

New Fiction

- MICHAEL LEWIS: *Kilroy Was Here*. 208pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 16s.
 DAVID DIVINE: *The Iron Ladies*. 399pp. Hutchinson. 21s.
 FRANÇOISE SAGAN: *Wonderful Clouds*. Translated by Anne Green. 124pp. John Murray. 10s. 6d.
 H. E. BATES: *The Day of the Tortoise*. 94pp. Michael Joseph. 7s. 6d.
 MARIE-ANNE DESMAREST: *Torrents*. Translated by Daphne Woodward. 252pp. Muller. 18s.
 AGATHA CHRISTIE: *The Pale Horse*. 256pp. Collins. 15s.

Mr. Lewis's short stories, *Kilroy Was Here*, are distinguished by having a tale to tell and by telling it effectively in terms of the here and the now. Whether he writes about a national serviceman's soldiering at a moribund depot; an American's imprisonment in fantasies of violence and tough omniscience; a young girl growing through the disenchantment of her first encounter with a young man; or an actress rejoicing in the independence that her craftsmanship and her character have won her, Mr. Lewis always rings the action in a substantial and recognizably living context. Three of the stories concern one Bernard, a bookseller-writer, who has a French wife and two children. He gives Mr. Lewis scope for criticizing various kinds of Philistinism and also for bringing in France. "Bal Gratuit" is the best of these, with its well-observed details of French provincial life, though perhaps a little marred by an uncharitable picture of an unwanted English guest. The most successful tale, however, is "Primers for the Age of Plenty", a terse, comically grim study of a successful businessman, in which are counterpointed two actions, in the first of which he is a very young man, just down from Oxford, trying to sell educational books on a commission basis, and in the second he is cynically carrying on some negotiations at board-room level. Mr. Lewis's sense of form makes the majority of his short stories unusually satisfying.

In *The Iron Ladies* Mr. Divine is concerned with the beginning of the era of armour-plate in naval warfare and he relates the great passage of arms in the American Civil War between the Merrimac and the Monitor. He gives no more than due emphasis to this crucial battle and his account of the race to build iron-clads both in the North and the South is excellent. *The Iron Ladies* is an ambitious novel, associating the historic progress of the war with fictitious as well as actual characters. Of the former the most significant is a young Virginian girl whose quick, deep patriotism colours her whole vision, leading her to make a blind and unlucky choice of lovers before a desolating experience improves her judgment.

Mlle. Sagan studies the morbid love of a young American for his French wife in *Wonderful Clouds*. Insatiable jealousy has become part of the husband's consuming passion for a girl who eventually revolts against the violation of her dignity by committing adultery. The story takes place in Florida, New York, and Paris and while it is distinctively in Mlle. Sagan's style and mood, the reader can hardly help feeling that the whole business is rather trivial. This is possibly because the fated pair have nothing in the way of serious work to do; they gyrate like the shepherd and shepherdess of a sophisticated pastoral, playing a game whose rules are thoroughly understood by Mlle. Sagan. The Parisian scenes are deftly and concisely brought to life.

The Day of the Tortoise is described as a short novel but its 90 or so pages of narrative are printed in agreeably large type and include some 20 pages of softly and blithely drawn illustrations by Mr.

Peter Farmer; it might more properly be called a short story. The simplicity and unity of the tale, too, conform to the nature of the latter kind. Mr. Bates's main character is a dim and willing bachelor, dwelling in a large, shabby house, at the beck and call of his three sisters, whose lunacies, whimsicalities and selfishnesses have become an unquestioned part of his existence. Into this pattern bursts a ripe and uninhibited shop-girl and a brief idyll ensues. The element of caricature is strong in the story and some readers may associate it with the romps that began with *The Darling Buds of May*. There is nevertheless something deeply human and kindly about the tale and its St. Martin's Summer atmosphere makes its own appeal.

Torrents (first published in France in 1953) is about the arbitrary marriage (brought about by a newspaper advertisement) of a Swedish doctor and a Dutch girl. The greater part of the story is set in South Africa, where the doctor practises, first on the veld and then in a town. The marriage, complicated by the detachment of the husband and the passionate love of the wife, saddened by the loss of its children and by the wife's emotional vulnerability, is finally broken by a criminal act. The book has enjoyed an understandable popularity with a wide public in France though some other readers may well find the story's *femme fatale* altogether too melodramatic a person.

Miss Christie takes as her theme in *The Pale Horse* an organization which undertakes to destroy (without trouble to its clients) wealthy and inconvenient people. Black magic brings in a sinister strain and the key-device of the murder-organization is ingenious indeed. Gaiety irrepressibly breaks into the most suspenseful moments—for Miss Christie's success is due to her frank recognition of the true sporting nature of the classical English detective tale—and the doctor, the police-detective and the amateur investigator cooperate good-humouredly against the forces of mischief.

VISCOUNT LUMLEY

In our issue for October 12 we published a review of the book *Shipmaster* by Gwyn Griffin in which, owing to a most unfortunate mistake, we alluded to Lord Lumley in describing ship passengers mentioned in the book who were emigrating to Australia and New Zealand.

The allusion should have been to Lord Lundy, a character in one of Hilaire Belloc's poems, and we wish therefore to take this opportunity of making it clear to our readers that the serious imputations which we made upon the gentleman mentioned in the review have absolutely no foundation in fact so far as Viscount Lumley is concerned and insofar as they have been read to refer to him are unreservedly withdrawn.

We tender our sincere apologies to Viscount Lumley and would like at the same time to express our regret for the distress and annoyance caused to him.