# Selfishness

THE GRAPES OF PARADISE. Four Short Novels. By H. E. Bates. 239 pp. Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown. $3.75.

By JAMES STERN

I OFTEN wonder what it is that keeps established authors—writers who are neither geniuses nor poor — producing one book after another, year after year. Some of these books are so obviously inferior to their best that one wonders why they have bothered to publish them. Has the act of writing, to these older, usually well-known men and women, become a conditioned reflex? Do they feel ill when divorced from their desks? Or are they simply incapable of judging their own works?

To these questions I once received an answer from one of the kings of the kind of writer I have in mind. Shortly before

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# Met Was Youthful Innocence Lost

his tragic death Stefan Zweig, a prolific man of letters and the most translated author then living, was complaining one evening in my presence of "having" to embark on another book. "*Why* do you have to?" I asked him. From his hesitation, the shock in his eyes, I could see that such a question had never occurred to him. "Oh," he muttered at last, "one owes it to one's public, you know." What a price, I thought, to pay for fame!

Now 55, Mr. H. E. Bates has been writing books for thirty-four years. His publishers give a list of eighteen titles, but the earliest of these appeared as recently as 1938. Even as long ago as the Nineteen Twenties Bates was writing novels and stories on English farm life in the pastoral tradition. Through them all ran a lyrical quality, as well as something both urgent and inevitable. One never hesitated to question their validity. Recently, as his many admirers must know, Bates has completed a hilarious trilogy about the family Larkin, whose members never hesitate to question whether their behavior is right or wrong, amoral or at least anti-social. For the Larkins, in fact, life in the Welfare State is one long lark.

In "The Grapes of Paradise" Bates has returned to what his publishers call his "favorite form of the novella." Of the four here, two are set in the drabber type of English middle-class milieu, a third on the shores of an Italian lake, and the title story in Tahiti. On each of these stories, even on the first page or two, is stamped the Bates signature: a rare gift for camera-quick evocation of scene. When, in this volume's opening paragraph, we read that "in those days the curving line of houses always looked like a freshly starched collar, intensely stiff and respectable, against the strip of biscuit-colored shingle and the sea," we are aware at once, as in the best of Hemingway, of the period, place and sort of people of whom we are about to read.

This tale, which should have been entitled "The Breath of Corruption," is told by a married woman looking back on her first sexual encounter at the age of 18. As old as time, about a girl's innocence lost to a selfish man of 40, it is beautifully executed; yet there crops up not only here but halfway through the other three stories as well a question which, judged by the highest standards, should not have to be asked: "Is this likely?" And in each instance, to this reader at least, came the answer: "No. Not likely. Possible."

Again, though serenely written, it is difficult to know what prompted the author to spend seventy pages on a group of people of so little interest as

*(Continued on Page 50)*

# Selfishness

*(Continued from Page 5)*

those in "A Month by the Lake." Of the characters in "A Prospect of Orchards," a story which appears to be a study of a male masochist, much the same might be said, except that Arthur Templeton—with whom the narrator used to box when they were young and who tries to delude people into believing that he can grow an apple to taste like a pear—turns out to be not only "an intolerably lonely man" but, like his dreadful wife and her friends, an excruciating bore. Why the narrator should insist on revisiting this couple on their dilapidated farm I simply could not understand.

The natural glory of the Polynesian islands gives Bates, who writes as though from an intimate knowledge of them, full scope for the talent which has earned him the name of master. Yet compared to his superb descriptions of land and reef in mid-Pacific, of approaching storm, of the silence and freshness after rain, of the colorful abundance of tropical fruit and flowers, the story of the relationship between Rockley, the naïve young white visitor from Vancouver and the huge, homely, immensely strong native girl, Thérèse, is unworthy. Suspense is here, but at the expense of violence; the conventional romantic peace of the islands is shattered, but I found the behavior of neither man nor girl convincing. Again one waited in vain for the inevitability of the earlier Bates.