

BOOKS

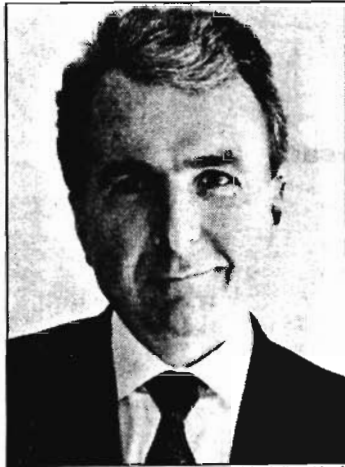
Neglected fiction: Revisiting treasure islands of the mind

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 of your attention, include:

* **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 pre-adolescent 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



By Madeline Kraft

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 extravagant lyrical and seductive prose.

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



By Marion Etlinger

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-



By Gene Golden

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



By Diana Wlchener

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 inner-city 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 emotions.

Eccentric Circles, by Larry Duberstein (Permanent Press, \$21.95). A first collection from an underrated novelist whose wryly affectionate studies of urban Jewish males combine comic exaggeration with meticulous comprehension of character. His stories' varied settings and bizarre premises ("The Second Craziest Person in Casper, Wyoming") provide a bubbling surface beneath which we make out the shapes of workaday loners, lovers, husbands and fathers stubbornly making do.

Under the 82nd Airborne, by Deborah Eisenberg (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$20). Seven intricately constructed, novella-like stories ("Holy Week" and "The Robbery" are exemplary) in which introspective troubled people are seen to grow and change, expressed with quite remarkable precision, wit and phrase-making mastery.

Finally, there's **Last Call**, by Tim Powers (Morrow, \$23). An acclaimed fantasy writer's dizzying stimulating magnum opus: a modernist version of the Arthurian romance in which murder replaces chivalric derring-do, a gambling neurotic emulates Sir Galahad, and gangster Buggy 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.