

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 newspapers 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

heroin," while "Jacobina Willhemina Carman 1973-87" with "limbs tangled in the dirt, hair rain-torn and wild," knows a more permanent violence. She was "found shot to death in a ditch in Bentinck Township." The poet also endeavours "to capture this man ... / The man that kept [Jacobina] prisoner/ ... over four-teen years ago."

Crosbie admits to relishing "pornography because it is explicit," while she finds "erotica more elliptical" and notes that "a lot of it—really bores the hell out of me." Thus, her offerings in *VillainElle* are "mini-essays on female sexuality." Quotations, once again, introduce most poems. Cited lines range from "Jesus Christ Super Star" to Sylvia Plath and Wordsworth. As an aficionado of T.S. Eliot, Crosbie, by using epigrams and citing passages in the body of her work, is enacting his view that all poetry, written through the ages, creates a continuous living poem. Her mind is Eliot's "shred of platinum" which acts as a catalyst to the feelings, phrases, images, and emotions that are stored, until they can unite to form a new compound (poem).

"Strange Fits of Passion" begins with an erotic verse in which the persona and the lover undress each other. In a stream-of-consciousness manner, the poem drifts to "The German/shepherd that licked [her] thighs" and "the first girl [she] ever kissed." The eroticism changes to fear for the life of her daughter, and concludes with lines which circle back to the dominatrix/lover and violence: "He was quiet also, and I whipped him, / I ground my heels in his chest / until he begged for mercy."

Women's aggressive sexual fantasies, and desires, determine the theme of *VillainElle*. The protagonist of "Poems for Jack the Ripper" terrifies herself with images like "the shadows fall, / in long slivers in the mist, / and your feet creep in the corners, in the black / edges of the night, a rustle of dead leaves and pale white bone. / You have returned."

*Pearl*, published in 1996, is described by the author as "elegiac." Violence, sex, and drugs proliferate in this collection of excerpts also. The poems seem to indicate real (or imaginary) lovers but in keeping with Crosbie's desire to appear illusive, she flips typical love-making vernacular giving the woman control and access: "I was the first... / to lubricate my fingers / and open him, tenderly easing the petals of the rosette, / my tongue in his urethra, a taste of honey."

Pop culture references: songs ("It must be him"), Sinatra (about whom she eventually plans to write a book), allusion to television programs ("Have Gun, Will Travel"), advertising ("Love's baby soft" perfume), drugs (heroin, cocaine), and a designed ambivalence when she speaks of sex/death ("death, the greatest high of all") give an ubiquitous feeling of isolation and loneliness to this deeply personal book.

Crosbie describes herself as an intellectual renegade who wants "to keep moving, keep thinking, keep developing," and the new selections in *Queen Rat* attest to this. The opening section, "Fredo Pentangeli," introduces archangels: Gabriel, the messenger; Raphael, who protects the young; Michael, who is both warrior angel and brother; and fallen angel Lucifer, but not in any spiritual or religious context. In fact, the flavour of this section is definitely Italian, suggesting Mafia scenarios as seen through the eyes of young Fredo.

Section two is a long poem, illustrated by photographs of a refrigerator door and titled "Presley." This sequence was inspired by an item from the *Weekly World News*: "Pet-crazy Dana Caneberry has kept her dead puppy Presley on ice in her refrigerator freezer for the past two years ... because she just can't stand to part with the pitiful pooch." Spoken in the voice of Ms Caneberry we hear of the incidents leading up to Presley's demise: his encounter with Priscilla the kitten and, in the words of his namesake, of "this magic night

of nights with you." The tone of voice in this poem is heartfelt and sincere despite the possibility of ridicule based on the subject matter, and is therefore a complete turn-around from Crosbie's generally ironic world view.

"Alphabet City," the last of the three new sections, again employs epigrammatic quotations and is a series of prose poems which alphabetizes places in and around Toronto. A is for "Allen Gardens," D is for "Danforth," X is for "Xtraordinaire (722 Queen Street West)." Ultimately, any reader of *Queen Rat* will have to be prepared to be frustrated in not recognizing pop-culture references, obscure quotations, and even those from whom quotations are borrowed (who are Boyce Rensberger, Scott Walker, Zizek?).

Yet, perhaps we can be content in recognizing the metaphysical conceit from which Crosbie's poetry, in part, arises. She is fluent in common poetical style (free-verse, prose-poems, mini-essays). She frequently organizes her thoughts in a dramatic and rhetorical form to present the argument of her persona. She employs outrageous logic and yet is realistic, cynical and sometimes witty. Without a doubt, she is a master of the intellectual technique of combining dissimilar images and heterogeneous ideas, which she literally "yokes together by violence" (in Dr. Johnson's words). Crosbie is also comfortable in exploiting all knowledge: intellectual, practical, and philosophical, true or otherwise to form this widely disparate collection of writing.

In conclusion, if you are a devotee of Donne (relish "The Fly"), Eliot, or even Cole Porter, you will enjoy the parallel structure of Crosbie's arguments, but be prepared to work at everything you read—even the erotic and feminist pieces may be so obscure that they lose their punch.