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“It Isn’t Like The Book”

—WHO’S TO BLAME?

By H. E. BATES

SOME recent remarks of mine concerning the American screen version of my novel *The Darling Buds of May* will perhaps have prompted some people to imagine me as a hypersensitive writer to whom the novel is a sacrosanct thing, not in any way to be re-shaped or violated in the course of its transition to cinematic terms. This, I must strongly emphasise, is very far from being true.

Anybody who has had much to do with the writing of fiction, which is very much an instinctive, imaginative and highly personal business, and the making of films, which is largely a complex collective manufacturing process, will know that the two media are so different in scores of important aspects that the number of novels and stories reaching the screen without extensive alteration and even without what sometimes appears to be mutilation is very small indeed.

The Saddest Words

That this is inevitable does not prevent millions of cinemagoers from uttering, year after year, the saddest words to be heard in the foyers of the entertainment world—namely, “It isn’t anything like the book.”

Here I must say that the film version of an earlier novel of mine, *The Purple Plain*, turned out to be surprisingly like the book.

On reflection it perhaps isn’t surprising, since I have always held that the art of fiction is much nearer to that of painting than, for example, to that of elocution. In other words, all that was important in the unfolding of the tale in *The Purple Plain* had already been expressed not in discursive, reflective style, but in sharply pictorial terms.

My objections to the curious metamorphosis suffered by *The Darling Buds of May* is based on the fact that what is ordinarily a matter of technical expediency in translating a story from one medium to another has here become a mere pointless display of movie-world lunacy. Those readers already familiar with the book will know that it deals with the joyous doings of the Larkins, a family of strawberry-picking, junk-dealing country spivs of engaging freedom of character to whom morals, income tax and the normal benefits of clergy are mere words.

Ironic Comment

Whatever virtues the story of these extraordinarily happy, uninhibited people may or may not possess one thing is quite certain: the book is as English as pubs, steak-and-kidney pudding and *The Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer. When you add to this the fact that it is also an ironic commentary on the great social revolution this country has suffered through the National Health Service (known to the Larkins as the National Elf Lark) television and other forms of drug addiction generally, you may



TRANSPORTED: The novel was about England and *The Darling Buds of May*. The film has an American setting and is about *The Mating Game*. It stars Debbie Reynolds, here seen in a spot of trouble with a couple of cops. Says author H. E. Bates: “It is a mere pointless display of movie-world lunacy.”

Photo: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

begin to see what angers me about the transition of the scene from Kent to Maryland, U.S.A., together with the complete Americanisation of all the characters and the changing of the title to *The Mating Game*.

It is rather as if the American company had decided to make a film of *The Canterbury Tales*—always assuming, of course, that they dare, which is highly unlikely—and had then transported Chaucer’s immortal characters to America, there giving them names like Joe Palooka, Soapy Jack and the Moll in place of the Miller, the Reeve and the wife of Bath; and finally putting them into a fleet of Cadillacs and setting them out on a pilgrimage to a Baptist chapel in Dallas, Texas, subsequently calling the film, of course, *The Dallas Story*. All this, stupid though it is and sounds, makes just about as much sense to me.

British ‘Western’

If you wish to look at it another way it is rather as if the Boulting Brothers or Ronald Neame had acquired the rights of a Zane Grey western and in an unaccountable rush of blood to the head had decided to make Wilfred Hyde White a lone cattle-rustler and set the whole affair on a Wiltshire dairy farm with the sheriff’s posse, in the final scenes, shooting up the Hunt Ball.

About the Writer . . . H. E. BATES

was born 51 years ago in Northamptonshire. After his marriage in 1931, he went to live in Kent and has remained there ever since. His first book, *The Two Sisters*, was published in his early twenties. Since then he has gained an international reputation as a novelist, short story writer and essayist and is the author of more than forty books, of which 16 are novels. His work has been translated into a dozen languages and his reputation in America, Australia and New Zealand equals, and in some cases surpasses that in his own country. His war-time service with the R.A.F. in the Far East inspired him to write *The Jacaranda Tree* and *The Purple Plain* two of his most successful novels. The latter was filmed with Gregory Peck and produced by the Rank Organisation. Among his recent work are *Love for Lydia*, *The Feast of July* and *The Daffodil Sky*. His latest book, *A Breath of French Air* will be published in July.

Fortunately taste, so often conspicuously absent on the precipitous slopes of the Pacific coast, is something I credit the Boultings and Ronald Neame with having in reasonably large quantities.

One Consolation

It is a remarkable fact that a few other English directors, for example, David Lean and Jack Clayton, also possess this elusive quality, a fact which may or may not have something to do with their having scooped up, over the past year or two, a sackful of silver trophies for films such as *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *The Horse’s Mouth*, *Room at the Top*, and so on.

In the unfortunate business of *The Darling Buds of May*—I beg your pardon, *The Mating Game*—I have, however, one consolation. As I write these words I have just put the final touches to a new novel about the Larkins called *A Breath of French Air*. This, as the title suggests, is set largely in France and my one consolatory thought is that, if and when the film rights are sold, the worst that can happen to me is that an Italian film company will buy it, turn all characters, French as well as English, into Mongolians and set the scene in Vladivostock.

But even that, I suppose, wouldn’t surprise the conjuring geniuses who, for reasons best known to themselves, cooked up *The Mating Game*. In fact they’ve probably already thought of it themselves.

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Note. Film companies pay well for story rights; but, with few exceptions, contracts give a producer complete control over what he does, or does not do with the original work. In extreme cases, studios have purchased novels only for their titles, or the prestige of the author’s name.

One agent told me recently: “We are negotiating with a studio to leave the author’s name off the screen credits.”

The Mating Game, produced by Philip Barry Jr. and directed by George Marshall, will open in London later this year.—Editor.