

New York Times March 1998

**The Next Step in the Dance**

*By Tim Gautreaux*

*352 pp. New York: Picador. \$23*

Life should be bliss for Paul and Colette Thibodeaux as Tim Gautreaux's exotic and deeply affecting debut novel opens. Handsome Paul's a skilled, hardworking machine operator who loves dancing and adores his wife. She'd had her eye on him since they were in first grade. Colette, at 23, is the "smartest woman he had ever known" and "the only drop-dead beautiful woman in Tiger Island," their insular Cajun community on Louisiana's gulf coast. But they're at opposite poles of contentment. Paul loves Tiger Island, where families are considered drifters if they've lived there only 140 years. To him, "a good place is wherever you are, if you've got the right attitude." But Colette longs for more: "Damn it, I want to know people who sparkle." So she flees to California, and Paul follows. He's passionate enough to chase her but cool enough to give her space. Colette's California dreaming proves illusory. Her freely groping boss and Paul's crooked one make them return to the more ingenuous gators and cottonmouths of the bayou, where Colette now appreciates her deep roots in the marshes. Appreciating Paul, though, comes slower. Readers may grow exasperated with Colette's tongue "like a fillet knife," but Paul perseveres, personifying devotion, which twice almost gets him killed before Colette, who'd wanted ease, finds through hardship what truly has value. Mr. Gautreaux's powerful accretion of detail, rapid-paced suspense, keen ear for the Cajun voice and poetic sense of metaphor, right down to the novel's perfect title, make this an august debut and mark his a fast-rising star to watch.