The Darling Buds of May

H. E. Bates

About the author

Herbert Ernest Bates was born in Rushden, England in 1905. After graduating from Kettering Grammar School, Bates earned a living as a reporter and a warehouse clerk. He wrote his first novel when he was still a teenager, but he ended up throwing it away. However, his second novel, *The Two Sisters*, was accepted for publication, a milestone that laid the groundwork for Bates's long and successful literary career.

Many of Bates's stories focus on the quiet life in rural England – a life that Bates loved dearly. In fact, his first published novel was inspired by a midnight walk that Bates took in the countryside near his home, a practice that he thoroughly enjoyed. His most famous works include *Love for Lydia*, *The Darling Buds of May* and *My Uncle Silas*.

In recognition of his prolific literary output, which included more than a hundred novels and collections of short stories, Bates was appointed Commander of the British Empire (CBE) in 1973. He died in 1974 at the age of sixty-nine.

Summary

*The Darling Buds of May* tells the story of the Larkin family, which includes Ma and Pop Larkin and six happy – and always hungry – children. The Larkins lead a quiet, peaceful life in the country, surrounded by cows, pigs, horses and chickens, and they don't have a care in the world – until the day they come home and find a man waiting to speak to Pop about something very, very important!

Chapter 1: The story starts with the Larkin family riding in their lorry back to their ‘perfick’ (perfect) home in the countryside. When they get home, they find Mr Charlton, a man from the tax office, waiting for them. He tries to get Pop to fill in a tax form, but instead of doing his job, he ends up falling in love with Ma and Pop's eldest daughter, Mariette, who takes him on a walk.

Chapter 2: Mariette and Ma and Pop finally persuade Mr Charlton to stay and play cards. He agrees, but he finds the game too hard to understand. Every time he tries to talk to Pop about the tax form, he is distracted by Mariette, who has put on special perfume to entice him even further. Finally, Pop gets Mr Charlton to drink several cocktails, so he is drunk when he goes to bed. The chapter ends with Ma telling Pop that Mr Charlton ‘just needs a bit more time’.

Chapter 3: Mr Charlton awakes feeling very ill. He tries to leave again, but his departure is halted by Pop's insistence that he drink a ‘Larkin Special’, and Mariette's invitation to go for a walk down by the water. Standing in the sunny yard with Mariette, he is surprised to realize that he feels ‘perfick’. The next day, Pop surprises everyone by buying a Rolls Royce. The Larkins' neighbour, the Brigadier, arrives for lunch, and Pop agrees to lend him the use of his field for a gymkhana. After lunch, Mr Charlton and Mariette go for a long walk together.

Chapter 4: The Larkins convince Mr Charlton to take a week of leave from his office and join them in picking strawberries. He struggles in the fields for a while before Pop introduces him to the man in charge of counting the strawberries as they come in. The man ends up giving the task to Mr Charlton, who is happier sitting in a tent and working with numbers instead of with his hands. He meets a girl, Pauline Jackson, who starts to get friendly with him. At the end of the chapter, Mariette and Pauline fight over Mr Charlton.

Chapter 5: Pop gets a doctor to check on Mr Charlton to see if he can get him a couple of weeks’ sick leave, and the doctor advises him to take another week or two away from the office to rest his back. Meanwhile, the Larkins are visited by a neighbour, Miss Pilchester, who is organizing the gymkhana. She gets drunk and goes for a drive with Pop. At Miss Pilchester's house, Pop kisses her and then returns home, where he tells Ma about it. They laugh about Miss Pilchester's dark, dirty home, and drink a beer together.
Chapter 6: It is the day of the gymkhana, an annual event in the region. The Larkins and Miss Pilchester work together to plan the event, and eventually it gets underway. At noon, Pop offers to buy an old mansion from a local man named Sir George Bluff-Gore. Then he gets Miss Pilchester to agree to take part in the donkey race by promising to kiss her at the cocktail party.

Chapter 7: The gymkhana is a great success. Afterwards, everyone goes to the Larkins’ house for the cocktail party. Pop starts giving people his new cocktail – the ‘My Darling’. He meets with Sir George’s wife, who tells him that she will help to change her husband’s mind about selling Pop their house. Then Pop meets Angela Snow, who asks him to plan the gymkhana for her village later in the summer. Pop starts setting off fireworks, and everyone joins in, and then Mr Charlton asks him if he can marry Mariette. Pop says ‘yes’, and then shares the news with everyone at the party. More big news comes after the party when Ma tells Pop that they are going to have another baby. When Pop asks Mr Charlton if he plans to go back to work, Mr Charlton decides to stay on at the Larkins’ home. At the end of the story – as at the beginning – everything is truly ‘perfick’!

Background and themes

The quiet country life: The Larkins live in the country, where everything is beautiful, golden and ‘perfick’, as Pop likes to say. It is a pastoral setting, and it wins out over life in the city in that Mr Charlton chooses to stay on at the Larkin farm instead of returning to his job – and life – in the city. Bates describes the countryside vividly, presenting it in a pure, golden light. Everything is green and blooming; everything is full of life. Bates portrays nature as the great provider, and he seems to suggest that paying attention to her and her provisions can lead to a truly happy existence.

