Neglected fiction: Revisiting treasure islands of the mind

By Bruce Allen Special for USA TODAY

Cormac McCarthy's universally praised novel of initiation, All the Pretty Horses, dominated the American fiction scene in 1992, as did major retrospectives of such important short-story writers as Thomas Williams and John Edgar Wideman. Socially conscious and technically accomplished first novels from Dorothy Allison, Darryl Pinckney and Susan Straight, and memorable work from such increasingly respected figures as William Kennedy, Richard Price, Susan Sontag and Robert Stone, also characterized the year. Other 1992 books, unreviewed in these pages and equally deserving

where Do You Stop? by Eric Kraft (Crown, \$15). The newest installment in Kraft's endearing "Peter Leroy" series returns us to the fictional clamming empire of Babbington, Long Island, for a hilarious reminiscence of Peter's preadolescent years, his awakening to sexual feelings and other inchoate confusions, and his struggles over the years with the memory of an unfinished science project. This unpretentious, plainspoken tale offers a detailed picture of middle-class American domestic life and a funny perspective on the process of growing up absurd in the 1950s.

Carmichael's Dog, by R.M. Koster (Norton, \$21.95). The author of the underappreciated "Tinieblas trilogy," a Nabokovian comic epic portrayal of a Latin American dictatorship, returns with an arguably even more remarkable invention. This is



ERIC KRAFT: 'Where Do You Stop?' continues the tale of Peter Leroy.

the story of conflict between a successful novelist (Carmichael) and the demons who literally possess him and redirect his energies — that is, until their host threatens to undo their bad works by developing a genuinely selfless love for the title creature. One of the year's funniest and most accomplished fictions.

Other notable novels:

Love's Mansion, by Paul West (Random House, \$22). A loving celebration of the lives of the author's parents and of English village life in the 20th century, written in extravagantly lyrical and seductive prose.

The Venerable Bead, by Richard Condon (St. Martin's, \$21.95). The deliriously convoluted history of an Iragi-American businesswoman and her nefarious connections with



PAUL WEST: Crafts an ode to his parents' past in 'Love's Mansion.'

Hollywood and the international espionage circuit may be less coherent than its invaluable author's deservedly classic fantasies, but it's such a hoot that nobody will care.

Tar Beach, by Richard Elman (Sun & Moon; paper, \$12.95). A portrait of a Brooklyn Jewish neighborhood in 1947, accomplished mainly through bracingly feisty conversations, becomes a song in praise of the survival instinct and the sustaining power of an embracing culture.

Two splendid first novels:

Cold Times, by Elizabeth Jordan Moore (Summit, \$22). A harshly realistic chronicle of the effects of poverty and domestic violence on two families in rural Maine, tightly plotted and powerful.

The Long Night of White Chick-



BEBE MOORE CAMPBELL: Murder propels 'Your Blues Ain't Like Mine.

ens, by Francisco Goldman (Atlantic Monthly, \$21.95). The story of a Guatemalan-American's search for the truth about a possibly political murder fashions a surfeit of intelligent detail about its protagonist's two countries into a fascinating study of cultural contrasts and tensions.

Memorable fiction from black writers includes:

Your Blues Ain't Like Mine, by Bebe Moore Campbell (Putnam, \$22.95). A moving first novel, based on the Emmett Till case, and its lingering effects on the families and communities of victim and killer.

Let the Dead Bury Their Dead, by Randall Kenan (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, \$19.95). Twelve related stories about an insular North Carolina town whose inhabitants wrestle



DEBORAH EISENBERG: Author of 'Under the 82nd Airborne'

with quotidian dilemmas, and also with the supernatural. Occasionally overwritten, but consistently invigorating and engrossing.

Lost in the City, by Edward P. Jones (Morrow, \$19). This powerful collection of realistic stories, set in Washington, D.C., and detailing a generous spectrum of black innercity experience, reaches far beyond stereotypes to illuminate the rich inner lives of outwardly deprived and threatened people.

Three other fine story collections: A Parallel Life, by Robin Beeman (Chronicle; paper, \$8.95). In nine vivid stories and the title novella (a thrillingly complete and convincing portrayal of an adulterous librarian's outer and inner lives), Beeman feelingly depicts the crises of women

caught between their new-found freedom and their vulnerability to traditional expectations and emo

Eccentric Circles, by Larry Du berstein (Permanent Press, \$21.95) A first collection from an underrated novelist whose wryly affectionate studies of urban Jewish males com bine comic exaggeration with metic ulous comprehension of character His stories' varied settings and bi zarre premises ("The Second Crazi est Person in Casper, Wyoming" provide a bubbling surface beneath which we make out the shapes o workaday loners, lovers, husband and fathers stubbornly making do.

Under the 82nd Airborne, by Deborah Eisenberg (Farrar, Strau & Giroux, \$20). Seven intricately con structed, novella-like stories ("Holy Week" and "The Robbery" are ex emplary) in which introspective troubled people are seen to grow and change, expressed with quite re markable precision, wit and phrase

making mastery.

Finally, there's Last Call, by Tim Powers (Morrow, \$23). An ac claimed fantasy writer's dizzying stimulating magnum opus: a mod ernist version of the Arthurian ro mance in which murder replaces chivalric derring-do, a gambling neu rotic emulates Sir Galahad, and gangster Bugsy Siegel emerges as a mysterious simulacrum of the Fisher King. A mystery in several senses Last Call is 1992's most challenging novel and one we'll be puzzling over well into the next century.

Bruce Allen writes frequently about contemporary fiction.

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