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Concluding our series in which writers open their personal notebooks for you, here a best-selling author shows you how he does without one

WHY I WROTE THAT BOOK



by H.E. Bates

NO, I do not keep a note-book. For the simple reason that Nature has already provided me with a very good one in the shape of a round object that sits on my shoulders.

In the past when I kept notebooks I always lost them. I also discovered that the notes I made in them were rarely used, often mystified me completely when I referred to them at a later date and were occasionally utterly incomprehensible.

It is true that there are things in my head that are also, from time to time, completely mystifying to me and more often than not utterly incomprehensible both to myself and other people, but I am, happily, more certain about one thing. So far I have not lost my head.

The virtues and advantages of this natural notebook are fairly obvious. Its highly complex processes are less easy to explain. It is not simply that it costs nothing and that it is always with me whenever and wherever I need it and that its contents never get lost. A note made in it is more than a piece of hopeful calligraphy. It is a seed. This seed may lie dormant for a long time, perhaps years, before its germination. But it never dies.

My notebook also possesses other curious features not found in the kind bought in stationers' shops. It is capable of the oddest intuitive processes—sometimes acting, as it were, in reverse (I will explain this feature in a moment). But there are times when it reminds me very much of these modern mechanical brains into which you feed scraps of apparently disjointed data and get, in return, a correct and comprehensible answer.

My first experience of the advantages of the flesh and blood notebook over the paper variety came from seeing a woman on a bicycle.

She was placid, dreamy and rather fat. On the carrier at the back of her bicycle she carried her equally placid, dreamy and rather fat little son. I saw her several times. I did not speak to her, did not know her name or the name of her son and had only the vaguest notions of who and what she was.

From the simple visual note recorded in my natural notebook I concocted, as I thought, a story about her. It seemed to me a piece of fancy, a guess at her future made imaginatively, in the dark.

To my great astonishment almost every detail of this fanciful guess about her life turned out to be true—even to the fact of her possessing a particular kind of singing voice and nursing the tenderest of musical ambitions for her son.

This sort of thing repeated itself so often that

from somewhere about that time I stopped keeping notebooks. It is true that I sometimes scribbled down a remark or two, a thought, a touch of colour on the back of an envelope, distrusting for a moment the receptive and recording power of the eye. But such manual notes were, once again, nearly always lost and if ever they were found again were discovered to be less exact, less vivid and less reliable than the method of filing away apparently irrelevant details in the pages of the mind and then, as it often seemed, forgetting them.

Let me give an example of this and then, after it, an example of what I can only describe as the intuitive process of the notebook in reverse.

During the war, while in Burma, I was so impressed by an incident of a Burmese child playing on the steps of a shattered pagoda down on the hot central Burma plain that I spent most of one torrid afternoon, in a tiny stifling tent, trying to set it down as a short story.

When evening came and I cooled off in the three inches of tepid water that servicemen in the East will remember as a bath I had soberer thoughts about it all. I realised that I was acting precipitately, that my short story might well, in fact, be a novel. I therefore put the few pages of script aside—they were really not much more than brightly crayoned shorthand notes—until I could, as I hoped, expand them in more congenial and peaceful surroundings at home.

When I finally came to do this, to begin the novel that was subsequently called *The Purple Plain*, the notes had, to my intense annoyance, gone somewhere with the wind. Moreover, I felt lost without them. Burma was six thousand miles away. The war was over. The East, which had seemed so vividly, indelibly and arrogantly coloured, had become a dull, blurred mess from which I could not extract a single scrap of imagery or illumination. For once I desperately needed my notes. I felt I could not proceed without them.

Finally, I did proceed without them. I re-wrote the passage with which the novel now begins, including the episode in which, as filmgoers may remember, an embittered RAF pilot watches a Burmese child thoughtlessly play with a lizard and then as thoughtlessly crush it with her hands.

And then, having written it, I found my notes. The discovery was more than interesting: the flesh and blood notebook had been uncannily faithful. Down to the minutest detail it followed the notes I had made on paper. The mind had photographed every scrap of colour, recorded it and faithfully

given it up again. But what of this process in reverse? No stationer's notebook could do for me. I feel, what the flesh and blood notebook has just done for me after nearly four years.

The words you are reading now are being written on a sub-tropical island. Four years ago I came here for the first time and then, a year later, wrote a story about it. The essence of this story, a purely imaginative one, was that a pretty young married woman, neurotic and nervous, came to the island in the heat of summer to escape from a rift in her marriage that she had not the courage to face at home.

Having left her ship on the spur of the moment and then having poured out her troubles to a sympathetic young man and almost killed him, physically and emotionally, in the process, she calmly decided to catch the next ship back again. I put this young lady on a ship whose name I knew but had never seen, and I labelled her grey matching pieces of luggage with the letter "V."

Three weeks ago I boarded the same ship. Almost the first thing I saw on the quayside in England was a set of grey, matching luggage labelled with the letter "V." On board almost the first person to whom I spoke was a pretty, nervous, neurotic young woman who was running away from a rift in her marriage that she could not face at home. I will not say more except to record that five days later, as calmly as the young woman in the story, she decided to turn round, as the ship reached exactly the same port, and go home again.

I do not attempt to account for this, any more than I attempt to account for the fact that, having written a novel called *Spella He*, which dealt with the rise and fall of a great house in the English midlands during the nineteenth century, I subsequently opened a local newspaper and found in it an obituary notice of a man who had not only looked and behaved like the main character of the story but had sprung from the same beginnings and had almost exactly the same exceptional kind of career. I had never heard of him from Adam.

No; I do not keep notebooks. And I doubt, now, if I ever shall, for my head serves me very well. Moreover, apart from its inexplicable habits and its inexhaustible capacity to record notes for me every minute of my waking hours, I have got into the way of trusting its peculiar shorthand. I am really very fond of it too. In fact I should be quite lost without it.