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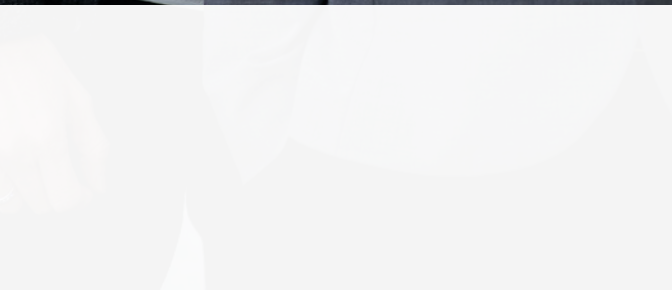
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## Her Own Voice

Barbara Ridley's new novel challenges readers' preconceived notions of disability, limitations and the inevitability of fate

Author Barbara Ridley knew she wanted the protagonist in her second novel, “Unswerving,” to be a lesbian and also part of the disability community.

She recalls how one writer friend read an early draft of the book and wondered of the main character: “She’s got a disability. Do you really have to make her a lesbian, too?”

“Yes, I do,” Ridley says, wryly adding, “Let’s just have one minority pigeonhole. We can’t have all these different intersectionalities, for heaven’s sake. That’s too much to handle.”

Not only does Ridley create several lesbian characters in “Unswerving” (University of Wisconsin Press) while tackling issues surrounding

physical disability, she does so with the insight and understanding earned over her 40 years as a nurse and then a nurse practitioner specializing in the care of adults with physical disabilities.

“When I’d meet people at parties and tell them what I did for a living, they’d go ‘ewww, that must be depressing.’ I did not think of it as depressing at all. We work hard and we are sometimes dealing with tragedy, but there’s also resiliency and the amazing ability of a whole team of people including the patient and the family to move on and reinvent themselves, find a new life and new community,” says Ridley in an interview from her home in the San Francisco Bay Area.

“I don’t gloss over how difficult it is; I show the obstacles. I wanted to write a protagonist with a disability that didn’t end in a cure or suicide which seemed a common trope. I wanted a realistic portrayal of someone adapting to a new injury.”

“Unswerving” centers on a young woman, Tave (short for Octavia), who wakes up alone in a hospital after a car crash. Dazed and despondent, Tave struggles to face the challenges of her new paralysis while worrying about her partner, Les, who was also severely injured in the accident and who’s now cared for by her homophobic parents who refuse to allow contact. Tave’s physical therapist, Beth, is dealing with her own girlfriend problems which pushes Beth toward over-involvement with Tave’s situation. Through a team and her own effort, Tave relearns life skills and gradually comes to recognize that her future will be very different from the one she’d imagined.

“I’ve been asked if Tave is based on an individual patient,” Ridley says. “She is not. But over my career, I’ve seen many

times the challenges and circumstances [patients] cope with and the barriers they have to address.” Ridley was intimately familiar with the working of hospital rehabilitation but since she’s not a quadriplegic herself, she sought the input of colleagues in the disability community during the writing of her book.

Ridley will discuss “Unswerving” at Booksmith in Brookline May 10 at 7 p.m. She’ll be in conversation with Boston writer Amy Hoffman, author of the novels “The Off Season” and “Dot & Ralfie,” both from University of Wisconsin Press, and three memoirs. Hoffman, who discussed “Dot & Ralfie” in the September/October 2022 issue of *Boston Spirit*, says Ridley’s novel “tells a story that needs to be told: about disability, recovery and LGBTQ life and relationships.”

For Ridley, who was born and raised in England where she attended the University of Sussex and the North London School of Nursing, the Brookline reading will be something of a homecoming. “My wife is from Massachusetts, though she was raised in upstate New York. She has family there, so we’ve visited many times,” she says.

Ridley retired from nursing in 2015. Her first novel, “When It’s Over,” a work of historical fiction, was published in 2017 by She Writes Press. Ridley based the character of Lena in “When It’s Over” on the experiences of her own mother, a refugee from the Holocaust who was part of a group of young, mostly Jewish, anti-fascist activists in Prague who managed to escape the Nazis. In Prague, Lena meets Otto, a refugee from Hitler’s Germany, and follows him to Paris to work for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. When he flees to England, Lena joins him there.



Barbara Ridley

“I never thought about doing creative writing or fiction until after my mother’s death [in 2002]. A friend I’d known for 40 years asked me questions [such as] ‘How did your mother end up in England’ and then said, ‘Wow, that sounds like a novel.’ I sat with the idea and I thought, maybe I will,” Ridley says. “I love reading fiction and thought, how hard can it be? Well, I discovered it is very hard. My first iterations were disastrous. But I took classes, I went to conferences and I worked away at it.”

Even though she’s also written creative nonfiction and memoir, with her essays appearing in journals such as Mud Season Review, The Forge Literary Magazine,

Persimmon Tree and The Copperfield Review, Ridley “became hooked on writing fiction” with her first book. “I felt I had more in me,” she says. She’s now halfway through her third novel, set in remote cabin in the mountains where a group of women including some lesbians are waiting out a snowstorm.

Over the years she worked on “Unswerving,” Ridley considered that perhaps she was writing linked short stories. “But Tave had a way of deciding that she wanted to take over and have the whole novel be about her,” she says. [x]

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