

**BOOKS**

**THE STRUGGLE FOR HAPPINESS**  
By Ruthann Robson.  
St. Martin's Press, 2000;  
\$22.95 hardcover.

Ruthann Robson is a woman of many dimensions: a lawyer, a scholar and a consistently wonderful lesbian literary writer of many genres. Best known for her most recent suspense novel, *alk/a*, Robson has also mastered poetry, nonfiction and short stories.

In her new book of short stories, *The Struggle for Happiness*, Robson's characters reflect her own multidimensionality and deep knowledge of everything from law and nature to ballet and utopian philosophy.

In each story, Robson locates her characters within the landscape of the contemporary lesbian nation. A security guard, lawyer, animal rights activist, singer, teen-ager, and Russian ballet teacher are a few of the many colorful and emotionally complex women Robson paints. Each is, in fact, engaged in her own struggle for happiness, juggling the demands of careers, lovers, friends and family.

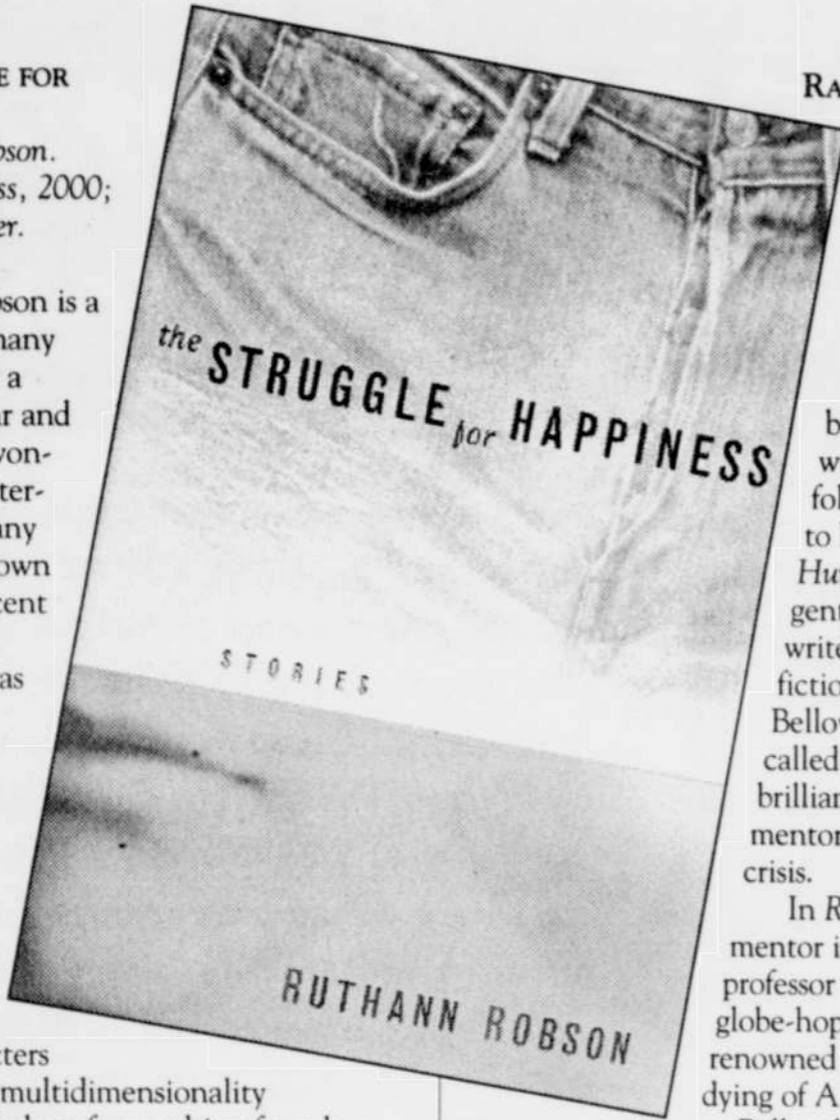
In the opening story, "Black Squirrels," a woman negotiates a debilitating illness and the loss of a lover against the backdrop of environmental devastation in her neighborhood. In "Women's Music," a guitarist's supposedly dead lover shows up at one of her concerts. And in "pas de deux," a young dance student blossoms into adulthood as a dance teacher but never stops looking for the older teacher who shaped both her career and her lesbian desire.

The final and longest story in the collection, "Close to Utopia," links the themes of the previous stories—loss and change; women's relationship to the environment; how identity is shaped by work, love and family—but departs from them stylistically. Robson experiments with language here, borrowing styles and ideas from New French Feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray.

