expedition turns into a media circus and leads to murder. Among the bad guys who attempt to hamper operations are some of the henchmen of Dr. Rutherford Straight, a brilliant, wealthy scientist suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a disease he believes can be healed by the “treatment.” Straight holds hostage Dr. Henri’s wife, Claire, and her 24-year-old savant son, Joseph, whose unusual gifts add intrigue to the story. Their plight poses more ethical questions for Sachs. Although there are some fine moments of suspense, the pacing tends to drag, and the flashback information might have better been used chronologically. The dialogue is too suffused with clever, sarcastic banter, and a shoot-out scene at the end is a stretch. However, with biblical archeology making the news recently, this latest from Ginsky will appeal to some readers of faith. (Jan.)

47TH STREET BLACK
Chicago’s virulent South Side is home to a pair of troubled young black men in the ‘60s who quit school and join the mob in Ojikutu’s gritty, robust debut. Though he is an outstanding athlete in high school, Morris “Mookie” King decides to drop out and hit the streets, along with best friend J.C. Rose. In an alley, they discover the decomposing corpse of murdered local thug “Johnny the Baptist,” lift his gold jewelry and attempt to sell it in gangster Tommy Ricci’s pawnshop. Seduced by Ricci’s money and power, Mookie and J.C. sign up for a mob-style education, and soon they are assisting boss man Salvie in small “debt recovery” assignments. In alternating sections rife with hardcore slang, Mookie and J.C. recount their graduation to more serious tasks (including managing a refurbished nightclub operation). In no time, they are overseeing the entire South Side’s mob activities. Money and power eventually drive the boys apart, and their differences become more evident. After they commit a sloppy murder, Mookie flees the scene and only J.C. is nabbed. Saddled with a lengthy jail sentence, J.C. has plenty of time to finish his GED and reconsider his lifelong friendship with Mookie. A tougher and wiser J.C. emerges from prison only to lock horns with Mookie, who is now primed to become a kingpin in the organization. Threats, bloodshed and murder are rife in this first novel, but Ojikutu keeps the mayhem tightly focused, offering up an accomplished and engaging story of gangster life on the South Side. Agent, Caroline Carney, Book Deals. (Jan.)

WATER OF AN UNDETERMINED DEPTH
Blue-collar men and women navigate the great outdoors and the tighter confines of personal relationships in this debut collection of 14 well-crafted stories. In “The Clubs,” a college student goes fishing with his father, a factory worker, and comes away with silent permission to follow his own path in life. “Side Job” offers another take on the demands of blue-collar life when a man takes a plumbing job against his better judgment rather than track down his family’s escaped canine. “A Girl, the Jungle, Monkeys,” a wryly humorous tale about a widower on a vacation in the tropics, takes an alarming turn when the protagonist is attacked by insects and stranded, delirious, in an out-of-the-way village. The title story is a brief gem about a father who worries obsessively about accidents, running through a list of gruesome news stories when his teenage daughter requests permission to go swimming at a local quarry and finally recalling the tragic end of one of his own childhood best friends. Chiappone’s succinct, almost abrupt narrative style cuts sharply to the chase, but his sparse prose never limits his ability to layer ideas and concepts. Not all of the stories are successful—occasionally the male blue-collar protagonists seem interchangeable, and some of the outdoor material is equally repetitive. But Chiappone’s ironic humor differentiates this collection, and his strong voice bodes well for subsequent efforts. (Jan.)

