

tionale for what exactly is going on. Zivkovic does a superb job of communicating the befuddlement, confusion and awe of individual characters as they wrestle with mysteries that exceed the understanding that their time, place and intellectual capacity permits. He also suggests a coherent cosmic blueprint that incorporates the novel's many episodes yet still remains intriguingly beyond full comprehension. Not all the mysteries are laid bare at the novel's somewhat abrupt end, but readers will enjoy the tale's epistemological gymnastics and the interplay of real and imaginary personalities. (Mar.)

**Forecast:** *The Ministry of Whimsy* imprint is known for its offbeat, experimental, genre-exploding work. Fans of books by Jeff VanderMeer and Forrest Aguirre will find this one up to the same high literary standard.

## Mass Market

### MOON IN THE WATER

ELIZABETH GRAYSON. Bantam, \$6.50 (480p) ISBN 0-553-58424-3

Set in Mississippi during the turbulent mid-19th century, this compelling romance from Grayson (*Color of the Wind*, etc.) offers a charismatic hero who will easily beguile readers. A for-hire riverboat pilot of humble origins, Chase Hardesty has long dreamt of owning his own boat, so when his boss, James Rossiter, offers him a deal—the Star Line's new stern-wheeler if he marries Rossiter's pregnant stepdaughter Ann, whom Chase has never seen—Chase finds that he can't refuse. For her part, Ann only wants to be free of her brutal stepfather and stepbrother. Assuming Ann will stay with Rossiter while Chase makes a riverboat run up to the wilds of Fort Benton, he is startled to find that his willful bride has stowed away on the boat and locked herself in his cabin. Circumstances enable Ann to gradually trust and admire Chase and even develop a rapport with his crew, but Ann carries a secret that may destroy their fledgling marriage. Grayson's absorbing plot races nimbly along a fast current. The sandbars and snags are as realistic as the people who confront them, and her details about river running would make Mark Twain proud. When the dramatic denouement finally occurs, readers will feel as if Ann and Chase are personal friends. (Apr.)

### ENGLAND'S PERFECT HERO

SUZANNE ENOCH. Avon, \$5.99 (384p) ISBN 0-06-054313-2

Although the popularity of the historical romance may be waning, writers like Enoch give readers plenty of reasons to return to the genre. With Enoch's latest (after *London's Perfect Scoundrel*), which ties up her *Lessons in Love* series, she delves beneath the super-

ficialities of glittering balls and perfectly tied cravats to focus on the wounds borne by Robert Carroway, a supposed hero of Waterloo but in reality a former prisoner of war who can barely steel himself to converse with his family, much less waltz with debutantes. But a chance encounter with Lucinda Barrett, easy conversationalist as well as regular waltzer, leads him to hope that he could have a normal life. Lucinda, who has her sights set on a duke's fourth son, is surprised when Robert offers to help her gain him, and even more surprised when her encounters with Robert grow more important than the success of her campaign. But her beloved father's dismissal of Robert as "damaged goods," followed by implications that Robert may be a traitor, could stunt his recovery as well as their relationship—unless Lucinda listens to her heart and trusts him. Lucinda's refusal to treat Robert as less than a whole man and Robert's sharp sense of humor give this charming tale depth, and Enoch balances it well with a hearty dose of screwball fun. (Mar.)

**Forecast:** *Enoch's collaboration with Julia Quinn on the bestselling The Further Observations of Lady Whistledown* (Feb. 2003) has given her some much needed exposure. As a result, this book should easily outsell her previous *Lessons in Love* title.

### OUT OF THE BLUE

JOANN ROSS. Pocket, \$6.99 (384p) ISBN 0-7434-6474-5

Ross's latest, the second in a trilogy begun with the far stronger *Out of the Mist*, follows famous country singer Lark Stewart through perils worthy of the silent screen's Pauline. They begin when Lark's longtime bandmate Danny Murphy is shot in New Orleans. Briefly suspected of the crime, Lark is then released, but not before a sadist who has stalked her escapes from jail. Her family sends her girlhood sweetheart, Lucas McCloud, to protect her. A onetime sniper and FBI agent turned furniture maker, Lucas's lifelong love for Lark—derailed first by teenage folly and later by his dangerous work—has never died. Though their return to their birthplace in the Smokies re-ignites their romance, Lark remains under threat from the stalker, a scheming ex-husband and Danny's still-unidentified attacker. In place of the colorful history and family humor found in Ross's previous installment, this book offers a jumble of overcomplicated backstory, inconsequential characters and melodramatic plot twists, including a temporary and unlikely bout of amnesia and a plane crash. Crowded with contrivance, the story never finds either its rhythm or its heart; to the end, Lark and Lucas remain puppets of the frantic plot rather than compelling characters in and of themselves. (Mar.)

### HOT NIGHTS IN BALLYMUIR

DORIEN KELLY. Pocket, \$6.99 (384p) ISBN 0-7434-6459-1

Set in the sleepy Irish village of Ballymuir, where glamour is scarce but gossip spreads faster than the Irish mist, Kelly's second contemporary romance (after *The Last Bride in Ballymuir*) focuses on chef Jenna Fahey, who has fled her high-powered American family to run a gourmet restaurant in Muir House, a dilapidated local mansion she holds under tenuous lease. When Devlin Gilvane arrives to scout the property for his multinational resort chain, she stands to lose both her home and her heart. Though born in Ballymuir, Dev is now a London bachelor with freewheeling ways and fast-track goals—all of which lose their appeal as he begins to appreciate the subtle charms of both Jenna and his birthplace. The surprise arrivals of Dev's widowed mother and Jenna's fashionista sister yield additional romantic intrigue, with a local artist-cum-witch providing the requisite touch of folklore. Kelly's straightforward story adds little to the Irish romance niche mapped out by Nora Roberts (among others), but it's warmly appealing thanks to its assured prose and deft characterizations. Dev is especially winning as a charming but conflicted romantic hero, while the quirky folks who populate Ballymuir create a funny, affectionately drawn world to which readers will eagerly return. (Mar.)

### DEEP CURRENT

BENJAMIN E. MILLER. Onyx, \$7.50 (368p) ISBN 0-451-41129-3

Miller's second novel (after *Zero Hour*) starts with a fascinating premise—in Antarctic waters, a giant iceberg has been detected, moving against the stream and heading straight for Hawaii. Marines and biologists are dispatched to land on the leviathan, where they discover a young boy and his infant sister, the only survivors of a shipwreck. The boy talks nervously of the ghosts on the floe, and soon after, members of the landing party begin to meet with gruesome ends provided by mollusk-like creatures called cepheids, byproducts of evolution taking a nasty turn. At this point, the story switches from military procedural to horror story, with members of the landing crew dispatched one by one and the survivors pulling together for a final showdown with the enemy; think *Night of the Living Dead* on an iceberg. Miller is not afraid to pile on the gore ("His viscera spilled onto the floor in a steaming heap"), which gets tiresome before long. The characters are thin and there are unresolved issues at story's end, but the story works on a gut level, thanks to a chilling monster and brisk pacing, even if it doesn't live up to the potential of its imaginative and promising setup. (Mar.)