

Bangor Daily News (Maine)

Distributed by Knight/Ridder Tribune News Service

March 27, 2006 Monday

Chamber pot of gold

Kristen Andresen, Bangor Daily News, Maine

Mar. 27--Lately, people keep giving Mameve Medwed chamber pots.

This might seem a bit odd -- and perhaps insulting -- unless you've read the Bangor native's new novel, "How Elizabeth Barrett Browning Saved My Life" (William Morrow, \$24.95) In the book, antiques dealer Abby Randolph is an unlikely heroine who experiences a change in fortune from an unlikely source: an ordinary-looking chamber pot once owned by the extraordinary poet. Abby is a down-on-her-luck thirtysomething who's still mourning her mother's death and the loss of her first and perhaps only true love. She's also still coming to terms with her own shortcomings -- she dropped out of Harvard, where her father was a legendary scholar.

When a colleague suggests she take the vessel on "Antiques Roadshow," her life is turned upside-down. Add a smarmy journalist, that long-lost lover and Abby's deliciously detestable "friend," Lavinia, and her humdrum life gets a lot more interesting. Just the way Medwed likes it.

"We all grew up with Lavinias," Medwed said by phone from her home in Cambridge, Mass. "She's like a Lucy on Charlie Brown. I like for my readers to say, 'I know somebody like her.'" Though she may have encountered a few holier-than-thou childhood pals in Bangor, Medwed, the daughter of Mimi and Harry Stern, has fond memories of her hometown. She was surrounded by lots of cousins and friends, and she loved going to concerts at the University of Maine.

She got an early start on writing at Garland Street Junior High, where she wrote a gossip column for the school newspaper. She and her husband, Howard, went to nursery school together, though they didn't reconnect until their college days -- she studied at Simmons College in Boston and he was at Princeton.

They married and moved to Cambridge so Howard could attend Harvard Law, and they've been there ever since.

Like any college town, Cambridge has its share of town-and-gown issues, and Medwed has woven them into the tapestry of her narrative.

"I have a lot of friends who grew up in academic families and it seems like the kind of life lived under a bell jar," she said.

Indeed, Abby Randolph's life is under constant scrutiny from her dad, Lavinia and most relentlessly, herself. Her antiques booth is the one thing that brings her joy, if she could just muster up the courage to trust her instincts rather than chastise herself for what she hasn't become.

Antiques seemed a natural fit, because Medwed started going to auctions and estate sales "practically when I was a baby." Her mom was a great lover of antiques, and when she passed away, Medwed inherited her collection of "Bangoreana."

Mameve (who pronounces her name May-MEEVE) has a fascination with objects, as well -- most notably fake food. She says she doesn't like fancy things. Her tastes tend toward the more eclectic, and flea-market portraits decorate the walls of her Cambridge home.

"I'm a writer, I'm a novelist," she says. "I'm always looking for characters and I have lots of strange people staring off my walls."

Those strange people have inspired compelling characters -- Medwed's four novels are packed with loveable people with real-life quirks. In each, her voice is spot on -- any woman who has felt like she doesn't quite have it together will identify with Abby. Not surprisingly, Medwed's writing always starts with a character.

"How Elizabeth Barrett Browning Saved My Life" sprung from a conversation with Medwed's agent, an antiques aficionado who sent her a New York Times clipping of a couple who met at a flea market.

"I wanted to write about my passion for an object," Medwed recalled. "The difficult part was deciding what that object was going to be."

It came down to a chamber pot and a cuspidor, and a friend told her the chamber pot was much more interesting. From there, a series of coincidences led her to the Browning connection, and the rest is history. Or, her story. And it's quite engaging.

"When you write a novel, it's like you're going around with a begging bowl," Medwed said. "You put all these pieces into the bowl and eventually you have all the ingredients for a recipe to make a novel."

Bangor Daily News columnist Tom Weber contributed to this story.