PATH OF THE ASSASSIN
If Thor’s second international thriller had any more testosterone, it would grow hair. This follow-up to The Lions of Lucerne is loaded with explosions, gunfights, car chases and hairbreadth escapes as Secret Service agent Scot Harvath battles religious extremists and incompetent CIA spooks to save the world from a cancer. The Hand of God, an apparent Israeli terrorist group, is blowing up mosques in Saudi Arabia, assassinating Arab leaders and hijacking airplanes, all in an effort to provoke the Arab world into war with Israel. Harvath tries to derail the terrorist plot and average the deaths of bystanders in the first book. Aided by Meg Cassidy, a beautiful Chicago public relations expert, Harvath chases the terrorist leader and a silver-eyed assassin from Hong Kong through Europe to North Africa. However, since Cassidy is the only one alive who has seen the face of the terrorist leader, the assassin chooses them, too, trying to kill Cassidy before she can point him out. The story is one bloody episode after another, with a touch of romance and colorful turf battles between the CIA, FBI, Delta Force and Harvath himself. Thor stacks the deck in favor of his hero—Harvath never makes a mistake, and his view of how counterterrorism operations should be conducted is invariably proven correct. To top it off, he boasts about his remarkable talents. With its infallible hero, fetching sidekick and wickedly noble bad guys, this international shoot ’em up sticks close to formula, but the well-orchestrated action and thrills will keep readers engrossed. Agent, Heidi Lange, Sanford J. Greenburger Associates. (Jan.)

COUNTRY OF COLD:
Stories of Sex and Death
This debut collection of 13 linked stories from the acclaimed author of the travel memoir The Water in Between tracks eccentric and
genuinely torn-up characters through barren, dramatic regions. The volume begins with the story of an obese maenad’s journey over a waterfall in a barrel (“Les Is More”) and ends with the account of a charged high school reunion in the same riverside town (“Manitoba Avenue”). Patterson is an avid and successful describer of place; the locales in this book, all fairly frigid, range from northern Canada to France. The everyday barbarism that often erupts in his landscapes rarely slackens, although it assumes radically different forms. In “Boat Building,” divorced Carol builds an ocean-going vessel and sets herself literally and psychologically adrift. In “Starlight, Starbright,” a man serving as a doctor in a remote Canadian military outpost suddenly finds himself thrust headlong into the middle of a firing exercise. There are strained, overambitious touches, as when Pat-erson ends numerous stories with “This was in [year].” This technique, although initially disarming, becomes almost maudlin with repetition. Also, the tone of the book is occasion-ally too wry for its themes, too self-con-sciously clever. Patterson is at his best when bringing out the natural poetry of the landscapes that fascinate him—at such moments he writes with the power of Russell Banks or Annie Proulx, with a gaze that both appreciates the beauty of the imagined scene and understands the socioeconomic complexities looming over it. (Jan. 21)

WHEN THE MESSENGER IS HOT

ELIZABETH CRANE. Little, Brown. $21.95 (224p) ISBN 0-316-09652-0

Crane creates a spirited cast of loopy, neut-ric and self-absorbed women, then puts them through their paces in this debut col-lection of 16 inventive but frequently one-di-men-sional stories. Dating is a primary con-cern, as in “The Archetype’s Girlfriend,” a tongue-in-cheek description of the common attributes and behaviors of gorgeous, over-the-top women who drive men crazy. “You Take Naps” is a similarly short but amusing checklist of romantic red flags drawn up by a 41-year-old woman who begins dating younger men, while “Normal,” the tale of a man who begins seeing a woman with a pen-chant for knives, takes the dating theme into (slightly) scarier terrain. The two most im-pressive stories in the collection, “Year-at-a-Glance” and “Return from the Depot!” delve into the issue of loss, imaginatively splicing grief and humor. In “Return from the Depot!” the protagonist insists that her recently deceased mother will be coming home soon. Her friends tell her she’s in de-nial, but then her mother really does re-turn—from a bus depot in North Dakota—and becomes a celebrity and the star of a TV sitcom. Crane’s machine-gun, first-person narration is entertaining in small doses, but its magazine-style pertness grows tiresome over the course of the collection. Similarly, Crane’s bratty, city born-and-bred protagon-ists—the kind of women whose first thought is “Susan Minot” when “MNT” is traced on a Ouija board—rarely break out of their wisecracking personas. Still, the tart wit and sharp comic timing of these urban fic-tions will appeal to readers who relish jokes involving both Friends and Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. (Jan.)

