

One must admire Mr Bates who continues to strike out tales with such tireless freshness and range. Those of *The Watercress Girl* are mostly set in one of his well-tried habitats, that rustic scene which was once the English short-story world in itself: Coppard-land to the east, Powys-land to the west. The twist of Mr Bates's new tales is that, in each, the adult story is seen, fragmentary and uncomprehended, through the view of a child. What the boy remembers always of the watercress girl is her 'screeching, melancholy, marshy cry across the summer afternoon', and this expresses the mood of the tales, idyllic and cruel, as the lives of most young children are.

Mr Bates has a foible when on rustic ground: a horrible smock-and-gaiters heartiness — no escaping the warts and rheums and old-man's-lust. Happily, there is least of it in the two fine stories about poverty and its related grief, 'Let's Play Soldiers', a harsh little tale about the first World War, and the short, perfectly told 'The Far Distant Journey'. In tales like these Mr Bates can break the heart — the frangible thing, of course, that readers and playwatchers possess more often than people.

NAOMI LEWIS