

Blessed are the shelf stackers

SHELF LIFE

BY SIMON PARKE

(Rider £7.99)

AT THE age of 50 and having been an Anglican vicar for 20 years, Simon Parke left the Church and started a new career — stacking shelves in his local supermarket.

Why this swapping of aisles? Because Simon Parke had quickly discovered what the job prospects are these days for a middle-aged former vicar.

Turned down by London Transport, rejected even by fast-food outlets, universally suspected as a paedophile, he ended up in his local branch of an unnamed retail giant, sorting out the tenderstem broccoli and mopping up the latest yoghurt spillage.

Some might be downhearted by such an abrupt, dramatic and not-altogether-glamorous-and-roaringly-successful change in career. But the former Reverend Parke chooses to delight in all the

wonders and everyday miracles of his new profession — the fruit displays, the smell from the bakery, the tranquillity of the eggs section — and especially in his new co-workers.

So instead of his faith, he finds Faith — ‘Nigerian, Christian and lippy’ — and Sapphy with her glottal stops, and Bryn the deputy manager, ‘all gel, spiky hair and white socks’.

Everyone is given a very vicarly, warm and sympathetic portrayal, even Bryn after he is sacked for apparently stealing several thousand pounds. Such is Parke’s generosity of spirit that he even tries to be fair and understanding to Rosemary — the ‘tiny, glam but rather poisonous Jehovah’s Witness from Ghana’, whose specialities are making children cry and infuriating her colleagues.

Highlights include an excellent comic set-piece starring the dullest induction course in the world, and

Rosemary’s attempted conversion/seduction of the author. But Parke has no need for dramatic events, finding his best comic material and insights in the everyday mini-dramas at the store: the latest feud at the check-out or flirtation in the warehouse.

There are also several items of variously disturbing inside info. About, for instance, how milk — which we all buy — is kept furthest from the door, or how a Price Watch sticker means precisely zilch, or about the covert competition among check-out staff to get the good-looking customers in their queue.

Simon Parke is an endearing and funny writer blessed with wit, warmth and wisdom — and, as this book proves, an enviable ability to live in the moment. Even if that moment is spent rearranging the apples or sticking a meaningless Price Watch sticker on a cheese feast pizza.

HARRY RITCHIE



Former vicar: Parke