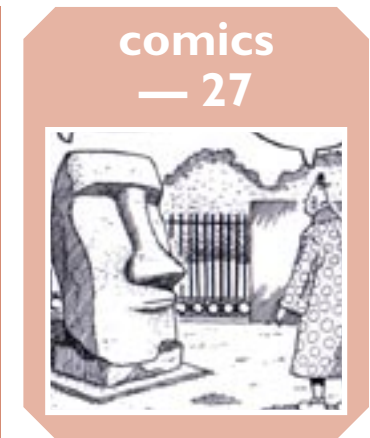
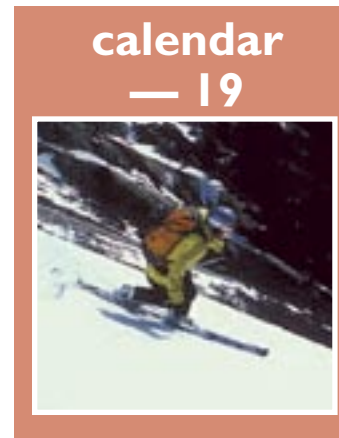
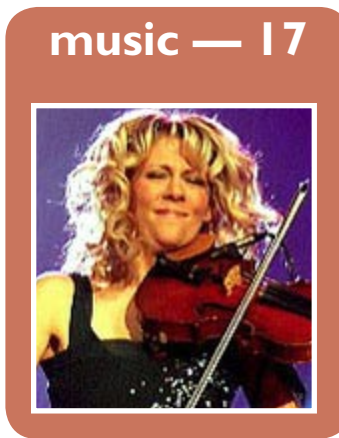


CULTURE

Feb. 23 — March 2, 2007



Love & Lust

Two new books for the heart

By Beth Kanell
Special to the *Vermont Guardian*

Valentine's Day comes and goes, with chocolate, flowers, cards, and plenty of mixed emotions. As an extension of the greeting-card holiday, the entire month of February now holds "heart" connections, like being "heart healthy" time for nurses and doctors.

It's also the time when publishers like to release books that focus on love. Two unusual — and strikingly different — ones for 2007 are Julius Lester's new "story," *Cupid*, and Harriet Brown's edited collection of women's short memoirs, *Mr. Wrong: Real-Life Stories About the Men We Used to Love*.

Mr. Wrong is wrapped in a sort of chocolate candy box pattern of men's faces, with the eyes blacked out for anonymity, and includes narratives from novelist Jane Smiley, poet/novelist Marge Piercy, playwright/poet Ntozake Shange, novelist/memoirists Ann Hood and Joyce Maynard, and 19 others. It's a stunning set of admissions from a double dozen of strong, savvy people — one of whom is male (bet you forgot for a moment that guys too can find a Mr. Wrong for their lives).

When I first bought the book, I almost couldn't read it: My own "Mr. Wrong" episodes are so depressing to look back on, and one of them in particular stands as a judgment mistake that I've said I'd never forgive myself for making (and sticking with, way too long!). But Brown is a lively, positive, dynamic woman, both poet and *New York Times* science writer, as well as synagogue cantor, and her introduction mingled just the right dose of rue, regret, laughter, and "oh, well!" So with her figurative company, I plunged into the tales.

And I recommend taking that plunge. Robin Westen's chapter "The Guru" is an eye-opener into how we fall under the spell of people who seem to be offering us exactly what we most desire (or, as editor Brown concludes, "no matter how freakishly idiosyncratic these guys were, they all had one thing in common: they fulfilled some need of ours"). After Westen's candid admissions of folly, both of heart and of loins, and her determined escape, she tells us, "I'm the one with the power. All I need is an open heart — and the will to hold on."

Smiley says in "A Good Struggle Relationship," "In the end, it was my fearfulness that broke the spell." Sara Ekks

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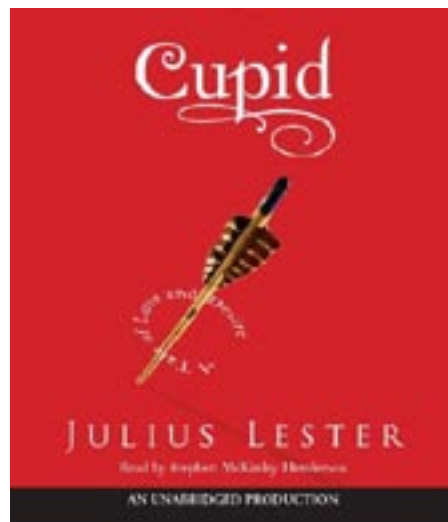


regret & delight

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gets herself a lawyer as a present for her third anniversary. And Dana Kinstler, in “My Hades History,” admits, “I had become more like a hungry daughter, craving sustenance, greedy and selfish, wondering when it had gone bad.”

