

# Kerr Collection of Short Stories Be

THE JUMPING-OFF PLACE. By Baine Kerr. University of Missouri Press. \$9.

*Reviewed by John Williams*

IN THE FIRST lines of the first story in this first collection of short stories, Boulder author Baine Kerr suggests the territory that his fiction will explore — a territory that we realize very quickly isn't only of the land but also of the human heart in the wilderness of its time and circumstances, in the chaos of its desolation and hope:

"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 not won. An unvanquished heartland called the Great Basin remains, a huge broken bowl claiming parts of seven states."

In this story, "Rider" (previously included in Martha Foley's "Best American Short Stories of 1977"), a young man accompanied by an odd and stubbornly helpless acquaintance drives from San Francisco to Denver, to a new start, a new wife, and an unborn child; the trip becomes a minor Odyssey in which the young man, lured by the dark, the unknown and the chaotic (exemplified both by the implacable landscape and the half-articulate inhumanity of his companion), gains at last the wisdom to "subside into the world of women and men, where life resides, where (with the birth of his child) the first human gesture would not be a scream, but the unfolding of a tiny red hand, inch-long fingers touching at the unfamiliar air."

IN "JUMPING-OFF Place," the title story of this collection, a thirtyish, up-and-coming liquor distributor, on a flight from San Antonio to Denver, meets a young girl from Texas who is artless, vulgar and innocent — and by that meeting is forced to confront the shallowness of his own self, the emptiness of his own soul and the vanity of his desires.

In "The Canaries of Lisbon, the Giant Carp of Japan," a

man looks back upon his boyhood with an itinerant carpenter father who made his living by "dogging the heels of great natural calamities: hurricanes, earthquakes, blizzards, floods, and tornados," doing "anything to make ruined things and lives work again." Looking back, he remembers a woman in hurricane-ravaged Norfolk, Va., weeping over the shattered fragments of her mobile home. "I abruptly began to understand," the narrator tells us. "The random loss, the fragility, the loveless fluxion of my life, my father's need to attend to these injustices, my connection to him and to the woman crying in the wreckage of her home — these things then took on the shape of sense and compassion." And we realize that though order may be brought out of chaos, that order is at best tenuous and impermanent; the narrator, observing the devastated landscape, remarks: "The day remained clear, warm, and utterly still . . . and only a careful intelligence would have detected that anything was wrong, that a false spring was fascinating the Tidewater of Virginia, or that the oaks' leaves abhorred the light."

AND IN THE FINAL story, "Rapture," Peter Moss, a veteran who became a conscientious objector during his army service in the Viet Nam years, continues a slow withdrawal of himself from the world, in search of transcendence or, as he names it, rapture. He has an ex-wife who has remarried, a young daughter he sees but once, and a born-again Christian mistress. He loses them all — "all he had" — in one exodus; but the loss seems scarcely to matter to him. "He renounced renunciation; he had outgrown that. Outgrown the self-seriousness that aspired to glory, the self-pity that longed for joy or death." In all his searching, the nearest he has come to the rapture he has sought was the sight of a golden eagle that once landed in a neighbor's backyard. And so, friends and family gone, Moss will "settle down into a placid, crusty middle age. Walk the dog. Spend weekends rocking on the porch, sipping tequila, jeering at joggers. Watching for eagles."

# Beautifully Written

Kerr's stories are fictions of quests and discoveries and though they are set mainly in the West and Southwest, and though Kerr evokes with great accuracy and richness the natural figurations of land, they are by no means the literary exploitations of the West to which we have become so used. Here, landscape and character are inseparable; one is the embodiment of the other. Kerr avoids the easy and protentious symbolism that besets much modern fiction, particularly fiction set in the West; he trusts his own intelligence and sympathy, and he trusts the intelligent and sympathetic response of the reader. These are extremely satisfying stories, beautifully written, richly conceived, and soundly executed.

THEY ARE particularly welcome in a time when it is widely supposed that that most indigenous of American literary forms, the short story, is in some trouble. We have seen the demise of many magazines that once abounded with good short fiction; we have seen the increasing reluctance of book publishers to take on the commercial risk of issuing original volumes of short stories; and we have seen the effects of these conditions upon a great deal of the short fiction being written today — conditions which persuade many writers to court the eccentric, the outlandish and the hysterical, in a poor effort to attract the attention of *someone*.

But Baine Kerr hasn't been persuaded to do so, and for that we can be grateful. He writes an honest, clear, and sometimes distinguished prose; his stories unfailingly engage the deepest interest of the reader, and they reverberate with those intimations of experience and understanding without which no fiction will long endure. "Jumping-Off Place" is an auspicious beginning; it deserves our respect and attention.

- John Williams, 1973 winner of the National Book Award for fiction, teaches creative writing at the University of Denver.