

Surviving the earthquake

A style which is unique, a voice at once compelling and recognisable.
NICHOLAS LE MESURIER discusses the novels of **BERNICE RUBENS**.

Bernice Rubens's seventeen novels may be said to fall into two broad and overlapping groups: those concerned with the enclosed worlds of tortured families and relationships seen through the eyes of lonely people coming to terms with iniquity; or the epic novels dealing with themes as awesome as the persecution of the Jews or the story of Russia this century. Never afraid to tackle a difficult subject, her characters range from an unborn child, to a closet transvestite, to God Almighty Himself.

A writer's career is rarely composed of fragments. Bernice Rubens has a style which is unique, a voice at once compelling and recognisable. Even when starting a novel with the attempted suicide of the main character the dark humour by which she is often categorised is there.

She is, of course, more than an audacious comedienne. Her roots are in suffering and a kind of sardonic humour which is a testimony to a legacy unique in human history. 'Know, stranger, of our chronic permanence', is an epigraph to survival which, whether it is of a people faced with the threat of extinction, or of an individual adrift in an existentialist universe, is the supreme command. Her work is a hymn to life, sung in an undertone beneath a chorus of disaffection.

Bernice Rubens's own background is eclectic. Born in Cardiff into a liberal Jewish family, her upbringing combined an awareness of her own cultural legacy with an outward looking interest in the city which she acknowledges as having adopted her. The sense of being part of the world, and yet different from it, informs the behaviour of many of her characters; and while her work frequently draws upon and refers to Orthodox Jewish settings and practices, she is by no means restricted by them.

Her first novel was published in 1960, and with it she established an identity which has remained throughout her career. *Set On Edge* is the story of a Jewish family, the Sperbers, whose eldest daughter Gladys suffers and perpetuates a sense of guilt which both stains their family relationships and makes for delicious comedy. The opening paragraph sets the scene for a whole oeuvre:

The trouble with family relationships is conscience, which is nearly always guilty. The Sperber family were guilt riddled, and as no man will bear his guilt alone but looks for its source, finding there someone to blame or hold responsible, so the Sperbers sought their rotten root. Each of them knew from the beginning where the search would lead them, and each was afraid of showing the other the way. (p 10)

Awareness that one is not what one ought to be, far from breeding humility, encourages a relentless tendency to scapegoating, of which the victim is an equally willing participant. Gladys adopts the role of martyr to the family, foregoing her own happiness to suffer that of others. Yet they themselves are far from happy: failure, disappointment and a talent for manipulation are their characteristics.

'Her work is a hymn to life, sung in an undertone beneath a chorus of disaffection.'

Best wishes,
 Bernice Rubens

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Their salvation lies in the unconscious talent for self-parody with which Bernice Rubens invests them.

In *Sunday Best* (1971), George Verrey-Smith, failed schoolmaster and husband, finds solace from the burden of his weekday identity by dressing in his wife's clothes on Sundays. As the confessional narrative makes clear, his form of guilt is directly inherited from the treatment he suffered at the hands of his father, a misogynist who took every opportunity to crush signs of 'feminine' weakness in his son. George's consequent behaviour, while certainly odd, has its own logic, and the revelation that he killed his father is easily accepted.

What distinguishes the novel, however, is the remarkable balance she achieves between a farcical plot, full of mistaken identities, caricatures and false pursuits, and the poignancy of George's situation. For he is at the mercy of his alter-ego, which is both a device to protect him from iniquity, and the means by which iniquity is thrust upon him.

George is one of a number of characters whose near-insanity is revealed as being a natural, almost inevitable, result of a conflict between a sensitive individual and an oppressive regime, from which they have no other escape. Her concern for the individual, and her sense of compassion for those whose lives are damaged by experience, are among her most endearing qualities.

The Elected Member, published in 1969 and winner of the Booker Prize in 1970, is a stark yet wittily told story of madness and institutionalisation. Norman Zweck, brilliant son of an East End Jewish family and inheritor of their outrageous expectations, is seen as descending into a hell of drug addiction and schizophrenia. His guilt neuroses have their source in sexual bewilderment, themselves a reaction to his role as the chosen one, elected by his family to live out their expectations of success and atonement. The links between the intensely knit family structure with its enforced orthodoxy, and his retreat into fantasy as a defence of his battered self, are acidly scored. Yet there is a great tenderness in the novel, and the strains of coping with a loved one who is insane, for whom family ties make them inevitably responsible, are beautifully revealed.

In this apocryphal passage, which occurs at the end of the novel just after his father has died and he realises that he is at last alone, Norman attempts to pray with a fellow inmate from the asylum where he has spent too much of his life:

...He closed his eyes and begged the old and ragged faith to enter him. "Shema," he began. He started in



BERNICE RUBENS: never afraid to tackle a difficult subject.