Tale after tale convinced me at last that if these people — including Raphael Kadushin, who proposes, “Everyone, at nineteen, is dumb and beautiful in equal parts, although they won’t realize it until years later” — could make the same kinds of mistakes I did, then I’m not a bad person after all, just an older and wiser one. The book gave me equal parts of laughter and forgiveness, with a stiff dose of clarity. What an asset it is.



Cupid: Connecting to teenage lust

Cupid: A Tale of Love and Desire, by my friend Lester, arrived earlier this winter, but it took me a couple of readings to sort out what I think it is and how much I like it.

The book landed in the “young adult” fiction section, told by a “storyteller” in clearly black language. Like C. S. Lewis’ final novel, *Till We Have Faces*, it’s a retelling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche — the gorgeous love-making son of the goddess Venus falls in love with a delicious mortal, Psyche, to the fury of the jealous goddess. Disaster, terrible tasks to accomplish, and some amount of redemption follow.

Early reviewers of *Cupid* seem to have thought the book was supposed to teach mythology. That’s about as off-base, I believe, as the early reviews of the Lewis book, which struggled with a Christianity that was far from the cloying sweetness of “Jesus loves me” and that dared to put a nasty person into the narrator slot.

Lester’s storytelling voice is much like the one he’s used in his noted children’s books like *Sam and the Tigers* and his retelling of the Uncle Remus tales, as well as his innovative original folktales like “Shining.” But this time he’s clearly talking to teens who are experiencing waves of lust and love, anxieties about beauty and jealousy, eagerness to be admired and awareness of some of the costs. He also

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throws in plenty of fiction-voiced insights from his own adventures in loving: At the end he even admits, “You think you’re hearing a story about somebody else, and then something clicks and you start to feel that the story is about you. The interesting thing about this particular story is that it taught me that sometimes I act like Cupid [male, that is, and pretty self-centered initially, delaying the kind of real love he could have had earlier in the story] and sometimes I act like Psyche [female, and taking huge risks while also screwing up].”

What I especially like about *Cupid* is that Lester works hard at separating lust and love, while admitting that both are wonderful. He talks about the satisfactions of sweet sex, about the delights of feeling beautiful, and about marriage. He even dips into darker emotions, like depression: “Depression is one of the worst feelings there is, but just because you feel bad, it does not mean that what is happening to you is bad.”

By now, you’ve figured out the drawback of the tale: The narrator interrupts it often, and you can’t read the story without

being aware of Lester as storyteller, lover, boyfriend, and husband. For some teens, that’s unacceptable: Fiction’s declared utility for them is escape, not reflection.

So if you give the book to one of those teens, try to get them to read it twice. The first time, they’ll follow the plot and struggle some with the names of Gods and Goddesses and think they’re doing an assignment for the school mythology unit.

But the second time, I’m betting they’ll discover that the wry, teasing, wise voice behind the story is a voice to hold onto, and to believe. We all need a little faith in what love is going to bring to us, and what it’s going to demand from us. Lester makes it clear that the happy endings are within our grasp.

Hmm. Now that I think about it, maybe these two books have more in common than I realized. ☺

Beth Kanell is co-owner of Kingdom Books, a mystery and poetry specialty shop. For more information, visit it online at www.KingdomBks.com.

Featured Non-Profit

To provide area residents with the very best medical care close to home, BMH is planning to build a state-of-art 27,000 square foot Out-patient Center. When complete, this new facility will house a number of outpatient units including:

- Oncology Services
- Women’s Imaging
- BMH Breast Care Program
- X-ray & Nuclear Medicine
- Pre-operative Assessment
- Physical and Occupational Therapy
- Orthopedic Physician Offices
- Comprehensive Care Clinic (for HIV patients)
- Outpatient Cardiology Testing

The estimated cost of this project which includes total renovation of the Ambulatory Care Unit, is \$11 million. Funding will be provided by a combination of local donations, borrowing and internal resources.



Since 1904, Brattleboro Memorial Hospital (BMH) has provided area residents with the best medical care possible — resulting in recent national recognition as one of the top 100 hospitals in the United States. But the health care needs of this community have changed dramatically. Today, more than 75 percent of the surgical and diagnostic procedures performed at BMH are performed on an outpatient basis.



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