

In 'Browning,' possession is nine-10ths of the draw

The Boston Globe

By Roberta Silman | March 12, 2006

How Elizabeth Barrett Browning Saved My Life

By Mameve Medwed

Morrow, 248 pp., **\$24.95**

This is a novel as delicious as its title, and a wonderful antidote if you're slightly depressed, searching for something to sink into on a snowy day or, like its heroine, have been in sweats since Friday night and it is now Sunday afternoon. Hard to put down once you have begun, "How Elizabeth Barrett Browning Saved My Life," by Mameve Medwed, is narrated by Abby Randolph, who is not known for being a good "finisher," who quit Harvard just short of graduation and now owns a booth called "Objects of Desire" at an antique emporium in Cambridge. When the novel begins, she is mourning her beloved mother, Emily, who died in an earthquake in India, and trying to get her bearings since her boyfriend and business partner, Clyde, ran off with one of their customers. Although Abby is not above letting you know how sorry she is for herself, she's also extremely engaging.

Moreover, her situation is fascinating: a child of an eminent Harvard professor and a proper mother who finally gave in to her feelings for her dearest woman friend, Abby is truly alone. After Mom ran off with Henrietta, Dad married one of his students and is now in California with a new family. All Abby can call her own is the stuff she sells, picked up at auctions and places like Brimfield, and her friends in the emporium. In short, she's miserable. But when her colleague Gus spies a dusty chamber pot in the corner of her booth, things begin to happen.

The chamber pot, once the property of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, leads her to a hilarious encounter with the television program "Antiques Roadshow" and the discovery that she owns something valuable. However, instead of bringing her the lift and money she needs, it sets in motion a chain of events that eventually guides her back to her first and lost love. To get there she has to deal with Lavinia, Henrietta's daughter, who is an amusing, though not entirely convincing, caricature of the evil, self-deluded goody-two-shoes whom we have all known. Lavinia was Abby's best friend when they were growing up next door to each other and is now suing her for the chamber pot.

So Abby becomes embroiled in a lawsuit, hires a college friend who has become a hot-shot lawyer, and discovers the complications of subpoenas and depositions. Along the way she has an adventure with a reporter for The Boston Globe, who is too patently sleazy for this reader to believe that Abby would fall for him. Still, that's part of her charm; although Abby can't seem to finish things, she also doesn't know when to stop.

Yet she is learning, and on the morning of the deposition she muses: "Usually I try not to dwell on my losses. Not that I'm some Pollyanna who can always separate the gold from the dross, as you already know. As you also already know, I do have a tendency to whine about those who done me wrong as well as my own failings. . . . But I'm making a huge effort to improve my character. If character is destiny, then I'm determined to whip mine into better shape."

But don't be deceived by Medwed's light touch and irrepressible sense of humor. Here is a canny writer with a distinctive voice who knows what it is like to be young and loopy in an increasingly loopy world and who is also inviting parallels with the 19th century, when intelligent women rose above familial tyranny, depression, and illness through sheer will.

Taking courage from Browning's remarkable story, Abby begins to explore her relationship to things and gets to the deeper, crucial question: Who owns what, or whom? As she realizes, "People exist in their objects; they inhabit the walls of their rooms. Old things bear traces of lives lived; possessions provoke cherished memories. That was Grandpa's watch, a son might say. I remember when he wore it, the way it dangled just so from that chain. I picture my mother holding the chamber pot, . . . treasuring the history contained in its discolored porcelain."

Objects are easy, though; either you have them or you don't. But what about one's feelings, memories, secrets, and dreams? Don't you own those as well? This is at the core of Abby's malaise and current predicament. For Ned, Lavinia's older brother, has written a terrible novel called "The Cambridge Ladies Who Live in Furnished Souls," from the E. E. Cummings poem, which also serves as the epigraph for this book.

It is one thing to write about the pain of being abandoned by mothers who have found "pure ecstasy," as one writes just before her death, but it is quite another to mine a beloved's inner life without a trace of caution or apparent remorse. For Abby, Ned's novel constitutes an unforgivable betrayal and raises the eternal question: To whom do we belong? It has been posed by families of writers for centuries (think Erica Jong's husband reacting to "Fear of Flying" or John Updike's first wife to the Maple stories) and is extremely important in an age when fiction and memoir have become so blurred. So although this charming, wry romp gallops to a happy close, and Abby surprises herself along the way by developing real "spine," it is this more profound problem that lingers, compelling us to confront our own bonds with our diverse objects of desire.

Roberta Silman's most recent novel is "Beginning the World Again." She can be reached at rsilman@verizon.net.

See "Bookings," Page C6, for information on a local appearance by Mameve Medwed. ■