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personals ads on page 54?

BOOKS

Far from heaven

Author of some seriously raw fiction
says she's really a big goof

BY LISA BRADSHAW AND ELS DEBBAUT

Is Rebecca Brown some kind of sadist?

The Seattle lesbian writer's newest compilation of linked short stories is as emotionally tormenting as its predecessors—10 books full of stormy, dysfunctional family and lesbian couple relationships, abuse, death, AIDS and loss.

A quote from "Heaven," the first story in *The End of Youth*: "The lady in the first heaven is my mother, brown-skinned and plump...the way she was before she turned into the bald, gray-skinned sack of bones she was the month she died. The guy in the second version is my father, clear-eyed and strong and confident, not the sad and volatile, cloudy-eyed drunk he was for his last forty years. I've been thinking about heaven because ever since my parents died I've wished I believed in some place I could imagine them."

Brown's 1998 novel *The Dogs: A Modern Bestiary* was so ravishingly desperate and frightening (a young lesbian fights off ghostly Doberman pinchers that suddenly appear in her apartment), some readers had trouble finishing it.

The 47-year-old author, who reads from her latest May 11 at Powell's, claims she's "known to be extremely goofy and silly," so why the literary lashings?

"There is a love of despair in my books, but...there is at least a little hope in them, too," she says. "If nothing else, the hope of survival, of wisdom, of beauty."

True. Brown's characters—who are often clearly based on herself and her own troubled youth with an alcoholic father whose Navy job moved the family frequently around the country—struggle through depression, pain and confusion but ultimately (usually) survive it.

"To a certain degree," she shares, "all of my work is autobiographical, so in that sense [my] early books...are drawn from or about 'real' relationships.... But I am happy to say my recent work is not about miserable relationships."

REVIEW

The *End of Youth* is Rebecca Brown's newest highly original bundle of stories, rants and essays, many of which appeared separately through the years in other publications. And yet they oddly belong together.

There is a natural continuation of characters and a recurrence of the idea of life after the death of youthful ideas. There is the perspective of irreversible wisdom of the narrator, in part gained after the loss of both parents.

As always, Brown goes Buddhist style. The language is clear and deceptively simple, the emotions are eerily universal, and no judgment is attached.

The reader is left with essential reality as it is, in all its bittersweet glory. Nobody quite achieves this like Brown does, and that's just one of the many reasons she is heavily under-acclaimed.

There is a lot of sadness in her work, but it's always soothed by its beauty. And it is funny and sexy, like in the stories "Nancy Booth" and "Vision." Try her if you dare—you will not be disappointed.

—ED



Rebecca Brown reads from *The End of Youth* May 11 at Powell's Books

Perhaps that's because for 11 years now she's been with "the world's greatest girlfriend. She and I had a commitment ceremony seven years ago and hope to become old ladies together with lot of cats."

What *The End of Youth* is about is the past, about missing the visions of the way things were. "I wish I could see the way I did when I was young," reads the last sentence of the first story.

Brown teaches at Hugo House, a community literary center, and in a low-residency master's of fine arts program at Goddard College in Vermont. She worked as a caretaker for several years, mostly for people with AIDS, which fueled *Gifts of the Body*, her 1994 book about a home care assistant to AIDS patients. "That has been important to me," Brown states: "I really believe we should act compassionately with one another."

She's also quite an opera buff, giving lectures for the Seattle Opera on such potent topics as Japanese-U.S. cultural relations, feminist interpretations of fairy tales and censorship in art. She's near collaboration with Seattle's Better Biscuit Dance and with New City Theater, who will produce her play *The Toaster* this fall.

The woman is smart. The writing is, too, but the language is so straightforward and simple, it's deceptive. "I am moved by the direct statement, the clear observation," she explains but notes that "my style is very deliberate, very careful and studied. I revise a lot!"

Does Brown really believe in an end of youth? "Well, that's a narrator, a construct, speaking those sentences—not exactly, entirely me. But I do think I used to believe or have desires...that I no longer do. For example, I was really politically involved and thought the world could change. Some of it has changed—life is so much easier for queers these days, for example. But I no longer hope for just, honest, peaceful government, for example."

In any case, don't worry about Brown's intentions—they're all good. "No, I ain't a sadist. I'm a pretty boring, old-fashioned gal!"

REBECCA BROWN reads from her new book, *The End of Youth*, 7:30 p.m. May 11 at Powell's, 1005 W. Burnside St.

