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Book Review

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the Wilderness

By David Gates

FOR A LITTLE WHILE

New and Selected Stories

By Rick Bass

471 pp. Little, Brown & Company. \$28.

KATHERINE ANNE PORTER argued (or at least asserted) that "novella" is "a slack, boneless, affected word that we do not need to describe anything"; her stern yet vague taxonomy recognized only "short stories, long stories, short novels, novellas." But writers who work in that Venn diagrammatic long story/short novel zone can find reassurance, if not absolute

THE ANCIENT

MINSTREL

Novellas

By Jim Harrison

255 pp. Grove Press. \$25.

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Out of the Wilderness

By Smith Henderson

SCIENTISTS SAY WE'VE entered a new geological age, one they propose calling the Anthropocene owing to humanity's outsize effect on the environment. There's little doubt to any observant person that we're making a mess of things. Driving up I-90 south of Florence, Mont., you can see the damage. Although the loggers quit clearcutting the mountains in the 1980s, the rest of us didn't stop superheating the planet. Now pine beetles, which flourish in our era of abbreviated winters,

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KATHERINE ANNE PORTER argued (or at least asserted) that a "novella" is "a slack, boneless, affected word that we do not need to describe anything"; her stern yet vague taxonomy recognized only "short stories, long stories, short novels, novels." But writers who work in that Venn diagrammatic intersection of story/short novel zone can find reassurance, if not absolute definitional clarity, in this term for something that's neither a malnourished novel nor an overstuffed story: a ge-

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'For a Little While'

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have left acres of dead ponderosa and lodgepole pines.

Rick Bass has been writing about the environment since way back in the Holocene, even before he moved to Montana and turned out impassioned reams from his cabin in the wilderness. Now, in this collection of selected and new short stories, "For a Little While," we have a core sample of a literary titan. At last. For what comes into focus in this collection is that Bass hasn't been writing just to save our wild places, but to save what's wild and humane and best within us.

Bass is, hands down, a master of the short form, creating in a few pages a natural world of mythic proportions. There is no better example of his special skill than in the perfect yarn "The Hermit's Story," which begins like this:

"An ice storm, following seven days of snow; the vast fields and drifts of snow turning to sheets of glazed ice that shine and shimmer blue in the moonlight, as if the color is being fabricated not by the bending and absorption of light but by some chemical reaction within the glossy ice; as if the source of all blueness lies somewhere up here in the North — the core of it beneath one of those frozen fields; as if blue is a thing that emerges, in some parts of the world, from the soil itself, after the sun goes down."

One long proposal of chemical magic, the fantastic origin of the very color blue, and Bass has situated us at the intersection of science and another kind of terrestrial alchemy. As the dog trainer Ann and her client Gray Owl take his hunting dogs out for a few days in the wilderness, Bass's world-building is so beautiful, crisp and perfect that dread mounts. Something must go wrong. And it does. A hellish arctic front descends. They decide to pitch camp and wait out the storm near a frozen lake. Gray Owl goes for water and promptly disappears into the ice. He has taken with him their tent and rations. Ann has no choice but to try to retrieve them, and she hazards out onto the cracking ice:

"She peered down into the hole and dimly saw Gray Owl standing down there, waving his arms at her. He did not appear to be swimming. Slowly, she took one glove off and eased her bare hand into the hole. She could find no water, and, tentatively, she reached deeper."

Gray Owl reaches up and helps her in. He explains that the lake froze over and then drained. This happens more often

than people realize, and Bass renders every detail of this waterless world with bracing exactness. The storm blows itself out and the stars in the night sky appear embedded in the grinding ice, contracting in the chill. When the pack sets out the next morning, they use cattail torches to light their way, igniting little pockets of methane in "explosions of brilliance, like flashbulbs, marsh patches igniting like falling dominoes, or like children playing hopscotch" until the flames blow holes through ice. The dogs flush little birds

and sublime event. The empty lake is home. The humans who crashed through their icy roof — that's the magical thing.

When Bass concludes the story, "Such is the nature of the kinds of people living, scattered here and there, in this valley," he isn't elevating nature — he's elevating us.

The valley Bass is talking about is the Yaak Valley in northwestern Montana, where he moved in 1987 after years as a petroleum geologist in the South. The people who choose to live in the Yaak don't endure the long harsh winters as much as celebrate them. To be in a truly wild place with verdant summers and the proximity to elk, wolves, wolverines and moose is a privilege afforded to few. And the characters in "For a Little While" — even those from Mississippi or Texas or the Southwest — are Yaak people. Independent people. People drawn by a mysterious valence to cavort naked, leap into the water, run, hunt and fight. In short, they act like the animals they are. The animals we are.

The fully drawn, reflective people in "For a Little While" are often just as astonished by their own mysterious behavior as we are, and they get into loads of trouble. They aspire to run strong beef cattle, but wind up with diarrheal calves that will not



Rick Bass

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live out the week. They get caught out in the weather, often with the people they love. They plumb icy rivers and are helplessly drawn to fire. Dolphins beckon them into the ocean and they go. These wild human creatures sate every longing, they can't stop fighting, and they sometimes don't quite know why.

But as you roll through this rollicking survey of Bass's fiction you begin to feel an uncomplicated holy motion. Deer are hunted. Fish are fished. Rivers are traversed. People race naked in the desert. Bass presents the blood rite of field dressing an elk with no adornment, because like all the essential human endeavors, it needs none. The pleasure and privilege of reading Rick Bass is to see how sacred we are, most pointedly in the gorgeous stories "The Blue Tree," "Swans" and "The Canoeists."

The geologist knows how short our time is, how brief this Anthropocene could be. The greatest joy in "For a Little While" is the belief, in story after story, in the goodness of all things on this earth, including us. So much can be done, there is so much to learn, if we just remember what we are. □

SMITH HENDERSON is the author of a novel, "Fourth of July Creek."