

Valeriy Tarsis as though on a notepad on one side of him, while busy with something far more important: a most ill-organized piece of writing, full of blunders, such as telling us that Nastasya is no longer a barmaid pages after having already described her promotion to singer, and referring to her pages later as 'nothing more than a barmaid'.

In Part Two the book opens out in true Russian style to describe (usually in entirely pointless detail) so many characters that we are soon distracted sorting out the Gladishchevs from the Lyashkevichs and the Lucernovs. It doesn't matter if we can't, because confusion seems the author's whole point. Nastasya fades before Pasha, a lovely Komsomol, who falls insanely in love with Stepan and, she announces, has 'worked out the design for a light, prefabricated system-built summer restaurant', disconcerting girl.

Everyone is now lusty and philosophising. Pasha's younger brother's mind is 'already boiling with insatiable passions and burning desires', as Russian minds should, which is why, I take it, her sister, Irina, whom 'nothing gave greater pleasure than lunch or dinner in a restaurant', is the one to meet a sticky end, for being so plain—and serve her right too. Between the lusty and adultery, there are long discussions about the 'state of the union' and communism generally: 'Of course bureaucracy is the greatest evil of our lives'. As Part Two ends three sisters are found dreaming of Moscow (names this time: Irina, Tonya and Pasha . . . near thing!)

Suddenly, in Part Three, we get chapter headings and a chapter by the French journalist 'freely translated from the French' but utterly Russian, though in English, all the same. In the last lines a tortured Stepan shoots Nastasya dead. Had he but done so on page one, much human effort (including mine) could have been spared. I ended the book with Keats' question, after listening to a nightingale, on my lips . . . and with a quite new and, I hope, only temporary aversion from all things Russian. Valeriy Tarsis has scored a point. Translation: fluent, manful.

Anne Britton on fading childhood

H. E. BATES

The Distant Horns of Summer. Michael Joseph, 25s.

A sadly evocative novel of the near-tragedy of one small boy's summer, a summer in which he is tossed into the care of an unknown 17-year-old girl. First he comes to love her because only she seems able to enter his strange but intensely real world of make-believe, where his only friends are Mr Pimm and Mr

Monday. She learns to talk to them in workman's language, lay places for them at table, include them in their games. Then she meets a man, a travelling salesman, whose eyes and voice excite her and who dismisses in a crude gesture James's non-existent friends. Slowly his child's world, pathetic as it is, begins to crumble. Again and again he tries to hold on to what is left as the summer dies away, seeing so much, yet understanding nothing, of the adult world except that it only destroys.

It is some years since H. E. Bates wrote a book aimed so directly at the emotions. It has a rare, haunting quality.

Eugene George on analgesic corks

LESLIE THOMAS

Orange Wednesday. Constable, 25s.

Kingdom Brunel Hopkins, the fearful, civilised hero of Leslie Thomas's new novel, is one of those charming idiots who allow themselves to be tossed about by life cork-fashion, full of gratitude when it doesn't hurt and fortitude when it does.

In forgotten Fulsbad, a long day's journey from Army HQ, he watches amiably over the disintegration of the army's Moribund Documents Section. Housed above the sleepy spa's steaming health baths, he eats and dreams and is content to be forgotten. His life is pointless and wonderful. But of course it can't last. Down in the forest someone is stirring it. First comes a summons to HQ, then an invasion of security men, hard-eyed, vicious and psychotic. Fulsbad, it seems, has been fingered as the very best place to hold, in terrible secrecy, a very dramatic event. So Brunel, the only man who knows the town and its people, becomes a reluctant cog in the complicated machinery of preparation for Orange Wednesday.

For a time it looks like going well enough. True, in among the trees a bunch of potty old Nazis are cavorting in cowboy fancy dress, and down at the baths there's a bit of unpleasantness in the after-hours' gloom. But there's also Prudence, a gorgeous, willowy, well-endowed and only mildly indiscriminate security aide, who functions best on raw bedsprings. It should be all a bit of a giggle for Brunel, but suddenly the whole thing goes sour on him in that odd way that it often does for cork-people.

It's difficult to see why the jacket and blurb insist that the book is a thriller. The appeal of Thomas's story isn't at all in its plotting, structure or action. Indeed it's hardly a thriller at all. More like a splendid diversion which exerts great pulling power with its warmth, wit and humanity. Great analgesic qualities. Marvellous stuff for making the world go away.