

JUMPING-OFF PLACE

Stories by BAINÉ KERR
 University of Missouri Press. \$9

Theme of self-rescue marks an intelligent, ardent collection

A review by Cia McClanahan

Books of short stories as well as novellas are being brought out regularly these days by five academic presses — University of Illinois, Johns Hopkins, Louisiana State University, University of Pittsburgh and University of Georgia — as well as by University of Missouri Press, in whose Breakthrough series of previously unpublished authors "Jumping-Off Place," by Baine Kerr, is Number 33.

Three of the four stories in this intelligent and deceptively modest volume share a common theme: the labor referred to in the Taoist book of wisdom, the "I Ching," as "Work on what is spoiled" — the struggle to repair the catastrophically broken, to remake lives nearly ruined by the evils of personal experience.

In the most evocative and flamboyant of the stories, "The Canaries of Lisbon, the Giant Carp of Japan," a boy and his father travel, by means of a truck outfitted with handyman's tools, in the wake of natural calamity.

"We drove from the East Coast to the Dakotas for ranch work after the blizzards of the winter of '57, then south to Kansas and Missouri, stricken by cyclones. That fall and most of the next year we worked in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, all recovering from Hurricane Audrey. We travelled, in '59, from New Orleans to Hebgen Lake, Montana (earthquake), to Jalisco, Mexico (hurricane, mud slides, flood, thousands dead: a disaster so irremediable we retreated to the border after a week)... We cleared rubble, reconstructed buildings, helped families salvage their belongings and repair their homes, did anything to make ruined things and lives work again."

Because of his father's obsession with disaster, the boy learns compassion, as well as the sustaining anomaly, "the miracle of survival, the fortuity of what remains, the almost wondrous, almost holy quality of what is spared."

In "Rider," calamity is more modern, more psychological, as sinfulness moves, so to speak, from Old Testament to New Testament: "... divorce, disintegration, teeterings on the edge of madness... Not quite ruin, but all the rack I could handle."

A young man undertakes to move out of his 20s and California, into his 30s and Colorado. Speaking in the voice of chastened intelligence, and with the gingerly tone of a survivor, he lugs what remains to him — "detritus salvaged from a disastrous decade-long encounter with the State of California" — back across the Western mountains to a new life within snug limits:

"Across the Great Basin, just over the Continental Divide, a pellucid wholeness beckoned; concentric glowing rings — Colorado, the house there, Chris, inside, the child inside her — an aurora 1,300 miles to the east, 'an orbbed drop of light, and this is love.'"

"Rapture," another story sharing the theme of self-rescue, concerns Peter Moss, a young man with temporary custody of his 1½-year-old daughter. He is a veteran: of divorce, of an unforgettable evil in Army training camp, of a late, heroic attempt to win conscientious-objector status. Proud of his heroism but ready to unload his sadness and begin a new life, he is courting a girl who is a perhaps-too-articulate Christian. She proposes conversion, and Peter Moss refuses.

Like the narrator of "Rider," though, Peter Moss appreciates the stubbornness of a faith strong enough to resist the modern temptations: depression and excess. Watching birds plunge through a waterfall to build their nests, he observes:

"... the fitful strength, the lunatic will, the brainless courage of bird and spouse, diving into the bursting heart of the falls to deliver some ridiculous wisp of weed. Homemakers."

Another story, "Jumping-Off Place," a touching experiment in point-of-view, portrays a rather detestable, self-satisfied young liquor distributor — again, divorced — who flirts condescendingly, on a jet flight from Dallas to Denver, with an unsophisticated Abilene teen-ager who could, nevertheless, eat him for breakfast.

This intelligent and quietly ardent book of stories is as carefully written, as free of cant and as amusing as contemporary fiction ought to be.

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