

Schizophrenic Adventures

DEAR LIFE. By H. E. Bates. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 149 pp. \$2.

By SIEGFRIED MANDEL

MR. BATES'S short stories and short novels, which have won him a considerable audience, have been compared in quality and depth with the works of such divergent craftsmen as Chekhov and Joyce. His craftsmanship is obvious in this latest short novel, but the quality and depth are not consistently apparent. "Dear Life" works up an atmosphere which reminds one of the macabre attempts to make the real unreal as in the best of Poe, Strindberg, Schnitzler, Kafka, as well as in Truman Capote and Shirley Jackson of recent promise.

In this psychological thriller Mr. Bates sensitively describes the schizophrenic adventures of several persons who move in confusion between the reality of life in postwar England and the reality of their imagination until tragedy short-circuits their lives.

The story itself flies about in fragments; only when these fragments are caught can they give a coherent picture. A scholarship which comes Laura's way is coarsely rejected by her stepfather. The consequent yearning for the love of her dead father, the aggravation resulting from her loss of the scholarship, a wild and loose escapade with Johnny, her only neighborhood friend, all topped by beatings administered by her drunken stepfather tend to unsettle Laura's mind almost completely, so that everything which comes into contact with her assumes a blurred and frightening shape. Only once does she really break out of her passive, will-

less shell, when under the impetus of a furious hatred she helps Clay, a Canadian ex-sailor who has befriended her, to beat her sotted stepfather to death. After this act of revenge both flee the city to commit assorted crimes until Clay is shot to death and Laura surrenders to the unseen pursuers.

The warm rural passages in Mr. Bates's writings are not so much caused by intimacy with country life as by his hatred of the city. Mr. Bates has pointed this out in an old autobiographical statement in answer to those critics who place him in the rural tradition. He explained the rural lyricism of his writings as perhaps having been inherited through vagabond ancestry on both sides of the family.

In fact, there is a great deal of country imagery in "Dear Life" although most of the scenes are set in the city. There seems to be almost poetic vengeance in the way the city's more unpleasant features are accented: bombed-out sites, the ruins of war; the dark canal and water-front; hints of alley life; homes, crowded and without privacy; stifling offices and their carnal employers. A pall of haunting gloom and despair is made to hang over the city.

Students of creative writing ought to be delighted with the range and technical versatility of this short novel. Mr. Bates works from an impressionistic palette, skilfully mixing adjectives, similes, metaphors, to reproduce sounds, colors, and smells. The impression however remains that Mr. Bates too often uses a trowel to pad poetically an essentially simple story.