

In and Out of Storytown

SINCE ALL WRITING IS WRITING, the common prejudice against short fiction should be regarded as an affectation rather than as an idea. But to say this isn't to deny (what a glance at some of the books at hand confirms) that the power of the ordinary writer of short stories to inspire cynicism is superior to that of the ordinary novelist.¹ The power mentioned can be variously explained. Worship of speed, over-responsiveness to snippets that the critical vacuum has turned into doctrine (the pistol on the wall at the start of a tale must go off by the end)—these doubtless are factors. The anxiety they induce encourages the short fictionist to come on stage like a bush vaudevillian or a Storytown grip, shouting, wheeling a shiny bike (his theme), or grinning through a lasso (his swell plot). And the sight of so many props in an opening paragraph, such a quantity of fictional junk, rouses distrust that even the most obviously craftsmanlike novelist can suppress at least for a chapter. There are other explanations, to repeat—but none of them alters the fact. Competence in long forms increases a reader's respect for the major achievements of literary art; in short forms it brings to mind the aesthetic of Disneyland, which sees the imagination as a racket operated for kids.

Among English operators in the Storytown-Disneyland line H. E. Bates has for some years enjoyed high standing. Elizabeth Bowen says of him that he has "become a term of comparison," and while that phrase is often used senselessly about people who produce a barrel of books (*The Grapes of Paradise* is this writer's eighteenth title), it has some meaning here. Bates' literary personality sets a definite standard—for remoteness from the cultural realities of his period. It recalls a day when every writer had himself done in oils at twenty-five, belonged to Pall Mall instead of smoked it, sat at the captain's table at galas, was welcome to marry your sister, and felt free to complain to his journal about the Bishop's wife, if her gossip at somebody's dinner did in a "delightful *donné*." This does not mean that Bates is slow about sex; he invariably offers at least one Adults Only sentence per tale:

She laughed again. With rising excitement he felt his hands slip to her breasts. Her thoughts were suddenly a racing jungle of bright impressions that included . . . the oleanders by the lakeside and the

¹ THE GRAPES OF PARADISE, by H. E. Bates. Atlantic-Little, Brown. \$3.75. SPRING SONG, by Joyce Cary. Harper. \$3.95. THE GO-AWAY BIRD, by Muriel Spark. Lippincott. \$3.75. AMONG THE DANGS, by George P. Elliott. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. \$3.95. SHADOWS ON THE GRASS, by Isak Dinesen. Random House. \$3.75.

lake itself, stretched like a blue glass lioness in the autumn sun. ("A Month by the Lake")

Neither does it mean that his writing is less than crisp and neat; the man is, in fact, unusually strong in words from nature and bold images (consider the "oleanders" and the "blue glass lioness") that give you the lyric lift. All that is meant is that Bates' literary voice speaks from the center of the good value position about literature—a position that reflects extreme loyalty to the great audience that knows what it likes, extreme impatience with the view that sex, poetry or truth should deter a writer from getting on with the bloody entertainment, extreme obliviousness to the news that everything he can do with his bloody entertainment has for years been done better by Granada and Rank.

The position described, as is plain, requires of the writer who wishes to maintain it a willingness to spend a lifetime in fantasyland, and it can be said for Bates that *The Grapes of Paradise* contains few hints that he is discontent with this fate. His little village, like other Storytowns, is a place of mockups first of all—big ones (Tahitian lagoons, Locarno steamers, U spots like Lausanne and Montreux) and little ones (tortoise-shell jewel boxes and jackdaws and pubs). It is occupied by guards officers with tremendous moustaches (bounders, of course), innocent girls named Christine, loose good-natured women named Ruby, neurotic housewives named Valerie Templeton, and bachelor manufacturers of light machinery named Major Wilsaw. As for the common life of the townsfolk—well, Christine robs the jewel box of the miserly old aunt on the third floor back, and the guards officer sports with Ruby after the golf club dance, and Major Wilsaw sows one wild oat at Como only to learn thereafter the proper worth of a patient English plainjane who's been watching him ever so amusedly. . . . The map thus offered does not, true enough, reveal every secret of Bates' hamlet: on occasion the Mayor runs off a sneak anti-romance. Where solidier functionaries, imitators of Maugham or Conrad, would gasp at a Tahitian encounter that did not occur on a verandah over punch and a lagoon (two laconic types ironicizing each other), Bates has his interlocutors meet in a barber shop, introduces a Marlowe who prefers orange juice to rum, and trades up from the standard Polynesian dancing girl to one who is ugly and masochistic. But this amounts to no breach of faith: the tale in question is, finally, about sharks and passion, and is no better than it should be—not a word of it asks to be thought of as true. *The Grapes of Paradise* is Bates in his province, in short, laboring to establish—here at the eighteenth hole as where he began—that literature has something to offer even to the age of telly, Tony and indoor necking. It is only sad that the need for the offering cannot be called grave.