



Oh! to be in England

H.E. Bates

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With a letter announcing the imminent arrival of Madame Dupont, Pop and Ma Larkin learn that little Oscar and Blenheim - are to be christened. Pop, who needs no excuse to open a few bottles and host the perfect party, rushes out and buys a fun fair to celebrate. But there are one or two gatecrashers even Pop hadn't counted on turning up.

'Oh To Be In England' was the fourth of five immensely popular comic novels in the Larkin family series, consisting of 'The Darling Buds of May' (1958), 'A Breath of French Air' (1959), 'When the Green Woods Laugh' (1960), 'Oh! To Be in England' (1963), and 'A Little of What You Fancy' (1970). Bates, speaking of how he was inspired to create the Larkin family, recalled the real junkyard that he often passed near his home in Kent; and he remembered seeing a family -- a father, mother and many children, sucking at ice-creams and eating crisps in a "ramshackle lorry that had been recently painted a violent electric blue". He tried writing a brief tale based on the family, but soon decided that he couldn't waste such a rich gallery of characters to a short story." Pop is a wonderful character who hates pomp, pretension and humbug; loves his family, but doesn't hesitate to break a few rules... and his and the Larkins' secret is "that they live as many of us would like to live if only we had the guts and nerve to flout the conventions."

Oh! to be in England Details

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Nancy says

Just loved it! Slim little paperback and incredibly fun! Now I have to get the author's other books because this is the middle of a series. I cannot wait to see how things pan out with Primrose and that poor Vicar Mr. Candy. A cast of true characters without ever being a caricature. Because we have all met most of these personality types. Taken alone they can be annoying or fun. Taken all together is a screwball classic laugh out loud book!

Dean Haywood says

Perfick

Camilla Tilly says

Bates uses his fantastic language in this fourth novel about Pop Larkin and his eccentric family in the Kentish countryside. It has its funny moments thanks to his extraordinary word choices and descriptions of things. But unfortunately the storyline in this fourth book is much weaker than the previous ones. It's a sentimental ode to an England that is disappearing. In a way the book resembles his short story collections more than a novel since he this time does not have a real thread throughout the book and seems to have had lots of different ideas for it. It starts with a story on how Pop decides on humiliating an arrogant Captain. But that story has nothing to do with the rest of the book. Then there is violence in form of modern youths deciding to pick on old-fashioned villagers and customs. One does not want things to really go THAT dark in a Pop Larkin novel where everything is always so wild, funny and cozy. What the book mostly is about though is the christening of Pop's youngest son, Oscar who has turned 3 years old and that of his two month old grandson, Blenheim. All the Larkin children decide to get christened at the same time as "the babies" and a character from book two, Mademoiselle Dupont, shows up in this novel as a godmother. But Bates does not really follow up here character that well. He concentrates more on the fact that Ma has started to paint nudes, especially of daughter Mariette who has just become a mother, and he also deals a lot with the fact that the now 14-year old Primrose Larkin, tries to seduce the interim priest in the parish. Can I recommend the book? Yes, because I think that the fifth and final novel will much build on this one and that is how I felt when I read this book: It's a book one must get through to understand and enjoy the next one.

Tracy says

Great

Each of these books has had me gripped from start to finish. Couldn't be more prick if it tried .

Stig says

I had forgotten I had this book, but found it on my shelves when I was looking for something to read on my daily commute to the salt mines. I probably bought it just because of the wonderful title, and I am glad I did as this was a delightful read about a very unconventional family.

To make things even better, it turns out that it is part of a series, so there are more books about the Larkins to look out for. And even an old TV series if I'm not mistaken...

Bob Hartley says

It's funny that the eccentric are patriotic in this, since that's a pairing still fresh in the English way of thinking. I went to Canada and loads of houses had the flag outside and I found it completely backwards. We barely celebrate St George's day.

Saw some of the punchlines coming, including the very last line, but it was written years ago and humour seems to have got more profound since so I can't fault it. It's a farce with the quality of a Tom Sharpe novel, God's honesty.

Orinoco Womble (tidy bag and all) says

Much better than the previous two installments. Mariette and Ma each have a baby to christen, but when the local padre discovers none of the little Larkins has been properly "churched", it turns into a family affair. Mlle Dupont is called over from France to stand godmother to little Oscar, and Primrose falls for the vicar, convinced he is a man of mystery--and he is, rather.

A light read, good for the heat wave we've been having. What someone called "potato chip" fiction--you munch it down quickly in spite of the lack of nutrition, enjoying it at the time, but a few too many can leave you feeling slightly sick. My only shudder was that Pop Larkin again runs his admiring eye over his developing daughter in a way that smacks of the incestuous. At the time the book was published (1963), the readers probably chortled at how randy he is--these days, it's a little icky, and certainly unnecessary. Therefore only three stars.

