ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Buffalo Gal: A Memoir
Laura Pedersen
Fulcrum
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"After working my way up from clerk to trader, combined with the advent of financial instruments known as index options, by age twenty-one I was a millionaire," the author writes. Seldom since Jane Eyre's quiet "Reader, I married him" has one sentence of English so utterly reversed the fortunes of a gawky heroine with humble origins. Pedersen survived the ignoble fate of her parents' divorce-induced poverty in the culturally and economically depressed tundra of northern New York State, and traded it in for the security of the temperate south, that is, in the legal institution of the New York Stock Exchange.

Pedersen tells the story of her vindication in a book that is as defiantly irreverent and generously comic as it is fiscally instructive.

Jane Eyre was fiction's magical thinking about unavailable men; *Buffalo Gal* is an accomplished woman's coming-of-age nonfiction (she was born in Buffalo in 1965) in which the men are stoic and fleeting and the mothers are energetically defeated. There's her eccentric father who leaves his only child to fend for herself, her starchy mother of an antiseptic nature who fittingly becomes a nurse, her Danish grandfather's rags-to-rags relocation to Buffalo in the Great Depression, a funny high school drama teacher so gay that if he didn't exist she would have had to imagine him as her savior. But her bedrock of psychological grit and iron—that wacky Buffalo optimism of its blizzard-blessed locals who build so many backyard swimming pools—is what yields the author's success. An only child misdiagnosed as retarded by her simple family doctor, she is almost militantly comic in claiming her slacker status while proving her mental health by amassing a time capsule of life in the 1970s' Rust Belt.

The book is compulsively readable, and owes its deadpan delivery to the fact that she has performed stand-up comedy on national television (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *Late Night with David Letter-man*, *Today*, *PrimeTime Life*, etc.). Indeed, so brightly brittle is she (over her parents' divorce, for example) that one almost murmurs, "But how does that make you feel?" Perhaps that's the sequel.

Far from resting on her millions, Pedersen is the author of eight books, was one of

President Clinton's Ten Outstanding Young Americans in 1993, and now teaches in New York City's East Harlem. As she says, "the only difference between comedy and tragedy is where you end the story." She ends on a high note, as a hometown Buffalo export who does her town proud.