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Oil Notes

By Rick Bass

Houghton Mifflin

This past winter Rick Bass may have produced one of the best story collections of the year, but that's no way to try to earn a living. By profession, Bass, like his father, is a geologist. Specializing in petroleum development, he has kept journals while on the job these last several years, and what he jotted there now appears as *Oil Notes*.

The book tells how oil is located and drawn from the ground. We learn from Bass a good deal more about oil than we did from, say, Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* about either zen or motorcycle maintenance. But like Pirsig, Bass uses his ostensible subject only as a slack anchor while he drifts about in the waters of life and its meaning.

As in his stories, Bass speaks with the muscular voice of the youthful (31 this past March) naturalist outdoorsman in clipped, unadorned prose. And as with much bestselling fiction--*Jaws*, *Coma* and *Shogun* come immediately to mind--he combines an absorbing blend of spirited writing with an area of technical expertise.

Though seriously flawed, this is an immensely attractive book because the journal-keeper himself becomes immensely attractive: a young man forged of benevolence, honesty, caring, and a deep love for the life he lives. He treasures looking for oil, which he speaks of in rhetoric most men reserve for a woman, because "it is one of the few things in the world that is not governed by paradox . . . it usually--hell, almost always--plays by the rules. . . . It's consistent, and you can count on it. . . . I love to log wells. . . . I still find myself holding my breath when the tool first starts up out of the hole. . . . No one has ever before seen what I am seeing."

Oil often serves Bass as a metaphor for life. Searching it out has taught him tenacity and resolve: "You can always find a reason not to do something, or to be skeptical, or frightened. There's no talent involved in not doing. You have to try to avoid dry holes; but to be frightened of them, frightened into inactivity and negativeness, means you have been defeated."

The book's only significant character beside Bass is his girlfriend of several years, Elizabeth. Bass tells of their first date, his inviting her to the park for a picnic lunch of bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwiches, quixotically lugging a microwave and extension cord in his trunk to plug into the tennis court lights outlet to grill her bacon. Idealized through Bass's eyes, Elizabeth and oil often become metaphors for each other: "We fall asleep hard, tired, holding each other. But underground, because she is Elizabeth, there is only so much. . . . Each day, each time I see her, becomes increasingly valuable because some is gone, and I am happier. We may have twenty years left, or three months, or forty years, or more, but it is a finite unit, like the quantity of anything in the world."

This is how Bass as journal-keeper sees the world. It is to be savored, lived in the present, loved with an uncompromising passion. Elizabeth, original-formula Coca Cola, oil, a stray dog, fine writing, the outdoors, there are no fine distinctions when Bass feels something is to be loved; it is to be loved completely and here and now. There is, in fact, more zen in this book than in Pirsig's. Its author speaks with the child-like purity of heart of the enlightened monk.

But not completely. Not only, as a petroleum geologist, is Bass aware of the horrors our lust for its energy will visit upon the earth within a century--despite his frequent paeans of joy he is not a complete Pollyanna--he is also aware of his own limitations: "There are more important things in life than a Chosen Profession. I would like to . . . tug on my beard and tell you what one of those things is, but I am only twenty-eight and I do not quite know, yet."

That's one of the two main failings of this book. It falls short of its implied philosophic design, far short. Its epigraph comes from Peter Matthiessen and its front jacket flap carries a blurb from Annie Dillard; putting a passage of *Oil Notes* next to one by either of these mature and magnificent journal-keepers will show Bass's youth to painful disadvantage. *Oil Notes* has many evidences of the combined sensitivity, perceptiveness and courage where wisdom will someday be, but Bass should have waited for that time.

Particularly disappointing, as Rick Bass writes superb fiction, *Oil Notes* is not carefully written. The prose has an unshaped spontaneity that gives it an attractive artlessness, but much of the time the writing looks merely careless. Often, it feels hard to escape the suspicion that Bass's publisher grew tired of waiting for the trio of novellas and the novel on which Bass is reportedly working in the isolation of a Montana farm and said, "Look, Rick, you're hot right now; have you got an old notebook lying around we could make some bucks with?"

If not the book Rick Bass could someday make it, even tomorrow, this is by no means a bad book. It is, in fact, an endearing book filled with a beguiling innocence, optimism and unashamed elation. If we might not wish to sit down with it again, we would certainly wish to sit down many times with the man who wrote it. Familiar with Bass's collection *The Watch* and its award-winning stories, we may not have found in *Oil Notes* the writer we were looking for. But we did find what Diogenes was looking for: a good, honest man.