

Reviews

Fiction:

Lily Brett: *You've Gotta Have Balls*. New York: William Morrow, 2006, 275 pp. \$ 19.95, ISBN 978006050569.

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Opening the pages to the latest Lily Brett novel is like meeting old friends. The main character is Ruth Rothwax, an Australian citizen living in New York. She is about 50 years of age and runs a successful “writing business.” That is to say, she writes stylish letters for customers that are flung all over the United States, and she designs innovative greeting cards. The business is apparently so successful that she can employ two assistants and still make loads of money. She even has some German clients, which elicits her comment “Germans are very fussy. As fussy as Jews“ (267). Well, Lily Brett (who was born in a German DP camp in 1946) is entitled to ambiguous feelings about the country of her birth.

In her previous novels, there were other names and slightly different professions for “Ruth”, and the narrative situation was that of a first-person narrator, but the essentials are always the same. There is her quirky father Edek, who has recently moved from Melbourne to New York after his wife Rooshka’s death. This too we remember from previous novels – Edek moved to New York in *Just Like That*, and in *Too Many Men* father and daughter travel to Poland in order to re-view the holocaust’s history and geography. Ruth’s (and Lily Brett’s) parents are Polish survivors of Auschwitz, which has featured prominently in all her other novels, essays and above all, her poems. Lily Brett is likely to drop a holocaust reference without any warning, for instance on p. 29: “Edek and Rooshka were always surrounded by the dead. And Edek and Rooshka had hundreds of dead”. In the background, there is her husband David, a successful painter (Brett’s real-life husband David is indeed a successful artist) and her three children.

Very much in the foreground is New York, a city that is almost presented as an additional character. The narrative is littered with references to real streets, real locations and real restaurants, and also some prominent real people. Stephen Spielberg and Luciano Pavarotti make brief but important appearances; in a previous journalistic piece it was Bette Midler. It is all supposed to add to the authentic ‘feel’ of the story. Which only takes off after about 50 pages: A year prior to the narrative’s time, there had been a visit to Poland by Edek and Ruth, and there they met two hotel waitresses. Somehow they managed to befriend Edek, which Ruth suspects it has mostly to do with Zofia’s impressive bosom. Ruth, however, (and Lily Brett) are flat-chested. Quote: “Zofia wasn’t fat. Just solid. Very solid. Zofia had very large breasts – her breasts looked wilful. ... Zofia seemed to wear only very short, very tight skirts and plunging necklines. Necklines that, from one day to the next, appeared to be plummeting dangerously” (22). Ruth develops a comical obsession with those breasts. She out-obsesses any male sex maniac. Even her husband reproachfully tells her she “is a bit preoccupied with Zofia’s breasts” (167). Here are some examples.

[Walentyna] was no match for Zofia, who, with laserlike precision had focused her breasts and her attention on Edek (86).

She looked as overloaded with energy as she had in Poland. Almost obscenely energetic. ... Her breasts were firm and pointed. As if they were making an announcement. A large announcement (89).

Zofia’s breasts, which were barely contained in a short, tight black top, moved when Zofia moved. They almost sprang out without any help, several times (113).

Zofia looked boldly into the camera. As did her breasts (191).

The reader is surprised when Zofia’s age is revealed: she is 69. Hardly a realistic age for a Marilyn Monroe bust, methinks. At the end of their Polish stay, Ruth discovers Edek has slept with Zofia. Though she is a tad discomfited by her father’s virility, she thinks the episode will be of no consequence. Wrong – because Walentyna and Zofia have meanwhile both won green cards in the annual green card lottery and now turn up in New York. Ruth’s resentment of their intrusion is considerable. Not only do they manage to steal her father’s heart, to impress her husband David, to win over her children, they also embed themselves in her father’s apartment, persuade him into opening a restaurant, and they have the nerve to *like* Ruth when she treats them like Polish dirt. Zofia and Walentyna are great cooks, and Edek is a great raconteur and manager, and so their joint enterprise, a Lower East Side shoe-string Polish restaurant specializing in meat balls (aptly called ‘You’ve Gotta Have Balls’), a project that Ruth dismisses out of

hand as impossible to succeed, is a runaway success. There are lines of customers after only three days, Stephen Spielberg and many of his film crew dine there, Pavarotti turns up, the food editor of the *New York Times* writes a glowing report (titled “What Balls They’ve Got!”), they feature in several tabloid newspapers and the three of them even make it onto the cover of the *New York Magazine*. To complete the clichéd happy ending, Zofia and Edek get married. To add some realism, Lily Brett supplies us with four meat ball recipes in the novel’s appendix (one of which I have tried out: delicious!)

