Layabouts and Lovers

ELEPHANT'S NEST IN A RHUBARB TREE & OTHER STORIES

By H. E. Bates.
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By Brock Baker

HERBERT ERNEST BATES, who died in 1974, was born in Northamptonshire, England, in 1905. He was an extraordinarily prolific author: over 300 short stories, 25 novels, several plays and collections of occasional essays, a guide to the flora and fauna of his native county and a multivolume autobiography in the just under 50 years of his career (he published his first book, a novel, in 1926).

His short stories have rightly received the steadiest praise. He is so gifted as a short-story writer it is hard to understand how many of his collections could have been out of print in the United States for years until New Directions put out a selection in 1987. A reader is immediately beguiled by his range of sympathy, his sensual exuberance, his expert plotting, his tenderness, his humor, his unfailing eloquence and his deep regard for the dignity, even the heroism, of those who often appear unlikely candidates for such praise.

Most of the stories in "Elephant's Nest in a Rhubarb Tree" are set in England, and they have mostly English characters. Yet when there is a prominent rural character (and dialect), as in "Great Uncle Crow," it might just as well be in Vermont. The subtle portrait of that "masterpiece of a man, your Uncle Crow," who, for all we are shown, is only an eloquent, gently alcoholic layabout, captures both the illusions about rural poverty often held by those not part of it, as well as what is to be gained from an eccentric like Crow who could only exist within it.

Or when the touching, saddening tale of two lonely people almost finding romance from an encounter on a commuter train ("The World Upside-Down") compels our respectful attention to the needs, hopes and achievements of these less than glamorous or unusual people, it is for no other reason than that their struggles — perhaps to our embarrassment — seem our own.

H. E. Bates covers so much ground in a story, it is breathtaking — often for the characters, but always for the reader. In "Chateau Bougainvillaea," for instance, a young woman on vacation in France with her fiancé finds herself slowly working out in the course of a long summer's afternoon that she has made a terrible mistake: "They had been engaged six months. She had been very thrilled about it at first, showing the ring all round, standing on a small pinnacle of joy, ready to leap into the tremendous spaces of marriage. Now she had suddenly the feeling that she was about to be sewn up in a blanket."

In "The Captain," about an unmarried couple who rent a country cottage and hire a local 16-year-old boy as a caretaker, we are repeatedly lulled into a pleasant midsummer stupor by evocations of rich vegetation, hot sun and the lazy days when the boy is on his own during the week, only to be abruptly plunged into a queasily realistic nightmare of sadistic violence and revenge: "The otter hung from the dog's mouth like a piece of sodden flannel, and then the dog began to tear it to pieces, throwing it about, ripping it in lust, until it was like a blood-soaked swab."

But every one of these stories has something to galvanize or refresh the present-day American reader. The driven sensuality of the lovers in "The Kimono"; the madcap antics of Aunt Leonora in "The Trespasser"; the poignant mix-up of possessiveness and affection an almost grown-up daughter inspires in her father in "Go, Lovely Rose" — these are some of the felicities this small sample of Bates's stories supplies.

My hope is that publication of "Elephant's Nest" will mark the beginning of a full-scale revival of this contemporary and worthy colleague of Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene, who has been too long neglected. □

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