductions and interpretations of the script, and then a translation of the raw material on which they were based. Each reader can be his own Sumerologist, and the only flaws in an excellent and scholarly book are a sad lack of