

Thrills, Pills & Chills

Poet-performer Cheryl B's posthumously published memoir. **By Stephanie Schroeder**

I mostly knew Cheryl Burke by reputation: a street-smart writer and performer who went by the moniker Cheryl B the Motor Oil Queen. The “motor oil queen” part was ironic. It was based on the content of one of her most famous spoken word poems and describes a sexual encounter where a dude uses motor oil as lube to fuck a girl up the ass.

This story was classic Cheryl B—unsentimental, tough and impenetrable. This rock-star glam-slam poet was, at first, a serious alcoholic: A brilliant writer and performer, she was pissing away her talent on huge amounts of tequila and cocaine. Cheryl got sober in 2001 and never looked back. Her legendary poem “Reasons to Stop” details the day she decided to give up drugs and booze. When she died two years ago, from complications related to Hodgkin’s lymphoma, Cheryl B was only 38 years young and had been sober for almost a decade.

The co-founder and co-host, most recently, of the New York City monthly reading series Sideshow: The Queer Literary Carnival, which presented “serious literature for ridiculous times,” Cheryl had earlier created and produced PVC: The Poetry vs. Comedy Variety Show, a live slam between comics and poets. She had also founded and curated the multi-genre series Atomic, an extremely popular Brooklyn reading event.

Cheryl B was also a playwright. Among her other plays, she wrote *The Donut Hole*, which ran in New York City for long enough to raise her profile beyond literary badass to true star status. *The Donut Hole* was a work that touched many lives. “She had a for-real, unique, fresh and original voice,” said one colleague who was also a fan. “Cheryl was able to find the humor in really painful situations without in any way dismissing the reality of it all.” The play is about teenagers who work in a donut shop in Nowheresville, and also discover sex and sexual power.

A few years ago, in a Lower East Side bookstore, I watched Cheryl read for about an hour from *When I Knew Everyone on Avenue A*, the memoir she was working on at the time. I was blown away. Her story was extremely powerful.

When I heard that her memoir was being published as a novel, *My Awesome Place: The Autobiography of Cheryl B*, I couldn’t wait to get my hands on it. There’s plenty in it for everyone, particularly those of us who have never fit in. Cheryl was the fat kid everyone made fun of, the shunned ugly duckling, and the too-smart-for-her-own-good girl in a family of violent, unself-aware and selfish people.

This is her father’s reaction when she was accepted at New York



University: “He lifted up his dinner plate and hit me on the head. ‘You want to go to college?

Look at you, you’re 21, as fat as a house!’” In Manhattan, between her junior and senior years at N.Y.U., Cheryl “rented a walk-in closet of an upscale apartment in an exclusive building in the West Village.” As a young adult, she struggled to find her place in the world and her voice as a writer. While at N.Y.U. she met her new best friend, a flamboyant gay man, started partying hard, and dating women (and men). A famous quote of Cheryl’s, which she used to describe her sexuality, is repeated in the book: “I’m 85% lesbian, 15% bisexual, 100% Queer Dyke.”

My Awesome Place was pieced together—from Cheryl’s last manuscript and her earlier drafts, as well as essays and emails—by the three other women in her writing group. The foreword, by her literary executor, Sarah Schulman (who also edited the book), and the afterword, by her girlfriend Kelli Dunham, are both extremely informative and so heartrending; only a sphinx could be unmoved. The press release from Topside Signature accurately describes the narrative as inhabiting “a liminal space between fiction and memoir, track[ing] her struggle to translate her working

class New Jersey roots and define herself as an artist against the backdrop of an unforgiving city, a series of disastrous girlfriends and boyfriends, and an intense, intimate relationship with drugs and alcohol.”

