

Fiction

A CHILD TAKING NOTES

H. E. BATES: *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal*. 206pp. Michael Joseph. 15s.
ISOBEL STRACHEY: *The Perfectionists*. 256pp. Anthony Blond. 15s.

The core of Mr. Bates's inspiration lies in the Northamptonshire of his boyhood and youth. In time, at any rate, one might narrow it down even more closely than that to the timeless, golden summer of 1921, perhaps, when small-town industries were still often pre-mechanized, when flint roads were still dusty, when the countryside dreamed, breathless and multi-coloured in the sun, and creamy dairymaids, whose bare legs set the corn swishing as they passed, strode either to their tasks or to lustful holiday encounters. What a child he must have been, this young Bates, set down among the cottage shoemakers and the small farmers, taking notes plentiful enough to supply the ammunition for a lifetime of good writing.

He is probably tired of having people tell him that he is at his best only when he operates within a ten-mile radius of Evesford. Yet to the truth of this the stories in *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal* can testify. "Thelma", "The Place Where Shady Lay", "The Daughters of the Village", "The Spring Hat" and "The Enchantress" are some of the stories in the present volume. They are all rivulets rising somewhere in that Northamptonshire past of his, and they all confirm Mr. Bates's position in the first rank of contemporary short-story writers.

"The Place Where Shady Lay" is a particularly splendid example of his art. In it a child is brought horrifyingly face to face with human degradation. Shady Baxter, who once was "a big, handsome chap [with] one o' them big, curly moustaches, like a pair o' bull's horns", is long past his passionate spring-time, has become, indeed, a server of prison-sentences, an outcast and a tramp. The child comes across him lying up in a derelict hovel, and the encounter has that breathless, tactile vividness Mr. Bates is master of.

Some of the other stories go far afield in search of setting and character to the Pacific Islands and a low-much-travelled local princess, or, in "The Yellow Crab", to the

Caribbean and a holidaying Detroit tycoon. These have less of the author's characteristic directness and immediacy. Yet these too cast a spell, and one admires the skill with which the plentiful material is selected and laid out.

The Perfectionists is mannered and skittish. The too-plentiful, stylized dialogue, though it is less intense, less concentrated and less doom-laden, recalls the manner of Miss Ivy Compton-Burnett. The book is vaguely contemporary in setting, but there is still, in all the houses which Miss Strachey visits, a metaphorical green-baize-covered door dividing, as in vanished days, the servants' hall from the Aubusson-carpeted stamping-grounds of the gentry.

These gentry, a weird, unearthly crowd, are Miss Strachey's concern. There are Claude and Paul, painter and botanist, friends since Oxford days and cohabiting still, in middle-life, in a rural fairyland. There is Lawton Cheke, an improbable farmer on modern lines who reads, as well as has, *Liaisons Dangereuses*. Lawton has married Susan, the only person in Miss Strachey's portrait gallery who can lay claim to any sort of level-headedness. But Lawton is still distracted by his long attachment to the blind, elderly, affluent Eleanor, and Susan turns from his resultant moodiness to Paul, and succeeds in reviving his vestigial heterosexuality.

"People are so unsatisfactory", says Susan. "You need them but you never know what horrors they will put you through." This might be taken as the text of a book which, with its gruesome little asides on scientific farming, its insulated, English-upper-class *aperçus* ("But if you tell people garlic is good for the kidneys we shall have all those stupid porters and lift-attendants stinking abominably"), and its unsheathed emotional knife-play, remains throughout outspoken, intelligent and odd. Another froward child, in fact, has been taking notes amid Gothic ruins.