



Amy Bloom

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and emotions and desires are portrayed as they are—messy and complicated.

In the title story a mom awakens to her child's real gender identity: "Jane knew that she had managed not to see it, as you manage not to see that your neighbor's new baby has your husband's eyes and nose." In "Light Into Dark," Lionel and stepmother Julia try to get through Thanksgiving, sharing the secret of an incestuous night together. "Running to Eden" follows husband Charlie and lesbian best friend Ellie as they shape an unusual connection during the care of Mai, the third, ill member of their liaison.

A strong smell of death and illness wafts through most of the book's scenarios. This deliberate presence of imperfection adds instant desperation and unpredictability, stripping characters of their last pretenses (e.g., a mistress straddles her lover in his darkest hours of Parkinson's disease) and liberating and intensifying each central love.

And just when you think the gloom will never end, something beautiful sprouts out of it. It's but a tiny part of Bloom's vast insight into the quirks of the human heart, deriving, no doubt, from her long career in psychotherapy.

To top it off, her astuteness is accompanied by a witty side, filling the collection with welcome irony: "She is now practically a professional observer of gender, and she sees that although homeliness and ugliness won't win you any kindness from the world, they are not, in and of themselves, the markers that will get you tossed out of the restaurant, the men's room, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival."

A *Blind Man* was nominated for the National Book Award, and its title piece was chosen for *The Best American Short Stories 2000*. Bloom also wrote *Come to Me* (more short stories) and *Love Invents Us* (a novel).

—Els Debbaut

When Sara Ryan learned that a woman whose daughter checked out her book *Empress of the World* from a public library in

Houghton, Mich., was refusing to return it because she didn't think it was suitable for the public, the Portland writer sprang into action.

She immediately contacted the library and offered to send an autographed copy. The staff happily accepted.

The 30-year-old's first book has received a lot of attention. *Empress* has been written up in *USA Today*, *Teen People*, *Publishers Weekly* and other periodicals, which have described it as a tender, compelling story about a first love affair between two girls attending a summer camp for gifted and talented kids.

The novel was also nominated for a Lambda Literary Award in the Children/Young Adult category. (It lost to Julia Watts' *Finding H.F.*)

Ryan calls the whole thing "very exciting."

The Michigan-born novelist's literary habit began at a young age and became more focused when, as a teen-ager, she attended Clarion, a science fiction and fantasy writing workshop. She remembers it as very intense—16 aspiring young writers and six instructors spent six weeks together at Michigan State University in Lansing. "The experience pushed me to becoming serious about writing... it had a huge impact."

Ryan moved to Portland almost five years ago for her job in the Multnomah County Library's school outreach program working with teachers and media specialists to provide resources for children and adolescents. She says she loves her job because she gets to put her passion about books into action.

Unlike similar gay-themed novels about young people, *Empress* "doesn't deal with all the negative social ramifications of 'coming out' to angry parents, prejudiced peers or disappointed school counselors." Instead, because the story is set in a place removed from the usual hometown and family dynamics, it can focus on the excitement and uncertainties of a first love that "just happens to be lesbian."

