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Kaleidoscope: 20 Stories Celebrating Women's Magazine Fiction

By Ellyn Bache

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When I was little (and wanted to be a writer), the only person I knew who was a “real” writer was Ben Bache’s mother, Ellyn Bache. My dad wrote books but always described them to me as “dry adult books for the reference library market. You wouldn’t enjoy them, Kitty.”

But Ellyn Bache wrote novels, and local bookstores had them on display up front. And then one of her novels, “Safe Passage,” was made into a film starring Susan Sarandon and Sam Shepard!

Whenever Ellyn and I were in the same room I was completely unable to function in her presence. My mother—who never knew me to be quiet, shy or retiring, let alone speechless in any situation—couldn’t understand it. But Ellyn Bache wrote stories that got published in the newspaper and magazines! She was Ben’s mom! This couldn’t be real. But it was.

Eventually, I got over my intimidation and read Bache’s novels. Whenever her pieces appeared in the Star News or Raleigh News & Observer, I read and reread them to search for clues as to how to get work published in the papers. If anyone asks Bache, she is quick to say she wrote commercial fiction, and her short work was crafted with the market of women’s magazine in the 1980s and early ‘90s in mind.

Recently, at the behest of her fans, Bache revisited her short work from that era and decided to release an anthology called “Kaleidoscope.” In the interest of full disclosure, we should probably mention the title story appeared in *encore* in 1991. Other outlets that ran stories selected for “Kaleidoscope” include *McCall’s*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Virginia Country Life*, *Seventeen*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Woman’s World*, and *The News & Observer*.

In spite of her novels’ success, I really think Bache’s gift is short fiction. Much like Edith Wharton—who found fame through her novels, but whose short stories are devastating for their power—Bache can aim the arrow and fire right at readers’ hearts.

The pieces in this collection tend to fall into two categories: struggling with love or struggling with family. “Running from Love” approaches both through the lens of a young woman trying to sort out her engagement to a romantic man half a world away or her attachment to a family right here. To Bache’s credit, she handles the push and pull of the family and each romance as a decision the female protagonist has to make for her own happiness. What does she really want? What is she expected to want? In a very short space, Bache manages to move the reader from what seems safe to what is terrifyingly desirable.

An anthology really should demonstrate a writer's range of ability and "Kaleidoscope" explores a variety of forms. The old-fashioned ghost story makes an appearance with "The Babysitter," which is about a new mother who finds herself jealous of the baby's relationship with a ghost. "A Kiss in the Wild" takes a turn at the "boy meets girl, boy loses girl" motif. A little magical realism comes into play with "Raspberry Sherbet," a look at the struggles of those blessed (or cursed) with extraordinary sensitivities, and who have to make their way in a world populated by people who don't share their visions.

"Pho," originally published in the Chicago Tribune, follows 25 years of life with an immigrant family from Vietnam as they make their way in their adopted county and bring up the next generation. Viewed through the lens of one of their sponsors, it looks at more than two decades of life for refugees finding their way in the changing landscape of America. I think looking at the family with the narrative voice of an American woman, rather than creating the voice of a refugee, was a powerful choice for Bache to make. Because what we (the audience) see instead is the real frustrations of trying to help people who have different ideas of what help they want.

"Kaleidoscope" as a collection of short stories seems to give the reader permission to try this human family experience from different angles. We do not all approach problems, life, family, or love the same way. But that doesn't mean we are wrong because we go about it from different perspectives. The age of these stories reminds that, though the trappings of the outside world change, fundamental things—like loving people, caring for yourself in a confusing world, and trying to find a path forward when you have lost too much to even know where to set your foot—don't change. Bache brings that concern to each piece with a deft hand.

Gwenyfar Rohler

<http://www.encorepub.com/carpe-librum-local-writer-ellyn-baches-kaleidoscope-anthology-shows-range-and-outreach/>