You’ve Gotta Have Balls will possibly be enjoyed more by male readers than by females. The customary themes that we men are fascinated with are all there: how to handle a husband, how to deal with sex and passion, but most of all the theme of how women interact with other women. One female character claims that men are better equipped than women to handle friendships; men see companions in one another, women rivals. And anyway, men and sex (not necessarily in this order) are the most important ingredients in a happy woman’s life. We have not heard that theory for a long time and are duly flattered. And what a lot of discussion it engenders amongst the female characters! Ruth sets out to disprove it by forming a women’s debating society – and fails. Most of her friends are more willing to invest time in their partners than in female bonding. This discursive stream however only dominates the first 40 pages. When Zofia and Walentyna arrive on the scene it is more or less abandoned, which adds to the impression of an unbalanced narrative. It lives on in a curious way through Zofia’s breasts, whom the flat-chested Ruth comes to see as an unfair advantage to ensnare her father, and a counter-feminist weapon.

The real hero of this story is the 87 year-old holocaust survivor Edek. Of course, we have met his rugged and quirky individualism before, not only in previous Lily Brett stories but also in Art Spiegelman’s character Vladek, the central protagonist of his cartoon narrative *Maus*. Since she has not experienced Auschwitz, Lily Brett – and this is typical for second generation Jewish survivors – is constantly demonstrating her admiration and respect for the generation that did. It should not really surprise us that some of this “respect-paying” borders on the neurotic. In her autobiographical novel *Just Like That* (the German title is *Einfach So*) Brett’s first-person narrator admits of an irrational resentment of every American who drives a Mercedes, and muses that all Jewish people should keep up a collective resentment of Germans. In her generation, this respect has assumed many forms and guises that were provocatively called the “holocaust industry” by historian Norman G. Finkelstein: efforts to prove the complicity of Swiss banks in the holocaust, the feverish accusations against Kurt Waldheim, and more recently, the exposure of Polish anti-semitism before and after the war. In regard to the last example Lily

Brett has made a substantial contribution in her 700 page narrative *Too Many Men*, which must be read in tandem with this novel. But on the whole, Brett leans more towards Roberto Benigni's comic mode of weaving holocaust memories into her narrative than Eli Wiesel's straightforward historical accounts.

With a punning title like *You've Gotta Have Balls*, the dominant tone has got to be a comic one. Funny moments there are a-plenty, for instance when 69-year-old Zofia starts telling Ruth how she and Edek (who is 87, remember) manage to have "great sex": the secret is she wraps her legs around him. Because sex, as Zofia reminds Ruth, is "very good for the heart and the liver and the kidneys" ... "and the skin too". Ruth is not comfortable with that information, and when she discusses it with her friends Sonia and Teresa, a hilarious conversation develops about when, where and why to wrap female legs around – whom: husband, lover, or doorman? And while they are about this 'serious' subject, we are treated to a discussion of how important for female pleasure is the shape and size of penises. Ruth is alarmed by her friend Sonia's admission that she covets Zofia's "sex of the leg-wrapping kind." Sex with her husband is only mediocre, she tells her, and that "almost anyone, short of a rapist, sticking his dick in me would feel pleasurable." Prudish Ruth finds this information alarming. Ruth cannot remember whether she ever wraps her legs around husband Garth. She must phone him at once:

"But have I wrapped my legs around you"? Ruth said.

"Of course you have wrapped your legs around me," Garth said.

"When?" said Ruth.

"I can't give you the exact time and date," said Garth. "Sometimes you wrap your legs around me, sometimes you lie flat, sometimes you have your legs in the air."

"Really?" said Ruth. "I feel much better knowing that" (203).

This dialogue is followed by Teresa's information on how to choose the best sperm bank if you want to get pregnant. Did you know there were sperm auctions, sperm sales and discounts, sperm catalogues and sperm birthday presents? I didn't either. But in New York, nothing seems impossible.

There is, however, a sense of sameness in this novel which begins to grate on any Lily Brett fan's nerves. Her narrative heroines appear in various shapes and guises, but they are always born in Germany to holocaust survivors, were raised in Melbourne, and have emigrated to New York, where they do extremely well in various fashionable professions. There is the memory of an ever-sad mother, there is an artist husband, and most importantly, there is the quirky father. Edek is just too good to be true. I remember how my own father slipped into dementia well

before Edek's age, how his bodily functions deteriorated and how difficult relations were with him until he finally died in his nineties. None of this applies to Edek who seems to have a sexual appetite like a teenager and a performance like James Bond, and whose grasp of business matters is on a par with Bill Gates. Brett writes for a certain market, and that market is now open for stories about the elderly because the geriatrification of western societies is a huge social problem which we do not want to countenance. But as an escapist novel it is in a class of its own.
