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TWO VOICES, ONE YAWN

*Despite the promise of a brilliant hook, Lucinda Ebersole's
Death in Equality doesn't deliver*

by Kerry Hart

I can only definitively speak for myself, but I suspect I speak for a few other authors, too, when I say that the highest compliment we can pay each other is to pick up a book, read the blurbs or the first few pages, and say, "God, what a fabulous idea! Why didn't I think of that?" Most writers strive to find a narrative voice that stands out from the crowd, a vehicle for a narrator that takes readers down a road far different from the well-traveled high-

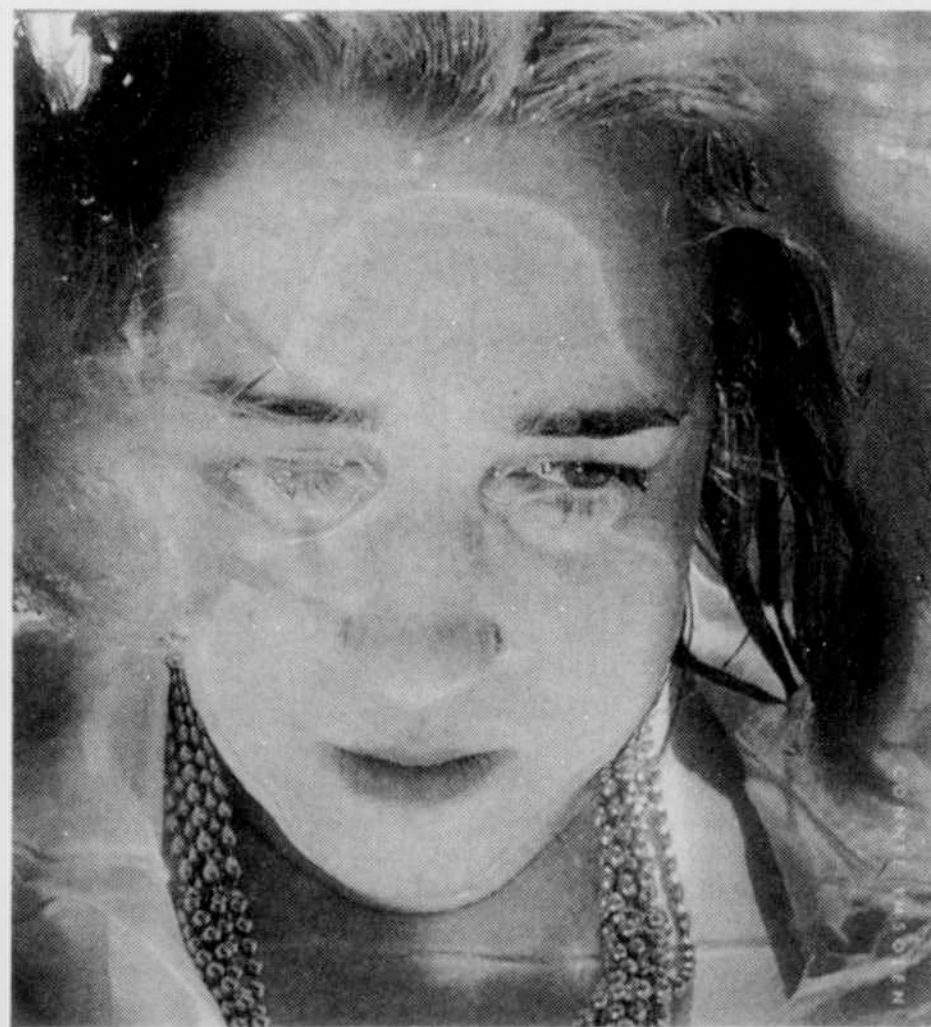
to death, a pervasive subject in the novel. From Flannery O'Connor to Dorothy Allison, and all points before, after and in-between, Southerners are noted for killing off characters in some of the strangest ways. Not Ebersole. Two little boys in this spare work die in fires—and fires not even interestingly set. A Boo Radley-type character endlessly walks the town of Equality, and on one occasion the narrator (in her memory) picks him up and gives him a ride, which makes her visiting friend from the Upper East Side nervous, although this odd fellow does absolutely nothing but sit erect and stare out of the window until they drop him off at a gas station. A dead father visits his daughter, then comes back to take her with him a week later—and this story is so lackluster that not one tiny hair on my body stirred. Cordelia has left behind a male and a female lover in New York, but the reader knows only the barest facts of these surely important relationships.

Books

ways of fiction. Lucinda Ebersole, in *Death in Equality*, her first novel, has done this.

Her narrator, Cordelia, finds herself, a non-smoker, dying at age 43 of lung cancer. She is the seventh and last Cordelia in her matrilineal line, and she returns to Equality, Ala., to die. Cordelia has "spent an entire life in a world of words"—most of them reading the books published by others, as well as editing, proofreading and otherwise participating vicariously in the world of authorship, only having "one or two" of her own stories published over all those years. Cordelia is the self-acclaimed "greatest unpublished author

Perhaps I was expecting too much of Cordelia's unconscious mind, but—especially since she perceives that the stories it holds, had they seen print in her lifetime, would've made her the greatest published novelist of her generation—I believe I had a right to expect fireworks. Instead, this book is a series of one fizzle and dud after another. I found Cordelia's conscious mind only slightly more engaging, as her world becomes smaller and



Lucinda Ebersole

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of her generation," and is on the verge of taking her untold stories to the grave. Enter author Ebersole.

And the brilliance starts here...

The book is printed with two different typefaces. One represents Cordelia's here and now voice—a voice increasingly wavering and focused on the large and small details of the death of its body. Regular injections for pain release Cordelia from this world and allow her unconscious mind, composed completely of memories (and presented in another typeface), to tell the stories she's kept to herself.

Unfortunately, there ends the brilliance.

Ebersole's stories, to put it bluntly, are uninteresting. Further, they are so disjointed, so unconnected to each other or to the narrator herself, that the reader cares little if anything for the myriad characters that march ploddingly through this book. Apparently this Southern writer has an amazingly deficient imagination when it comes

smaller, her perceptions wispier. I came to dread her pain injections as much as she did. I didn't want her to go to that boring place, and I surely didn't want to go with her.

This woman's dying at such a young age was the profound piece to explore. But it wasn't to be. Instead, truncated and disjointed stories that we could've done without, stories that repeatedly tease us with whispers of importance never spoken loudly enough or long enough for us to hear hogged the narrative. In the final analysis, I hope Ebersole herself is not terminally ill and that she's around after the death of this narrator's consciousness to tell a more robust tale in a more captivating voice.

Death in Equality by Lucinda Ebersole.
St. Martin's, 1997; \$19.95 cloth.
Kerry Hart, author of Not So Much the Fall,
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