

REUBEN, BERNICE RUTH (Bernice Rubens) (1923 - 2004), novelist

Name: Bernice Ruth Reuben
Date of birth: 1923
Date of death: 2004
Spouse: Hans Rudolf Nassauer
Child: Sharon Nassauer
Child: Rebecca Nassauer
Parent: Eli Harold Reuben
Parent: Dorothy Reuben (née Cohen)
Gender: Female
Occupation: novelist
Area of activity: Literature and Writing
Author: Desmond Clifford

Bernice Rubens was born on 26 July 1923 at 9 Glossop Terrace, Splott, Cardiff, the third of four children of Eli Harold Reuben and his wife Dorothy (née Cohen). Her father was an Orthodox Jew from Latvia who had fled pogroms in 1900, via Hamburg believing he was on his way to America. He had been swindled and his ticket took him only to Cardiff. There he met his future wife whose family had escaped persecution in Poland.

When Bernice was a child her family attended the synagogue on Cathedral Road (though she later caused offence by marrying at the rival synagogue in Windsor Place). Music was central to her family; her two brothers and sister all played professionally at different stages. Bernice herself played cello but not to the same standard as her talented siblings. She said that, instead, she learnt how to listen, and this helped her develop as a writer.

After attending Roath Park Primary School and Cardiff High School for Girls, she studied English at University College, Cardiff - 'my first major folly...to be saturated in the great nineteenth-century tradition of the English novel turned out to be no great favour to a would-be writer.' After graduating in 1944 she became a teacher in Birmingham, which she enjoyed, although she was sacked summarily from her first post for organising opposition to the use of corporal punishment.

After moving to London she established herself as a director and scriptwriter of documentary films. Alongside writing this remained her lifelong career. In 1947 she married Rudolf Nassauer (1924-1996), a wine merchant, poet and novelist whose Jewish family had fled Germany just before the war. They had two daughters, Sharon (b. 1949) and Rebecca (b. 1951), before the marriage ended in divorce in 1969 due to his infidelity, though they maintained a lifelong relationship.

Her first novel, *Set on Edge*, was published in 1960 under the name Bernice Rubens which she used from then on. Her fifth novel, *The Elected Member* (1969), won the Booker Prize in 1970, the second year of the prize's existence. She was the first woman to win the prize, and remains the only Welsh winner. She was short-listed again for the Booker Prize in 1978 for *A Five Year Sentence*. Two of her novels were made into films, *Madame Sousatzka* (1962), based on the experiences of her brother Harold, a child prodigy pianist, and *I Sent A Letter to My Love*, and a third, *Mr Wakefield's Crusade*, was made into a TV drama series by the BBC in 1992.

Rubens was remarkably prolific, publishing 25 novels in all plus a memoir, *When I Grow Up* (2005), averaging a book almost every 18 months. Typically, her novels are short and easily readable. The setting is often domestic and suburban. Her prevailing tone is humorous, sometimes darkly so, and her plot lines veer towards absurdism and occasionally gothic. She claims in her memoir that she didn't take writing 'too seriously', and this lightness is reflected in her style.

A good number of her books are set in and around Cardiff and draw on her own experience, such as *Set on Edge* about a Welsh Jewish family, and *Yesterday in the Back Lane* (1995) set in wartime Cardiff against a background of German bombing. *I Sent A Letter to My Love* (1975), a story of identity and sex, is based on family holidays in Porthcawl. Cross-dressing and sexual identity are themes in *Mr Wakefield's Crusade* (1985) and *Sunday Best* (1971). In *Birds of Passage* (1981), two women are repeatedly raped by a ship's steward but respond very differently to the experience.

Her 1983 novel *Brothers* is markedly different from her other works. It is a vast historical novel telling a family history (essentially, that of her own family) taking in Czarist Russia, Odesa, Hamburg, Cardiff, Leipzig, Moscow, Israel - and the Holocaust, where part of the family's history ended. It is a gripping story, in parts almost too painful to read; one can only imagine what it cost to write - in her memoir she hints at difficulty, with heavy understatement. No other work by a Welsh author matches *Brothers* in its scope and tragedy, and no Welsh author has written a greater novel.

Leon, in *Brothers*, buys a ticket from Germany to Wales with some difficulty and then laughs, 'for there was something

faintly unreliable about a country that even the ticket official had never heard of. Identity and ambiguity are central to Rubens's work. The Jewish identity is characterised by movement, survival, the bag kept packed. The Welsh identity is marked by doubt and a certain lack of precision. What and where exactly is it? Indeed, who is it, and does it include me? In her memoir Rubens says, 'my birthplace as well as my nationality were accidental, and I accepted that, by proxy, I was a survivor.'

After five years in Birmingham, London was her home throughout her adult life. She was Welsh and Jewish; she seems never to have felt anything else. She remained a frequent visitor to Cardiff but had no real connection beyond. In a sense, it was Cardiff she identified with rather than Wales. In her memoir she is grumpily dismissive of the growing use of Welsh on public signage and felt alienated by the rising Welsh identity which developed over her lifetime. 'Once upon a time, I had thought that the land was mine. But now I am made to feel a foreigner...'

She was made a fellow of University College, Cardiff in 1982, and was awarded an honorary DLitt by the University of Wales in 1991. Two of her novels were awarded prizes by the Welsh Arts Council, but nevertheless she has been rather neglected by Wales's literary establishment, perhaps partly because of her own ambiguous attitude towards Wales. Bernice Rubens is unquestionably one of Wales's outstanding novelists in either language.

Bernice Rubens died on 13 October 2004 at the Royal Free Hospital in London.

Author

Desmond Clifford

Sources

Bernice Rubens, *When I grow up: a memoir* (London 2005)

'[Bernice Rubens](#),' *The Independent*, 15 October 2004

ODNB: Valentine Cunningham, [Rubens, Bernice](#) (2009)

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Bernice Rubens](#)

Archives

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