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## THE WATCH: STORIES

By Rick Bass

Norton

Last Christmas, Rick Bass sent a friend in New York City a six-foot Douglas fir tree, through the mail. It must be easy to conjure colorful schemes in the Yaak Valley of northwestern Montana a half-hour from the nearest phone, where Bass, a petroleum geologist by training, cares for a ranch and creates some of the most vibrant fiction being written today.

*The Watch*, this 30 year-old's first collection, contains stories already anthologized in *Best American Short Stories 1988*, *Prize Stories 1989: the O. Henry Awards*, and *New Stories from the South: the Year's Best, 1988*. He has appeared in this year's *The Pushcart Prize XIII* and won the PEN/Nelson Algren Award Special Citation.

These ten stories show wide range in style, theme and setting, and not all of them work equally well. "The Government Bears," the closest thing to a weak story in the group, is a sprawl of summarized narration that fails to engage. Yet, it is Bass's willingness to take chances, to experiment, that leads to the excellence of the other stories. As Marilyn Ferguson, author of *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, once observed, "The difference between successful people and unsuccessful people is that successful people fail more often."

Bass seldom fails here as he sets in motion characters trying to find and hold on to happiness before the world closes in. In the powerful, O. Henry Award-winning title story, 77 year-old Buzbee has left his son at their isolated country store and fled to the Mississippi swamps to restore his youth and freedom. There he fights alligators and malaria to stay free of the son who has set a \$1000 reward on his head because "\$900 or some lesser figure would have seemed cheap--and some greater number would have made people think he was sad and missed the old man." Buzbee accumulates a harem of discontented wives who've slipped away from abusive husbands, but after his interval of primitive, naked freedom, his son captures Buzbee and chains him to the porch in hope they might "sit around on the porch and talk forever, all of the days."

"In Ruth's Country" is the hauntingly sad story of a young couple in untamed Utah juxtaposing the beautiful, unyielding country with severe man-made strictures that force an early end to young love. "Redfish," one of three stories about the same group of Texas friends, casts two young men wading into the Gulf of Mexico to fish, the narrator intoxicated by the splendor of the shore but aware that as he dreams of riding horses into the waves the horses too would be "no doubt full of their own fears of sharks, of drowning, of going down under too heavy of a load, and of all the things unseen, all the things below."

Those who get trapped or meet the things below can be beaten, as is Dr. Lynly in "Wild Horses," a poignant tale of loss and guilt filled with images of injury and healing; Dr. Lynly "had that look to him that told . . . it might be the last year of his life. It wasn't so much any illness or feebleness or disability. It was just a finished look."

One thing that helps forestall being beaten is the majesty of the land where these stories are set. In the Mississippi Valley of "Wild Horses" at night "there were only the dark shadows and pale lights, and a low gold thumbnail of a moon--a wet moon--came up over the ragged tear of trees by the bayou." At the Idaho/Canada border of "Choteau" only the the land can last because "it's a rough country, and beauty doesn't do well up here unless it's something permanent, like the mountains, or the river, or even the great forests, century-old larch and cedar." To Bass that land is Hemingwayesque in its restorative power; it is where Galena Jim Ontz takes his friend to hunt "high in the Canadian Rockies, and watch clouds pass over the moon, feel the bite of what feels like the edges of eternity, a certain forever-aspect to things, as if this is the way it should always be up in this country--frigid, locked-in and cold, with springtime and yellow-flowered summer only an accident, which will, one of these years, not even bother happening."

But when other people cross into this landscape it can knock characters' lives and hearts a bit off-center. To purge the guilt of failing to stop a woman's fiance from drowning, once a month Sydney in "Wild Horses" stays at the woman's farm, "and they would go into her big empty closet, and he would let her hit him: striking him with her fists, kicking him, kneeing him, slapping his face until his ears rang and his nose bled . . . and the palms of her hands hurt too much to hit him any more." In "The Government Bears," 60 year-old D.W. Pitts tells us that over 30 years ago a man hit him in the head with a 14-inch pipe wrench because "he said he didn't like me because my clothes were always too clean and because he said he had seen me looking down the creek like a crazy man, just watching it, when there was nothing there."

Perhaps most off-center of all is the narrator of the hilarious yet pointed story "Cats and Students, Bubbles and Abysses," included in *Best American Short Stories 1988*. Written eight years ago in one sitting during a week Bass was in an intense rage (two girlfriends left him within three days, and he had just started a job in Mississippi where he was an instant outcast), this may be the best story in the collection. The 31 year-old narrator lives with a pompous roommate he despises, and whose teeth he knocked out three years before, and teaches literature at a Mississippi junior college. He is a writer. Unfortunately, he has written nothing. He and his best friend, Slater, another past-30 writer who writes nothing, drink beer and watch TV and talk about girls and try to redeem their lives by taking under their wing a protege, a writing student named Robby who "hasn't really written anything yet, not any stories or anything like that, but he can write the hell out of a sentence. He writes some of the best I've ever read, it's just that they aren't ever about anything. It's like he gets tired easily."

Still, the narrator is convinced that if Robby "ever gets untracked and is able to write a whole story or a book even, say six or seven thousand sentences about the same thing, then the big boys up in New York are going to go nuts about him. Where did this gem come from? they will ask." They try to get Robby a girlfriend by bringing a former student Robby's picture and a tablet containing ten of his best sentences, but she glances at the sentences and asks them to leave: "I do not think she liked number six, the one about the dry leaf that blows hollow and forlorn down the empty canyon." Still they persist in helping Robby so that he may get out of the bubble few of us escape that keeps us from accomplishment, self-realization and happiness, the bubble in which the narrator is trapped forever.

This is a book about people searching for ways to slip into a fulfilling space as time slides by them, about some who try to move forward and others who choose not to. It marks the stunning debut

of a writer with near limitless promise. Getting into Rick Bass now is like investing in Apple Computer when it was still a penny stock.