

THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Catherine Bush. Toronto: Harper Collins, 2000.

BY LESLIE AMBEDIAN

What are the links between public and private violence? Does the scale of conflict matter to the civilian victim? What does it mean to intervene—or to fail to intervene?

These are the questions with which Arcadia Hearne, the protagonist of Catherine Bush's accomplished second novel, *The Rules of Engagement*, must wrestle. Arcadia's concerns with conflict are both professional and personal; she studies modern war and intervention as a researcher for the Centre for the Study of War, and ten years prior to the setting of the novel she was the subject of a duel between two university students. This duel, fought with pistols in the Rosedale ravine, is the defining incident in Arcadia's life; in its aftermath she flees Toronto for London (not even pausing to discover the outcome) and disassociates herself from all reminders of her Canadian past, including, to a large extent, her family. Despite her distaste for the violence she has witnessed and perhaps, unwittingly, engendered, she uses the duel as a touchstone in her life; she occasionally tells people about it merely to witness their reaction. Although she fears violence her relationships are temporary affairs with friends who are themselves attracted to it in some way. She enters into a brief marriage, but the relationship is poisoned by the existence of the duel. Martin, her husband, sums up the failure of their marriage:

"You think I'm not good enough for you, don't you? [...] Don't you?" He picked up a metal rubbish bin that had rolled into the gutter and hurled it clanging down the street. Turning, he

stood in the middle of the pavement, waving his arms. "Don't you? Just because I won't kill for you or be killed for you."

Arcadia's healing becomes intimately bound together with her work; because she herself failed to intervene, to stop the duel, she becomes obsessed with the concept of intervention.

The causes of the duel are not cut and dried. Is Arcadia really the subject of the duel, or is it rather some anachronistic, romantic notion of honour? Does the challenger, Evan, expect her to return to him if he bests his rival at thirty paces with a pistol, or is he simply sowing the ground of Arcadia's new relationship with salt?

And what exactly did he hope to prove by it? It was crazy [...] Perhaps this was all Evan wanted, anyway. His manic strategy. To drive a wedge, to fuck things up between Neil and me.

The Rules of Engagement is an entertaining novel, although there are occasional moments and plot devices that grate. Arcadia is constantly, somewhat tiresomely, referring to her own unusualness: her name, her profession, her father's profession (nuclear physicist). She expects everyone she meets to be surprised by her in some way. She is irritated by the assumptions people make about her, yet assumes that people will, for example, disapprove of her father's work on nuclear reactors. Arcadia comments upon the duelling death of the French mathematician Evariste Galois, but refers to him instead as "Gauloise;" is Bush calling into question Arcadia's reliability as an historian, and hence as narrator, or did the fact-checkers simply slip up?

These quibbles aside, Bush's novel is a thoughtful exploration of the sliding scale of warfare, the idiocy of the duel between two students differing only in scale from that of the conflicts witnessed by Arcadia's war

correspondent friends. Arcadia states that "the duelists' story is not complete without the girl's story," so too, military history is incomplete without the story of those caught in the middle. "In the end," Bush writes, "the questions are the same. Everything converges. Are we to intervene or not? Who are we to let slip within our borders? Who's a stranger? Whom do we allow ourselves to love?"

THE LADY'S MAN AND OTHER STORIES

Linde Ebruk. Toronto: Lugus Publications, 1999.

BY MAUREEN LENNON

Linde Ebruk's *The Lady's Man and Other Stories* pictures a grim world.

The title story begins with Earnest, naked and alone, bound hand and foot in bed, in a rented cottage in Italy. He listens to the sounds of his lover departing in the rental car, and, after falling helpless to the bottom of the stairs, hopes that his wallet has been stolen too, so that when his body is finally found, his identity will remain unknown.

Ebruk immediately and vividly convinces us, through Earnest's self-obsessed, sadistic musings in the first two pages, that solitary death is exactly what this man deserves. The rest of the story spells out, in lengthy detail, the tawdry, destructive life that has led Earnest to this Italian bedpost.

In search of success, he has discarded two sets of children (first, a brood harshly neglected, in an exact mirror of his own family of origin; then a single petted child, in a fantasy of pampering that is equally disastrous), several wives, and two friends (both dead, one by suicide,

the other drowned, tied to a garden chair after a sadistic sexual romp).

Long before these grisly deaths, though, we'd be happy to see Earnest getting a taste of his own medicine. In fact, dying alone in an Italian cottage seems too good for him.

