

SHORT BUT NOT SWEET

JOHN O'HARA: *Assembly*. 408pp. Cresset Press, 21s.

H. E. BATES: *The Golden Oriole*. 204pp. Michael Joseph, 16s.

In a bouncy preface Mr. O'Hara tells us that the twenty-six stories in *Assembly* were mostly done in two sittings of three hours each, and that "it was some of the most joyful writing I have ever done".

"Joyful" isn't quite the word some of us would choose in order to describe these vigorous, cynical pieces about expense-account Americans living out the sad aftermath of innocence. Their atmosphere reeks usually of stale cigar-smoke and liquor spilt the night before; the characters for the most part talk tirelessly to each other—and with what an unerring accuracy Mr. O'Hara notes down what they say—in an enervating, centrally heated fug. Joy, which needs to be clear-eyed and fresh-complexioned—dewy, might one say?—isn't at all an emotion that arouses Mr. O'Hara's interest. The subjects that bring him all eager to his desk for those three-hour sittings are tarnished ones that give him little excuse not to despair.

The clash between the generations whose misbehaviour-patterns are for all that basically similar, the dire effects of quick wealth and slick publicity on people not equipped to cope with them, and the infinite resourcefulness of men and women when it comes to the business of giving each other pain—these are among his favourite themes.

Mr. O'Hara works mainly through dialogue. It is wonderful dialogue. It artfully suggests looseness, casualness, aimlessness, and yet every word of it flies straight at the target. Groups of people come to life through what they say, and the clash of competing personalities is brought vividly home. His world is a very ugly, shopsoiled place, where wealthy, fifty-five-year-old wives go to bed with hotel waiters while their tycoon husbands shoot their mid-eighties on chromium-plated golf-courses, and where cynical bartenders and professional hostesses team up in order to extract more profit out of the grimy addictions of their clientele. And yet the total effect is not really depressing, because Mr. O'Hara observes and records it all with such exactness, fidelity and verve.

In *The Golden Oriole* Mr. Bates for once sadly disappoints. Not one of these five novellas will stand up to close scrutiny. They are fluent, of course, and put together with the utmost professional competence. But creative insight into these five groups of people, and the situations in which they are involved, is lacking. In one of them a long-distance lorry-driver, always on the fiddle, gives a lift to a young student who plays the part of

a shocked stooge in a comedy duo. This story shows Mr. Bates in that woefully larky *Breath of French Air* manner of his which it is really time he renounced.

The other four read like self-parodies. In them Mr. Bates seems always to be reaching out—and over-reaching—in an effort to recapture the manner of those drowsy, listful pastorals of an earlier time, or those still, intense studies of small-town provincial life in which the dust on the aspidistra in the parlour bay-window is as touchable and real as the pile on grey velvet. But somehow this time his magic doesn't work. Even in the title story, which is the best of them and which has a theme one would expect him to respond to—the shy, passionate woman whose marriage hasn't brought the physical awakening she craves—Mr. Bates shows an uncertainty of touch.

DOROTHY DUNNETT: *The Game of Kings*. 543pp. Cassell, 21s.

At the opening of the sixteenth century Scotland was a civilized country with a high standard of education, in close touch with France and Italy; trade prospered, the nobility were beginning to embellish their fortified dwellings. Then purely military misfortunes, Flodden, Pinkie, Solway Moss, destroyed the power of the central government. The people who endured the ensuing anarchy were not medieval paladins but modern men and women, interested in the arts, flippancy, adventures, gay and witty talkers. Dorothy Dunnett has set them talking as well as fighting, and the result is a stimulating book.

Francis Crawford, Master of Lymond, has been outlawed, accused of gulding the English in a foray which ended in the killing of his own sister. As an outlaw he lurks on the Border at the head of an armed band, attacking and robbing various important soldiers on both sides until he has found the evidence which will clear him. His adventures are perhaps a little steep, a little too valiant to be convincing; but everyone talks all the time, and the talk is quite another matter. In between the duels and the desperate gallops over the moors the characters pour out quotations in old Scots, French, Spanish and Latin; they converse with a subtle malice reminiscent of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

The hero is perhaps a little too good to be true; no experienced reader will doubt that a happy ending is on the way, even though it takes more than 500 pages to reach it. But this is an historical thriller with a difference, amusing and witty as well as exciting.