

books

Original Sin

Biting the Apple delves into the lure of pleasure

by Glenn Scofield Williams

What happens to a dream deferred? Or to a dream collapsed? In *Biting the Apple*, the third novel by Berkeley, Calif.-based lesbian author Lucy Jane Bledsoe, this question is explored through the life of Eve Glass, an Olympic athlete turned self-help guru with a penchant for kleptomania, and the three people who find themselves, for one reason or another, inextricably tangled in her complex life. This stunning novel is simultaneously lighthearted and heartbreaking, with extraordinarily memorable characters you can't help but root for. With intelligence and elegance, it explores important themes such as authenticity, grace and self-sabotage in prose that can best be compared to the light, efficient sprint of an Olympic runner. *Biting the Apple* is an excellent, insightful read.

Recently I was privileged to have an online conversation with Bledsoe, some of which is printed here.

Glenn Scofield Williams: What led you to set this story in Portland?

Lucy Jane Bledsoe: I grew up in Portland. The city still has my heart and soul. For me, writing a book that explores issues of authenticity has to be set in Portland. I know this is changing, but I still think of Portland as a place that lacks cynicism. Also, *Biting* is a story about a sprinter, and Oregon has a history of excellent runners and a literature to go with it.

GSW: What drove you to write this story now?

LJB: I wanted to explore how one moment, one event, can be completely different things to different people. So in this story, a moment of grace is simultaneously a moment of injustice, depending on who is describing their experience of that moment. I also wanted to look at how an intense, potent moment can affect lives many years down the road. In *Biting*, this grace/injustice moment eventually leads to several characters' unraveling—and also to the protagonist's redemption.

GSW: You continue to play with the theme that going into the past is one of the best ways of going forward. What drives you to write about that?

LJB: Near the end of her life, I heard Susan Sontag say on BookSpan, and I'm paraphrasing here, "It's very American to think you can invent yourself, make yourself up." I wanted to play with this idea, explore which parts of ourselves we can indeed make up and create and which parts we are born with (DNA) and which parts get stamped into our characters by life experience.

In *Biting*, I'm playing with this tension between an authentic self and a constructed self or, put in the most cynical possible way, the self as a product. That's why I tell the story in four voices. One is the high school friend who is enraged by the lies that have shaped Eve's success. Another is her ex-coach (who is also her ex-husband) who had all his dreams invested in her success. A third is the woman hired to manage and market Eve as a product. The last section of the book is told in Eve's

own voice as she comes to define herself and take control of her own story.

GSW: Does everyone find a way to self-sabotage at one point or another, and is this the book's notion of original sin?

LJB: I think the problem is that our society frames pleasure-seeking as self-sabotage. When you think of Eve (the one in the Bible) outside the framework of Christianity, she's in a lovely place and bites an apple. It's important to note that her bite is not only an indulgence in pleasure, it's feeding herself, taking care of a basic human need. But Christianity endows this apple-eating with the symbolism of all pleasure, including sex. So that taking pleasure gets equated with self-sabotage.



Lucy Jane Bledsoe grew up in Portland before moving to Berkeley, Calif.

I want to ask, Why? Why is pleasure—food, sex, play—pitted against goodness in our culture? So I created a character [named Eve] who, to become a world-class sprinter, must overcome just about every kind of temptation. She fails. She picks the apple and eats it. In fact, all of the main characters in the novel fall far short of their early expectations for themselves. This story explores what it means to fail at something that requires such tremendous sacrifice and why the pleasure principle—biting the forbidden apple—holds such sway. 10

LUCY JANE BLEDSOE reads from *Biting the Apple* 7 p.m. March 20 at Broadway Books, 1714 N.E. Broadway.

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