

Review: *Gryphon* by Charles Baxter

**'Gryphon: New and Selected Stories' finds magic in everyday life**

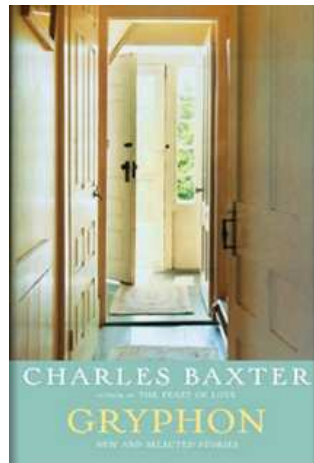
By JOSEPH PESCHEL

Special to The Star

Maybe best known for his novel "The Feast of Love," Charles Baxter is not only a brilliant novelist — you must read his beautiful and eerie "Saul and Patsy" and the psychological gem "The Soul Thief" — but also an accomplished critic, teacher and essayist. As a short story writer, he's as precise and insightful as anyone working in the form today.

A Baxter story always surprises with its metaphysics. Typically Midwestern, Baxter's characters appear to be living ordinary, even mundane lives when suddenly the supernatural or near-supernatural, sometimes the beautifully strange, rears its magical head. Not really magical realism, it's more like correlative subtext that has replaced T.S. Eliot's objectivity with a metaphysical

phenomenon — the magical correlative.



The 23 stories in "Gryphon: New and Selected Stories" include seven previously uncollected pieces and a sampling of Baxter's best from four earlier collections: "Harmony of the World" (1984), "Through the Safety Net" (1985), "A Relative Stranger" (1990) and "Believers" (1997).

Baxter tells stories of the passions, loves and lives of his characters. They often venture off to a mild sort of madness, like the substitute teacher, neurotic Miss Ferenczi, of the title story. She introduces her

grade school students to mythological monsters and tarot cards as she tries to feed the children's imaginations, excepting one student, with hope for the future.

In "Kiss Away" (an O. Henry Award winner), two unemployed young people try to find jobs and love. Her tarot cards and a bizarre homeless man — he claims he's a genie — drive this mystery of love and danger, possibility and fate.

"Harmony of the World" follows two failed musicians — he's a failure as a pianist, she as a singer. They begin a doomed romance. He knows his limitations: He's technically perfect but lacks passion. She has plenty of passion but lacks skill.

Many of those older stories are well-known from award anthologies. Some of the new stories, such as "The Cousins," "Poor Devil" and "Ghosts," have appeared or are noted as

“Distinguished Stories” in recent “Best American” collections.

In “The Cousins,” Benjamin, in a “posture of perpetual contrition,” tries to make sense of his life after attending the funeral of his cousin Brantford, who may have died by accident or by suicide. “Poor Devil” tells the history of a recently divorced couple as they scour their old home so that the ghosts of their fights do not carry over to the new owners. In “Ghosts,” Edward Augenblick seems more apparition than real when he appears in the wink of a moment in Melinda’s father’s house. His claim

that he once lived there proves false; he has visited the house for love of Melinda.



In “The Old Murderer,” Ellickson, an alcoholic who regrets hitting his child, finds some solace in befriending the bad-tempered old neighbor who years ago murdered his wife. Out of prison, the old man goes places

in the spaceship he has built in his mind.

Baxter’s stories summon up a haunting beauty; his is a way of illustrating the mystical connections in life. I wish Baxter had written a foreword that explained the genesis of these stories and his reasons for choosing them for this collection.

But this is a marvelous book. It brings a certain unexplained splendor, as the narrator in “The Cousins” says, to “the rewards of plain everyday life.”

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**Gryphon: New and Selected Stories**, by Charles Baxter (Pantheon; 416 pages; \$27.95)

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