

Philadelphia Inquirer May 7, 1989

DREAMS OF DISTANT LIVES

By Lee K. Abbott

G.P. Putnam's Sons. 206 pp.

Throughout the 1980s, Lee K. Abbott has been steadily writing some of the most inventive short fiction in America. By the time his second collection, *Love Is the Crooked Thing*, appeared in 1986, Abbott had clearly established his unique voice, a muscular Southwestern twang laced with poetry. And he had found the theme he could render as no one else: the male experience of married love tottering, then lost or thrown away.

The best stories in that book focused on amiable golf-playing types doing all the things they'd grown up believing a real man does. Then they watched a woman too good to lose walk away, often into the arms of a neighbor once thought a friend. The language careened around the page and more than once sailed out of control, but the stories that worked, and that was most of them, sent a shiver of recognition into our male memories of what we'd been taught to believe, and what that had so often cost us.

Abbott's widely acclaimed third collection, *Strangers in Paradise*, was better still. The theme, despite an occasional Vietnam story, stayed the same but widened to address the roles of father and son as well. By now, Abbott's language was under such masterful control that it never slipped and had a humor making the heartbreak of its speakers more forceful for their lack of self-pity. There were moments, as we might feel in reading *Twelfth Night*, when it felt the author was simply reshaping the best tricks that had worked for him before, but even then, as in his O. Henry Award-winning story "Living Alone in Iota," the human truth gleamed through the tricks.

In his new collection there are no tricks. These are stories about "the hole the inner life pokes in the outer." They tell of men who have a love they prize but undervalue. In those few stories that tell of love beginning, it comes like a disorienting blast, as it does for Chappy in "1963": "After she closed the door, he held an inventory of himself: a wild pulse beating in his eyes, breath whoosing in and out of him like a wet wind."

But usually love is leaving, spinning a man into a top ready to keel over from loss, time moving "round and round and round until, when the heart is involved, there is no now or then; there is only turmoil with you in the center of it, like a stick." Bobby Joe, in "Once Upon a Time," looks across a tennis net at the wife he's just realized doesn't love him anymore: "Love, the force and want of it, ripped through the center of me, leaving me to be king and clown both. There it is, I kept telling myself. And I can't have it. It has legs and good breasts and makes a loud song in bed, and I don't have it anymore. . . . Silently, I went to the service line. I had shut down inside, gone still as a ghost town; there was nothing in the flesh of me but wind and dry, cracked organs."

These men are El Paso ministers and Cleveland pediatricians, they have sons named Buddy or Pudge, wives named Darlene or Ellen Kay, and they cheat with pampered blondes named Helen whose Shaker Heights "living room is part Town & Country, part Ponderosa" or sporty types like "Terri Ann

Mackey, a rich, three-times-married former Zeta Tau Alpha Texas girl who might one day make headlines for the dramatic hair she has or the way she can sing Conway Twitty tunes."

Their problems can span generations; the pain of Buddy's lost first love sparks both remembered and vicarious pain for his father in "Here and Time and Not." In the hauntingly beautiful title story, included in *Best American Short Stories, 1987*, the loss of their women invades and reorients their dream life. They can feel strikingly similar to each other, brothers in domestic tragedy.

For this, Abbott has paid. Too much alike. An occasional critic asks, "Is there no other story Abbott can tell?" The question misses the point, misses the very source of these stories' power.

At a recent reading, a Flannery O'Connor Award-winning author was asked of her stunningly wrought fiction, "Is that all you know about: marriage and divorce?" Would we ask of Monet, "Is Rouen Cathedral the only building you know?"

Abbott has listened to the best advice a literary editor ever gave (sadly a fictional one, T. Gertler's in *Elbowing the Seducer*): "I want to hear your voice completely. I want you to tell me in a story the truest thing you know." We praise rather than condemn Hemingway for the intensity of vision that enables us to see the same horror in different tone colors in Nick Adams, Frederick Henry and the old waiter in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." It is both Fitzgerald's and Katherine Anne Porter's strength that we see the same disillusionment recur in story after story. For variety, we can buy anthologies, Whitman samplers. From writers, we demand the truest thing they know.

What Lee K. Abbott knows is how we play by the wrong rules, take the easiest way, be an affable guy, say a casual yes when we needed a disciplined no, and then find we have unraveled the fabric of our lives. He knows, although his men find out too late, about "lies and love and how forgiveness works." He knows how "it is now and then necessary for the child, in ways mysterious with love, to forgive the parent."

The best part is how he shows it. His ingenious voice crackles with energy, catching human weakness in a ranging web of prose. Left by his wife, achingly alone, the narrator of the title story tells us, "One time, after a phone call from Karen (a conversation whose last lines were so impersonal they could have been uttered by Martians), I sleepwalked. My dream concerned thirst, and when the alarm went off, on my nightstand I found not one but five glasses of water; and I report to you now that I drank each of them, slowly and seriously, as if I dared not, as if the penalty for neglecting what our dreams bid us do is not less than death itself. Yes, I drank them, and after each, in the silent moment between the putting down of one and the taking up of another, I had a vision of myself as I was when Karen and I married--an eager beaver ignorant of what time can do to love."

In *Dreams of Distant Lives*, we have Lee K. Abbott at his best. And if his constant appearance in the Best American, O. Henry Award, Pushcart Prize and Editor's Choice collections is no fluke--and it's not--that's about as good as the American short story gets.