is to make us care by making us know—and *that*, mom and pop, is technique.

Baine Kerr is not a less-is-more story-teller. On the contrary, in the four stories of *Jumping-Off Place,* Mr. Kerr gives us—there's no other word for it—a motherlode of information: on deserts, on Army life, on traveling, on history and the whole and honest folk who live it. Kerr writes westerns—not the shoot-'em-up, galoot in the black Stetson, sod-buster versus cattleman sort, but the kind in which, as old Hank James did suggest, "landscape is character." "Rider," for example, opens like this:

> Anyone driving between California and the Rockies for the first time will realize he has been lied to all his life: the country has not been settled, the West was not won.

It continues, perhaps another 1500 words, discursive and dense with detail, fixing for the reader a place where "epochs intermingle" and "causal principles are left to the absolute rhythm of sun and night and the recklessness of the wind." It is an opening, fellow travelers, that smells of authority and conviction, and, as noted buckaroo Ford Madox Ford once observed of such authors, "You can trust him for the rest."

Kerr comes at story from every direction but the obvious, his "angle" of address various and surprising, his plots—remember those old-fashioned things?—as tight as knots. Even at his least successful, as in the title piece, Kerr writes with force and forthrightness, anxious for the reader "to subside into the world of women and men, where life resides . . . ."

Indeed, you can trust Kerr for much: for proper pace and for the inside poop of feeling or thought and for endings which offer "knowledge, the meaning of mysteries." You can even trust him for irony, particularly that which makes "a trip a memorable exodus, lousy with symbols and deeper meanings, with resolution and revelation, the stuff of literature . . . ."

Annabel Thomas, whose collection of sixteen is the twelfth winner of the Iowa Award for Short Fiction, seems to share Kerr's concern about the fits and half-glories that are life: "It's the people I care about," she says elsewhere, "the human capacity to achieve momentary grace or to fall from it, to create works of love or deeds of ultimate horror, the results of the

choices we make in life." (One wants to admire such good intentions, even as one travels the paved road to hell.)

Also like Kerr, Thomas has the knack for authoritative and arresting openings: "Up on the top of the world I saw Boann on her wedding day. She was drunk on blackberry wine lying flat on the warm ground with the morning mist rising from her shoulders" ("On Gobbler's Knob"). Or: "At first, Margaret hid in corners. Sitting in corners, she forgot how to button and how to eat with a fork" ("Margaret and Erdine"). Or: "All of the children who came to Miss Evir for piano lessons were frightened of her brother Ashur. His face made them tremble. He looked like a walking nightmare" ("Ashur and Evir").

Such openings inspire confidence, in part because Ms. Thomas appears to have little use for the agenda of pointy-headed art—the dialectic of theme—happy instead to let story speak for itself. Like O'Connor, to whom comparisons are already being made, Thomas takes story on its own terms, no more able to thwart its outcome than the man in the You-Know-What. The turf here is Appalachian rural and hardscrabble, the people exposed and realized in prose of the upstanding, hard-working and God-fearing sort. Here, for example, is Farmer Bob's picture of his helpmate in "Twister":

> Weak and foolish with the pleasure of the food in his belly and the relief of resting his body after the long morning's labor, he delighted in her and how her concern was all with life. Her body exuded life. There was no room for death in her.

If her concerns are O'Connor's—the flawed, the tragic, the graceful—her style is, yup, Hemingway's: swift, balanced, exact, the kind of expression Everybody's Poppa had in mind in, say, "The Big Two-Hearted River," to which Thomas may have fashioned a fine thematic companion piece in her title story. In this, Thomas presents us with a woman going underground (literally), fleeing the anticipated A-Bomb Apocalypse. She is outfitted according to survivalist manuals, and hers is a story of digging and darkness and true exploration which lead not only to the Indian Room, to the Bat Room, and to the underground rivers, but also to the Home Chamber of the Self