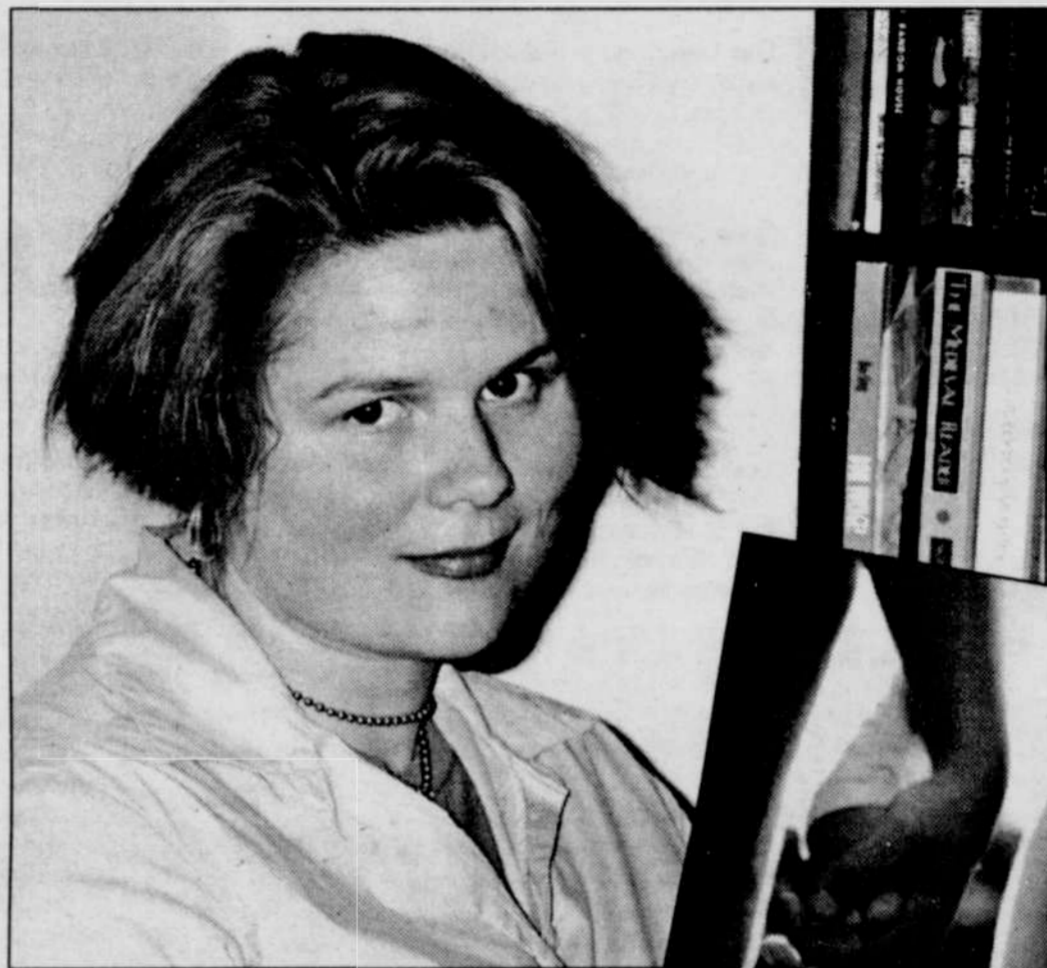
Except for the incident in Houghton, the book has received what Ryan believes is surprisingly little protest. As a librarian she is keenly aware how many books with "controversial" content are under attack. Instead, most feedback is coming from encouraging e-mails written by young people and adults—gay and straight—who find her account of love realistic and convincing.

One girl "read the book in three successive sessions in different bookstores. She didn't want to buy it or check it out of the library

Unsuitable for the public

Sara Ryan's *Empress* makes no apologies

by Jack Turteltaub



Sara Ryan's coming of age story was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award

because people would 'know' about her," Ryan shares.

Another young woman reported that she made her sister read *Empress* because "her entire family was homophobic." The sister's experience with the book "changed the whole outlook of the family."

This is good news to Ryan, who identifies as bisexual and lives with a male partner. "I feel comfortable in my identity," she asserts. "One reason I wrote the book is to make space for people to be bisexual, as well as gay or transsexual."

Ryan has adapted one of the characters from

Empress for a comic book story with her partner, illustrator Steve Lieber, for the magazine *Cicada*, which is geared toward teen writers. She also pens an occasional technical support column for *Voice of Youth Advocates*, a publication targeted at educators, librarians, counselors and other professionals who work with young people.

In fact, the reaction to *Empress* has been so positive the writer is working on a sequel, which will focus again on the same young lovers.

She's in no hurry, though, noting getting it on the shelves is less important than making sure she "gets it right."

Visit SARA RYAN at www.sararyan.com.

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