

Los Angeles Times Sept. 29, 1991

Living After Midnight

by Lee K. Abbott

G. P. Putnam's Sons. 241 pp.

Lee K. Abbott is a gambler. His freewheeling style itself sets syntax and diction at hazard, and in his fifth story collection he risks leaving the territory he'd made his trademark, one nobody explores with more truth and command: the male experience of married love slipping away. Until now, an Abbott story usually focused on men who have wives they prize but undervalue, who are left holding only the wrapping while they throw the gift away.

While their underlying intent remains what Abbott has called to "make clear the hole the inner life pokes in the outer," his new group of five stories and a novella looks at how life has too many warps, nooks, dips and sharp edges to offer a secure pattern. With flesh and emotion, the whole seldom equals the sum of its parts. That unsettling imbalance, in variations on those words, appears in each story. Sometimes, say when we're in love, the whole is more; sometimes, like when our daughter has inexplicably died, the whole shrinks to precious little and holds little precious.

Three stories--"Getting Even," "Freedom, A Theory Of," and "The Who, the What and the Why"--share a Byronic torment by early memories that become obsessions: a bizarre fistfight, a thorny friendship, the drowning of a sister, desertion by a father, the death of a child. Remembrance of things past shapes all future behavior, fragments the personality and leads to self-destruction. While none of these three stories quite reaches the level that has made Abbott's name perpetually listed in annual best-story collections, they become studies for the title novella.

In his first venture into that long trance-like form in the unsalable word-count zone, Abbott weaves a dark tale of college friends inextricably bound. Reed, from a conventional background, leads a drab, directionless life. His cohort, H-man, is a nihilistic rogue who introduces Reed to cocaine, guns and convenience store hold-ups. Yet, Reed follows him to the heart of his own darkness because he finds no heart in his sources of light. Only with H-man can Reed feel alive.

Abbott's signature virtue is the poetic, even acrobatic, Southwestern voice that tells his stories. In the Joycean line of writers tenaciously keeping language fresh, his aesthetic comes from another era, one that built baroque cathedrals, when more was more. Abbott's prose doesn't merely roll gracefully but does backflips on the balance beam, where failure would be humiliating and glaring, as sometimes it is. He launches sentences out like far-flung nets and usually draws them back full of surprise. A bruised man feels "compelled to speak about my personal life--the hollow it had lately been, its sockets and hinges, the quakes and boom-boom-boom it sometimes was." A student

recalls a lecture, "the way the words had gone in like fishhooks, barbed and bent enough to rip coming out." Teenagers on nitrous oxide discuss "what pleasures might be discovered at the intersection of the raunchy and the lurid."

His best stories dazzle with their synthesis of recognition and muscular lyricism.

"Sweet Cheeks" shows how a romance becomes a woman's bittersweet, crippling fixation. The lawyer was an odd choice for her to adore, "him the sort who watched his language and used his turn signals and was at pains to say excuse me every time he went to the gents," but his quirks enthralled her, his wacky menagerie of gifts, how "he'd be at her ear saying good night, Cheeks. Or Babycakes. Or Sweet Chips. Crapola that there ought to be a law against using with an honest-to-goodness grown-up." When he told her he was leaving, "they made love that night, their last. They mumbled 'excuse me' a lot. And 'pardon me.' And damn near tried to keep their give-and-take free of any chitchat that had an *L* or an *O* or a *V* or an *E*--trying, it seemed already, to reach each other across time and distance, plus whatever other dimension heartache could be measured by." Sweet Cheeks bears his gifts and memory into subsequent relationships as a wall between her and any other man, a searing portrait of our inability to get out of our own way on the path to love.

Beneath a surface bubbling with humor, "How Love Is Lived in Paradise" has breathtaking power and depth as college football coach Bubba Toomer learns of love, heroism and transcendence from an English tutor and "nearly one thousand yards of Super-8 movie." Bubba was just another overweight coach yelling at large teenagers, boys "named Ickey and Tongue and Herkie--nearly a hundred who thought nothing of mud and hurly-burly as the medium to be distinguished in" until film of a runty tailback showed him what valor looks like. "Clearly, this was beauty, which is composed of all you love and cannot survive without . . . It was the creature in him, and me, I was attending to--the thing that in flight looks smooth and intent and imperturbable. The meat of us that turns toward light and sound and shrinks from an unfriendly touch." When, years later, Bubba meets English tutor Mary Louise Tipton, with "a smile that involved the whole of her face," he discovers his own capacity for transcendence, a love that has "eight syllables and half the color wheel."

Bubba's ecstasy reflects Abbott's own elation at language itself, his saucy insistence that English is an inexhaustibly playful resource for showing us ourselves.