Finally coming out the other side, Cheryl B stayed sober, went on to create superb work, and continued to inspire and encourage other writers and artists. She shared the last part of her life with comic Kelli Dunham, the first girlfriend Cheryl really trusted. It’s been said in and among Cheryl’s community, and the N.Y.C. artistic, literary and queer communities, that Dunham’s

love transformed Cheryl from a self-loathing, secretive figure who was always willing to give help but never able to ask for it, into an open, welcoming—even happy—woman who learned how to reach out and embrace the community that came her way. Now, that community is giving Cheryl’s words a life beyond her own. (topsidepress.com) ■

A TASTE OF THE GOOD LIFE

In two new books, lesbians find themselves through food, family and farming.

***Licking the Spoon: A Memoir of Food, Family and Identity*, By Candace Walsh**

(Seal Press): Candace Walsh is a writer and magazine editor who’s compiled several collections for Seal Press, including *Dear John, I Love Jane: Women Write About Leaving Men for Women*. *Licking the Spoon: A Memoir of Food, Family and Identity*, is her first solo work, a hybrid of food-based, family memoir and contemporary lesbian coming out story. In the first chapter, “How Cuba Married Crete,” she writes, “I decided to write about my lifelong love affair with food, and once I sat down, I realized that I needed to talk about my own ingredients: my family—my grandmothers and grandfather, my mother and father, who gave me my genes and made the meals that shaped my tastes—one way or another.” We see Walsh learning to cook in her family kitchen and the kitchens of her grandmothers, how identity is hidden and revealed through food, and also the devastation to her family caused by generations of grief, abuse and addiction.

Unfortunately, so much detail in the book’s early chapters also gives rise to a notable overabundance of family members, including great-grandmothers, grandfathers and uncles, until they’re virtually indistinguishable to the reader. Yet, in other parts of the book, there are inferences to people never introduced by name, such as her siblings, an odd oversight. Although Walsh describes her

bulimic behavior throughout the years, she never recounts a recovery process. The reader is left wondering if her recent forays into juicing and eating raw foods have helped heal her—or are yet another symptom of disordered eating. Some of these issues could have been cleared up in the editing process, but ultimately they do not detract much from the story. At its heart, *Licking the Spoon* is a love story written by Walsh for her wife Laura, whom she found after so many years of failed heterosexual relationships, and for the food and the family recipes that helped nurture her along the way. Engaging in its narrative and as satisfying as the recipes for Ropa Vieja and Chicken Fricassee included, this is truly a memoir from the heart.

***Getting Somewhere*, Beth Neff**

(Viking Juvenile): Beth Neff spent many years owning and running an organic farm in Michigan. So she knows how to authentically describe the environment of her first novel, *Getting Somewhere*. Having raised several teenagers, Neff also lends credibility to the notion that city kids might thrive in such a place—especially if they’ve been sentenced there by the juvenile justice system, in lieu of a harsher sentence in a correctional facility. It’s these life experiences that inform the premise of *Getting Somewhere*, which explores 12 weeks in the lives of Sarah,

Lauren, Cassie and Jenna, four teenaged girls who’ve experienced homelessness, sexual abuse and crime. As they get used to the loving guidance and dedicated work ethic of the farm’s lesbian owners, all four teens must grapple with issues of identity, recovery, self-worth, safety and betrayal. Neff creates characters readers will care about, and lets the story unfold sweetly, like an heirloom tomato ripening under the warm summer sun. And her descriptions of farming, with its bounty of vegetables, and of the land, with its rivers, trees and fields, may make readers want to dig in the dirt. If this sounds too pastoral, rest assured the novel has also got grit, and Neff doesn’t shy away from tough issues like eating disorders, drug use and cutting. Nor does she portray small town life as excessively idyllic, or make her lesbian characters overly altruistic. But the tension really mounts when one girl, battling her own inner demons, attempts to sabotage the entire experience. As the book winds towards its satisfying and believable conclusion, readers will hope that somewhere in the real world, wayward young girls may be given a chance to experience the recovery process depicted in this thoughtfully crafted first novel.

[Rachel Pepper]