Ebruk tells this tedious, predictable story not for our entertainment, but perhaps as a cautionary tale. Although Earnest isn't the suave charmer we usually think of as a "lady's man," our view is of the inner man, an unpleasant sight. His unsavory and tawdry activities depend on his ability to charm women and men out of their better senses.

The second story, "Three Sides of a Triangle," is much stronger and more interesting. Like the "lady's man," the "triangle" conjures up familiar images, but here the interior monologues reveal depth and complexity.

The two women in the triangle are convincingly real. Their musings have a wry humor, and flip through a myriad of topic and detail in ways familiar to any woman. The situation they find themselves in makes sense, and the resolution is neither predictable nor easy. This is an engaging story.

In the final offering, "Prosaic Love," an older man wields power over a younger woman. This is "prosaic" in part because it's familiar, everyday material, as are the self-delusions of both characters.

Mr. Montague is convinced of his prowess as a writer (he's certain "that he thought lucidly in neat, punctuated paragraphs"). The young woman, Roselyn, hired to help edit his novel, reads the torrid love scenes in Mr. Montague's manuscript as evidence that he is in love with her.

She is in love with this idea of his love, as well as with the pattern of their days together which shelters her in a kind of perpetual childhood.

When Mr. Montague has a stroke and Roselyn loses his manuscript, she summons her wits and writes a replacement story. The new book is published, but under Mr.

Montague's name: Roselyn's declaration of independence remains anonymous.

Mr. Montague, who writes feverish and poetic love scenes, is afraid of actual emotion, so that he flees when Roselyn confronts him with her feelings. He uses words not to express but to protect himself. Roselyn is afraid of independent, adult life, but she is inspired by Mr. Montague's words to speak her own feelings. In the vacuum after his exit, she acts on her own, writing a successful story. Her "prosaic love" may be what she's able to do once the poetic image of Mr. Montague's love is exploded.

Linde Ebruk writes at a distance from her characters, and this distance underlines the patterns that hint at how complex and difficult her subject is.

The men in these stories are, at best, shallow and uninteresting; at worst, horribly destructive. The women are more complicated, but they too are shackled and shadowed.

This is a dark, but sometimes suggestively interesting, world.

QUEEN RAT: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

Lynn Crosbie. Toronto: Anansi, 1998.

BY BERYL BAIGENT

Lynn Crosbie's literary work came into controversial focus in 1997, with the publication of her novel, *Paul's Case*, based on the life of convicted murderer, Paul Bernardo. A *Books in Canada* (# 154) interview notes that Crosbie wrote this book of fiction after avidly following the trial, with the intent to "raise some provocative critical points about ... female sexu-

ality," and hoping that she will "inspire thought." Crosbie would like her readers to "begin to construct a different way of not only looking at Paul Bernardo's case but at this kind of person." Additionally, she notes that her "attraction" to criminals began as a way of exploring a voice that is so "other" to her.

This brief comment will perhaps help readers to come to grips with Crosbie's *Queen Rat: New and Selected Poems*, a large volume, organized into six sections, evenly divided into three parts new poems, and three parts excerpted from earlier books. Violence, here too, is a major part of Crosbie's ethos. She is seduced by celebrities, pop icons, and murderers, and assumes the voices (and vices) of Jack the Ripper, Ted Bundy, and Louis Longhi, "the shampoo killer," while in her poem dedicated to Farrah Fawcett, titled "Look Homeward Angel," the terror of domestic brutality is evoked. Her second novel is based on the life of murdered *Playboy* centrefold, Dorothy Stratten.

I hoped that by reading the *Books in Canada* interview I would have some insight into Crosbie's psyche. I discovered that she has a PhD from the University of Toronto and works as a teacher, cultural journalist, editor, poet, and novelist. With only three books of poetry to her credit, published in 1992, '94 and '96 (all of which are represented in this collection), she has already been deemed worthy of a selected works.

From Miss Pamela's Mercy, six poems which were inspired by sensational newspaper stories, are included in the book. "Look Homeward Angel" is the first of these. Crosbie explains that she has taken "an extant narrative, especially of someone who is powerless, and [accorded] it a revisionary retelling, to give someone like this woman a voice" (*Books in Canada*). "Pamela Des Barres," the "Miss Pamela" of the title poem, speaks of being "married [to] a vicious man," who reads her "long fractured/ poems about