

"Catherine Foster," by H.E. Bates, Cape, 30, Bedford Square, London, 7s. 6d.

Among all the merely adventurous, the sentimental, the melodramatic and the prosaic novels being published to-day, and which are doomed to early oblivion despite their big sales, it is a pleasure to read one that is genuinely poetic—not in theme but in treatment and style—and therefore, in my humble opinion, abiding.

The spirit of Tchekov, de Maupassant, Turgeniev and other masters of literary form, a spirit that, in different styles, sheds the trappings of false emotions, dispenses with tedious anatomical analyses, and sets in relief the dramatic moments of action and thought, is slowly but surely feeding the imagination of a number of younger writers in the English tongue. There are one or two, in England and America, in Ireland, Australia and South Africa, who are feeling their way through the morass of glorified journalese to a purity of style and form that will set the note for the future, if the reading public is wise enough to pick the chaff from the wheat.

Contrary to the notions of most beginners, it is not difficult, given a natural bent for writing, to acquire a grandiose and flourishing style, to work out a complicated plot and pack the story with "incident from start to finish." There are so many doing this, to the despair of discriminating readers. The large vocabulary of to-day, the loose adjectives and high-sounding phrases developed in an age of rapid commercial expansion, the journalism that does not use 50 per cent. of Anglo-Saxon sounds, the empty rhetoric of politicians, the slangy smartness of some leader writers and the ponderous mechanism of others—all are acquired and imitated with treacherous ease, making it difficult for the would-be author to preserve beauty and simplicity.

One of England's rising young authors, rising in the sense of improvement in style and treatment as distinct from popularity, is H.E. Bates. His first novel, "The Two Sisters," was acclaimed, with the restraint natural to the reception of a first effort, by many of the best known critics of England and America. His second book was a notable collection of short stories, the longest story, a remarkable introspective work, giving the book its title of "The Day's End." The third book by H. E. Bates is his second novel, "Catherine Foster."

It is difficult to believe that the author is still only 23 years old. There is in this book a mature understanding of men and women older than the author—not the harsh judgment of so many young people, but sympathetic faithfulness to characters woven from the real. There may not be many exactly like Catherine Foster, but there must be many women who have had similar thoughts and experiences, women of imagination tied painfully to husbands who are too dull and faithful to bear, compelled to entertain "friends" whose outlook is the negation of their own. Such prisoners of sex may here enjoy a mental revolt, while they learn how tragic may be a revolt in act. Was Catherine Foster's secret revolt worth while? Did her passionate experience with her husband's brother resign her to a dull existence or did it make her perceptions of the unfitness of her circumstances all the keener? We are not told much about that. There is a hint at the end that "she saw herself little by little losing her fresh abundance of beauty, secretly and mutely nursing within herself the ache of an impassioned memory."

As the publishers admit, the story is almost banal—the seduction is too easy—but it is the treatment that matters. It has the sombre, brooding quality of Bate's previous work, with a delicate flavour of irony and a developing appreciation of dramatic as against unnecessary detail, and it is written in language that is beautiful, because it is simple and carefully chosen.

C.H.S.J.

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