

Bruce Ducker

Write to the top

Colorado's master of literary fiction
satirizes 'all of life's sacred cows—

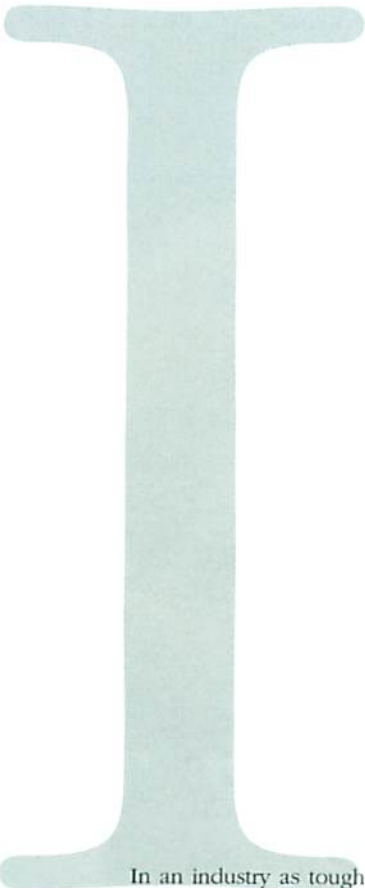
God, death,
sex, money,

in a delicious novel that
skewers Aspen's caste system

but appreciates the
true diversity
of the town.

Last spring, Denverites packed the downtown Tattered Cover Bookstore to capacity at the launch of Bruce Ducker's new book, greedy to indulge in the biting wit and insightful commentary he is known for. It's not often that a writer publishes two books in one year, but Denver-based author Bruce Ducker managed to release his recent satire, *Dizzying Heights—The Aspen Novel* (Fulcrum Publishing, May 2008) and a new collection of riveting short pieces entitled *Home Pool—Stories of Fly Fishing and Lesser Passions* (Stackpole Press, September 2008) in a single year.

by Corinne Joy Brown



In an industry as tough as the literary fiction market, that's probably some kind of record. But Ducker, a seasoned pro with nine titles to his fame, deserves the success. "In life one must always be ready with an elevator speech," he quips. "The kind of thing you need if you're stuck in an elevator with a stranger." For anyone who knows him, this would be some oratory. For those who are unfamiliar with his work, imagine a masterful storyteller with a unique and sophisticated voice, capable of weaving characters that readers care about.

Ducker's stories are laced with humor, pathos and a kind of worldly charm. His novels are often richly layered and meant to be savored, word by word. To his credit, he's won a Colorado Book Award for *Lead Us Not Into Penn Station* (1995), was a finalist for *Mooney In Flight* (2003) and was nominated for the American Library Award and a Colorado Pulitzer Prize, an honor earned by the novel, *Marital Assets* (1994).

"*Dizzying Heights* is filled with sharp cuts and short scenes," he explains. Its narcissistic and self-absorbed characters are justified by the fact that we live in a society where, in his words, "Hypocrisy is a beatitude." Ergo, the zany cast is a reflection of the worst of ourselves, like a sideshow wavy mirror, using comic distortion for effect.

A writing retreat

A corporate lawyer by profession and a writer by choice, Ducker is a New York-born transplant who's called Colorado home for the last 40 years. He's been writing novels since 1975 and his poems and short stories often appear in the nation's leading literary journals including *Poetry* and the *Yale, Hudson and Southern* reviews.

Although he lives in Denver, Ducker and his wife Jaren retreat as often as they can to the Aspen valley where he seeks the necessary quiet to focus and write. "I try to write when I get away," confirms Ducker, referring to their house in a secluded glen far from town. "I like the mornings best. I actually have a writing room there and don't take calls."

Aspen from the inside

Ducker knows Aspen well, long before it became a celebrity-filled Hollywood haven. In the novel *Dizzying Heights*, a delicious tale about a real estate scam, greed, the search for identity and finding true love (not necessarily in that order), he writes with the certitude of an insider and the brio of a survivor who's managed to stay clear of the pack. "America has a caste system," says Ducker, with a knowing smile. "It's all about money. In Aspen, a Jaguar drives up and a Bentley gets out."

Lofty Aspen addresses and exclusive restaurants seem to separate the well-to-do from the general population with a wide swath. Its gated mountain communities and resort clubs effec-

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tively shut out those who can't afford to be there, with no apologies. Yet, in the brilliant summer sun or sparkling snow of winter, everyone, rich and poor alike, suntanned and smiling, seems to get along.

Peek at a scene in the novel: "It was one week to Christmas. The birth of the prophet of the meek and powerless was nowhere celebrated with greater zest than Aspen. Jewelers placed their wares in glistening windows, each bracelet, each

bijou freshly dipped in thiourea bath and lit by halogen bulb. Haberdashers set garlands and greens amidst their suede, crocodile, and snakeskin, their silks and pashminas. Family by family, the absentee owners returned. Entire households disembarked from Gulfstream and Lear, in a protocol reminiscent of the Roman senate..."

