

NEW FICTION

- H. E. BATES : *Death of a Huntsman*. 222pp. Michael Joseph. 12s. 6d.
FRANCIS KING : *The Widow*. 343pp. Longmans. 16s.
MARTIN BOYD : *Outbreak of Love*. 254pp. John Murray. 12s. 6d.
DAVID STACTON : *Remember Me*. 265pp. Faber and Faber. 15s.
DAPHNE DU MAURIER : *The Scapegoat*. 368pp. Gollancz. 15s.

In his new collection of four novellas, *Death of a Huntsman*, Mr. H. E. Bates returns to his best form. They are all essays in feminine unscrupulousness set in motion by jealousy, possessiveness or other causes.

In the title story, Harry Barnfield, a prosperous city man, found complete relaxation in his old red brick double-gabled house with its row of excellent stables, and fences and brushwood jumps in the fields beyond. His blowsy wife, whose main passions were for gin and garlic, was not able to affect his contentment. He had come to terms with life and found it reasonably good. There was something to be said for an Eveless Eden, until a young girl in a yellow sweater, jodhpurs, black velvet cap and pig-tails rode her pony over Harry's land and shattered his peace of mind. Twenty-five years earlier Harry had flirted with her mother, and now that faded beauty would neither allow her daughter to grow up nor her former lover to live in peace.

Perhaps Mr. Bates rounds off his story a little too neatly, but that is the only criticism to be made of a novella which shows the author to great advantage. "Night Run to the West" is a tragi-comic exercise in attempted murder which beautifully reveals the moral code of a good-natured lorry driver, and "Summer in Salander" brings an errant, neurotic wife to a tropical port where she soon leaves a new load of mischief behind her. These three stories are memorable. The fourth, in which Mr. Bates takes as his mouth-piece a middle-aged woman, is less successful. His outlook is essentially masculine, and this story of an irresponsible young girl who brings havoc into the lives of two elderly people has not quite come off.

Mr. Francis King's *The Widow* is, perhaps, more accomplished than anything he has written but it is on the whole less satisfying than some of his other work. What began as a crusade ends in futile charity. Christine Cornwell loses her husband, a senior Indian Civil servant, when he is on his way to take up a new and important post. He leaves her with two children, a girl of 18 and Adam, an attractive boy of 12. Christine accepts the challenge with courage, and faces a rather shabby existence in England, the Second World War, and finally the horrible wounding of Adam without flinching. Mr. King's quiet prose

and clever characterization carry him triumphantly to this point in his story. It is when the war is over, her children settled and Christine herself apparently without purpose that the story flags, but of the fitness of the ending there can be no doubt. The Christines of this world must give, however unworthy the recipients of their help may be, and this is why a reader may put down *The Widow* with a feeling of frustration.

The explorations of the civilized Australian world before the First World War made by Mr. Martin Boyd in his earlier books *The Cardboard Crown* and *A Difficult Young Man* are continued in *Outbreak of Love*. Mr. Boyd is adroit, occasionally amusing and very sure of his ground. If Melbourne society just before 1914 was not like this, it clearly ought to have been. Diana Langton married Wolfie von Flugel, a musician, very much against her family's wishes, and "had spent 23 of her 40 years in his moral and financial support." Wolfie needed both of them as he was without either conscience or humour. Diana felt that she owned some amusing and exotic animal, but she was outraged when Wolfie's latest mistress, a raffish Cockney lady, became tipsy and insulting at a Government House Ball. It was only then that Diana felt that she had had enough.

A few years ago King Ludwig II of Bavaria found an English biographer, and now, in *Remember Me*, an American writer, Mr. David Stacton, has made him the central figure of a novel. It is, in fact, a kind of imaginative biography. Mr. Stacton's approach to his subject is inclined to be portentous and his style is at times transatlantic, but those who prefer their biography with a dressing of fictional sauce will enjoy the work.

In her ninth novel, *The Scapegoat*, Miss Daphne du Maurier makes use of one of the oldest clichés in fiction. Improbabilities leap out at the reader from every page. Not one of his nearest relations believes that an Englishman has taken the place of the French Comte. Only the family hound is unconvinced. The usurper deals with tricky domestic situations and handles problems concerning the family business with great aplomb. Miss du Maurier believes in her people and happens to be a born story teller. *The Scapegoat* is likely to give pleasure to many undemanding readers.