

It is the lack of reverence for which the writers loved most and new readers will hold him dear. The way dedicated the book, "To Lydia, my wife by marriage (the papers on her)," is clue enough for what lies ahead. Nothing is sacred. For example, in the column titled "First Inklings" Barker talks about sex as lightly as if he were discussing his tomato crop, which he also discusses:

When I was in Aaron Gove Junior High, I learned how to talk around the playground where babies come from, but I must say I didn't believe it.

So that's what I went and did. And it went away, for sure.

It wasn't until some painful weeks later that I finally figured she meant for me to lift my bed with my hands.

This is a book to be enjoyed in savory sections, like a box of Christmas chocolates that lasts until June. □

REVIEWER: Julie Hutchinson is a freelance writer and artist in Denver, Colorado.

Challenging Nature

Lumping-Off Place and Other Stories

AINE KERR

University of Missouri Press, \$9.00 cloth ISBN 0-8262-0311-6

IN BAINE KERR'S FIRST BOOK OF stories nature is very big — not as a limitless resource but as a force both grand and terrible, a force of huge physical and mythic proportions, dwarfing human features, placing them in perspective. Three of the four stories are set in the West but Kerr's emphasis is much broader than this suggests. It is wilderness that intrigues him, wilderness where epochs intermingle. *Limestone shoulders granite. Causal principles are left to the absolute rhythm of sun and night and the recklessness of wind.*

In the story "Rider" (which appeared in Martha Foley's 1977 edition of *The Best American Short Stories*), for instance, nature thwarts a man's attempt to order it. A whimsical passage pokes fun at a macho geologist who becomes infuriated when a five-thousand-year-old bristlecone pine he's attempting to date breaks his coring tool; we cheer for the bristlecone. In another passage a mountain peak assumes the form of some "ancient, living, glacial creature." In this and the other stories here is repeatedly the suggestion that in matter and energy some godlike force is present.

The omnipotence of nature affects the personalities of Kerr's characters, as well. The protagonists of these stories are male and have in common that they want to

bend others to their will, want to control the course of events. All of them come up against the power of nature in the form of an immovable object or an irresistible force: a hurricane, a woman with a mind of her own, a blizzard, another man's shallow stupidity. So the subsidiary characters become paradigms of this great and terrible force. Like nature, they are not easily overcome by will. They refuse to be ordered, controlled, or ignored. In the story "Rapture" the hero, Peter Moss, proudly defies the Army and eventually is discharged as a conscientious objector. But this stance evolved out of and depended upon an arrogant certitude which, in civilian life, works against him. He drives away his wife with this inflexibility and when he meets born-again-Christian Karen Campbell his arrogance not surprisingly gets in the way. He still wants to "seize affairs by the collar and cow them to his will." He assumes he can convince her his way is "The Way," but she is adamant. Peter finally realizes he can't change what happens or ignore it — he has to accept it.

While initially the humbling of these heroes strikes us as just, we view them more sympathetically as their vulnerability is revealed. Like the victims of the natural disasters these men can neither anticipate nor avoid the devastation of human upheaval. That's why these stories are so gratifying and why the power of tornado and volcano which Kerr's writing evokes is still awesome — a single human ego assumes its proper proportion in relation to the universe.

Kerr's prose is precise and lucid, appropriately adaptable to its shifting subjects. (Continued on page 27)

REVIEWER: Marilyn Krysl lives in Boulder, Colorado, and is the author of *Honey, You've Been Dealt a Winning Hand*.

dia. He served as editor and/or some seventeen different regional and national; was a show host; narrated a number of in Paramount's *The Search for* portraying himself as a reporter; University of Colorado and the Writers Guild. March 29, 1981.

BAINE KERR WAS BORN IN HOUSTON, Texas, in 1946. This is his first book of short stories, though all of the stories in this collection have been published separately before in journals. "Rider" was included in *Best American Short Stories* in 1977.

Kerr was one of seven co-founders of the literary quarterly *Place* (headquartered in Palo Alto and the Sacramento delta area of California) and he served

as its editor from 1971 to 1973. His writing background also includes work as a journalist for the weekly *Lexington News-Gazette* in Lexington, Virginia, during 1969 to 1970, and teaching journalism at the Boulder Valley Institute in Boulder, Colorado, in 1973. He received his B.A. from Stanford University and a J.D. and M.A. from the University of Colorado at Denver.

designed to give the least amount of offense to the greatest number of people. Any such confrontations would probably be considered too emotionally or intellectually demanding for the casual pulp reader or filmgoer seeking pure recreation. The recent surge of Hispanic cultural pride may one day produce a widespread awareness and appreciation of cultural differences. Such an enlightenment is a prerequisite to the weakening and eventual obliteration of these negative racial images. In the short run, however, the best we can hope for is a more sympathetic and less offensive treatment of the Mexican.

Popular culture may not be a perfect reflection of a society's collective consciousness, yet by its pervasive nature it does express a common denominator in the attitudes of its audience. □

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"Kerr's prose is . . . appropriately adaptable to its shifting subjects."

Though occasionally Kerr's style turns a bit self-conscious, and here and there a paragraph may seem excessively lyrical for a prose narrative, the effect is generally engaging, compelling. Especially in descriptions of landscape as a mythic force the reader is drawn into a state of enchantment.

They had entered an amphitheater formed by hundreds of humped boulders as big as trucks and airplanes wrecked at the head of the gorge. Dark, ancient, igneous things, conceived in fire when the plains were ocean, split and corroded, speckled by black and silver grit. Two hundred feet above, the full flood of spring melt erupted out of the rim, squalled down the rocks to a tossing pool. Above the rim, on top of bare constellations of stone, two big ponderosas stood black against the sky, like guard towers over a place of violence as old as the earth.

We're reminded of Faulkner and his belief that it is the encounter with wilderness that teaches us courage and humility and his fear that with the destruction of wilderness these virtues might disappear. We need writers whose work evokes the grandeur and awesome extent of the natural world, the sheer beauty of the land and the poignancy of human existence within this natural landscape, the healthy and undeniable tempering of our sense of reality that this relation to place — our place — inevitably educes. Kerr is certainly a writer for whom this is a primary theme. He is an eloquent thinker and a traditional writer in the best sense of the word. □

