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The Book of Jane: A Web-Exclusive Profile of Jane Hamilton

by Claire Kirch -- Publishers Weekly, 2/16/2009 6:27:00 AM

Jane Hamilton has driven 140 miles north from her rural southeastern Wisconsin farmhouse to talk books at A Room of One's Own, the venerable feminist bookstore in downtown Madison.



Hamilton, 51, has a sixth novel, *Laura Rider's Masterpiece*, coming out in April from Grand Central. This is cause for celebration, but she's also mourning the changes in the publishing industry that she's witnessed in the decades since her debut novel, *The Book of Ruth*, was published in 1988.

"There are a lot of books right now that no one is reading," Hamilton says, eyeing the rows of trade paperbacks against the wall. Hamilton believes that Americans were serious readers in her youth: "We weren't even particularly geeky. There are young people now who are serious readers, but there aren't as many.

Not to sound full of gloom and doom,"she adds, "but the book culture in this country has changed. Author tours used to have a sense of excitement and pleasure, a sense of occasion. I remember stores having a table with wine and food. It was just a real evening," she recalls almost wistfully.

Now, Hamilton jokes, "You read for a few minutes, or not at all. I've been told, don't read, just talk about the process. All I hope, selfishly, is that there will be real books until the day I draw my last breath."

The good news is that Hamilton's self-described "malaise," her fear of the imminent demise of the entire book publishing industry, has also inspired her. It's what prompted her to throw aside a "D.O.A." novel she'd been working on for four years about a smalltown librarian embroiled in a love affair and begin writing *Laura Rider's Masterpiece*.

"This book is all about reading and it's all about writing," she says. "It's dealing with my anxiety concerning the end of the book culture, and with my anxiety as the kind of writer who has to use details from other people's lives and so is really not a good person."

Laura Rider's Masterpiece, a modern-day take on *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, centers on a smalltown master gardener and aspiring romance novelist, Laura Rider, who engineers as a plot device for her first literary effort a real-life "conscious romance" between her hypersexual husband, Charlie, and Jenna Faroli, a cultured Wisconsin Public Radio talk show host and local celebrity Rider admires. Rider composes lyrical e-mails that Charlie then sends to Faroli, who is easily seduced by Charlie's way with words. The two begin a romance that changes the course of the lives of all three in unexpected ways.

"I wanted to write something to cheer myself up, something that's kind of satirical," Hamilton says, describing *Laura Rider's Masterpiece* as "frothy," a "little puff." It's a real departure from her five

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earlier novels -- *The Book of Ruth* (1988); *A Map of the World* (1999); *The Short History of a Prince* (1998); *Disobedience* (2000); and *When Madeleine Was Young* (2006), all intense family dramas set in smalltown Middle America that include such heavy themes as a toddler's accidental drowning, a brain-injured woman's unrealized life, family dysfunction, adultery, love triangles, homophobia, emotional abuse and child sexual abuse.

Oprah Winfrey, whose reading preferences have been well documented, chose two of Hamilton's novels for the Oprah Book Club. *The Book of Ruth*, the story of a young woman's hardscrabble life as her family disintegrates around her was a November 1996 pick and *A Map of the World*, in which a child's death leads to a school nurse in a rural town being charged with sexual abuse and brought to trial, was picked in December 1999.

Hamilton, who admits that her earlier novels seem as full of gloom and doom as her feelings about publishing, calls *Laura Rider's Masterpiece* "a comedy." But, she insists, there are poignant moments, just as there are comic moments amid the tragedies in her previous books.



The character of Laura Rider, who doesn't actually read books, though she wants to be a published writer, was conceived on a cruise ship, where Hamilton was teaching writing to a group of middle-aged people who, she says, so desperately wanted to write, but seemed so unaware of what's involved in writing and publishing a book. "I got thinking about that whole aspect of our culture," she explains. "People want to be artists, but don't want to do the ground work."

Hamilton quotes the fictional Jenna Faroli, the unwitting victim of Laura Rider's machinations, who herself is quoting George Bernard Shaw while grilling Rider on her literary ambitions. "Hell is full of amateur musicians."

But Hamilton does concede that her character Laura Rider could pull it off and be a reasonable romance writer because, she reflects, while sounding doubtful: "You never know who is going to be able to do the work."

If Hamilton comes off as a literary snob both in person and in *Laura Rider's Masterpiece*, we can forgive her for her attitude. The youngest of four siblings, Hamilton grew up in a family of writers in Oak Park, Ill. Her mother, a journalist, wrote poetry, her grandmother a novel. "We were also an intensely reading family," Hamilton recalls. "We didn't have a TV until I was 12."

After graduating from Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., in 1979, Hamilton married apple farmer Bob Willard, and started sending short stories to magazines she "liked," until Helen Rogan, then an editor at *Harper's*, accepted "My Own Earth" for publication on Hamilton's 25th birthday in 1982.

"I was ecstatic," Hamilton says. "Even though I sent my stories out, I didn't think I'd ever be published. People had told me how difficult it was, how you couldn't do it as a living."

That first story launched Hamilton's career., "I was able to get an agent, and I applied for grants and stuff," she says.

Reflecting upon the past 25 years, Hamilton alternates between optimism that books will persevere and pessimism that she will be able to continue writing full-time.

"There'll always be books," she says. "But for those of us who've been able to make a living out of it, that bubble is probably over. My goal is just to somehow keep going."

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