The modern novel is under fire with charges of dreariness and lack of the robust qualities of its predecessors. Here a distinguished novelist answers the critics.

Don't Blame the Author —He Reflects Today

by H. E. BATES

IS the novel, by far the most popular literary form for more than the past 200 years, losing its popularity? Is the novel of today less robust than its forerunners? Is it more outspoken? Can its authors be more easily charged with obscenity, lack of ability to tell a story or, as a correspondent to the *Daily Mail* suggested last week, with sheer dreariness through lack of action?

Artists of every age and kind are commonly subject to the charge that their work, in some way or other, does not measure up to that of their predecessors. Thus the Impressionist painters were reviled and laughed at when their work was first shown to Victorian France; Ibsen was called "an open sewer" because his work was not quite in accordance with the standards of 19th-century drawing-room comedy; and modern music has gone to pot because you cannot whistle it so easily as you can Schubert and Mozart.

In much the same way modern roses are alleged, quite wrongly, to have no perfume, and strawberries to taste more like cotton-wool than they did in Edwardian days, when, of course, summers were hotter anyway.

Why, in the first place, has the novel held its popularity in a score of languages, especially English, French, and Russian, for so long?

I suggest that it is partly because the novel is an artistic form of gossip. It is the most entertaining means in printed form of letting you into the secrets of other people's lives, particularly their love affairs, that ever existed.

Secret windows

HUMAN beings being passionately curious about each other, it is not surprising that they have seized with such pleasure on a literary form which, through secret windows, gives them every opportunity of gratifying their widest and deepest curiosity about other people's lives.

Secondly, it has given them infinite opportunities—unrivalled until the advent of the cinema—for what is now called "reader-identification." In other words, the reader can get any amount of pleasure and uplift from imagining himself or herself to be Captain Hornblower or Anna Karenina, or escaping from being a clerk or a typist to become, for a few hours, an adventurer in the South Seas or a woman running away with another woman's handsome husband.

There is, of course, much more to the novel than merely this; and it has been well and truly said that "the novel can be anything according to the hands which use it." It is, in fact, the most flexible literary instrument ever devised, and every craftsman or artist who comes to it is capable of making of it something utterly new and entirely his own.

Now, is this wonderful literary instrument declining in popularity or not? The answer, to my mind is, flatly, No. It is true to say, I think, that it is not so widely bought as during the years of war, but the conditions of those years were entirely abnormal. But what is beyond dispute is that the novel today sells in far greater numbers than it did in the Twenties and Thirties.

In those days a novelist and his publisher would have been quite happy at a sale of 3,000 or 4,000 copies or even fewer. At 10,000 copies they would have toasted themselves in champagne. Few publishers today would get exceptionally excited over such figures. And really established novelists like C. S. Forester, Nevil Shute, Monica Dickens, and Graham Greene may sell anything between 50,000 and 100,000 copies.

It is even possible for a first-novelist, such as Mr. David Unwin, to sell 25,000 copies, and a new novelist, such as Mr. John Masters, 40,000. The sales of Maugham and Hemingway, of course, go up into millions. A few years ago such figures were unknown.

Robustness

WE now come to the question of robustness, or of dreariness through lack of action, as the writer to the *Daily Mail* would put it. I wonder, by the way, how often the detractors of the contemporary novel ever read novelists of yesterday? I have a sneaking feeling that it is not half as often as they would sometimes like me to think it is.

I have a great admiration for the work of Mr. Graham Greene, a novelist whose subjects are, to many readers, depressing in the extreme. How often do the critics who charge him and some of his contemporaries with dreariness go back and read, for example, *Jude the Obscure*?—one of the most depressing novels ever written. And is someone going to tell me that the novels of Mr. C. S. Forester are less robust than, for example, those of Meredith, now hardly read at all but once the novelist of his day or less exciting than those of Conrad?

Prize bore

I MUST confess I am a long way from being convinced that the novels of Hemingway and his contemporaries are less robust or active than those of Trollope and his; or that the virile tales of Mr. John Masters, one of our newest novelists, contain less action than those of Miss Austen or our prize literary bore, Henry James.

No: the charge that the novel is too much this or too much that, too dreary or inactive, too introspective or too outspoken, is in itself quite futile. The novel of today is the novel of today; it cannot be the novel of yesterday, or the day before yesterday. And everyone would hate it and no one would read it if it were. The great thing about the novel, as indeed about any real artistic form, is that each generation can and must make it its own.

