

Commentary on *Owning Betty*
Roberta Lee

When I initially began plotting out *Owning Betty*, I was enthralled by the idea of weaving together--loosely, at first, then tighter and tighter--several stories about romantic and erotic obsession. I knew it was a technical challenge, perhaps more so in that the same cast of characters would move through all the different storylines. I think having completely separate casts telling each story would in many ways have been easier, since each story could be written independently, then intercut.

In *Owning Betty*, Laura and Jack find an unfinished screenplay left behind by her dead husband, David, which dramatizes an obsessive love affair that ends in murder. Tommy's elderly father, Nick, is accused of killing Tommy's terminally ill stepmother, Betty, and sets out to find "the real killer". Laura has a fling that sparks yet another obsession, and her two-night stand begins stalking her, with results first hilarious, then creepy. And, in the background, Jack's long-term mistress, Debbie, is surprised to find her obsession with him drifting into indifference. All are stories about obsession and its many confusing manifestations, and all twist around each other during a January wracked by recurring ice storms and the claustrophobia the truly awful weather brings.

As with all my fiction, a satirical edge cuts through *Owning Betty*. My stories all take place in a very alternative universe, where the only close relationship Tommy has is with his cat, Ralph--until he discovers that his girlfriend, Joey, has certain cat-like qualities. Laura's house is so haunted that it drives "the world's best known psychic researcher" to run away in terror, but the ghost that inhabits it clearly thinks of himself as a guardian angel. The cure-all for everyone's various addictions and neuroses is a nice big creative product, and the best way to find out which SUV survives best in a rear-end collision is to use two competing models to kill someone.

Owning Betty, however, is also the third chapter in a cycle of three novels--each of which shares a cast of characters, and each of which builds on the previous titles. The overarching theme of all three--*The Liar's Guide*, *The Chilling Effect*, and *Owning Betty*--is spiritual awareness, and my characters each find or deny the fulfillment of that premise based on their own specific path.

So . . . serious fiction that is also often quite funny, at times erotic, occasionally even creepy. At least, that is my aspiration! I leave it to my readers to decide to what degree my work achieves that lofty goal.