

## book reviews



# Mental Masturbation

BY FRANCESCA SUSANNA

Reading *The Wrestling Party*, by Bett Williams, is like sitting at a bar on a dead night with some out-of-town chick, who would be attractive and interesting, except she just drones on about herself, all the cool parties she's been to, and all the cool people she knows, whom you've never met or even heard of. It is supposed to be a non-fiction memoir that reads like a novel, but it is a disconnected group of too-personal essays that read like a lot of self-absorbed dreck.

*The Wrestling Party* revolves around two things: an intense and doomed affair between Williams and a Euro-trash chick, Anikka, and the question of when desire for someone much younger, specifically a teenager, becomes exploitation. The two themes don't really come together since Anikka is twenty-nine and Williams a few years older when they meet, but in order to turn a pile of unrelated essays into something novel-esque, Williams throws in ruminations about an affair with a seventeen-year-old high school senior she had when she was thirty.

"No one wants to talk honestly about sex between adults and teenagers ... except to just say it's bad," Williams writes. It is a thrill to read this, as if that blah-blahing bar fly is finally going to start a real conversation about a real issue, maybe even let you get a word in edgewise. Unfortunately, Williams doesn't want to talk honestly about it either and immediately picks up where she left off: talking about herself.

Early in the narrative Williams complains about going to see a performance in which a storyteller "meticulously chroni-

**The Wrestling Party**  
By Bett Williams  
Alyson Books,  
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cles" an ordeal with an ovarian cyst, in hopes that the process of sharing her story will heal her. "Maybe it did," Williams writes, "but it made me quite ill." It's brilliant irony, because Williams is doing much the same thing as the cyst survivor; chronicling an intense and debilitating experience for her own sake. Who cares about the audience? Like the story teller, she is engaging in mental masturbation.

About two-thirds of the way through, the book really shines in a ten-page passage that describes the wrestling match for which the book is titled. In this passage, which is really worth the effort of going to Borders and reading it in some sunny window, Williams gets out of her head and takes on the voice of one Shawna Blackwell, "guest sportswriter." The writing is hilarious and honest. It does everything that Williams tries to accomplish in the other 184 pages of whiney prose. Shawna Blackwell seems to be a thinly disguised Shawna Kenney, an L.A. writer and S/M scenester who contributed a glowing blurb to the back of *The Wrestling Party*, and may or may not have "guest-written" those ten pages as well.

Williams' characters, real life friends of hers, are an unusual and interesting lot. There is her best friend and sexual advisor David, "...a Zen priest and a martial arts teacher...also Scottish, a pervert and degenerate writer," Anikka, the beautiful Swiss "pervert" with whom Williams is obsessed, and Allison who sort of tags along for the ride. David oddly resembles an actual writer, Barry Graham—a

Zen Buddhist from Scotland who lived in Phoenix for a time and whose website is linked to Williams'. He also contributed glowing blurbs in praise of *The Wrestling Party*.

There is a story in there. Bett is on the rebound from her relationship with the underage Shannon who has really thrown her for a loop. Bett is going from one party to another, taking drugs, writing away the pain, and searching for the meaning of her life. She meets Anikka first at a dance club then sometime later at a cookout. The first date is dinner and sex at Bett's house. Another day they go raspberry picking. They party, they wrestle, they break up and become friends. In between, Bett explores the edges of trendy sex and they end up like every other lesbian pair: processing over a bottle of wine.

None of this is new. It isn't told from some fresh new angle, and no new insights are revealed. Since Williams uses most of her energy writing about herself, none of the characters come to life enough for the reader to really care what happens to them. Some of the book is sexy and titillating, but there are all those volumes of Lesbian Erotica which offer more and better along that particular vein.

Williams touches on important topics in her book, but doesn't explore them. When does desire for someone younger become exploitation? When is it acceptable or sexy or therapeutic for a grown woman to piss on the floor? These questions could use some discussion, but she is too busy partying and being hip to stop and really think about them. ▼

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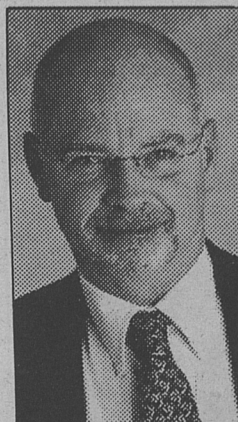
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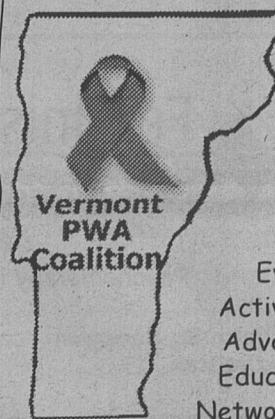
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