

New novel delights, despite foul mouths

ANNIE HARPER, slightly kooky third grade teacher in Tacoma, Wash., is glib, caring, compassionate, endearing and foul-mouthed. I started the book concentrating too much on the last attribute and REALLY, REALLY didn't like this book through the first eight chapters — maybe even more than that. But then a funny thing happened, her loveableness started shining through, and by the end of the book I embraced her — but still wished she'd clean up her language. Another thing that didn't work for me in this book — footnotes! I hate reading footnotes, they break up the flow of my reading, and a lot of the funny stuff is found in the footnotes of this book — can you believe one runs four pages?

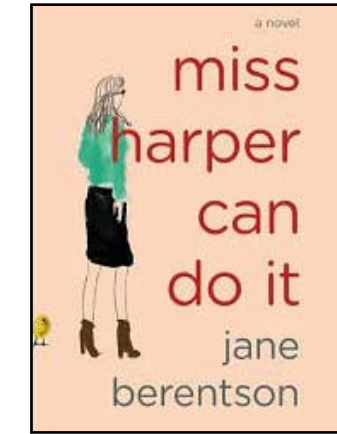
Annie Harper is waiting for her boyfriend David to return from Iraq. Berentson writes the book as a draft of a memoir yet to be written. This too irritated me for a while, but I finally came to realize that part of the charm is the stream of consciousness in which the book is written. No doubt it actually took a lot of planning for the writing to flow in such a seemingly scattered, intimate and current fashion. During the course of her waiting, waiting, waiting for David, she comes to examine herself as a person—often coming up short in her own eyes. But the more she sees herself as a “bad ass ... black hearted ... failure ... I totally suck at everything” person, the



more endearing she becomes. Twenty-somethings will no doubt see themselves or their friends in this book and love it start to finish.

During her wait, she surrounds herself with zany but loveable supporting actors: Gus, her sometimes goofy, but always there and supportive, platonic buddy from childhood; Loretta, her 92-year-old nursing home project who fills Annie with romantic tales of her own WWII waiting, waiting, waiting for her beloved Ron; the children in her third-grade classroom; and Helen, the chicken she adopts to keep her company and provide fresh eggs for breakfast during David's absence.

The unnecessary foul language aside, Berentson's writing is delicious. It's kind of like



your favorite casserole that has those yucky green peppers in it — you have to pick out (read over) that part and savor the parts you do like. I'm reminded of what Roberta Stearman used to say in our fiction writing classes at USU — use profanity sparingly or it loses its effect. Berentson would have benefited from that bit of advice.

Here are some of the good-ies:

Annie preparing for the arrival of Helen: “I downloaded the building plans from this Web site about having pet chickens and then tweaked the plan a bit to suit my tastes. Future Unnamed Chicken of Mine will reside in a stately A-frame dwelling complete with a sunroom (the front section is just wire) and a more private bedroom suite (ideal for discreetly entertaining guests and sleeping late into the weekend mornings). The sunroom has a flapping, doggie-style door that can be latched shut by Chicken's landlady (me!) so Chick-

en's housekeeper (me!) can easily remove waste, change the sheets, fluff the pillows. Now all my chicken coop needs is some decorative flair, which I will wait on until I'm familiar with Chicken's personal style and coloring.”

Annie fears David is dead: “I wake up to the sound of my cell phone chirping from the living room. It's my mother, and I feel guilty for ignoring it again. I flip on the television, and nothing much has changed. They suspect that the bomber was one of the camp's contracted Iraqi barbers who had managed to hide his allegiances and involvement with the Ansar al-Sunnah Army. I wonder if he had ever buzzed the hair of any of the now-slain soldiers. I try to plan out my day. I need to do laundry. Pay some bills. Go grocery shopping. Should one do these things whilst her boyfriend's life is in the air? I really don't feel like doing much of anything. Lying on the couch, staring at the walls for minute after wretched minute, seems like all I can manage.”

Annie imagines David's Christmas gift's fate in Iraq: “The package toppling out of the back of some large truck and getting run over by a tank. Sand grinding into the soft cotton of the black size-large boxer-briefs. The shattered screen of the mini DVD player. The . . . smudge of my homemade fudge destroying the flawless white of the brand new, tagless undershirts.

“All this package disaster

fantasizing isn't helping me at all. The anxiety of his smashed gift evolves into the anxiety of his smashed body and then dips into a series of guilt waves because I'm worrying about a stupid package and not the future of a tumultuous country. Or all countries. Or innocent slaughtering. Or the future of democracy. Or all the women in the world who will lose their lovers tonight. But isn't there still such a chance it could be me? Oh, how the holidays stink in self absorption!” So Annie opens a box of chocolates, lights a candle “and indulges by recounting the lovely holidays that I, Annie Harper, have shared with my darling lover, David Peterson. And it's going to make me feel so lavishly consoled. I just know it.”

And the last day of school: “I sigh. Look at the clock. The class follows my gaze, and we watch the last ten seconds pass together. When the bell rings, I stand by the door, accepting thank yous, hugs, and a few homemade cards. I love the hugs. They're so full of energy and excitement, nothing like the wimpy boyfriend-in-Iraq hugs that I've received so many of. Those pity embraces, damp and flat like a wet ponytail. These hugs — the on-to-fourth-grade hugs — are hugs with potential, hope, and future. Hugs powered by Popsicle sugar and revved by a baseball card clipped to the shiny spoke of a bicycle.”

In brief, to know Annie Harper is to love her!