

Consumption

THE BEDROOM SECRETS OF THE MASTER CHEFS, fiction by Irvine Welsh. W.W. Norton, 2006. Hardcover, \$24.95.

The *Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs*, the new novel by Irvine Welsh, is somewhat misleadingly titled. Though it's promoted as a "transgressive parable" of the restaurant industry, there are few master chefs present, and even fewer bedrooms for their secret transgressions. *Bedroom Secrets* is the story of two rival health inspectors — both young, ambitious and fatherless — and a terrible curse one manages to place upon the other. The result is what you might expect if Anthony Bourdain pitched a novel to Chuck Palahniuk.

The amoral center of this dark tale is Danny Skinner, a handsome but immensely self-destructive kitchen inspector. Skinner, in his early twenties, has the liver of an old man. His health, like his job, is slipping away. He vows to change, but in order to understand his appetites, he goes looking for the father he never knew. That process of discovery is interrupted, however, when Brian Kibby — a nerdy teetotaler, model-train enthusiast and virgin — takes employment at the Health Inspectorate. Kibby threatens Skinner's professional standing and mental stability, invoking a fury in Skinner that's never fully explained.

One night, in a drunken outrage at a pub, Skinner places a terrible hex upon Kibby by invoking Kibby's name over a few dozen pints of lager. The curse is a spectacular two-for-one: The physical abuse of Skinner's addictions transfers to Kibby, which in turn causes Skinner's legendary vices to proliferate. It's one thing to indulge without consequences; it's another to know that your nemesis is paying the tab. Skinner adds absinthe and ecstasy to his regimen, eventually putting Kibby into intensive care and in need of an organ transplant. Skinner's murderous schaden-

freude comes closer to ambivalence; his only real concern is that if Kibby dies, so too will their "marvelous arrangement."

Bedroom Secrets is about a particular kind of self-loathing, a deep hatred that can only come (if Welsh's parable is to be believed) to young men without fathers. But that's a long hook on which to hang a menace like Skinner; once fashioned, Welsh can't manage to



make Skinner more complex. Skinner is such an unrelenting jerk that he'd be comical if he weren't so cruel. What Skinner isn't is sympathetic. He's so nasty he's impossible to enjoy, and when he finally tries to repent, he's impossible to understand.

Bedroom Secrets isn't far from Bret Easton Ellis territory, a place where infan-

tilized characters are constantly outrunning their own emotions. It's a syndrome that makes for stiff reading, resulting in a bleak, uninspired output that feels devoid of any complex psychological truths. Skinner's change of heart towards Kibby comes too late, at least for one of them. The turnabout only further confuses just who, or what, Skinner is. Despite Welsh's pitch-perfect dialogue and carefully evoked atmosphere, one can feel the flutters of a moral dilemma at work, but not the humanity to give it a pulse. **EW**

Irvine Welsh reads at 7:30 pm Thursday, Aug. 24 at Powell's on Burnside, Portland.

From Rizzo to AARP Momma

THERE ARE WORSE THINGS I COULD DO, memoir by Adrienne Barbeau. Carroll & Graf, 2006. Hardcover, \$25.

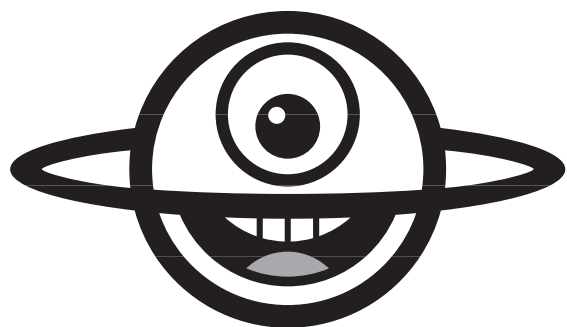
Actress Adrienne Barbeau has had a long and varied career, from originating the role of Rizzo in *Grease* on Broadway in the 1970s to a turn as Ruthie the snake-dancer on HBO's "Carnivàle" in 2003. She had a major role on "Maude," with Bea Arthur, and appeared in a handful of films by horror director John Carpenter, whom she also married. At 51 she gave birth to twins; she quips, in her new memoir, that she was "the only woman on the maternity ward who was a member of AARP."

Barbeau's memoir covers just about everything a fan would want to know about an actress: how she started, the determination of the early years, the first good roles, the roles she got later, as she grew older. But Barbeau lets on early that though she's kept a journal since she was very young, she wrote mostly about her relationships and hardly at all about her work. In that case, her memory must be a remarkable thing: There are stories

aplenty about her best-known projects and, in a dryly humorous chapter, a film she refers to only as "the rat movie." Her personal life sounds familiar notes, but the crisp details about the sometimes strange life of a television and film actress are at times fascinating. Though Barbeau doesn't get technical, she

does give a good sense of just how much work, done by how many people, is required to get a film made. What she doesn't give is a sense of immediacy. Barbeau's writing is plain and straightforward; she's light on description and when she writes about emotionally affecting moments, their weight is sometimes lessened by the simplicity of her style. Still, as Barbeau downplays the excitement of starring in a film, she succeeds at presenting herself as a warm, considerate woman whose job was her dream — doing it just happened to put her in front of thousands of people. — *Molly Templeton*

Adrienne Barbeau reads at 7 pm Tuesday, Aug. 22 at Borders.



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