Hebrew to clarify which god he was addressing, but he was conscious of Billy at his side and he had to pray for him too. "Jesus," he whispered. He momentarily checked on his addressee. He was glad that what they called his madness had managed to transcend the childish obscenity of that word. "Jesus," he said, and moreover, "Sweet Jesus." His sobs were choking him, not only for his father, whose peace he almost envied, but for himself and Billy, and all those around him, so loosely tacked onto life. He looked around the ward and smelled its desolation. For loneliness smells. He looked at Billy, then at the chessplayer, the swallower, the hand-washer and the tight-lipped lad in the corner ...he gathered them all into his prayer. "You," he screamed to the ceiling, "And you bloody well know who I mean." He sank weeping onto his bed. "Dear God," he said. It was a word after all that covered everybody. "Look after us cold and chosen ones." (p 24)

The weightiness of her themes is frequently offset by humour, which serves to heighten the tragedy while appealing to our sentiments. Jewish, and particularly Yiddish, humour plays heavily upon irony, sarcasm and paradox, for which there is an historical precedence; for as Leo Rosten points out in his delightful book, *The Joys of Yiddish* (Penguin 1988), "...the only way Jews could retain their sanity was to view a dreadful world with sardonic, astringent eyes," and quotes Isaac Bashevis Singer as saying: "Yiddish may be the only language that has never been spoken by men in power." Thus, "Is

only a little mad, my son." suggests within a phrase a father's desperate longing and helplessness before a judgement too terrible to bear.

If there is a God in Bernice Rubens's world, he is a remote one; though he has a walk-on part in a later work, *Our Father* (1987), for which she won a Welsh City Council Prize. Here, God takes to appearing before her protagonist, Veronica Smiles, in all sorts of unlikely places. Veronica, a professional explorer and escapee, has a serious guilt complex, which is gradually explained through her perusal of a drawer full of letters and newspaper cuttings. These lead her back to confront a crime committed in the innocence of childhood, which nevertheless caused the death of her parents and step-brother for which she has been seeking redemption in frigid independence ever since. Her meeting with Edward Boniface, aristocratic but infertile heir to a fortune, and her subsequent engagement and not so-immaculate conception, are feeble attempts to assuage the knowledge that she is ultimately responsible. God, who appears as a rather vulgar and inept old man, appears at her bidding—though annoyingly only at her unconscious bidding—to dog her attempts at atonement, until she finally repays her debt in kind.

If Veronica is burdened with a weight of psychological luggage which she must gradually unpack and store, so too is another of her characters who, in an altogether different vein, also has close encounters of the divine kind.

Sabbatai Zvi, a 17th Century Turkish Jew who actually lived to become what she calls: 'a rumour Messiah, a saviour on the grapevine, a buzz in the market place,' is the vehicle she uses to explore a curious phenomenon in history and in the human psyche: the need to believe.

Part of Sabbatai's nature is decidedly human: a homosexual and masochist, he is also a brilliant scholar with a voice, 'like an angel.' Moreover, he smells like an angel, was born at a portentous moment and claimed for himself the divine role at a time when there are pogroms in Poland and refugees in plenty to swell communities already high on expectations. The pressure of publicity and the demands of his followers lead him to assume the Messianic crown and march on Jerusalem, with inevitable results. His egotism is deftly set against his vulnerability, and as in *The Elected Member*, the influence of his family is pertinent and well traced.

Though her vision extends from her Jewish background, only seven of her novels have fea-

tured mainly Jewish settings. The survival vision, however, which is elemental to her work and which drives her characters to invent complex and sometimes bizarre strategies to help them deal with iniquity, is pervasive and distinguishes much of her writing. Such a vision has its source in the experience of a people for whom history is a tale of oppression culminating in genocide, the systematic character of which has never, yet, been equalled.

Brothers (1983) represents an attempt to realise that vision on a historical plane, and while it undoubtedly has an overt sense of moral purpose about it, it is nevertheless an important work, and contains some of her finest writing.

In a revealing interview with Michael Parnell (NWR 9) she tells how her own Welsh background and her awareness of the proximity of tragedy inherent in the Welsh experience, particularly in the mining valleys of South Wales where her father, a refugee from Latvia, worked as a credit draper, contributed to the section of the book where Aaron and Leon, third generation of the Bindell family and refugees from pogrom in Odessa, made their home in Wales. In a recurring pattern, one brother looks out beyond the Jewish community, while the other remains stalwartly within. The marriage which occurs outside is a disaster; yet in the pit explosion in Senghenydd in 1913 which kills his wife and son, a link is suggested between the Welsh community, with its inheritance of reticence and survival, and the Jewish diaspora, with its own tenets of survival:

