

And now for something completely different:



Toronto neighbourhoods, public transit, inspire award-winning book

By RUTH MESTECHKIN
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Author Rebecca Rosenblum was washing her hands in a movie theatre washroom recently, when she spied a pair of 17-year-old girls emerging from the stalls. She watched them swap whispers, yelps and hugs. Then they approached Rosenblum and asked her for a tampon.

The moment was commonplace. But it's the incidental individuals who strike her - the people who aren't a part of her life, but simply step in.

"We have this moment, and I don't know if those girls remember it, but it definitely hit me really hard," Rosenblum says. "And the fact that we live in this world and we're missing 90 per cent of what goes on. But sometimes you get a little glimpse of what other people's lives are like."

Rosenblum, 30, records these moments in her blog, *Rose-coloured* (rebecca-rosenblum.blogspot.com). But most thrilling for her now is her forthcoming first collection of short stories, *Once*, to be published by Biblioasis. *Once* won the Metcalf-Rooke award for best new work. Her win was announced last fall, incidentally at a reading for another book.

"It was for a Diana Kuprel translation of *I Wrote Stone*, and I was enjoying that. And at the end they announced that I had won and everybody clapped and turned and looked at me, and I'm like... hi," she says sheepishly, re-enacting a hand-wave with a laugh. "It was a nice moment."

Rosenblum, originally from Mount Hope, Ont., a farming community outside of Hamilton, Ont., currently lives in Toronto. She moved to the city in 2003 and finished her master of arts in creative writing at the University of Toronto. She credits certain city elements such as

public transit and neighbourhoods for inspiring her tales in *Once*, due to be launched on Sept. 15. But the stories are also anchored to the characters.

"I think it's a lot about being young and wondering what comes next," she says. "And being uncertain and feeling like you don't necessarily know where you fit or what's going on or what you should do. That's really an overgeneralization, but I think in all the stories there's a sense of that, a sense of that kind of confusion."

Some authors use autobiographical material for their work. But Rosenblum tends to stray from this practice.

"I get very wrapped up in what actually happened, and what everyone would feel like if they knew I was writing about them. And that takes a really long time to work through," she says.

Rosenblum often dreams up a situation that is removed from her, but she transposes her emotional experiences into it. And although she says her imagination only extends so far, she is not afraid to take on challenges. In the fall, she will have *Linh Lai*, a short story written from the perspective of a Vietnamese immigrant, published in the *New Quarterly*.

"To a certain extent, I did do research for it, but it was more an act of empathy. And it's an artistic challenge to write around the things I don't know," she says. "The more experience, the more I can write. But the more I grow as an artist, the more I can write."

Rosenblum uses her non-fiction blog to push her limits, too. She says she tends to become self-conscious when expressing her opinions. Through her blog, she sharpens her reviewing and criticism skills, writing about movies and music and doing restaurant reviews. Blogging, for Rosenblum, is a way of setting low stakes.

"No one has to read it, no one's paying for it - if they're bored they can go away," she says. "But at the same time, to write for an audience and try to tell them what I think, in some way that's interesting and meaningful. So it's my attempt to learn to write non-fiction. So far, so good!"

The encumbrances don't stop short at non-fiction writing, either. Rosenblum's genre of choice is the short story, but the literary media often dismisses the genre as ready to peter off and perish. She says there's much talk about the difficulty of selling short stories, because people want a novel, where the piece is centred on one single thing - and the thinking goes that if you like the first page, you'll probably like the rest.

"The short story is something different, because it's more various and there's more freedom in 15 pages to do something wild or something weird, or something very intense, because you don't have to sustain it for 200 pages. And there's a lot of freedom in that



Rebecca Rosenblum is the Metcalf-Rooke award winner for her debut collection of short stories titled *Once* which is scheduled for release next month.

artistically," Rosenblum says. "I don't know how easy or how hard it is to sell, but I think it's wonderful to read and wonderful to write, and I wouldn't want to see it go. But I don't think that could ever happen."

Rosenblum's stories have appeared in the journals *The Danforth Review*, *Exile Quarterly* and *Coming Attractions*.

Every time she puts the pen to the page, she says she's very particular about reaching for the perfect word.

"And that's one of the pleasures of my job - that I can think about words all day. And I think about grammar, I think about commas," she says. "I don't think an artist would ever think that 'brushstroke doesn't matter.' I think that writers think that way about 'buts' and 'ands' and 'semicolons.'"

Although Rosenblum has landed several successes this year, she admits she does feel nervous about trying new things. And one particular blog post notes that the song *That's Not My Name* by the Ting Tings - a song about a girl who's always getting her name forgotten - makes her feel less alone and anonymous. She says in certain circumstances, she does feel this way.

"I float around and no one's really sure who I am," says Rosenblum. "I think that's why anybody writes, why anybody tries to put their own experience on paper or into music, in the hopes that there's someone else out there who's struggling with this stuff and we can do it together. I'm really interested if anyone's going to relate to this stuff. I really hope so."

The book launch for *Once* is Sept. 15 at the Gladstone Hotel, 1214 Queen St. W., a This Is Not A Reading Series event presented by Pages Books.

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