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BANGOR'S OTHER NOVELIST

The unguided approach to writing

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A few years ago, Mameve Medwed was at a weekly brown bag lunch with a group of fellow writers. She had just completed one of her novels, and someone asked whether she had begun her next. "Oh yes," she remembers answering. "I've got the Post-it on my wall." And the other writer said, "You mean you've got the character list, and the settings and the psychology sketched out?" And Medwed replied, "Oh no! It just says 'Start the next novel!'"

Medwed, an ebullient, sharply dressed, artistically accessorized woman, was recounting this anecdote at a tearoom in Midtown Manhattan last month as she emphasized her staunch opposition to outlines. "Outlines are the kiss of death. Robert Frost said, 'No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.'" She went on to quote E.L. Doctorow: "Writing a book is like driving a car at night. You only see as far as your headlights go, but you can make the whole trip that way." On the other hand, her friend Arthur Golden graphed a Dickens novel in order to create "Memoirs of a Geisha." "He noted that this many pages in, this happens, and that many pages later, that happens." According to Medwed, he studied every story line and then wrote a treatment for "Geisha" before actually beginning the novel.

But Medwed's unguided approach to writing is more in keeping with her protagonists' unguided approach to life. In the delightfully titled "How Elizabeth Barrett Browning Saved My Life" (Morrow, \$24.95), her fourth novel, Abigail Randolph is the most recent in a line of female leads from hyper-educated families who are grasping for a sense of purpose and struggling to gain their romantic footing. A 33-year-old antiques dealer - well, that's a little fancy-sounding for the unkempt Abigail, who halfheartedly maintains a tiny stall in a cramped antiques market in Cambridge, Mass. - she has recently been ditched by a social-climbing loser for one of her customers. Abby is the only child of a judgmental but world-renowned Harvard professor who turned out to be saving up all his fatherly enthusiasm - "Baby on Board" signs and cooperative nursery school - for his second family, which he began with one of his graduate students after Emily, Abby's mother, left the marriage for their next door neighbor, Henrietta. As the book opens, we learn that Emily and Henrietta died a year earlier in an earthquake in India.

Abby is a fictitious version of a very real type who resides in that insular and frequently insufferable town sometimes referred to by its own inhabitants as "The People's Republic of Cambridge." She dropped out of Harvard just shy of a diploma and cannot escape being defined by her own shame and the disappointment she has brought on her father and snooty old friends. The trajectory of Abby's life is changed not by the poet of the title, exactly, but by a chamber pot that she used, a vessel that Abby inherited from Emily. A colleague encourages Abby to lug the porcelain relic onto

"The Antiques Roadshow" (in a scene that, though researched entirely online, will thrill devotees of the traveling TV series). Its spectacular appraisal attracts the attention of Lavinia, Henrietta's daughter and Abby's worst friend/best-enemy, and a litigious internecine battle ensues.

One would think that by repeatedly holding the Cambridge cabal under a microscope in her novels, Medwed would be risking ostracism within the very place that she has called home for 30 years. (A native of Bangor, Maine, she laughingly refers to herself as Bangor's other novelist; her mother taught Stephen King's children in nursery school.) But Medwed is not afraid, even as she acknowledges that the lost soul on whom Abby is based is unhappy with the book, and that the utterly detestable Lavinia hews dangerously close to a real person. "People understand that it's fiction," the author explains. "You might start off with a few real characteristics, but then it morphs into a fictional character, and you start to make things up." Then again, "even if a character is made up entirely from scratch, and all his traits are imagined, I'll have someone say, 'That's me!' They see themselves in a completely fictional character. So you're damned if you do, you're damned if you don't."

Although Medwed, happily married since the age of 21 to a man she knew in nursery school and with whom she has two grown sons, is a couple of decades removed from the restless malaise of her 30-something protagonist, she finds it intriguing to "inhabit a character who's on the brink of figuring herself out. It's such an interesting time." Unfortunately, a lot of cultural critics think it's a time to be labeled "chick lit," which angers Medwed. "If you write about a woman in her 30s, it's immediately called chick lit and that's just terrible. I looked on Amazon, which I should never have done, and someone had called it [the book] that. It's a very dismissive term."

Likewise, Medwed has a beef with people who look down on humorous writing. "Those of us who write things that are funny are often dismissed as LITE - light. But, first of all, what's wrong with being entertaining? With making people laugh? Second, those of us who write about funny things write about the exact same things as the heavy-duty tragedy writers, who write about love and loss and death and friendship and disappointment. There's a lot of profound stuff going on underneath the laughter. A comic novel should not be dismissed as a beach read."

And as Medwed begins work on her fifth novel, she might be inclined to add that a Post-it should not be dismissed as anything other than a perfectly valid stand-in for an outline.

Daphne Uviller is the co-editor of "Only Child: Writers on the Singular Joys and Solitary Sorrows of Growing Up Solo," to be published next winter.