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A Novel of the Week

By H. E. BATES

Technique But No Story



Kay Boyle

YEAR BEFORE LAST. By KAY BOYLE. Faber and Faber. 7s. 6d.

MISS BOYLE is a rebellious and uncompromising artist. Her technique is so individual and the rhythms of her prose so intricate that her novel is difficult to read and harder still to digest. If you are fond of those novels in which the hero makes his entrances, speaks, kisses and seduces as though he were being timed with a stop-watch and in which the conversation and the thought are both as light as the love of the chivalrous hero for the virginal heroine, you will find Miss Boyle baffling and perhaps tedious. But if you welcome the artist who has something to say and who says it individually and arrestingly, in spite of a thousand faults, *Year Before Last* must interest you and may probably excite and impress you.

Martin Sheehan is a young Irish-American who has "loved and lived variously, but kept burning and pure his defiant devotion to a larger dream." With two women for companions, he roves about Provence, Nice, Cannes and Monte Carlo, living a life of excitement, drunkenness, jealousy, fierce love and hatred, behaving very like a character from a novel by Hemingway and affording Miss Boyle a constant opportunity for nonchalant and cynical comment that recalls Hemingway also. The story of Martin Sheehan is, indeed, thin, second-hand and negligible. It is Miss Boyle's technique which demands attention.

Before them, the lights of the car were eating a soft dusty path through the accumulating dark. And here the claws of cactus and teeth of pine were at them, and the stones that lay about on the slopes were as white and lofty as the moon. Here the stones were so plentiful that they might have dammed all the waters of earth and heaven. There was no wind blowing, but this great wind of night seemed to blow past their faces. There were no longer any voices speaking, and before they could answer each other their hands fled together and their mouths fell upon each other in famine.

Such a passage, rich and lively with metaphor, is typical of Miss Boyle. Open the book at any page and you will find a metaphor:

The thunder had lowered on them and splintered into sound the very instant the stabs of lightning struck through the lasting ropes of rain.

The sun was shining down in pure hot slabs of light upon their heads.

The sky was clear as a well, and the milk of the clouds flowed steadily out of the strong teats of the southern wind.

But one does not judge a book by its metaphors nor by the originality of its technique. Miss Boyle writes brilliantly, but Martin Sheehan and his crew are shadows, mere ghosts of those Frenchified Americans which are overrunning modern American literature as they lately overran Paris. The amusement they afford us becomes briefer and briefer. They are pitiful subjects for a writer of Miss Boyle's calibre.***

H. E. BATES

Other Novels of the Week

SON OF DUST. By H. F. M. Prescott. Constable. 7s. 6d. A romantic novel of Brittany in the eleventh century. A splendid story in every sense: strong characters, a sound plot, and a sense of spiritual values.****

THE BOOK-BAG. By W. Somerset Maugham. Orioli, Florence. 21s. A long short story about a planter in the Malay States and his love for his half-sister, told with discretion and with story-telling skill that shows Mr. Maugham at his best.***

TEN THOUSAND YESTERDAYS. By Mrs. Percival Connellan. Wishart. 7s. 6d. The only son of a Chinese Mandarin marries an English girl. She refuses to bear him a child. The struggle between his love for her and his devotion to his ancestral beliefs throws light on the conflict between East and West.***

CHÉRIE. By Jacques Deval. Secker. 7s. 6d. A French prostitute in Panama and how in her longing to get back to France she gets involved in espionage. Brilliant characterisation.****

COME, DREAMS ARE ENDLESS. By Sydney A. Knight. Cape. 7s. 6d. A novel of primitive life, romantic and full of Nature. An original fantasy.***

DOGGETT'S TOURS. By Richard Turpin. Grayson. 7s. 6d. Shrewd and amusing picture of the head of a great touring bureau who believes he is a benefactor of mankind. This young novelist may be another H. G. Wells.***

PRIVATE CONCERT. By Monica Hills. Hutchinson. 7s. 6d. The country house and village. Love and good living. Well written English comedy.***

DANCE OF YOUTH. By May Edginton. Collins. 3s. 6d. A first-rate May Edginton story.***

THE LONG CHANCE. By Christopher Culley. Herbert Joseph. 7s. 6d. A cow boy story with a difference. Sound character-drawing and first-class horse stuff. As good as Zane Grey.***

MADAM. By Richmond Barrett. Cape. 7s. 6d. A satirical study of a rich woman, an amusing but devastating analysis of selfishness.***

To enable readers to judge the merits of novels at a glance, we add stars to these short notices. Five stars denote a masterpiece, four stars a novel of outstanding quality, and so down to one star.