

This gift of the startling, delighting image has been developed by Mr. Bates to a remarkable pitch. This is from the first page of his latest collection of stories, *The Watercress Girl*: 'On her cheek, just under her right eye, was a big furry brown mole that looked like the top of a bulrush that had been cut off and stuck there.' A small boy sees it on Pacey, an ugly myopic woman, who is taking him to pick cowslips on a hot day. They chatter; in the fields the child asks her to let down the black coil of her hair; he crowns her with flowers. Nothing else happens. Yet Mr. Bates manages to hint at some sort of transfiguration, a moment of blinding, innocent happiness. Most of the stories in this book, all of them about children, work with the same apparent simplicity, even the more sinister ones. The whole collection seems to me the best thing Mr. Bates has done for a long time; and this may well be because the child's anarchic eye, skimming for sweets and excitements, matches the way Mr. Bates characteristically gets his effects. Too often in the past, in his 'adult' stories, the action has been betrayed by bulrushy moles, cut off and stuck on to the page with no other justification than to create a vague climate of good will in the reader, an ingratiating trick that cancels the carefully easy craftsmanship of the rest.