

R E V I E W

Rita Mae and "Burnton Widows"

Sudden Death, by Rita Mae Brown.
Bantam PB, \$3.95.

by Karen Jesser

Readers who enjoyed Rita Mae Brown's previous works of fiction may be mildly disappointed by her latest venture, *Sudden Death*. In *Rubyfruit Jungle*, the autobiographical overtones are subdued by the raucous and zany adventures of Molly Bolt as she discovers her lesbianism and the unwelcome implications of her discovery. This, Brown's first fictional endeavor, is an insightful celebration of unabashed courage and ambition. *Six of One* is a vibrant illustration of Brown's ability to combine real human emotion with an uncontained imagination and the product is winning fiction.

Sudden Death delivers Brown's keen wit and sense of humor but they come wrapped in numerous, though fortunately brief, diatribes against the shortcomings of human nature. There is nothing inherently wrong with an author attempting to enlighten her readers with moving revelations of the facts (and fallacies) of life. In fact, Brown warns the reader of the forthcoming pearls of wisdom in her Genesis. (The Genesis serves somewhat as a forward to *Sudden Death* and is well worth reading for those of you who customarily skip the first twenty pages of any book.) However, the problem is that Brown's pearls of wisdom are rather presumptuous and not too enlightening. Oh, well, the excess baggage is worth muddling through, particularly if Brown's psychoanalytical definition of "dyke" is just ignored.

The "Scruples variety" of fiction Brown lapses into as she recounts the trials and tribulations of women's professional tennis notwithstanding, *Sudden Death* is entertaining reading. Brown's efforts to have the reader fall in love with the protagonist (and the protagonist is not always herself!) are as effective as ever. An interesting twist to *Sudden Death* is that at its conclusion one wonders just who the chief protagonist is. Carmen, the star of the women's tennis circuit, and Harriet, her professor lover, are strong characters throughout but "sudden death" describes more than Carmen's struggles in her love affair with tennis and her obsession with winning at the Grand Slam. Though one may weary of the primary relationship, that between Carmen and Harriet, the satellite interactions sustain the reader's enchantment with Brown's knack for character development. Baby Jesus, Harriet's feline "progeny" and its own attempt at literary acclaim make reading *Sudden Death* a must for any cat aficionado:

Harriet has just gotten off the phone with Baby Jesus.

"What book did you say Baby Jesus was writing?" Carmen asked.

"Catalogue," (book about feline lumberjacks.)

"Hmm." She attacked her steak and then brightened. "I think she'd make more money if she wrote one called *Catagory*."

"Oh, why is that?"

"Kitty murders. Couldn't miss."

Jane Fulton, a reporter whose charac-

ter is obviously modeled after the late Judy Cook Lacy to whom the book is dedicated, provides relief to Harriet and their dalliances away from the tennis circuit provide the reader with relief. Brown's appreciation of camaraderie is brilliantly displayed in all her works.

As is the case with most of Brown's books, the reader, upon finishing *Sudden Death* is faced with the challenge of discerning when the memoirs end and the fiction begins. I suppose this is more of an option than a compulsion but more than idle curiosity provides the impetus for such mental trifling. It is Brown's provocative style of fiction writing that make her books entertaining long after the cover is closed. *Sudden Death* is a welcome and refreshing addition to the growing field of gay and lesbian literature.

Burnton Widows, by Vicki McConnell.
Naiad Press PB, \$7.95.

by Lisa Bouslaugh

Imagine driving along the beautiful Oregon Coast and enjoying the rocks and ocean spray when a huge limestone castle comes into view. Your imagination runs wild.

Burnton Widows is a gripping mystery about an old limestone castle on the Oregon Coast which was built and lived in by generations of lesbians. Two of the women were murdered in the castle on the night of their ninth anniversary.

One year after the murder, reporter Nyla Wade, the Burnton Beacon's newest reporter, intrigued by the beauty and history of the castle, decides to do her first feature on the crime.

One of Nyla's first stops is the local historical society, where she meets Perry Day Truman, the gay curator of the museum. Perry's knowledge of the castle's history and of the women who have lived there provide the bulk of Nyla's story.

Perry takes her to the very beginning when Dru Ketchum and her sister Molly arrived in Burnton by wagon train: to Mercy and her black evangelist lover, Olympia Swan raising Mercy's daughter in the castle; to Perry's late friends, the murdered Val and Joan.

Val and Joan had, in their will, named Perry as the receiver of the castle, but Joan's greedy children are contesting the will. Joan's offspring have received a huge offer from Seascope, a land developing corporation, which wants to tear down the castle and build a glorified Howard Johnson's on the bluff.

The demolition of the castle will also bury Joan's "questionable" lifestyle and the castle's "sordid past."

Meanwhile, looking through the castle and talking to townspeople about its history, Nyla discovers that the events surrounding the Burnton Widows' murders just do not piece together. Nyla's untrained investigative reporting goes to work.

But dredging up a closed murder case a few weeks before a tourist season opens in a small coastal town doesn't sit well with the locals. Nyla Wade is in for a lot of surprises, and so is the reader.

Burnton Widows is the kind of book one just won't be able to put down. It is excellent reading and the familiarity of the setting makes for a very interesting diversion.

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