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CLASSIFIEDS	JOBS	HOUSES	CARS	MARKETPLACE	SHOP			
HOME	LOCAL NEWS	SPORTS	ISLAND LIFE	ENTERTAINMENT	BUSINESS	TECHNOLOGY	OPINION	HELP PAGE

Island Life

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Island Life

- About Men/Women
- Taste/Recipes
- Book Club
- Faith Calendar
- Comics
- Tube Notes
- TGIF Calendar
- E-Postcards

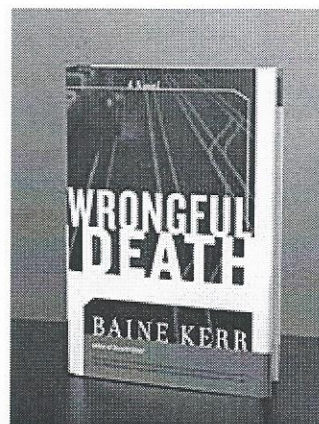
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Posted on: Saturday, May 25, 2002

BOOK REVIEWS Multilayered stories provide a satisfying read

By Wanda A. Adams
Advertiser Books Editor

Baine Kerr's "Wrongful Death" is a sophisticated, multilayered story, one in which none of the answers are easy, none of the issues clear-cut. Kerr, who lives in Boulder, Colo., but spends part of the year at his home in Puako on the Big Island, draws on his experiences as a personal injury attorney and, intriguingly, as an elections supervisor and war crimes journalist in Bosnia and at The Hague.



"WRONGFUL DEATH" by Baine Kerr, Scribner, hardback, \$25

There is story within story within story here, peopled by mature characters: a widowed and grieving attorney who flees to Europe to escape his pain and gains some hard-won perspective; the hard-bitten but very human woman he meets there and comes to love; the railroad worker, proud of being a successful woman in a man's world, who pays with the rest of her life for a single, terrible mistake; the loner who is horribly injured in an accident at work, and who may just be a murderer; and the young client who is driven to find out what happened to the mother from whom she was too long estranged.

The railroad engineer is June Mooney, who, one snowy night, is at the controls when her engine pins a co-worker, Dale Stillwell, between two

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- The Site
- The Web
- Classifieds

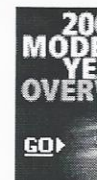
Back Issues

Featured News

- Nation/World News
- TGIF Calendar
- Photo Gallery
- Special Projects
- Columnists

Customer Service

- Help Page
- Contact Us
- Subscriber Services
- Reader Services
- Advertising Services



trains, nearly killing him and leaving him brain-damaged. Guilt-ridden, she becomes Stillwell's caretaker and then his wife. Later, June Stillwell is found beaten into a coma and her moody, introspective husband is the prime suspect, though nothing is proved against him. June's daughter enlists attorney Elliot Stone to help find out the truth.

Stone is familiar with the case because he had once been engaged by the court to serve as Dale Stillwell's conservator, signing off on the settlement offer made by the railroad because Stillwell is too incapacitated to look out for his own interests. Now Stone becomes June's advocate.

Grisham, this isn't. Poor Elliot Stone's case hardly does anything so simple as to make it into court. Instead, he must first clarify in his own mind what happened, chasing down clues that only seem to complicate the case. The ending is satisfying and heartening, though, as often happens, justice comes awfully late.

Kerr's first chapter, detailing the accident, is a masterpiece of descriptive writing, calling on all the senses so that the reader is right there, in the swirling blizzard, as June inches a string of railroad cars toward her doom.

The dialogue throughout is top-notch; particularly when Stone is speaking with his lover, Quierin, the half-Dutch, half-Indonesian anthropologist who leads the exhumation team with whom he works in Bosnia. Her somewhat fractured English highlights her intelligence, her pragmatism and her magnetic sexuality.

And Stone is an attractive central character — smart but a bit of a bumbler, a man of feeling in a heartless profession, capable of things of which he is not proud, particularly as he takes stock of his life after what he has seen in Bosnia.

"Wrongful Death" is due out May 27 but is available online and in some stores now.

Two recent self-published novels by Hawai'i authors explore widely divergent landscapes:

...

"KHALIFAH A Novel of Conquest and Personal Triumph" by John Elray, Aardwolfe books, trade paperback, \$14.95

John Elray is a technical writer who has long been fascinated by the historical roots of conflicts in the Middle East. When he stumbled on the story of the tumultuous years of conflict that followed the death of the