Shorter form

IT is dangerous to dogmatise about the future, but one thing I do believe about the contemporary novel is this: it is about to become much shorter. There are, I think, two interesting reasons for this. The big circulating libraries no longer exert on publishing the powerful influence they had before the war, when they were in a position to ask for, and get, solid lumps of reading up to 250,000 words.

Today no publisher wants novels of such length—though the autumn will see a distinguished exception in Miss Clemence Dane's new long opus—and the libraries can no longer put pressure on him to produce them.

Finally, and most important, television and films have exerted and will continue to exert on the writing of fiction a considerable influence towards brevity. When a few shots of film or camera can establish in seconds what novelists used to take pages and chapters to do, it is obvious that the novelist can profitably re-examine his art.

Gone ahead

IT behoves him more and more to get his effects with the greatest economy of means. He must not shirk the opportunity, which Graham Greene and other writers have already taken, of making his work more graphic, more pictorial, and more diverting in fewer words.

Perhaps, after all, that is at the root of the charge that the novel appears to have less action than it used to have. In some ways, perhaps, readers have gone ahead of it. It may well be that film and television have fostered in them a more impatient eye, a less reposeful vision, than they used to have.

They no longer need to be told so much; they are now capable of grasping effects and drawing conclusions from fewer and swifter impressions. If this is so, the novel must adjust itself to the new audience quickly, as I think it will. For above all it is the business of the novelist to entertain, never to bore.

You Should Take Pride in Being a Wife

ANN TEMPLE'S
Human Casebook

How can I get myself into a state of mind where I honestly don't care about my husband's tremendous popularity? At the moment it just makes me feel wretchedly overshadowed, whereas I'm sure I ought to feel only pride.

We have a small son. I have no help, so I am always in. My husband is always out. Last winter I made such a fuss that he stayed at home every evening. He never threw it back at me and we had an extraordinarily happy winter.

Now, realising that I am depriving several local societies that badly need his help, I feel I must let him go, but must do it graciously. I could be absorbed myself in an art in which I have had some success, but at the end of a long domestic day it is terribly difficult to get down to it. I know that when I see him taking up the activities in which I once shone myself, and having that full social life I once enjoyed, and I see myself left with the washing-up night after night, I am going to be resentful. I suppose I am just plain jealous.

I should be able to get down to my own interests, glad that he is having fun, but I know how weak and self-centred I become when I'm tired. This is an earnest plea for help.—LUCY.

YOU have tried to be honest in your thinking here, but your honesty stops short of facing the basic cause of your resentment.

I am afraid you must look closer at the problem. What is really disturbing you is that you *chose* marriage and motherhood for your career but still jib at having to give up the interests and the friendships of your free and single life. You want to eat your cake and have it. You want the best of both worlds.

That is what you have not faced in your thinking. You kid yourself that your resentment flares up only when you are tired. It is there all the time. (Beware of that false front of pleasantness over a sullen resentment. It's horrible to live with.)

The state of mind to aim at is an acceptance of the circumstances and a willingness to lump them for the sake of a career which brings the deepest of all satisfactions to a woman—the making of a home and the exacting art of giving the children their best possible start in life.

Once you put first things first and keep on seeing them as first your mind is cleared for getting to grips with the secondary things. Once you experience a tremendous pride in your own job you will have the pride which you feel you ought to have in your husband's success and popularity.

This is not to say that you have to be a plaster saint or a resigned martyr. Heaven forbid! Your job needs its respites and its breaks just as any other job does.

A wife and mother of small children particularly needs relaxations and social hours for herself. This is where you are lucky. Your husband has shown himself charmingly willing to help you. You need not rush to the two extremes of always keeping him at home or encouraging him always to be out. You are both intelligent enough to be able to find the compromises.

For the easing of your heart, let me remind you of something. The ambitions you have to let go now because they run counter to your job will come rushing to your aid some day. It will be when you are faced with another major problem—how to make a full and rich life for yourself after the children leave the home for their own world outside.

WHAT THEY ARE ASKING

The one my guest from abroad asked me is: "Why do the English drive on the left of the road?" None of us here has a clue.—T.R.T.

IN the old days of travelling on horseback you never knew whether another horseman on the road was a traveller or a "money-or-your-life-man." So when two horsemen met each other both sidled to the left of the road in order that their sword and pistol arm should be free and ready for attack. The English held on to the traditional "left" for driving.