

New Fiction

- VANCE BOURJAILY: *Confessions of a Spent Youth*. 437pp. W. H. Allen. 18s.
 H. E. BATES: *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal*. 206pp. Michael Joseph. 15s.
 ARTHUR CALDER-MARSHALL: *The Scarlet Boy*. 222pp. Rupert Hart-Davis. 16s.
 PAUL WEST: *A Quality of Mercy*. 206pp. Chatto and Windus. 15s.
 SID CHAPLIN: *The Day of the Sardine*. 286pp. Eyre and Spottiswoode. 18s.
 ISOBEL STRACHEY: *The Perfectionists*. 256pp. Anthony Blond. 15s.

Underlying Mr. Vance Bourjaily's extremely long novel are certain assumptions common to much present-day American fiction: that youth is fascinating always and in itself and that accounts of its sexual initiations and adventures are both shocking and irresistibly interesting. Though *Confessions of a Spent Youth* is, we are assured, "intended to be the definitive novel about the generation too young to be lost and too old to be beat", Mr. Bourjaily shares these assumptions not only with the "beats" themselves and members of his own generation (Mr. Mailer, Mr. Jones), but to some extent with members of "the lost generation", such as Scott Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe.

He is entirely interested in his hero's adolescence and young manhood and tells us almost nothing about his childhood or parentage. The detailed accounts of how he "made out" sexually and emotionally with some sixteen different girls (including 12 prostitutes) are embellished with scarcely anything but some adventures concerning alcohol and marihuana and that nostalgia for the male friendships of the early years also not uncommon in transatlantic fiction. Three virtues save Mr. Bourjaily's book from foundering entirely in the collapse of the aforementioned assumptions: an excellent prose-style; an energy that is fantastically sustained as he takes his rather characterless hero through college, the war, Greenwich Village, and the intricacies of seduction; and an occasional capacity, amid much that reads like pure fantasy to strike a note of worthwhile and unashamed accuracy.

Mr. H. E. Bates has published more than 50 books and had his meed of praise; yet it is possible that his virtues are not as highly rated as they should be. No praise could be too high for his power to visualize and describe a landscape, a street, the weather, a wild-flower, the sea, and a great many other things; his prose coruscates with exactly realized and defined visual sensations. In his latest collection of short stories—which range from rural England to Tahiti, from full-length studies such as "The Enchantress", a portrait of an Edwardian working-class beauty, and "Thelma", about an hotel maid who comforts the travellers, to delightfully poised anecdotes such as "Where the Cloud Breaks", about an old colonel who teaches his country neighbour to communicate with him by signal flags—his powers of observation and compression, his wry humour and his occasionally disturbing pathos are all once more exemplified. *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal* may well be his best collection ever.

Mr. Calder-Marshall's original concep-

tion, his first creative glimmer of *The Scarlet Boy*, may possibly have been more profound and exciting than the book he has written. A spiritual thriller about a chain of wickedness among dead children who inhabit a house and manifest themselves to a living child, it gives the impression of constantly failing to grip quite as it should. It takes too long for the narrator, a literary recluse, to purchase the house on behalf of his left-wing barrister friend and too long to establish the fact that it is haunted. We get to the chilling centre of things only when the book is almost over; there is an archness in the telling which may be in character but certainly reduces what shock there may be, and it is reflected in a certain cosiness in the theology the novel is meant to interpret.

The conception that *A Quality of Mercy* is meant to embody remains a little obscure all through. A crazy old woman, her garrulous, cynical and philosophical brother and her aging spinster daughter live in a New England wood. They hold elaborately stylized and vicious conversations with one another and these are interspersed with autobiographical monologues by the old man, a vaguely literary failure who has had a rather improbable but tragic love affair. Eventually the arrival of a honeymoon couple in a cottage near by unhinges the frustrated daughter, and the book, which is written in an ambitiously poetic and metaphorical prose, comes to an end in an uprush of violence. The ultimate point remains, as has been said, rather obscure, but Mr. West successfully brings off some odd effects here and there.

The Day of the Sardine is much more straightforward: a colloquially grimy autobiography of a teddy-boy who has a chip on his shoulder because his father walked out years ago and his mother wants to marry the lodger. He goes through several jobs and from bad to worse as he progressively gets more deeply involved with gangs and violence. The novel, whose climax is a murder, certainly emanates hopelessness and has one or two scenes of effective horror, but Mr. Chaplin evidently intends us to think better of his hero than he succeeds in making us do.

The Perfectionists is an attempt to uncover the raging passions underlying the smooth surface of life in artistic and dilettante Sussex. Paul and Claud have been living happily together for years until the arrival of Lawton Grigg and his young wife Susan, who arouses Paul's dormant interest in women. Miss Strachey's account of what transpires thereafter is somewhat novelettish.