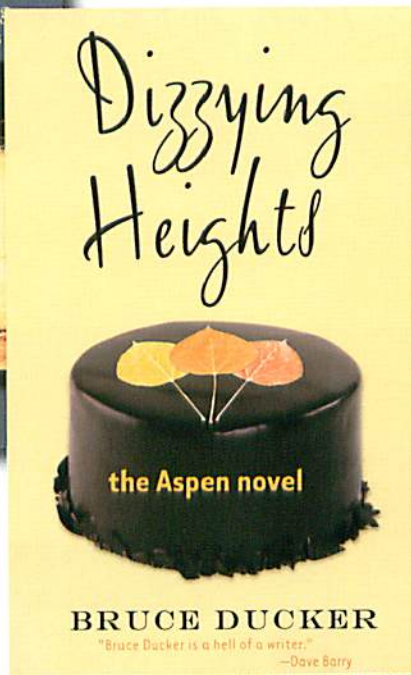
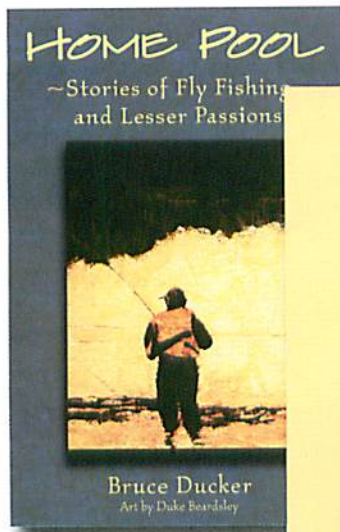
Through Ducker's wide lens, artists, rock stars, fashion designers, land developers, attorneys and real estate moguls are all at his mercy, as well as local hotel maids, waitstaff, environmental protection groups and even the state patrol. Tongue in cheek, Ducker engages a cast of 27 odd characters, some inspired by actual celebrities, in a plot to corrupt a pristine wilderness area with an exclusive real estate deal. The plot twist includes the creation and marketing of a fantasy software program, an unexpected love story and the need to protect a feigned Indian burial place. Pure Hollywood and great fodder for film.

The novel's protagonist, Woodrow (Waddy) Brush, lands in Aspen due to a travel error, a lonely man in search of his destiny, who finally gets the girl. Memorable secondary characters include a homeless intellectual who lives in a cardboard box under the lights of the airport runway, an avant-garde sculptor who carves women's busts on mountain faces and a wealthy socialite who hosts philanthropic parties in Starwood, to name a few. Somehow, the portrayals are eerily familiar. The reader just has to keep up.

"I like to think I've created squalid realism combined with manipulated realism," says the author. "The themes of the satire are all of life's sacred cows—God, death, sex, money." Ducker captures the varied landscape as well, his mountains, sky and tumbling waters drawn with a poet's pen. But beneath the glamorous setting and the fast-moving spoof is a larger, compelling story about vanity, values and saving the earth. Classic Ducker—rich topsoil covering buried treasure.

A rich personal life

Writing apparently sustains the author as much as any of his other passions. Among them are flying, playing jazz piano and, of course, fly-fishing, a sport he's avid about. His list of fishing



destinations ranges from Yellowstone to the headwaters of the Amazon. Fortunately for the reader, his literary pursuits let us into his cultured personal world, a place made richer by his love of philosophy and a keen understanding of human relationships.

The novels *Bloodlines* and *Failure at the Mission Trust*, two more entries in the Ducker canon, complete a body of work that deals head on with universal dilemmas—the temptations of

midlife, the weight of guilt and blame, angst between fathers and sons. A compassionate humanist with a sense of humor as dry as a martini (Blue Sapphire gin, I'm sure), he often creates intriguing protagonists who are imperfect but never fail to evoke our deepest respect.

Style meets substance

In *Home Pool*, his latest release, Ducker introduces some of the most memorable situations and characters ever to embrace a rod and reel. (The book is actually a series of fishing-related stories previously published in elite sporting journals.) As in many of his other works, his characters are often searching for something, or are in need. And as always, his elegant mastery of language and mood enhance his flair for storytelling. Ducker's crisp literary style equals content every time, a reward for the serious reader. Make no assumption—one hardly needs to be a fisherman to enjoy the stories. With the author's help, you're a lot closer to the core of the experience by the collection's end.

When asked where his ideas come from, Ducker replies, "The triggers for my books are all different. Basically, I want to reach people, entertain. I want my readers to have the enthusiasm at the end that I had at the beginning. For my characters, I like to take what I observe and rework, mining the past." And when asked what's next, he replies, "Many of my friends think a lot about the future—its impact and opportunity. To me, the real poetry in life is not knowing." 