

THE CRAFT OF A NOVELIST

H. E. BATES

Eric
Phillips

The graceful prose of H.E. Bates reflects a gentle personality. He had made an appointment to meet me one morning at the Cafe Royal in Regent Street. I easily recognized him from photographs I had seen in the press and he turned out to be exactly the kind of man that I expected him to be. He referred to himself, during the interview he gave me, as a middle-aged man; but there is a boyishness about his pink complexion, and his pale blue eyes have all the kindness and tolerant humour of a young idealist. His grey hair comes as an afterthought.

Bates was only nineteen years old when he wrote his first novel *The Two Sisters*. The great Edward Garnett, a reader for Jonathan Cape, wrote a preface to this book when it came out, to introduce a new writer of singular talent to the reading public.

"Garnett," said Bates, "became my guide and counsellor. He warned me about all the difficulties of a novelist and I took what he had to say to heart. But I haven't had an adventurous life, you know. I've never been anything else but an author. Unlike some modern writers I have never been a ship's captain or a dishwasher?"

"How many books have you written, Mr. Bates?"

"Between forty and fifty."

"Are you ever stuck for a plot?"

"No. I don't need plots. I am a believer in the old theory that plot consists of character. I usually start off with one character and then let the story develop. It's the fusion of ideas, rather than any clear cut plot, that is important. But one idea is not enough. There must be a second - a fertilizer. It's something like a negative and a positive."

"Do you make a plan for a novel, set out chapter headings, and make a synopsis of the contents of each chapter?"

Bates shook his head. "No," he said with a faint smile that

suggested that he would find such a method tedious. "No, I make no notes before I start work. Sometimes, though, I jot a few things down in the course of writing. But this thing up here" - he tapped his forehead with one of his fingers - "is the best notebook I know. I used to make notes once upon a time - and I used to lose them. I haven't lost my head yet."

"Do you work to a fixed schedule?"

"Yes. When I've got some serious work on hand I stick to a time-table. Four hours a day - usually from eight till noon. That entails great concentration, and I find that four hours is quite long enough."

"You are a very polished writer, Mr. Bates. Does writing come easily and naturally to you - or do you find that you have to make several drafts and countless revisions before you are satisfied with your work?"

"There's no general rule. On the whole, experience tends to make it easier in that you know *what to leave out* and *when to stop*. You are uncertain about all this when you are younger. But each book presents its own problems."

"Which book of yours has had the biggest sale?"

"*The Jacaranda Tree* - but I've really no idea what made it more popular than the others. It may possibly be that people like reading, in the form of a novel, about some part of the world they are unacquainted with."

"As you progress with your work on a novel do you ever find that your conception of a character undergoes a change?"

"No, I won't say it changes; but if the character is any good at all it grows, and so eventually you finish up with a slightly different character. A novelist has to show that a character is capable of development."

I went on to ask Bates if he considered that the public's taste in literature was either improving or deteriorating.

"Improving," he said. "I'm sure it is. Radio and TV play a big part in forming taste - they are a great influence. And anyone who says that people have given up reading is talking nonsense. The figures from the public libraries prove that. Think of the huge sales of Penguins and Pan books."

"Which of the younger generation of novelists do you most admire?"

"I'm afraid I'm a little out of sympathy with most of them. Take *Room at the Top*, for instance. That to my mind was a very overrated novel. Perhaps it's a sign of middle-age, but I don't think this generation can hold a candle to the twenties. That was the Golden Age of Modern Literature - both in England and America. The American crop was as rich as ours. Faulkner and

Hemingway were still young. And it seems to me that the standards were so high at that period because competition was so great. It was hard graft to get there....I shall never forget the advice that Edward Garnett gave me at the outset of my career. 'The path of all art', he said, 'is endlessly difficult'! The idea that fiction is easy to write is a great fallacy. Some of the younger generation seem to think it's enough to achieve a reputation with one book. Many young writers in my opinion succeed too early. They're made by one stunt or one gimmick or a single appearance on TV. It's much better to build up a reputation slowly - and keep it."

That is what H. E. Bates has done himself. The sales of his books have increased enormously over the years. The quality of his writing has never deteriorated. He employs a simple, direct style and never strains after an effect. His work, like a piece of finely wrought tapestry, has no loose ends. He writes in soft colours.

The time I spent in Bates' company passed all too quickly. I felt a little sad when the time came for us to part. There were so many other questions I would have liked to ask him. But I shall find the answers in his books and enjoy his work all the more because of the memory of his own quiet charm.

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