While building an intriguing story of three American women who steal a wolf from an animal shelter and deliver it to a group of French, Asian and Caribbean-Canadian women who live and work on the Canadian tundra releasing wolves back into the wild, Robson asks us to meditate on women's relationship to language and our closeness to and distance from the wild. One character has spent 30 years conjugating the French verb *être* (to be) yet still wrestles with her own sense of who and what she is.

Like *alk/a*, *The Struggle for Happiness* delivers masterful storytelling wrapped in lyrical, yet economical, language. Robson seems to get better and better with each book. Let's just hope she doesn't wait too long before offering us another excellent and challenging read.

—Catherine Samch



**RAVELSTEIN**  
By Saul Bellow.  
Viking, 2000;  
\$24.95 hardcover.

*Ravelstein*, the new novel by venerable Nobel Prize-winning writer Saul Bellow, follows a plot similar to his 1975 novel *Humboldt's Gift*. A gentle, troubled writer—obviously a fictional stand-in for Bellow himself, here called Chick—aids a brilliant but eccentric mentor during a time of crisis.

In *Ravelstein*, said mentor is gay university professor Abe Ravelstein, a globe-hopping, world-renowned genius who's dying of AIDS.

Bellow has a gift for bringing objectivity to his characters and their situations through sheer volume of description and detail; we're given every nuance of a character's attitudes, opinions and tastes in everything from literature to clothes to composers. His depiction of Ravelstein as gloriously flawed—emotionally undemonstrative, greedy for life and all material things, genteel and elitist, socially hierarchical, stubbornly resistant to touchy-feely liberal humanism—is affectionate and charming.

Bellow almost abandons his admirable fairness when dealing with Chick's ex-wife (who, without the author's bestowal of individuality and idiosyncrasy, would be merely the cold, career-driven woman of stereotypical male chauvinist nightmares), but he manages to avoid sinking to outright misogyny.

Somehow, in just over 200 pages—less than half of his typical length—Bellow is able to use every tool in his vast, learned mind to bring morality, mortality, love, philosophy and history to bear on Chick and Abe's friendship, resulting in an almost too rich aggregation of real, empathetic humanity. The souls populating *Ravelstein* are immediately recognizable as human, their trials and triumphs engaging, their doubts and hopes profound.

—Christopher McQuain

**THE SILK ROAD**  
By Jane Summer. Alyson Books, 2000;  
\$12.95 softcover.

After reading the first chapter of Jane Summer's first novel, I was hopeful. It seemed as if she had set up an interesting structure for a coming-of-age dyke tale: an omniscient narrator instilled with a cynical view of 1970s white-bread America.

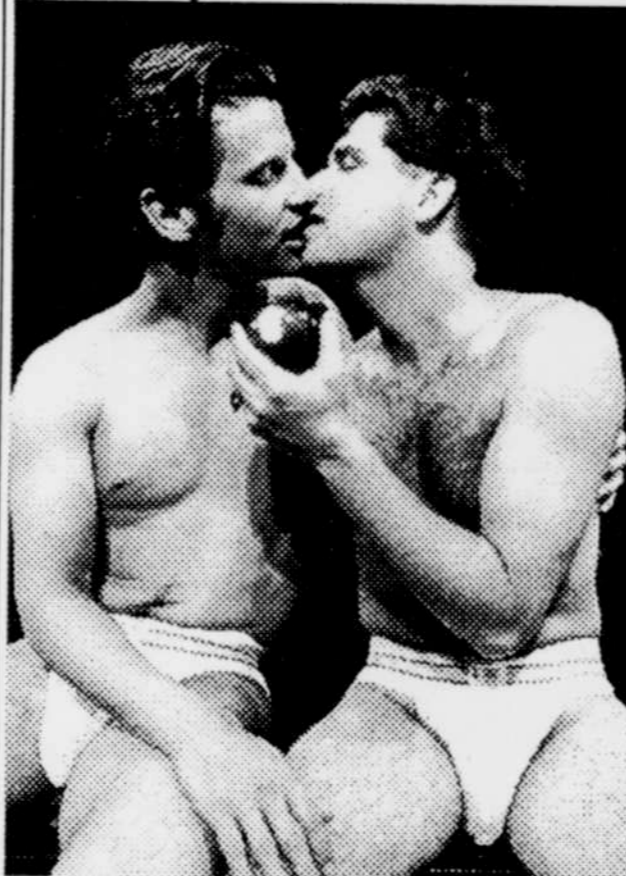
The narration is fragmented with random, vivid details of the town, hell, New York and a boyish, pubescent girl named Paige Bergman. The first chapter feels like a time bomb

Continued on Page 55



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