

THE MANY COLORS OF ELLYN BACHE

By Ben Steelman StarNews Staff

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Three decades ago, [Ellyn Bache](#) was a busy mother of four, churning out dozens of short stories for women's magazines such as **McCall's**, **Good Housekeeping**, **Woman's World** and **Seventeen**.

Back then, before the internet grew up, these magazines were thick with ads, and every issue included at least one or two fiction pieces, some of them very, very good.

Bache, of course, moved on to novels, most notably her 1988 debut ["Safe Passage."](#) which was made into a movie with Susan Sarandon and Sam Shepard. She retained an affection for the short form. Her 1993 collection, "The Value of Kindness," won the Willa Cather Fiction Prize, and she's been short-listed for the Nelson Algren Award.

So, she recently looked back in her files and retrieved 20 short stories, originally published between 1981 and 2003.

And the results are surprisingly good.

"Kaleidoscope" will cure some readers of their stereotypes about "women's magazines." The stories here seldom turn dark, but they almost never sink into mere formula.

As Bache argues in her introduction, they also turn out to be surprisingly contemporary. No one in these stories is staring at her iPhone. (These lead characters are almost exclusively women.) Her characters are starting relationships with men outside traditional marriage, most have careers. One is a chemical engineer. They wrestle with issues like body image and men's dogged refusal to take an equal share of child-care duties. These issues never get old.

Bache wrote for the women who read these magazines. (And, to be fair, not all of these stories come from women's magazines. Some were published in regional magazines; one, the brilliant "Pho," appeared in the Chicago Tribune. The title story actually first appeared in Wilmington's Encore.) Her characters are mostly middle class women. They're often tired, either drained by pregnancy or exhausted from getting up three times a night to tend a baby.

The heroine of "Where Tenderness Begins" is coping with a bad case of "baby blues" and is having problems getting attached to her newborn -- until a crisis rallies her to action. Betsy in "The Pregnancy" is a teenager with a callous boyfriend, who's mortified when her mother gets pregnant. "Miscarriage" takes readers into the dark place of losing a child. By contrast, "Raspberry Sherbet," about a young girl with synesthesia -- she "sees" music as colors -- reads

like Lee Smith in a lighter mood. (This one reads like an early draft for her 2007 romantic comedy “Raspberry Sherbet Kisses.”)

A few of the stories have Wilmington settings. “Waiting in the Wings” harks back to the days when the film industry was in flower and “Dawson’s Creek” was being shot here; a high school girl lands an extra job on a teen comedy filming here -- and even gets a line! (This particular story shows Bache’s subtlety; the story is really about a newlywed, who’s never lived outside the South, who suffers buyer’s remorse when she has to spend her first winter in the North with her in-laws; the whole crisis, however, is viewed through the eyes of her little sister, who really has no idea what’s going on.)

“Cutting Weight” draws on Bache’s intimate knowledge of high school wrestling. (Her late husband, Terry, was a longtime volunteer coach at New Hanover High School.) A young wrestler is starving himself to make his weight limit and suffering fatigue and anemia as a result. His sufferings echo the pain the rest of the family is feeling (the father has moved out, apparently for good), and how he copes mirrors how the rest of the family copes and endures.

“Kaleidoscope” illustrates a modern paradox. This should be a golden age for the short story; people are “too busy” to read and have too many distractions, so the short form should be ideal. These days, however, there are fewer and fewer outlets printing them. Bache’s collection shows us why attention should still be paid.

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