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## **BEFORE AND AFTER**

By Rosellen Brown

Farrar Straus Giroux. 354 pp.

What pediatrician Carolyn Reiser sees in the hospital emergency room at the start of Rosellen Brown's riveting new novel will change her family forever. High school student Martha Taverner, friend of Carolyn's son Jacob, lies dead on a gurney, her head smashed in, "collapsed like a beer can."

That evening, Police Chief Fran Conklin comes to the Reiser home to question Jacob, who has suddenly disappeared. In the insular town of Hyland, New Hampshire it's hard to keep secrets ("if you flushed your toilet three times in a row, everybody knew you were sick"), yet it comes as news to Carolyn and her sculptor househusband Ben that Jacob had been going off with the murdered girl every afternoon. In this town where crimes tend to get blamed on "outsiders," Jacob is the principal murder suspect.

Seldom since Gregor Samsa awoke one morning to find himself changed into a giant insect has a tale opened with a more transformative climax. The murder and police visit become for the Reiser family the fulcrum over which the normalcy of before teeters into the horror of after. As in her earlier novels (*The Autobiography of My Mother*, *Tender Mercies*, *Civil Wars*), Brown explores the terrain she knows best: how families confront and survive an overwhelming crisis.

Brown deftly manipulates the suspense of Jacob's elusiveness, capture and maddening silence, yet a taut murder mystery is the least of her designs. At that, we learn how Martha died long before the end. The novel's foremost achievement lies in how minutely Brown depicts each character coping with disaster as the conflicting ways they show their love forms a cat's cradle of tensions pulling family bonds apart.

Carolyn (for whom Meryl Streep is aptly cast in the film already optioned to TriStar Pictures) has devoted her professional life to children's welfare. The favored daughter from a privileged background, she has lived her life as the model "good girl" with a scientist's cool detachment. More comfortable responding from her head than her heart, she reads mysteries "only because they were like chess games." She wants the best lawyer for Jacob that money can buy, and she wants the grand jury to hear the unvarnished facts.

Ben, from humbler beginnings, is the passionate artist. No sooner is Conklin out the door than Ben searches for incriminating evidence to destroy. Combative and narcissistic, he views his son as both an extension and reflection of himself. If he feels it in Jacob's interest to destroy evidence or lie to a grand jury, he will not hesitate.

Judith, Jacob's 12 year-old sister, is the book's most subtly rendered character and perhaps its most deeply conflicted. She had been Jacob's partner in the Us vs. Them dynamic of parent/child, his keeper of secrets. Alternately exulting in Jacob's defiance and repulsed by his sexuality, she feels relegated by her youth to the fringes of the drama, beneath her parents' notice. From this distance, she watches her family become "a mess of threats and surrenders and regrets and things they won't say to each other." She sees heroes fall and truth crumble.

Braiding the narrative into chapters seen from these three characters' viewpoints, Brown shows the strain evolving from both within the family and without. The town that once thought Carolyn heroic for making house calls now finds her family outsiders, Jews, native New Yorkers, a menace. Patients stop coming to Carolyn's office, Judith is tormented at school, neighbors sign petitions against them and even burn a cross on their lawn.

Wedding stunningly wrought prose to brilliantly observed detail, Brown takes us deeply inside her characters. We see with their eyes. When Carolyn treats a child, we see "his eyebrows frail as Oriental brushstrokes." We feel the subtle competitive war that parenting can become, who loves the child more, who is the better parent. We sense how our children are many different people, how they mystify and embarrass us, how their actions can fuel the embers of destruction latent in their parents' marriage.

And yet, we feel also how disaster forges its own bond. "The worse our history," says Ben, "the more we had to stay together—only *we* knew all the parts, bad and good." And unlike the Taverners, to whom Martha is lost, for the Reisers there can remain wisps of hope that the sun may peek through the clouds tomorrow.