The names of the dead were in alphabetical order. So he did not have far to scan for Bindell. It was clearly not there, but he did not trust its absence. Perhaps Margaret had registered him as Davies. A little further down the Davieses began...There were two David Davieses and either of them could have applied to his son or Gramp, and Leon's heart froze. He looked quickly at the addresses in the opposite column, but both David Davieses lived in Stanley Street. Then he scanned the address column. Only one lived in the Huts. He looked at the name. Morgan Jones, the tenor in the Male Voice Choir. He turned away, the tears flowing freely now, and he did nothing to restrain them. He went back to his bench and he waited. More men were brought up that day and a few of them were alive...none of them wanted to speak. For their own reasons they had joined the conspiracy of silence that covered the subject of events underground. Their reasons were not those of the management, whose silence alibied the long history of their negligence. The rescued men held a survivor's reticence, that silence of embarrassment and shame. They took their women's proffered arms and made their ways home. But none of them, either of the dead

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or of the living, were Dai Davies or David Bindell. (pp 232-3)

Yet in spite of the possibility of universal suffrage, the litany which runs throughout the book and which confirms the identity of the characters, is that which is passed from generation to generation from the time of the 'first' Bindell who, faced with the imminent loss of his sons, aged ten, into the Czar's army, advises them:

"There is no cause on earth worth dying for...no God worth one's dying breath, no country worth one's martyrdom, no principle worth one's sacrifice. Only in the name of love is Death (sic) worthy. And friendship. Therefore make no friends. Friendship seduces sacrifice..."

"You must survive, my children...Love each other as you have always done, and give each other your protection. Never go to bed in a state of quarrel. Settle your differences before sleep. Remember us all and all the love that binds you. That will give you strength." (p49)

This is the touchstone of a faith to which each generation must adhere. For beyond the mask of assimilation each is essentially and irreducibly of that inheritance which sets him apart. For each represents an element of what she describes as 'chronic permanence' within a history of which the prime lesson and injunction is that, 'Pharaoh has sundry names, and Egypt dwells in many lands'.

Thus is atonement done, through allegiance and identity; ironically for the persecution endured and the guilt of survival suffered. Survivor's guilt is the most powerful and complex aspect of the emotional background to her work.

Such culpability, of course, is not the sole prerogative of Judaism. In *A Solitary Grief* (1991) Bernice Rubens explores the consequences of a tragedy of an altogether different kind, though it is one which, for Dr Alistair Crown, eminent Harley Street psychiatrist, has no less implications for his personal survival. The birth of his only child with Downs Syndrome is as an 'earthquake' which he must 'piteously survive' (p 10). Events which thus may go unnoticed on the scale of human suffering are to some of enormous significance.

That parents of children with disabilities should often feel guilt at their part in the relationship is well known: here Bernice Rubens traces the effect of that guilt upon her protagonist's masculine ego. His daughter is, in a sense, a slight on his manhood, an emblem of his imperfection, for which he must in some way atone. His particular form of

atonement comes in his support for Esau, a giant of a man covered in hair, whose own form of atonement for the damage done to him by his father is to expose his reviled body to those sorts of people his father most hated.

Atonement is dangerous, however, for having exposed himself once too often Esau finds he cannot live without his fears. For Alistair, who likewise cannot live without his source of fear, atonement is not so simple. His is, inevitably, a solitary grief, and the crime he eventually commits is but a doomed attempt to assuage a guilt which has no explicable source. Ultimately, she suggests, there are no answers to why we are as we are. If we are evil, then that evil 'does not require a cause' (p 239).

It is fortunate, then, that Bernice Rubens is able to reveal the flip side of horror, which is humour, and to portray it as a redeeming force in her vision. The comedy lies in the situations she develops, and the pathos of people who are burdened by their consciences and who struggle to atone. The stakes are high, and few ultimately manage to succeed. Buster, the unborn protagonist of *Spring Sonata* (1979) and her most audacious creation, chooses ultimately to quit the game before starting it: others less fortunate make do as best they can.

Yet there is a dignity to be found in survival, which in the end may lead to some form of deliverance. Madame Sousatzka, in the novel of that name, may be in truth Mrs Susskatz, and her famous method of teaching the piano a sham, but she is able to realise that, 'there is no limit to human endurance' so long as there is imagination left to turn adversity into triumph. This, through all her dark and labyrinthine explorations of the human soul in the extremes of its suffering and isolation, Bernice Rubens has continued to do.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

All Bernice Ruben's novels are available in paperback, published by Abacus, with the exception of *Mother Russia*, (1992), which is published by Chapmans. Apart from those novels mentioned in this article, Bernice Rubens has published: *Mate In Three* (1966) *Go Tell The Lemming* (1973) *I Sent A Letter To My Love* (1975) *The Ponsonby Post* (1977) *A Five Year Sentence* (1978) *Birds Of Passage* (1981) *Mr Wakefield's Crusade* (1985). ◇