

Haunted House

The book details the painful tug of one generation on the dreams and loves of the next.

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Rebecca Brown bends her angular frame onto a stool at Powell's Bookstore, opens a copy of *The Haunted House* and begins to read about Robin Daley, whose father is a "drunken pilot" and whose mother becomes a movie star, denying her daughter and her past.

She reads about alcoholism and American transience, about forgetting and inventing. "Truth takes time to catch up to a story," she reads, in a voice sturdy and clear as pine.

In the back of the room, a young man in a crew-necked sweater—a young man who looks as though he might captain the Gresham High School lacrosse team—leans toward another listener and stage-whispers, "What's this book about?"

Books

the haunted
house
rebecca
brown



Brown can't hear the question, but it probably wouldn't disturb her; she believes all kinds of readers need to hear the stories lesbian writers have to tell.

"I don't like the suggestion that we're writing for us (lesbian and gay readers) because we have nothing to say to them," she said in an interview here last month. "We have to talk to them...my editors are all white men. They say, I don't know about this world, and you need to tell me about it."

Three of Brown's books have been published in England and a fourth, *The Terrible Girls*, is forth coming there in August. The publication of *The Haunted House* by Seattle's Seal Press makes her work available for the first time to a range of American readers.

She describes the novel as "a very American book" whose themes transience Hollywood and the movies, the myth of quick success, creating a home touch important cultural nerves and reflect her own experience as a child in a family that moved often.

Now 34, Brown has lived in Europe for the last four years, working part of that time as resident curator of Robert and Elizabeth Browning's house and enjoying the "wonderful luxury of being able to write full-time."

The Haunted House, her second book, was written under very different circumstances. Brown had been working with the characters of the mother and daughter for several years, then began to gather the mental images that grew into the book's first and third sections—images of flight, of her father, of a house being built and then crumbling.

The result is a novel in three parts, each



resonating over the one before, with recurring images and scenes throughout.

"I don't think I had a model (for the book's structure)," Brown said. "I didn't say, I'm going to write a novel in three parts in which the third contains echoes of the first two. The form asks the reader to make significant leaps. It's a book that makes the reader work."

The book, which details the painful tug of one generation on the dreams and lives of the next, is dedicated to Brown's parents. Brown said she wasn't concerned about using personal material while she was working on the book but began to worry when she realized it would reach a larger audience, including her parents and other relatives.

"I wasn't worried about exposing them until I thought it might be published. But friends said, 'It's important. Ultimately, it could be loving and healing. And it is fiction; not everything in it is true.'"

Brown's work, layered and complex, is fueled by a variety of living and educational experiences and by wide ranging literary tastes. She has lived in Texas, Washington, D.C. and London; she graduated from George Washington University and then studied creative writing at the University of Virginia; she reads everything from Henry James to medieval women mystics.

"I've been reading St. Catherine and St. Theresa, for whom writing was a way to tell the truth, to tell a true story, not about technique or talking to an audience," she said. Her ideal reader, when she pictures one, would be a woman who shares her literary appetite and sense of history.

"To me, the most understanding reader I could imagine would be a lesbian who's read lots of classical literature, who doesn't believe writing began with Adrienne Rich."

Brown's voice gains a cynical curl when she talks about the acclaim her books have received in England—including favorable reviews for *The Haunted House* in the Sunday Times of London—compared to their relative obscurity here. British reviewers approached the book as "an interesting literary novel, by a lesbian," she said, while American publishers and press are more apt to categorize the book as "a lesbian novel."

The writers who most inspire Brown are those "who are daring, who are raw, who write the stories that truth compels them to tell." As more lesbians do so, they will develop a literary heritage of their own.

"We haven't been writing that long as a people," she said. "It's important to have another 500 crappily written novels about coming out...Then someday we'll have another Virginia Woolf, or Henrietta James."

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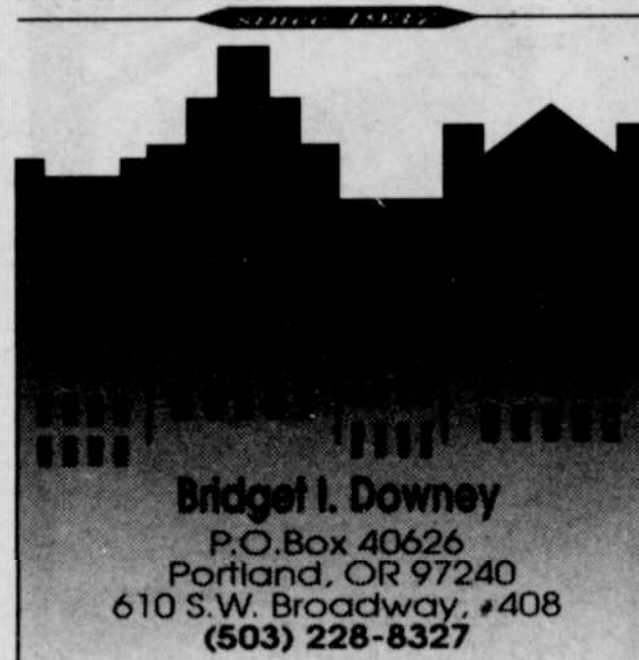
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