The Stories They Write

THE SHORT STORY. By Sean O'Faolain. 370 pp. New York: The Devin-Adair Company. $3.75.

THE MODERN SHORT STORY. By H. E. Bates. 223 pp. Boston: The Writer. $2.75.

By JAMES STERN

THREE, possibly two, decades ago these two books could not have been written. Of literary mediums, the short story as we know it today is the youngest. Elizabeth Bowen has called it "a child of this century," and H. E. Bates, echoing her words, states that "before the end of the nineteenth century it had no history." Nevertheless, though perhaps inevitably, most of what Bates and Sean O'Faolain have to say about the short story concerns the work of writers no longer living.

O'Faolain, in the far more ambitious of the two volumes (though it suffers from repetition and poor organization), devotes one third of his space to exploring what he calls the "writing personalities" of Alphonse Daudet, Chekhov and Maupassant. Of Bates' ten chapters five deal with the work of Gogol, Poe, Tolstoy, Wells, Kipling, Katherine Mansfield and D. H. Lawrence —none of whom, *incidentally*, is mentioned by O'Faolain.

For one who confesses to judge stories "by the opening sentences," the first lines of O'Faolain's book, in which he says that he once had "the valuable experience of conducting a class in 'The Art of Writing,'" would not seem too propitious. The words smack too much of the Writers' Conference, and even suggest the impossible: that the author is about to try to teach the reader how to write. Anyone expecting O'Faolain to show how the rabbit got into the hat should be disillusioned at once—unless he believes the reiteration that "it is not the subject that a man writes; it is himself" is going to help him write a good story.

WHAT O'Faolain does do—cleverly and with an infectious enthusiasm—is to show, by illuminating example, how three totally different temperaments (or personalities, as he would call them) lived and worked. He shows how Daudet failed because he ceased to be himself, allowed his "personality" to collapse; how Chekhov, no doubt the greatest influence on the modern short story, succeeded because he was humble, knew his limitation and to the end "wisely kept to his gamut." And he illustrates how Maupassant, the realist, the skeptic, who chose the Lower Depths, came through because, even in his last agony, he wavered no more than did the dying Hautot *père* who, as the priest approached, closed his eyes and "refused to show, even by a sign, that he understood."

In his book's central section, O'Faolain endeavors to drive home one all-important point in the writing of the modern short story. This is the art of suggestion or implication—a kind of short-hand properly understood in the past only by Chekhov. Thanks to the development of this art, all explanations, asides and elaborations, all such verbosities as Henry James loved to indulge in (admirers of the Master will turn green when they see what O'Faolain has done with "The Real Thing") were eliminated and the story, for the first time, became short. In consequence it has also become, on occasion, "difficult"—which is one reason why, today, the shorter the story the slower it should be read.

BOTH Bates and O'Faolain are in whole-hearted agreement that it was not the French, the Irish or the Russians, least of all the English (of whom both authors take a dim view as innovators of the story), but the Americans who perfected the art of conveying the greatest amount of information not only in the fewest words but in the most indirect manner possible. An excellent example of this

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new language, for which O'Faolain has coined the phrase "engrossed" alertness, is the opening sentence of Hemingway's "The Light of the World" —the last of sixteen stories reprinted in full at the end of the book: "When he saw us come in the door the bartender looked up and then reached over and put the glass cover on the two free-lunch bowls." Were Hemingway's story not so well known, a game could be played round its opening sentence, the prize going to him who extracts from it the most information.

In comparison, Bates' book —published in England a decade ago—is rather in the nature of a potboiler; its author, nevertheless, is more catholic than O'Faolain in his taste. Severe though he is on the English writers of stories, he does not fail to pay homage to Hardy, Katherine Mansfield and D. H. Lawrence as rebels against stereotyped tradition.

His greatest compliments, however, are handed to this country's writers who, from Poe to Katherine Anne Porter, have "created the most important indigenous tradition outside nineteenth-century Russia." It is largely due to them, Bates believes, that today "the contemporary short story is greater than it has ever been."