

# Books of the Times

By CHARLES POORE

IN the three novels we are reviewing this morning the course of love—false or fleeting or true—is rugged. "Venus, the Lonely Goddess,"\* finds John Erskine up to his old tricks again, spoofing the morality of the immortals, and writing his best book since "The Private Life of Helen of Troy." In "The Tunnel,"† Baynard Kendrick presents a pretty and distracted young woman torn between love for the living and the dead. And in "Dear Life,"‡ the distinguished novelist and short-story writer, H. E. Bates, has created a memorable thriller about a loveless English girl from mean streets flying before demons of small-town hell.

Mr. Bates' novel is a shocker, told in some of the most velvety prose of the season. The scene of his story is a town not far from London, probably in that "somewhere-in-southern-England" locality that the wartime communiqués used to talk about when they were telling where the latest flock of buzz-bombs had made their grisly landings, and very different from the prosperous American-suburban countryside we are to encounter later on in "The Tunnel," or, for that matter, in Mr. Erskine's *Olympus, Troy, and thereabouts*.

Mr. Bates uses the lasting scars those wartime bombardments made on human habitations and human character effectively in "Dear Life." His heroine, Laura, lives in the basement of a wrecked house with the remnants of a savage family. And when she escapes her shrieking mother, her bullying stepfather, and her dotty old uncle, she embarks on a brief career of unwitting crime that soon ends in a bombed-out place where her young gunman companion faces his last ambush.

## Violence Swift, Smooth, Sudden

It's all over fairly quickly in "Dear Life." We first see Laura, who has already had a couple of scrapes with the law, giving up her chance for a scholarship that might have saved her, taking a job with a far too loving town official, resisting what are known as his advances, meeting the gunman, and running off with him, she knows not where.

But she soon finds out. He needs money. And though he has just bashed in her stepfather's head, he sends her back to the home place to try to steal from her woolgathering uncle. One subsequent hold-up gets them a car, another—in a toy shop—gets them a more elaborate criminal record. And not long after that, they really face the music.

As usual, Mr. Bates writes so smoothly that his melodramatics seem to be happening behind some sort of a gauze curtain half the time. Even his habit of using the word "suddenly" to death does not really mar the rather creamy flow of violence.

In fact, you scarcely realize how violent Mr. Bates' novel is until you move on to the American scene of Baynard Kendrick's "The Tunnel." The contrast gives you the impression that some revision may be needed in the idea that American novelists are fond of gun-molls, stick-ups and such, while English novelists go in more for mental and moral crises in pleasant country places.

and broods, among other things, about her first husband.

That's only part of what's on Natalie's mind, a mind perilously close to the breaking point. Her other obsessions include a bitter memory of resentment against her second husband's mother, a belief that her living husband plans to poison her and marry her (former) best friend, a theory that maybe she'd better kill him, a lifelong fear of salt-water crabs, a complex about her old lawyer father, a conviction that her dashing first husband was not really killed in the war, and a somewhat extravagant partiality to very dry, very cold, martinis.

All her unhappy moments, her forebodings, her desperation, can be symbolized in the idea of life as a ride on a train that goes through dark tunnels. They can be, and they are—to a fairly exasperating degree. If you think Mr. Bates uses the word "suddenly" too often, wait till you see what Mr. Kendrick does with the word "tunnel."

Nevertheless, his expertly suspense-laden story manages to keep you consistently interested in knowing what's going to happen to Natalia and how her experiment in therapy through authorship—she writes most of a book within the book—comes out. Including the upshot of her murderous intentions, which are fundamentally just as unkind as those of the gunman in "Dear Life," though somewhat less practical.

## Venus as a Crusading Idealist

You'll not only fail to guess, in all likelihood, how John Erskine's "Venus, the Lonely Goddess," comes out, but you'll scarcely be prepared to guess how it begins. For it starts out in a prosier account of home life in classic Greece than Mr. Erskine has generally employed in the past, warms up to the cheerfully anachronistic dialogues of gods and mortals that so many writers have tried to imitate since "The Private Life of Helen of Troy" appeared, and ends on a note of cheerful ambiguity.

Venus is no wanton here. Her view of love is that of a mildly troublesome idealist. Around the Olympian dinner table, where Juno and Jupiter are apt to show the characteristics of Maggie and Jiggs, her efforts to do good to other people take a staggering battering. And they fare no better when she goes down the hill and gets herself mixed up in the later stages of the Trojan War. Not Vulcan, her less than couth husband, nor Mars, her conniving brother-in-law, nor Minerva, her bluestocking sister-in-law, gives much real help, either.

Anyway, her unexpectedly lofty theories of love and human brotherhood cause lots of brisk and entertaining talk. And that's what Mr. Erskine intended, as usual.

\* \* \*

## —Quotation Marks—

From "The Theatre Book of the Year: 1948-1949" (*Knopf*, \$4), by George Jean Nathan:

"Great tragedy is the tragedy of man's mind in strong conflict with the stronger fates; minor tragedy that of mindless man already beaten by them."

"Sartre gives the impression of a man rushing