

BOOKS



## Coming home

Oregon author shares the painful story of losing her mom to a homophobic family court system

BY LISA BRADSHAW

**LONG WAY HOME**

by Melissa Hart Romero. Windstorm Creative Limited, 2001; \$12.95 softcover.

One day in 1979 when Melissa Hart Romero was 9 years old, her mother suddenly packed up her three children and fled an abusive husband and their comfortable Southern California suburb. With little money and almost no explanation, her mom drove to a coastal town 90 minutes away and moved them all in with her lesbian lover.

Just as Romero and her younger sister and brother began to get comfortable with their new, somewhat funkier surroundings, their father showed up with police cars and a court order, forcing their mother to relinquish custody. "I remember that terrible day when my father drove us away from our mother and back to his house, flanked by two police cars, with the obscure explanation that my mother was 'sick,' and I remember almost every conversation at his dinner table for the next nine years, as my stepmother tried to indoctrinate us with her homophobic views."

In her first published novel, *Long Way Home*, Romero recounts the first year of her mother's coming out and the subsequent placement of her and her siblings with their father. The short semiautobiography is narrated by Ronnie, the eldest of the three kids. Romero ages her fictionalized counterpart a few years and, through Ronnie, explores her fears, biases and utter confusion during the intersection of several difficult childhood issues: a lesbian

mother, an unexpected divorce and the heart-breaking separation from a parent she adores.

Although Romero's mother went to court three times during the next several years, she never was awarded custody of her kids. Her first relationship was short-lived, but she soon fell in love with another woman, and the children visited them alternate weekends and some holidays.

"I regard the nine years that I only saw my mom every other weekend as tragic," Romero states.

"Every other Sunday night when she dropped us off at our father's house, we would sob and cling to her.... I have memories of those Sunday nights even after 20 years."

Particularly distressing to readers of *Long Way Home* is the effect this kind of change has on these children and, hence, others like them. Romero's mother was a stay-at-home, full-time parent, and their father was a virtual stranger who elicited fear from his kids more than anything else.

The authorities basically communicated to the entire family and their community that living with an abusive parent is preferable to liv-

ing with a knowledgeable, loving parent who is also gay. Making the situation more shocking was the father's acute emotional distance and clear discomfort with Romero's 5-year-old brother, affected by Down syndrome.

Reading the book, one can't help but wonder why, in the 1970s and in a county Romero describes as "very homophobic," her mother came out so quickly and honestly to a difficult spouse and the court system. "In her mind, there was no doubt that the child psychologist, the court mediator and the judge would see that my father was both physically and emotionally abusive. She was certain they would award her full custody. Even now, I wish I were capable of that kind of faith in our justice system."

Losing her children absolutely shattered Romero's mother, who had devoted her life to them. The mother in the book confides to a neighbor: "I don't know what to do.... My job and my new friends only make me feel worse. I've even thought about adopt-

ing some kids. I miss being a mother so much."

Before sending her manuscript to the publisher, Romero wanted her mother's blessing. "Neither my mom nor her partner could get past the second chapter," she reveals, "which ends with a scene in which the police show up and take the children away from their mother."

*Long Way Home* was written for young adults, but Romero asserts, "It has a lot to teach any age group about the...importance of respecting all people." This includes

respecting your children enough to be honest with them.

Because queer relationships are not within Ronnie's frame of reference, she doesn't have any sense of her mother's identity, regardless of the many

clues. Even while her town is gossiping and her schoolmates are taunting her about her "lesbo" mom, she does not attach any truth to it. It's more than halfway through the book before the revelation hits:

"Honey, in almost every custody battle, the mother gets custody of the children," she said quietly.

"So why didn't you get custody of us?" I

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—Melissa Hart Romero

demanding.

Mother fell silent, staring down at the open art book in her hands....

Finally, she looked at me. Her gaze was steady and strong, reminding me of the way she had looked that day in court before the elevator door had closed between us.

"I didn't get custody of you because I'm a lesbian," she said.

Mother's quiet words seemed to silence the fairy orchestra of frogs and cicadas under her open bedroom window. For a moment, the whole world seemed to hold its breath, and then the long howl of a coyote tore across the night.

"You're a...a lesbian?" I repeated finally.

Ronnie is full of resentment that she wasn't in on her mother's "secret" sooner, which makes coming out ultimately more difficult for both of them. In simple language, Romero has a knack for relating her characters' frustrations with their own lack of control.

In the five years preceding her recent move to Eugene, the author lived next door to her mother, a time she calls "incredibly healing." She continues to suffer from separation anxiety. "It's very hard to leave her now after I've been to California to visit," she comments.

Romero has written two other young adult novels, both as yet unpublished—one about a teen-age Ronnie living with her mother. "It felt good to fictionalize this—almost as if I were rewriting my own past."

Romero's past has motivated her to become involved in gay rights through writing. Also a teacher, she has introduced queer literature to her classes ("it almost got me fired a few times," she notes), and she and her husband are members of the Eugene chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

"Things have changed significantly in the last two decades," Romero observes. "Gays and lesbians have all sorts of options now regarding child rearing."

Still, her optimism is cautious. "Lesbians are still losing their children. My mother [recently learned of] a little girl whose dad wanted to take her away from her lesbian mom. It makes me very, very sad to think that there are still kids out there who are being taken away from good, loving parents and subjected to another parent's vicious homophobia." □

MELISSA HART ROMERO will read from *Long Way Home* 7 p.m. July 19 at *In Other Words*, 3734 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd.

LISA BRADSHAW is a Portland free-lance writer who thinks it would be totally cool if her mom were a lesbian.

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