BABY MOMMA DRAMA

CARL WEBER. Kensington/Dafina. $24 (320p) ISBN 1-57566-908-0

Weber gets down and dirty with a couple of bed-hopping African-American couples in his latest, a raunchy, over-the-top roman-tic romp that reads like a cross between a soap opera and a Jerry Springer episode. The protagonists are a pair of sisters, Jasmine and Stephanie, who have enough man trouble between them to last most families several generations. Jasmine’s gig as a postal super-visor in Richmond, Va., gives her the edge in stability over her younger sister, Stephanie, but she happens to be dating Derrick, a drug dealer who is serving a jail term as the book opens. Stephanie, meanwhile, lands a better boyfriend when she hooks up with Travis, a stable, staid army sergeant who is willing to marry her and adopt her young daughter, Maleka. But Stephanie screws up the relationship when she slips into the sack with her ex, a seedy hustler and absentee father. Jasmine has similar problems when Derrick gets out of prison early, just as she meets Dylan, a po-tentially stellar new beau. The novel’s first half is reasonably solid, but drugs, sexual es-capes, venereal disease and loud, mel-o-dramatic confrontations dominate the pro-ceedings once the basic plot is outlined. The four primary characters are well drawn—though cartoonishly addicted to sex—but virtually every secondary character in the book is introduced for the purpose of bed-ding one of the major plays. Weber starts off with an entertaining setup, but the frenzied booty calls and out-of-control plotting spoil a potentially good read. (Jan.)

SNOW


Fermine meditates on poetry, love, and art in this elegant love story-cum-parable set in Japan in the late 19th century. Delicate, sen-sitive Yuko Akita informs her father that he wishes to become a poet so that he can “learn to watch the passing of time.” Despite his fa-ther’s skepticism, Akita is soon writing beau-tiful haiku based on his obsession with snow. Seeking to help advance the boy’s career, his father invites the imperial court poet to evalu-ate Yuko’s work; after acknowledging the boy’s talent, the poet tells Akita that he needs to study other art forms. Akita embarks on a journey to study with master artist Soseki; along the way he comes upon a strikingly beautiful European woman frozen into a massive chunk of ice. The elderly Soseki be-gins teaching Akita, and the narrative shifts to focus on the older artist, a former samurai who left the military after being wounded and mar-ried a beautiful French tightrope walker named Snow. The happy couple had a daughter, but after raising the girl Snow grew restless. She went back to tightrope walking, and died in an accident while performing. Fermine’s pristine prose shimmers in English translation, and the deceptively simple story flows smoothly. The final twist involving Akita and Snow’s daughter is predictable, but the ethereal prose and Fermine’s graceful delivery of bits of wisdom make this brief fiction a memorable read. (Jan.)

Forecast: This novel was a bestseller in France, and may cross over better than many imports, particularly if it gets a holiday boost.

ALONG CAME MARY


This follow-up to Mapson’s popular Bad Girl Creek introduces a new face to the spirited gang of hard-luck women running a California flower farm. Mary Madigan (“Maddy”) Carinigella is a rodeo performer who decides to leave her job (and her boozey singing partner and boyfriend) and travel across the country, taking part in karaoke competitions. In Oklahoma City, she hooks up with Rick Heinrich, a fiercely independ-ent middle-aged journalist. While the two are in New Mexico, they meet Beryl Anne, an ex—Bad Girl who’s now touring the coun-try with her guitarist beau. In various ways, Maddy and Rick’s lives become entwined with the lives of the women of Bad Girl Creek, and eventually they make their way to the farm itself, encountering some rough patches in their relationship along the way. The book is told in the voices of several char-acters, primarily Maddy, Rick, Beryl and Phoebe, the founder of the flower farm—who is now pregnant and facing a life-threatening delivery. Mapson gives updates on other Bad Girls as well: Ness is learning to live with HIV and Nance is fighting her anorexia, even as she plans a wedding to Phoebe’s brother, James, and pines for her old love. Maddy is an appealingly saucy protagonist, though her voice gradually loses its distinctiveness and blends with that of the other narrators (who tend to sound alike) as the book wears on. The story is as sentimental as its precursor, but those who enjoyed the female bonding and entrepreneurial antics of the Bad Girls will be pleased with this chat-ty sequel. Literary Guild and Doubleday Book Club alternate. (Jan.)