

Rita Mae Brown has been a controversial figure and a study in contrasts practically since her beginnings. From articles, interviews, and news releases distributed by Bantam Books, one learns that Brown was illegitimate, orphaned, then adopted by poor but proud parents. She was kicked out of a university for "agitating for greater racial integration" and for her "pansexuality," as she calls it. An early member of NOW, she was kicked out of that organization for insisting on recognition for its lesbian membership. Brown was one of the founders of the radical feminist group, Redstockings. She has earned a BA in English and the Classics at New York University, a Ph.D. at Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C. and a cinematography degree from School of Visual Arts. She has seven novels to her credit, and several volumes of poetry, a collection of political essays, numerous articles and several screenplays.

Brown has come under fire by heterosexuals for fighting for lesbian rights within NOW and under fire from feminists for defending men. Once so destitute she lived in her car with her cat, she now raises the ire of socialists for exhibiting a penchant for nice things (among them a 27-room mansion and expensive cars). And still Rita Mae Brown is unapologetic.

Because of her schedule while in Portland, Brown was unavailable to *Just Out* but did agree to a by-mail interview. Whatever one thinks of her, obvious here are Brown's intelligence, quick wit, and the fact that Rita Mae Brown cautiously straddles no one's fence.

*In High Hearts*, the relationship between Nash and Geneva seems that of an almost-perfect heterosexual couple (a sensitive man, a strong woman). Does it reflect at all your view of heterosexuality? Your view of love itself?

Heterosexual relationships aren't that much different from homosexual relationships except for one mighty inequity: heterosexual relationships have the support of our society. As to Nash and Geneva, for me, they were two people caught up in events [the Civil War] beyond their control. They aren't a perfect couple, they aren't perfect individuals. They're real people in a real crisis or maybe a surreal crisis because it's so terrible.

As to Nash and Geneva being indicative of my view of love, I don't think any characters I write are templates for my view of love. They are true to themselves, not to me.

*In the book you say Southerners see the Civil War simply as a ploy by the North to get Southern riches, rather than as a sincere attempt to free slaves. Is this true?*

If the North cared so much about slavery, why was it so eager to use the products created by slavery? At no time did Northerners cut back on their use of tobacco, rice, cotton or liquor. If they thought it was so terrible, why didn't they boycott Southern products? Also, I don't think any war at any time is ever fought for moral reasons. It's fought over money, territory and, in ancient times, conquering people to use as slaves. There is never a good reason for war but leaders dress it up as best they can. The War Between the States is no exception.

*The Bible has been a source of oppression and injustice as well as comfort. You used Bible readings as a device to advance your novel. Any particular reason why?*

Bible readings were a form of entertainment at the time [of the Civil War]. I was trying to be accurate as well as use the Bible in a structural way. Also, I grew up on the Bible, King James Version, and I can quote scriptures right easily enough.

*The quotes that follow seemed particularly strong in the book. Are they at all representative of you? "What if God is a vegetable?" (p. 269); "I have enjoyed isolated moments of great happiness" (269); "I can-*

*not presume to judge a man when I lack the essential knowledge of his task" (283); "We're living inside a question mark" (284); "Monogamy might go against nature, but it certainly made one's social and emotional life infinitely easier. Easier on the purse strings too" (285).*

All are representative of me. Just the way my mind works.

*Are you learning now more toward humanism than feminism?*

I don't think feminism and humanism are two different nouns. You can't be a humanist without being a feminist. People who try to do so are, in fact, trying to avoid identifying with female lives.

*Do you feel "turned-on," in the sense of "attacked," by the women's movement?*

The women's movement went through a period when it attacked anybody with an I.Q.

against in gross ways and in subtle ways but I continue to think of women as a separate sub-group, then I'm participating in that discrimination. I'll fight for women as a group but I try not to think of them, in my personal life, as separate from men. I like people who are vital, thinking and good-humored. To date, I have not found those qualities to be gender-linked.

*Have you, as have so many others, been castigated as a manhater?*

Men who are afraid of independent women will try to call me or you manhaters. I think the only women who hate men are battered wives.

