



Dorothy Hodder, Compiler

Enter the closeknit, claustrophobic world of Beryl Rosinsky, the protagonist of Ellyn Bache's third novel. The time is the early 1960s and the setting is our nation's capitol, Washington, D.C., and Chapel Hill. The Rosinsky family are secular Jews for whom belief in the possibilities of man is as important, if not more so, as belief in God.

Beryl, a high school senior anxiously making applications for college, and her older sister, Natalie, are inmates in what they consider a crazy house. Their father, Leonard, was a prominent architect until the McCarthy hearings reduced him to managing a dry-cleaning establishment operated by deaf attendants in a neighborhood near Gallaudet College. Leah, their radical socialist mother, mortifies her daughters by traveling

around the country organizing civil rights and feminist causes and getting her picture in *The Washington Post*; she has little time left over for family. Grandmother Miriam, a Russian immigrant, keeps house for the family in between caring for her sister Gussie, who has suffered from recurring crazy spells ever since losing her true love to a pogrom.

Ellyn Bache.

The Activist's Daughter.

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Natalie escapes by marrying — to her family's amazement and with the assistance of a rabbi even — a nice young religious Jewish man named Barry, and moving to New York. Beryl's chance comes when Bubby Tsippi, Miriam and Gussie's mother, comes for her annual summer visit. The Rosinsky household is far from orthodox, but they make a pretense of keeping kosher whenever Bubby Tsippi visits. Beryl, however, absentmindedly serves her great-grandmother cottage cheese on a dish intended

for serving meat. When Bubby dies shortly thereafter, Beryl is naturally distraught. Her depression drags on until Miriam and Gussie, in Leah's absence, determine that Beryl needs to do what they did to escape unhappiness in Russia — emigrate to a foreign country. She has been accepted to attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which might as well be a foreign country, but is thankfully only a six-hour ride by Trailways Bus from Washington. Although Beryl has realized that she did not kill Bubby Tsippi, she is all too happy to shock and punish her mother by attending a school in an area of the country unaffected by the racial and social progress to which Leah has dedicated her life.

What follows is undoubtedly a most credible example of autobiographical fiction. We are privy to the coming of age of Beryl Rosinsky (read, Ellyn Bache) during the fall semester of 1963 when she begins her studies at Chapel Hill. She has two Christian roommates who are actually cousins: Ashley, a devout Southern Baptist, who becomes pregnant, converts to Catholicism, and marries a South American diplomat's son (in that order); and Susan, a Whiskeypalian, who eventually confesses to Beryl that though she goes through the motions of dating, she's not sure she likes boys. She has a tortuous on-and-off-again romance with David, a victim of childhood polio with his own problems to sort out. As she confronts double standards for men and women, blacks and whites, Beryl becomes, albeit unwittingly, an activist herself.

Ellyn Bache makes her home in Wilmington, North Carolina. She has written two other novels, *Safe Passage* (Crown Books, 1988) made into a 1995 film starring Susan Sarandon and Sam Shepard, and *Festival in Fire Season* (August House Books, 1992), and a collection of short stories, *The Value of Kindness* (Helicon Nine Editions, 1993), for which she received a Willa Cather Fiction Prize. All four works should be in public and academic libraries throughout her adopted state.

— Plummer Alston Jones, Jr.
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