

Texas - Land of the Big Hair: (Big Money Divorce Texas Style!)

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Penelope Books (November 2007)

Softcover \$14.95 (228pp)

978-1-4243-4400-0

Penelope Bernard's tax-dodging husband a software hundred-millionaire crashes her against the rocks of a pre-engineered divorce trial easily manipulating false testimony from her hopelessly dependent younger sister and even the issues-laden woman who gave birth to her. The press has a field day. Penelope muses "You know that your mother is scum when the Sally Jesse Raphael show calls..."

Like her patient Homeric namesake Penelope awaits the return of her barely attached Greek boyfriend Ulysses from mob-related business dealings overseas while surrounded by semi-wealthy to stinking rich suitors she tactfully deflects and delays. Insights on the mores of the highly privileged include exaggerated Texas stereotypes. The most potentially profitable match-up is with Ray Calhoun a Houston real estate billionaire inundated with a small army of gold diggers. He comes on like a second leading character but fails to resurface for two-thirds of the book.

Penelope's post-divorce life's mission is essentially to spread empathy with the slightest religious component. She clarifies to herself: "I heal others with touch with listening with being near." Despite a 170 IQ Penelope doesn't believe there's a finite amount of wealth in the world. That belief gives rise to guilt-free opulence and elaborate theme parties. She provides for every hostessing contingency down to the Monte Cristo cigars but the house is full of strangers: "I often find myself at my own party looking around wondering who the hell are all of these people? I do not fool myself that they are friends..."

The divorce's true causes (at least some of them) are buried in subtext; the nature of the marriage is obscured even as the narrator reveals choice aspects. Penelope dishes dirt and appears to hold back few internal revelations but readers are shorted illuminating or exculpatory information as pretty much the whole family lines up against her. Their motivation is given as simple greed but simmering grievances about the husband the mother and people who don't repay personal loans thoroughly dominate the book's middle as ongoing action is relatively neglected.

The Houston-based author is simultaneously raising children and enjoying retired life while stretching her creative muscles. Bernhardt is a backer of the 2007 independent comedy film *The Ten*.

Texas - Land of the Big Hair partly delivers as parody; see the chapter titles: "My Mother is A Sac of Dung" and "Some People Just Need Killin'." This is chick-lit in its setting attitude and point of view but it's also a measured allegorical play on classic literature. Bernhardt's alter-ego has verve and attitude; she has a service ethic and the latest scoop on Lone Star power brokers cleared to be alone with the U.S. President. She's inviting you inside the rarefied circle though she doesn't know just who you are.

(August 21, 2009)

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