*How difficult has it been to be openly lesbian and a public figure? Have you encountered "paparazzi" or hate mail? Do you think it's easier now?*

What makes being openly lesbian difficult is that I'm reviewed, not my work. Not until I am

ground gay movement since 1968 when I and three other people started Student Homophile League at Columbia University. The movement really took off after Stonewall. Political bonding creates more individual space. As more and more gay people realize we've got to support candidates, vote as a block and fight like hell on the job, life will be easier for everybody. It's the poor sucker who thinks s/he is going to be the exception to the rule that makes life hard. Closet cases turn on open people and then get the ax themselves from the very people whose asses they have been devoutly kissing.

*People, especially Americans, tend to see things in terms of absolutes — black/white, true/untrue. Would you say you try to avoid that — seeing, instead, two sides to every story?*

I see thirty sides to every story and hope I can reveal three or four. Nothing is simple. Not even death is simple. People who see black and white are at the insect level of intellectual development; they can function but they can't dance.

*Some have accused you of being elitist. Is it true?*

As I don't understand the accusation I can't refute it. It's hard to be an elitist when you've been orphaned and raised dirt poor. Perhaps my success is sand in the eyes of those who haven't been quite as successful. Beats the hell out of me.

*How sensitive are you? Insecure? Rough, tough? How confident? Again, Americans especially seem to see the rich-and-famous as superior, untouchable, unwoundable. Is it true? What do you think that view says about our culture?*

I don't know if I'm sensitive. I pick up a lot. I usually know what people are feeling even if they don't tell me. It's one of the virtues of being quiet, perhaps, and I'm quiet. You all see me on publicity tours where I must talk/perform. On my own I'm not very talkative and I don't want to be the center of attention. Feels too much like work. As for being insecure, I'm not. I don't understand the emotion. I figure you're all you've got. Being insecure must be when people wait around for others to like them. Total waste of time. I don't know if I'm rough but I can bench press 207 pounds and I think I can do more but my weight machine doesn't go any higher. Then again, if I get sick or something I'll be lucky to pump up 175 pounds. Am I tough? I don't know but I'm a realist. I don't expect people to be better than they are and I know in a clinch it will be myself that protects my own back not some other person. Am I confident? Yes. If you don't believe in yourself you aren't going to do Jack Shit in this world. I don't know if the rich and famous are superior, untouchable and unwoundable. Probably not. What I do know is that most of the people I know in publishing and film whom you might think of as rich and famous work hard. I've never met a successful person who didn't work hard. Jefferson said, "The harder I work the luckier I get." Holds as true now as it did in the Eighteenth Century. With few exceptions (disease, accident, violent intrusion into one's life) most people can change their lives in a positive way. My observation is that many people are waiting for someone to do it for them instead of doing it themselves.

I don't know what the idea says about our culture — about rich and famous people — and I doubt that any other culture is much different. We seem to want to believe that someone somewhere out there has an easier life than we do.

*Is there anything you would say to the Just Out readers?*

Laugh: It absolutely infuriates your enemies and it entertains your friends.



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over 95. No reason I should be spared its assaults. Things are better now because that kind of self-hate, and it was a community form of self-hate, those attacks, were so destructive it had to stop. It was a little bit like the Committee for Public Safety [the French Revolution's Reign of Terror] without the guillotine. My reaction was to keep working. I have never much cared what anyone thought of me. Why start now?

*Do you like women as a class, or do you feel that you perhaps relate better to men these days?*

Women as a class mean nothing to me. People aren't grapes, you can't weigh them in a bunch. I have to take every individual one by one. I know that women are discriminated

near the end of my middle age will this rectify itself because I will be past the age of sexual contact. Our society is very age-conscious, so I figure once I'm at my middle-fifties the fact that I'm a lesbian will be irrelevant. Odd, but I bet it's true. As long as one is sexually desirable, being a lesbian upsets those people who want to feel they should/could/would go to bed with you. I think it's pretty funny myself. As for paparazzi; yes, I encounter them. I tell myself they have to earn a living, too. As for hate mail, I get some of it but nothing like the old days. Now the occasional hate letter is either from a fanatical religious nut or a gay fanatic who says I'm not gay enough. I'd love to introduce these two kinds of people to one another. They have a great deal in common. It's easier now because we've had an over-