No worries or problems: Bates portrays the Larkins as carefree people who don’t have a worry in the world. It doesn’t matter what happens – Ma and Pop don’t let the usual stresses of life get to them. They seem to live by the notion that ‘whatever will be will be’. This carefree attitude brings good things to the Larkins, including a Rolls Royce, a farm filled with animals and enough money to buy Sir George’s estate. Pop doesn’t worry about taxes, and his laidback manner eventually rubs off on Mr Charlton, who exchanges his formerly ‘official’ outlook for a carefree one. Mr Charlton represents the fast-paced, stressful life of the city, while the Larkins represent the trouble-free existence of the country. Bates presents the former state as constrictive and unhealthy, and the latter state as free and fruitful. He suggests that happiness can be found by simply refusing to fret about the little things in life. His characters understand that life is too short to spend it worrying.

Abundance: The Larkins do everything in excess. They eat in excess, drink in excess and play in excess. For them, life is bountiful and meant to be enjoyed. Pop buys a Rolls Royce, not because he needs it, but because he wants to be able to take long drives in style. When Ma prepares meals, she makes enough to satisfy two families, not one. The alcohol overflows throughout the book, but it isn’t presented as a negative thing, as it might in many stories. Instead, it is shown as a healthy, pleasant and enjoyable reward that should be savoured as much as possible. Readers are likely waiting for the Larkins to pay for their excesses – perhaps in taxes – but nothing of the sort transpires. Instead, they continue eating, drinking and being merry right up to the end of the story. Bates is suggesting that life is too short to stop yourself from enjoying everything it has to offer, as often as possible!

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–2

Before reading

1 Discuss: Ask students to look at the picture on the cover of the book. Who do you think the people in the picture are? Why do you think this? Where do you think the people live? What do you think the people are like? What other things can you see in the picture? Do you like the picture? Why or why not? Does it make you want to read the book? Why or why not?

2 Discuss: Write the following words on the board and discuss their meanings as a class: beer, flower, horse, lorry, perfect, perfume, pyjamas, strawberry, tax and village. Divide the class into two teams. Give each student on each team a letter (A, B, C, etc). Student A from the first team should give the meaning of one of the words without saying the word. Student A from the second team should guess which word the other student is referring to. Award one point for giving the correct meaning and one point for guessing the correct word. For the next round, Student B from the second team should give a definition of another word, and then Student B from the first team should guess the word (and so on). After all the words have been defined and guessed correctly, total up the points for each team – the team with the most points wins.
The Darling Buds of May

Chapters 3–4

Before reading

5 Guess: Ask students to predict what will happen to the Larkin family, Mr Charlton and the other characters in Chapters 3–4.

6 Research: Put students into small groups and get them to look for information about Rolls Royce automobiles in the library, on the Internet, etc. Then get them to make a brochure to promote the automobile. When they have finished, the groups should stand at the front of the class and present their brochure to the rest of the class.

After reading

4 Discuss: Put students into small groups and ask them to think about the title of the book. Get them to discuss the following questions: What does the word ‘darling’ mean? Is it a positive word or a negative word? What is a bud? Where does a bud come from? What is the month of May like? What usually happens in the month of May? Do you like the month of May? Why or why not? Do you like the title of the book? Why or why not? Can you think of any other titles for the book?

Chapters 5–6

Before reading

11 Discuss: Ask students to think about why Chapter 5 is called Miss Pilchester and the Kiss. Who do you think gives the kiss in the chapter? Who do you think receives the kiss in the chapter? Why do you think this? Do you like the title of the chapter? Why or why not?

After reading

12 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture to describe the scene at the gymkhana. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the class and describe their picture to the rest of the class. The class should draw the picture as it is being described and then compare the pictures.

13 Pair work: Put students into pairs and get them to take turns describing Pop from the point of view of a) Ma; b) Mariette; c) Mr Charlton; d) Miss Pilchester; and e) Sir George Bluff-Gore.

14 Artwork: Put students into pairs and get them to draw a picture of one of the characters in Chapter 5 or 6. Note that each student should draw his or her own picture. When they have finished, the pairs should take turns looking at each other’s picture. Then each student should guess which character his or her partner’s picture illustrates.

Chapter 7

Before reading

15 Discuss: Ask students to think about why Chapter 7 is called Surprise at Pop’s Party. What do you think the surprise will be? What do you think will happen as a result of the surprise? Do you like the title of the chapter? Why or why not? Does it make you want to read the chapter? Why or why not?

16 Pair work: Put students into pairs and get them to look at the picture on page 45. They should ask each other questions about how the characters are feeling in the picture. How do you think Ma and Pop are feeling? Why do you think they are feeling this way? How do you think Mariette and Mr Charlton are feeling? Why do you think they are feeling this way?

After reading

17 Write: Would you like to be a member of the Larkin family? Why or why not? Get students to write sentences to answer this question.

18 Write: Put students into small groups and get them to write a short story about the Larkin family’s future. Note that this exercise can be done in class or as a homework assignment. When they have finished, each group should stand at the front of the class and read out their short story.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.