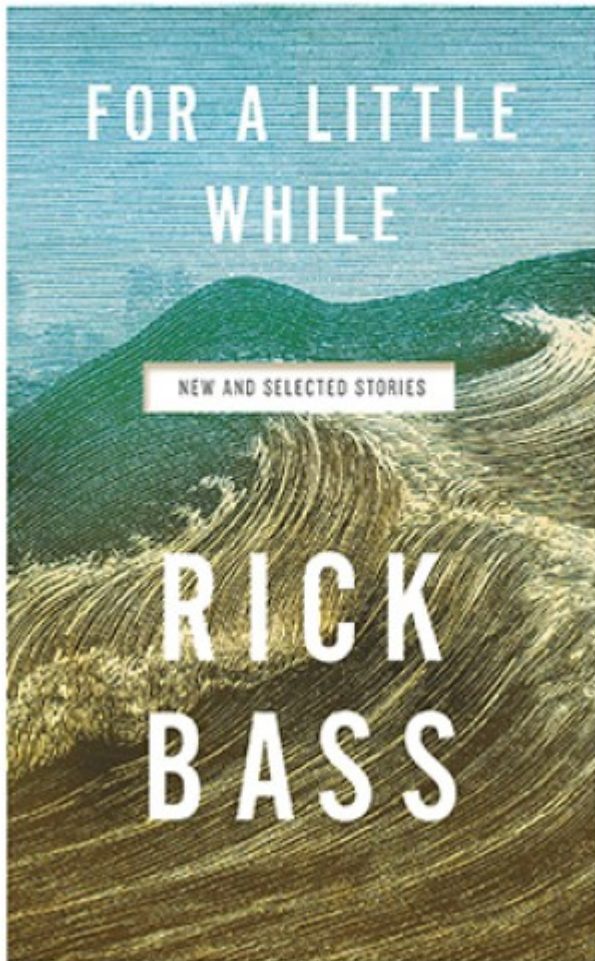


Stories from a glacier-shaped landscape

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by [Harold K. Bush](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue

In Review



For a Little While

New and Selected Stories

By Rick Bass

Little, Brown

One of Rick Bass's many strengths is his solid voice, one that is equal parts grace and humor, grief and suffering. But perhaps his chief strength remains his most striking feature: a gift for conveying the sheer wonder of natural beauty. Bass, like the Nobel Prize-winning Alice Munro, has been described as a "writer's writer": one deeply admired by fellow workers in the vineyard. Both he and Munro make a strong case for the abiding health of the genre of short fiction. The frequent comparisons of Bass with other writers of stature are telling: he is often likened to the masters of an earlier era, such as Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, J. D. Salinger, or even the unquestioned, reigning presence of all creative writing programs, Ernest Hemingway.

With the release of his latest collection, Bass has combined what he evidently considers the prize productions of his past—18 in all, representing most of the early collections—with seven new stories, most of which are stellar works. One might consider this book to be the best of both worlds, connecting his retrospective "greatest hits" with a new set list, and thus it is a perfect place to start if you are a reader new to the edgy, glorious, and often brutal natural settings depicted by the author.

Born in Houston, Bass lived for a long stretch in Mississippi before settling in a remote valley in northwestern Montana. He is known primarily for his great power in depicting nature and ecosystems—especially the bitter cold and the glacially shaped outdoors of the American West.

In a brief, primal scene portrayed in "Elk," for example, a story about the struggles of a hunter to secure the meat he has carefully prepared and packed after a lengthy hunt and then get it all back home, readers will feel the wind and cold of the setting. I also learned more about elk hunting, and about homesteading in a remote wilderness area, than I ever thought I might wish to know.

In "The Canoeists," even shorter at a mere three pages and featuring no dialogue whatsoever, a couple runs a river in Texas before returning to their workaday worlds in the city. Here we learn in a tiny, undogmatic way how Emersonian encounters

with nature can inspire and even edify our souls—a simple message, really, and one with a long American tradition behind it. Bass masters adventure, travel narrative, and inner conflict all at once in this slim feast of a tale.

But it's the characters that have the most potential to engross the reader. These are generally hard-bitten, blue-collar Janes and Joes, but average only within the confines of an untamed, overwhelming, and often dangerous landscape. Sometimes these characters look back on key experiences many years later, as in the classic "The Lives of Rocks," a haunting and haunted tale of a woman's memories of youth as she endures a severe illness. Nearing death, the protagonist Jyl is granted a new and vast sort of wisdom, simple yet elegant. The result is the riveting uncovering of the deepest yearning and desires of a particular human heart—described in nuanced, brilliantly stylized prose. For Bass, there's nothing like the unadulterated wilderness, in any kind of weather, for revealing what's really inside of us.

Some of the more brilliant episodes in this collection are found in the newer tales, such as the winsomely luminous "The Blue Tree." The story describes how a logger sets out with his two daughters to find a perfect Christmas tree. Their truck shuts down, and they are left stranded as a snowstorm descends. The mother becomes irritated about the entire, sometimes dangerous episode. But for the father at the center of the tale, it is recalled as an incandescent moment of truth and beauty: a characteristic, understated motif in Bass's work.

Later in the collection we revisit this same family years later, the mother having run away, in a tender story called "An Alcoholic's Guide to Peru and Chile." The father, in physical decline and out of money, insists on taking his two girls, the oldest about to leave home for college, on one last adventure together into South America. The poignancy of this shabby and confused ex-lumberjack of the Northwest trying unsuccessfully to stay sober and reconnect with his somewhat jaded daughters is thick. And yet Bass handles his characters so fondly that we really do connect with the rather pathetic father. One feels the author's deep care and even love for these deeply flawed souls.

Another new story, "How She Remembers It," recounts the memory of a daughter's trip to Yellowstone with her father. Bass stunningly evokes the compassionate graces of a young girl's first exposures both to the majestic landscapes of Montana and Wyoming and to the broken-down relics of humanity that they pass along the way. The narrative combines the natural beauty of a Norman Maclean story with the

dilapidated passions and grimly humorous darkness that readers confront in the southern gothic musings of Flannery O'Connor.

What Bass manages to pull off here is a kind of magic: How can we care about the grotesque old woman in the broken-down red Cadillac, feeding her voracious Chihuahua a cheap ice cream cone? And yet we do, as the sad father first passes this tattered woman's smoking car, then circles around to offer her some assistance. All of this is recalled, many years later, by the now adult daughter, with wonder and even awe. More generally, the author asks: How do we turn these odd, insistent memories of our childhoods into the warm and nostalgic legends they become?

The way Bass conveys love for his ramshackle characters reminds me of Sherwood Anderson's solemnly beautiful *Winesburg, Ohio*. Perhaps this is the secret to how masters of the short form bring it all together: the artist must love his creations and creatures, inviting the reader to do the same.