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## **CREATURES OF HABIT**

By Julie Baumgold

Alfred A. Knopf; 294 pp.

If, in a world riddled with starvation, war, homelessness and disease, you can be moved to tears because poor Libby Alexander will have to sell some of her jewelry to pay \$225,000 for a painting at auction, then Julie Baumgold's debut novel may be for you. Otherwise, it's unlikely.

That's a shame, actually, as Baumgold possesses some laudable artistic gifts, principally a keen eye, sharp wit and sparkling descriptive prose.

Here, however, she brings those gifts to material so vacuous that many readers will struggle to maintain interest from the top of any given page to the bottom.

Libby was once rich, born in the Park Avenue building that her grandfather built. Now, by the standards of her world, she is poor, which means she thinks twice about writing checks of over five figures. No longer able to purchase her way into New York society's most garish circles, she slices in with her pen, writing a newspaper gossip column under the affectation *The Pimpernel*.

The single mother of an ignored little girl well started toward her own neurosis, Libby has divorced two men who each tried to choke her. You won't blame them. To Libby, a Nantucket bag, embroidered belt or \$80,000 door are far more interesting than her daughter (she spends more time in a sleazy affair with the child's pediatrician than with the child), and nothing is so interesting as pretentious foreign women with "one of those accents that grew stronger with each year spent outside her native country" or self-absorbed men who divorce a wife because "her voice was wrong."

While no character here is substantial enough to distinguish from any other, they do occasionally manage to slip from bad to worse, as when at a tastefully catered funeral we see them "smiling with the simple joy in outliving anyone." Libby's set of middle-aged women are "partly friends, partly each other's prey," preening in spandex unitards before their personal trainers, aspiring for the day when they can be "'Wrinklies,' those women of another generation who had no need to hurl clothes and addresses at each other and were so much calmer and further along." Libby feeds off them, admitting she is "a pander, a troublemaker, a director, a pimp." That she could know what she is and yet be what she is chills any chance for a reader's sympathy.

So, instead, you find yourself hoping Baumgold, on some level so subtle it's eluded you, is actually satirizing this crowd, the weightiest of whose members feels made of meringue, yet nowhere can you sense that detachment of author from subject that signals satiric intent. Baumgold actually seems to believe that the world entered through doors "coated by overlapping faux finishes of marble-framed onyx and fake burlled

wood" is life's most meaningful one, one worth ignoring a daughter for, one where your friends are those with their fangs deepest into your back. She seems to believe, too, that if you write with enough fascination about the rich and nefarious you may be mistaken for F. Scott Fitzgerald. Some contemporary writers—Roxanna Robinson comes first to mind—can shape exquisite art from the world of privilege, but they populate that world with human empathy.

In *Creatures of Habit*, however, beneath the glitz and *faux mabre* there is not one compassionate moment nor one genuine emotion that is not egocentric. In the end, if we are moved at all it is by regret that trees died to produce a book so shallow.