An Odd1 says

"Oh! to be in England" by H.E. Bates refers to the eternal blissful "perfick" "beloved countryside, its nightingales and blackbirds, bluebells and primroses, haytime and high summer" p126 of Pa Syd Larkin, wealthy benevolent junkyard dealer, inventor and bestower of powerful cocktails, and equally-affectionate, generously-proportioned Ma. Their brood of early maturing belles are: Mariette married to Mr Charlton, poetic Primrose Violet Anemone Iris Magonia Narcissa 14 set on East End visiting parson carrot-top Candy 24, quiet Victoria Adelaide Anne Cleopatra, identical twins Zinnia and June both Florence Nightingale, sons teen Montgomery and toddler Oscar Septimus Dumont. Christening the youngest, two-month grandson John Marlborough Churchill "Blenheim" Charlton, leads to anointing all the children, as yet unblessed.

Pa teases a cigar onto seller of armor, Regency chamberpots, buggy, and assortments, diminished frail Lady Violet 74 of "a small brownish moth ... gold-rimmed spectacles ... soft wisps of sepia whiskers ... curious downy charm". When overlong-visiting niece and nephew, brow-beaten "deflated chamois leather bag" yellow-face p33 Mrs Broadbent and husband coarse florid "stinker ... self-styled lady-killer" p45 Captain, claim the spinster is ill, I thought she would need rescuing.

(Spoilers:

When luscious bikini-clad brunette Jasmine Brown dunks the cad, I recognized the story. When a teddy-boy organ-smasher's razor cuts old pal Fruity Pears an inch from death, into the hospital, Pa buys the rundown roundabout, swings and coconut shy fair, for their backyard celebration. Flat-chested, black leather jacket, tight dark red jeans, straw-dyed beehive, 19ish night burglar wields a similar tyre-slashing knife. The July Sunday christening guests swell the series cast: as Oscar's godmother France guest-house owner Mlle Dupont, as Blenheim's godmother elegant alluring blonde Angela Snow, spindly old Brigadier who calls thin-lipped berserker-hearted Miss Edith Pilchester "Pilch", ... and the razor-knife wielding teddy-boys who hurt Fruity.)

Typos:

p162 Queen Ann for Anne p210 correct, 18 pregnancies, died childless

Sharon Zink says

Not sure what being in England has to do with anything. This is a humorous story about a family of rednecks. It could be a mix between P.G. Wodehouse and Huckleberry Finn and possibly Tobacco Road.

Sara Aye Moung says

“Perfick”

Juliana Jura says

The first book that I have ever read about the Larkin family. Brilliant!!!! The next is on order and I've bought the DVD set to watch!!! I think the fact that it had Catherine Zita Jones cast as one of the Larkin daughters put me off the entire series. Got that one wrong! A thoroughly readable romp! can't wait to read the next.

Mark says

Another good read in the Larkin chronicles - the main event taking place in this book is the visit of Mme Dupont from France (as encountered in the second book when they went and stayed at her guest house) where she discovers that the residence of her "English milord" is not quite as palatial as she pictured in her dreams. This also coincides with the christening of the two youngest (Pop and Ma's child and Charley and Mariette's child) which then turns into a major event when they decide to christen the whole family (including Mariette) as they "simply never found time when they were younger".

As always, the language is very evocative and it makes you wish to join the family in their simple pleasures.

Mark Farley says

In the fourth book of The Darling Buds of May series, the erstwhile Pop and Ma throw parties for an eight child christening and the opening in of the new swimming pool, while getting upto the usual shenanigans and japes.

The Pop Larkin Chronicles are the quintessential feel good detached, countryside romp. Well known by the popular tv series starring David Jason and introducing a young Catherine Zeta Jones to the world, this series of novellas set in rural Kent depict a time of post-war relief, laissez faire attitudes and an eagerness to get on with life, enjoy nature and all it brings, not to mention the ability to eat, drink and be merry. As a whole, the series delights but can be rather disjointed and sporadic between volumes. They are a joy though and have you yearning for a spot at their table being force fed and watered.

June Louise says

This is one book in a series featuring the madcap antics of the Larkin family. In this tale, Mariette and Charley are getting their baby son, Blenheim, christened; and Ma and Pop Larkin think it would be a good time to get their youngest child, Oscar, christened at the same time. In fact, why just Oscar? None of the Larkin children have been christened, so Pop asks the locum vicar (Mr Candy) to do a "wholesale christening" on all 7 of the Larkin children.

There are several storylines within the tale which all join up to make one celebratory ending; from teaching the womanising Captain Broadbent a lesson he won't forget; to the visit to the fairground and Edith Pilchester's energetic coconut-shy-throwing skills, and a brush with crime. Add to the mix Pop's second eldest daughter, Primrose, who has "fallen in love" with Mr Candy; Mariette - who is posing nude for Ma's portrait painting; the naughty twins Zinnia and Petunia who between them confuse poor Mr Candy at the christening; and Madame DuPont, a French guest, who, thinking that the Larkins live in a large English manor, gets a bit disillusioned!

This is a fun book to read, harking back to long hazy summer days. I think I could do with some more of that..... So it's time to download some more books from this series onto my Kindle!

Sarah Tummey says

This was my favourite of the books that was televised. The scene in the buggy always makes me smile, when Pop is teaching Mademoiselle to sing "I've got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts" ... Try to imagine that sung with a French accent. <https://youtu.be/jSio9yaU1Rc>
