

GLOBE AND MAIL, AUGUST 27, 2005

Reviewed by T. F. Rigelhof

Tobacco Tale is Addictive

At first glance, *Smoke* seems like just the kind of CanLit novel that up-market downtown writers would like to sneer at. Set in a village called *Smoke*, in southern Ontario's tobacco country, *Smoke* tells the tale of a sensitive farm boy on the verge of becoming a man in 1958, and what he learns by listening to the stories told by the town's elderly doctor.

But this isn't *Jake and the Kid* revisited: Elizabeth Ruth is closer to Pedro Almodóvar, Todd Haynes and other leading members of the New Queer Cinema than to W. O. Mitchell. Like Haynes in *Far From Heaven*, Ruth recreates the 1950s with affection, understanding and uncanny accuracy. It's a virtuoso performance that neither preaches nor mocks the past, but subverts it by challenging us to rethink what is normal and what is not.

Fifteen-year-old Brian (Buster) McFiddie, the younger son of one of the Tilsonburg area's leading tobacco growers, falls asleep with a cigarette in his hand and wakes up with his bedding on fire. As burns are cleaned and fresh dressings applied to Buster's face, Doc Gray tries to distract him by recounting true crime stories of the Purple Gang, the Prohibition-era mobsters who ruled the liquor smuggling that ran from Windsor to Detroit. When the bandages come off and Buster has to face the world outside his bedroom, a gangster's fedora and a couple of other gifts teach him how to move forward, as the talkative doctor continues to come to terms with the past.

There's not a lot more that a reviewer can say about the plot of *Smoke* without giving too much away too soon. What a reader really needs to know to get hooked is that Elizabeth Ruth is an innovative storyteller, full of quirky surprises, who has the courage to confront basic preconceptions about self-identity.

In 2001, Ruth raised the bar for any writer in this country interested in sexual and social metamorphoses with a debut novel, *Ten Good Seconds of Silence*, in much the way Barbara Gowdy did with *Falling Angels* in 1989. *Ten Good Seconds of Silence* exhibited great daring in its insights into single parenthood among women marginalized by psychic states that are all too easily dismissed as psychotic. She was rewarded by being named a finalist for the Writers' Trust of Canada Fiction Prize, the City of Toronto Book Award and the Amazon/Books in Canada First Novel Award.

Ruth didn't take home any prizes, but her first novel has been adopted by several university courses and its German translation is creating a buzz similar to the one that made Gowdy more widely read and discussed in Europe than in Canada in the early stages of her career. Because both authors are equally direct and disturbing when it comes to human bodies and the transfigurations in flesh that love impels, they also willy-nilly have much to say about the spiritual crises of our time and the ways tolerance gets tested in everyday life. They speak directly to the urbane and cosmopolitan even when

their settings are as provincial as *The White Bone's* herd of elephants or *Smoke's* tobacco-harvesting crew.

The depth and fluidity of Ruth's first novel was marred for me by outbursts of metaphor and imagery that undercut rather than heightened its texture and intensity. Although there are two metaphors in the opening four sentences of *Smoke* so distracting that they ought to have been blocked by her editors, Ruth is much more her own stylist and less of a Timothy Findley wannabe this time around. Because she's so full of vitality, so drawn to so many things simultaneously, so alive, reading her is always likely to be more of a D. H. Lawrence roller-coaster than a Virginia Woolf Ferris wheel. Whenever the ills of this book's characters intersect with the culling and curing of tobacco leaf, Ruth is utterly compelling.

The child of a single mother who moved around a lot, Ruth has lived in more places here and abroad than most writers of even her much-travelled generation, and has supported herself by working at a lot of different things, including the midnight shift at a Chrysler minivan plant. Before coming to writing full-time via the Humber School for Writers, she spent more than a decade as a counsellor in women's shelters and mental health centres. She sees the world through a variety of lenses, including the one that comes from promoting and compiling the works of the writers she's anthologized in *Bent on Writing: Contemporary Queer Tales*.

The result is not only extraordinary empathy with a full range of characters, but also a keen sense of the everyday things ordinary people do with considerable grace under the pressure of earning a living, in inhospitable circumstances, to make homes for themselves and their families.

Smoke is a subtle, nuanced, unconventional probing of the anxieties of outsiders in a decade notable for conformity. Since I am someone who lived through that time among not-dissimilar people, it strikes me as a notable achievement for any writer -- and utterly remarkable for someone who is a self-confessed "city girl" born at the end of the sixties. More important, *Smoke* is not an aesthete's exercise in historical pastiche: It addresses the gap between how we see the maimed and deformed and how they see us in an unforgettable way.