

queer classics: rita mae brown's "rubyfruit jungle"

BY ERNIE MCLEOD

Reading Rita Mae Brown's famous 1973 novel "Rubyfruit Jungle," I tried to imagine I was someone other than myself. What if I was, say, a young woman in the early 70s with a budding interest in feminism and a blossoming desire for other women? Someone with an anti-authoritarian streak and a sharp tongue she's been afraid to set loose. Someone who hasn't read a novel with a wise-cracking, out, proud, ain't-gonna-take-no-shit lesbian heroine because, well, there really haven't been any. If I was someone like this, I imagine there's a good chance *Rubyfruit Jungle* would've rocked my world.

Rubyfruit Jungle was Rita Mae Brown's debut novel, and in her 1988 writers' manual "Starting From Scratch" she says she wanted it "to be so witty that even Republicans would be forced to enjoy it." "Forced" might be the operative word in that statement, though with millions of copies sold in the almost thirty years since it was first published, there have to be a few Republicans among its many admirers.

In just over 200 pages the novel covers the adventures of the unsinkable Molly Bolt from her childhood in a "rural dot outside of York, Pennsylvania" through her graduation from film school in New York some fifteen years later. It's a rollicking ride, the tone of which is set from the start when a boy flashing his "thing" to Molly on their way home from school sets off a chain of mostly farcical events that concludes with Molly's not-so-farcical discovery that she's a "bastard."

It takes some gumption for

an author to begin a lesbian novel with several scenes involving fore-skin, but gumption is one thing Rita Mae Brown has in spades — it's her badge of honor, the key to her recognition. Had the term "politically incorrect" been popular when *Rubyfruit Jungle* was published, I trust Brown would have happily applied it to the work.

Learning that she's a bastard is but one of the many traumas with which Molly must cope as she proceeds headlong and headstrong

ing another woman is as good as it friggin' gets, no matter what anyone might say to the contrary. This may not seem so revolutionary now — it may, in fact, seem a bit quaint — but thirty years ago thoroughly unabashed lesbian or gay male protagonists were hard to come by. The world can try to knock Molly Bolt down because she's a woman and a lesbian, but she'll do her damndest not to let it, and — more importantly — she's not going to knock herself down.

Quotable Rubyfruit:
"Once you know what women are like, men get kind of boring. I'm not trying to put them down, I mean I like them sometimes as people, but sexually they're dull. I suppose if a woman doesn't know any better, she thinks it's good stuff!"



into adolescence and early adulthood. Listing them wouldn't capture the sometimes juvenile, sometimes raunchy, sometimes tender, sometimes vengeful nature of the upheavals, but suffice it to say they mostly involve some combination of love, sex, money, and unjust treatment courtesy of the straight-white-male establishment.

What distinguishes Molly as a character is her unwavering belief that having sex with and lov-

Brown presents a character who makes mistakes and often shoots her mouth off at the wrong time, but she never doubts her own self-worth, intelligence, sanity, or sexuality. Though *Rubyfruit Jungle* is only semi-autobiographical, one can't help but sense this same self-confidence emanating from its creator.

Brown discusses the need for authorial self-confidence in the opening chapter of *Starting From*

Scratch. Humor, she believes, "comes from self-confidence. There's an aggressive element to wit." She goes on to say that men were allowed to be aggressive, i.e. funny, on the page, whereas women were expected — unless they were "on safe 'feminine' territory" à la Erma Bombeck — to remain seriously polite. Needless to say a book that includes not one but two animal excrement revenge scenes, orgasm by grapefruit, pee displayed in Macadamia nut jars, and blithe comments about mother-daughter incest can hardly be described as polite.

Late in the novel, confronting a childhood lover who's settled into heterosexual banality and wants to delete all "perverted" lesbian traces from her past, Molly cuts through the bullshit and declares herself a "devil-may-care-lesbian." I think it's safe to say Rita Mae Brown wrote *Rubyfruit Jungle* from an equally defiant vantage point.

Born in 1944, Brown's early life shares many details with that of her fictional creation. She was adopted, taunted for being a bastard, but raised by basically loving parents in York, Pennsylvania. Her family later moved to Fort Lauderdale, where they lived in a pink house. A voracious reader from early childhood, she attended the University of Florida on scholarship but, penalized for her involvement in the Civil Rights movement, she fled the South for New York in 1964, arriving in the city with no money and little else to go on. In 1969 she gained notoriety by publicly confronting NOW's refusal to address lesbian issues. As a result, Betty Friedan tagged her part of the "lavender menace," and Brown quit NOW to join Redstockings, a more radical feminist group.

Since entering the literary limelight with *Rubyfruit Jungle*, Brown has gone on to write screenplays and many books, including a memoir titled *Rita Will* (dishing on her relationship with the not-so-openly-lesbian Fannie Flagg), and a mystery series co-written with — I feel silly even writing this — her cat, Sneaky Pie. The scandal sheets went silly for a time back in the early 80s reporting on Brown's high-profile affair with Martina Navratilova, followed by one with Martina's ex, Judy Nelson. In more recent years Brown has led a less tabloid-ready existence in Charlottesville, Virginia, though she can still be counted on for pithy commentary, such as saying in a 1998 interview that the difference between the Democratic and Republican parties "is the difference between syphilis and gonorrhea."

Little did I know in 1973 that just over the hill from my adolescent angst in Barre a small press in Plainfield, Vermont, called Daughters, Inc. was pumping out many copies of a novel featuring feisty Molly Bolt, whom some have dubbed the female Huck Finn. Lord knows I could have used a dose of that feistiness at age 12, and I wouldn't mind a bit today. While I salute Rita Mae Brown the self-described "literary rabble-rouser," I can't say I salute *Rubyfruit Jungle* as literature. It's too broad to take seriously and not broad enough to be successful satire, but as Rita Mae Brown likes to respond to her critics: "If you don't like my book, write your own." ▼

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