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MR. SAROYAN AGAIN

Reviews by H. E. BATES

THE history of the American short story is full of examples of writers arriving on the scene with a completely developed technique upon which it was afterwards found either unnecessary or impossible to improve. The classic example is Stephen Crane, who started at the top with *The Open Boat* and finished at the bottom with *Whilomville Stories*. Crane is joined by Sherwood Anderson and Hemingway, among others, and finally Mr. Saroyan. In America, where the estimated total of unknown, unpublished and generally struggling short-story writers is, I think, 200,000, only the writer arriving with a technical equipment tested by laboratory standards has, apparently, a chance.

The price of the chance can be estimated by a glance at Mr. William Saroyan's new volume of stories, **Peace, It's Wonderful** (Faber, 8s. 3d.), which shows not the slightest advance in method on *The Daring Young Man*, which was seven volumes ago. Pick up Saroyan anywhere and the famous india-rubber technique is as good as new. Whether it's *Peace, It's Wonderful*, or *The Trouble With Tigers* or *The Daring Young Man*, the offering and the mode of offering remain the same. Time teaches Mr. Saroyan nothing and takes nothing away; and the ratio of successes in each volume remains, at one in ten, about the same.

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For courage, sensibility and singularity of theme few first volumes of stories have been comparable with **Asylum Piece**, by Miss Anna Kavan (Cape, 7s. 6d.). The common thread of these twenty-one interconnected stories is mental abnormality; this thread in turn splits into more refined strands: unspoken fear, the unspeakable terror of the outside world and its people, the imagined enmity of inanimate objects, the suffering of inward silence. When the final strand has fallen into place the stories are seen to be related chapters, rather than separate stories, in the tragic progressive history of a schizophrenic.

The book is consistently depressing; its moods are subjectively treated; there is very little to alleviate the inevitable progression of complicated pain. Yet the writing has a remarkable luminosity, a kind of transparent strength which here and there gives a page the effect of being painted on glass.

In a completely lunatic world I suppose there will be no more than a handful of listeners for Miss Kavan's still small voice telling these painful stories of mental abnormality and suffering. But if the theme is rejected the voice should be noted by short-story lovers as one of the greatest quality. Its descriptive range is so fine, the touch of emotional and poetic sensibility so deep and assured that it would be a considerable loss to contemporary fiction if it were not given the chance of being heard.

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Australian literature is still in a formative state, but I find it hard to believe that **Tales by Australians**, edited by Edith M. Fry (British Authors Press, 7s. 6d.), is representative of its growth up to date. Almost any criticism ever aimed at Australian literature—rawness, amateurishness, sentimentality, a refusal to abandon European models and draw on indigenous material—is fairly applicable to these twenty-six stories. Miss Henry Handel Richardson and Miss Katherine Susannah Pritchard are the only well-known names, and even they are represented by slightly despondent material not quite up to the standard of their reputations.

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A taste for Mr. Ernest Bramah was once

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considered the thing; his devotees urged others to savour a minor classic. The now well-known style, in the delicate, elaborately formal Chinese manner, still delights an audience, but to me the manner and material of **Kai Lung Beneath the Mulberry Tree** (Martin Secker, 8s.) has the slightest flavour of scented artificiality. Humour, charm and altogether some rather leisured entertainment are to be had by those who can tune themselves to Mr. Bramah's peculiar prose, with its nicely turned periods and its general air of archaic elaboration.



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