

# Desert Island Desperation

**Breakfast and Elevenses.** By John Bratby. (Hutchinson, 25s.)

**The Day of the Tortoise.** By H. E. Bates. (Michael Joseph, 7s. 6d.)

**Season of Assassins.** By Geoffrey Wagner. (The Quadriga Press, 15s.)

**The Leather Boys.** By Eliot George. (Blond, 16s.)

**Tales from the Calendar.** By Bertolt Brecht. (Methuen, 15s.)

NOVEMBER is a cruel month for reviewers: after two months' spate of talent (John Updike, Angus Wilson, Evelyn Waugh, Muriel Spark, Alan Sillitoe, V. S. Naipaul, Francis King and Richard Hughes) darkness descends again with the fog, and one is left staring sadly at ten or twenty bundles of mediocrity. I should like to appeal to publishers for a more balanced diet.

Instead of which, John Bratby. Not even the fact that the first 200 readers to tear off and post a triangular flap on the back cover will get a signed artist's proof of one of the illustrations could reconcile me to *Breakfast and Elevenses*, a rambling, eventless, lead-heavily ironical account of the youth and schooling of an English middle-class boy. It is presumably Mr. Bratby's idea of poking a little gentle (but wise) fun at the conventional world: but he treats both his characters and his readers with such massive condescension that the pokes are more like blows from a sledge-hammer than anything else. 'The seemingly seldom sagacious Digglewick' is one of Mr. Bratby's minor creations; and another gets this man-to-man appraisal:

She would go all soft at the mention of Dana Andrews, the film-star; and you would be overdoing it more than somewhat if you called her a profound girl, for she was superficial, fresh, charming, girlish and dreamy, but not a lady philosopher.

'If you are stuck on a desert island with only this book to read,' writes the author ('with dry humour') on the dust-jacket, 'you will read *Breakfast and Elevenses* again and again and again.' Me (though I might linger a little over the illustrations), I'd jump into the sea first.

*The Day of the Tortoise* is an extremely simple little fable, set in a typical Bates milieu where people have quite enough money and never do a stroke of earning, but are not in the least educated or grand or otherwise intimidating to potential readers. Fred, a middle-aged bachelor, is utterly exploited by his three eccentric sisters, who keep him continually on the run doing things like fetching the pet tortoise for an Animal Communion Service in Ella's room or delivering Aggie's letters to Gandhi. But when a girl who serves at the local dairy comes to Fred in real trouble, he learns a thing or two from her—principally drinking gin and leaving his sisters to look after themselves—and remains, when she leaves to marry the man after all, both wiser and more independent. If only Mr. Bates's self-consciously bitter-sweet mixture could

manage more than a gram of bitter to a sack of sweet—but it's clearly an impractical wish. The illustrations (by Peter Farmer) are this time rather less of a redeeming feature.

I was impressed by the list of critics who had chosen some of Mr. Wagner's previous books as Books of the Year—Russell Kirk, Angus Wilson and Reginald Reynolds. But if anyone does the same for *Season of Assassins*, the shock will be a nasty one. It is an unattractive, tritely visualised and grovellingly improbable war-and-after story, which starts with desert commando rough-stuff (brains on the floor), moves into some missing-person hocus-pocus in Italy and ends in an orgy of John Buchan melodrama in a deserted German monastery which is really a hide-out for escaped war-criminals. Mr. Wagner can sometimes record particularly inane dialogue accurately and well, but I could find no other reason for finishing the book.

As for *The Leather Boys*, it is like the worst sort of social work: the middle class protesting that, under their inarticulate hides, the working class are Just Like Us and what could be nicer? The author, whose presumptuous pseudonym apparently conceals 'a well-known woman novelist' living in Highgate, has got inside the minds of motor-cycling toughs sensitively enough to invent two of them who are having a homosexual affair which principally involves kissing and who plan to run off together to join the Merchant Navy. Their gang comes down heavily on them for trying to rob a cinema on their own and disaster follows. As far as I was concerned, disaster had already struck by the time I reached this passage:

He wanted to ask Reggie if he loved him, but it was embarrassing to talk about love, although he watched it in films and sang about it in songs. Songs suddenly seemed to have meaning for him. It wasn't all tripe. He wanted to analyse his feelings and Reggie's, to talk about themselves and their relationship. But he didn't know the word 'analyse' and he couldn't explain his longing.

It was an enormous relief to turn from all these to something which is not a novel at all—Brecht's collection of poems and fables, which have all the bite and concision of a book of Chinese sayings, together with a *solidity* of content, a texture like that of good thick cloth, which is all and unmistakably Brecht's own. It is the stranger in this group, in quality as well as form, and might even do some good to the other four authors.