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BOOK REVIEW: Hannah Merker

Medwed puts life's funny foot forward

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One writer has described Mameve (pronounced MAY-MEEVE, an inspired combining of two grandmothers' names) Medwed's writing as "outrageously funny and deliciously wicked."

In "How Elizabeth . . ." her fourth novel, she outdoes herself in her propensity for the comic, and her penchant for writing about the oft not-so-subtle instability of one's self abutting the manifest mores of one's immediate heritage.

Abby Randolph is recovering from the recent departure from her life of her latest live-in boyfriend, with whom she had set up business in an antiques mall. How to erase the "C" (for Clyde) from the name of her cubicle - A & C Collectibles? Clyde, we soon learn, is a mere parenthesis in her lacking lovelorn life. At 33, Abby, though reluctant to admit it, is still in love with her Ned, the boy she grew up with who lived next door. They have always been close, until he wrote his first novel, confiding all her secret longings, yearnings, revealed to him in utter confidence.

It is easy to label Medwed's latest - a love story with a high IQ. Abby, sitting in her cubicle waiting for an assault of customers, barely arranges her found artifacts in an appealing manner. Her next-door antique seller, rearranging her mess, notices a ceramic piece carelessly filled with faux fringe floral featheryness, an artless arrangement. Hmmm . . . what do we have here, he mutters.

Oh . . . just something her mother and her mother's female lover had picked up in their travels in Italy. Yes, here is another dimension to Abby's historical life - her mother and the mother of Lavinia and Ned, who lived next door, with their Harvard professorship husbands, have run off together to a life of love, and have recently died together in an earthquake in India. The dusty ceramic object half hidden in Abby's cubicle is a chamber pot.

Abby's antiques/cubicle/neighbor suggests she take the chamber pot to the television show, "Antiques Roadshow." To Abby's amazement, she is told the chamber pot once belonged to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. It is worth \$75,000.

Business picks up with Abby's newly acquired fame. Her father, now rapidly producing a new family in La Jolla with a graduate student, cannot understand why she left Harvard just short of a degree. Abby, like her mother, has always been enamored by old things: "In spite of my starts and stops, I'd always liked everybody's leavings, the discarded and dented bits and pieces of other people's lives . . . 'Our Abigail's a pack rat,' my father would opine as I'd tiptoe past his study with yet another box of salvage. Everything's a learning experience, my mother would soothe.' "

Meanwhile as Abby's life unravels before us, we cannot help laughing at Medwed's utter wit. This is a Cinderella story for the modern era. As soon as Abby's notoriety abounds, Ned's sister, Lavinia, her former "friend" advances a lawsuit for the return of the chamber pot, which she had not wanted, shoved off to Abby's protectorship, when they were dividing their mothers' belongings. "I picture the sweet drawing of the cocker spaniel with the word Flush written underneath it now sitting in Mary Agnes's (her lawyer) vault, not that an inanimate object requires Solomonic solutions."

Abby's love life begins to pick up. A reporter for the Boston Globe calls her for an interview. He wines and dines her and ultimately beds her. "Yes, reader. You can't admonish me any more than I admonish myself. Mankind is weak and a woman in need of a man, a woman with legal problems and a single carton of yogurt and a frozen chicken a la king for one in her refrigerator, is weaker still."

He will later divulge the interview skills he learned in journalism school. "I must admit," Abby sighs, "I must confess I shed a few tears. For old, generic breaking-up's sake. The signs were all there - his sex manual skills. I'm sure he was the kind of kid who drowned kittens, who pulled off the wings of butterflies. Was I so desperate that I could overlook such blatant character flaws?"

Medwed has said, "I've always wanted to write about people's obsession with things." Born and raised in Bangor, Medwed grew up in a household of readers and collectors. "In my family," she says, "the arts were valued above the practical." She has lived in an old Victorian house, stuffed with all sorts of collections, for 30 years, with her husband, whom she met while building sandcastles, in kindergarten. "I grew up," she tells me in a telephone conversation, "with lots of antiques, no conveniences but a lot of beautiful and half-broken-down furniture and cracked plates. I love old stuff."

All Medwed's books are comedies of manners from a risible, oft hilarious point of view. Her first novel, "Mail," about a woman from Old Town, Maine, who falls in love with her mailman, has been optioned for a movie. The screenplay has been written by the perfect choice for Medwed's humorous take on life - the late Wendy Wasserstein.

Medwed's books, short stories, touch our hearts, engender a rippling outloud
laugh from us as we read, glimpses of moments in that perchance, at the time, we
did not recognize with laughter.

Her writing is difficult to put down, her characters lingering in our minds long
afterward. Perhaps because they are us.

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