

# Cruddy by Lynda Barry

Sociology, Violence



Lynda Barry has provided a thoughtful, interesting, and provocative novel about Roberta Rohbeson featuring, on the surface, two diverse, but related story lines. The first is the story of Roberta as a sixteen-year-old girl and details what happened to her to cause her to be grounded for a year for dropping two hits of acid in September of 1971. It is Roberta who gives the book its name. While grounded in her room she begins to write in her diary with an ominous note of her intended suicide, " I planned this way before the drugs were a part of my life. . . .

It was my idea to kill myself" (Barry two pages before 1). This plot thread is interwoven with a more detailed sinister thread that took place five years earlier when Roberta's parents separated and, at her mother's insistence, Roberta hid in the back of her father's car and accompanied " the Father," as she calls him, on a bloody, murderous, cross-country spree fueled by the near constant drinking by her alcoholic father. The spree ended with her father as the prime suspect in the Lucky Chief Motel Massacre and with Roberta walking through the Nevada while covered with blood (Barry).

It is unclear however whether either of the plot threads actually occurred within the world of the novel or whether they are the imaginings or hallucinations of a teenage girl being punished for misbehaving. Unlike many books that deal with teenage angst by portraying the protagonist as a person with a " woe is me" attitude, *Cruddy* distinguishes itself by not falling victim to this self-indulgent trap. Roberta is detached from her family. Like the impersonal description of her father as " the father," Roberta's mother is called simply " the mother.

" Roberta views her younger half-sister Julie with the usual contempt of teenagers who are forced to share a bedroom. Roberta has a matter of fact attitude toward the events in her life and blames no one for her actions. She remembers and acts upon some of the philosophical aphorisms her father espouses. " DO NOT HESITATE. NEVER, NEVER HESITATE" and L. L. S. S. , (loose lips sink ships) (Barry 30, 99). The book features a large number of charcoal drawings that illustrate the accompanying text. These pictures provide the reader with the best physical description of the father.

Page 22 features a portrait of a hard looking man with deep-set eyes and a cigarette drooping reminiscent of Humphrey Bogart. The picture reveals an independent man who will brook nonsense from no one and will not hesitate to use violence should the need or opportunity arise. The father's face reveals no compassion for anyone, not even his daughter Roberta whom he calls Clyde. Ostensibly the alcohol binge and crime spree of the father starts at the time of the separation of Roberta's parents.

When the father discovers that Julie, the younger sister, is not his, but the child of his wife's boss he snaps because of the stress caused by the discovery. Combined with the apparent suicide of his father known as Old Dad, it was more than he could bear. The newspapers covering the story of the murders alleged that the father stole Roberta in the middle of the night and left a note threatening to kill Roberta if the mother calls the police or tried to find them (Barry 23). According to Roberta this is largely a fiction put on by her mother to get her picture in the paper.

The real story is the mother made Roberta hide in the car and accompany her father. At the novel's beginning the father was due to inherit the family

business, a well-known local meatpacking plant where he worked as a butcher and had developed a good reputation locally. Instead of leaving the business to his son Old Dad sold it "out from under" the father and left him unemployed and without funds. Allegedly Old Dad placed the money into three Samsonite suitcases none of which he gave to the father. Then Old Dad hanged himself in the meat cooler.

He believes his father, Old Dad, has cheated him and that he is just getting back what was his by natural right. Allegedly much of the father's motivation lies in hopes of recovering the suitcases and the supposed money in them. However, it is difficult to determine if there is any truth at all to the story of the three suitcases of money. Supposedly the meatpacking plant was heavily mortgaged and selling the plant was necessary to pay the debts, "at least I'm not leaving you in the hole," said Old Dad.

If this were the case one would expect him to open the suitcases as he found them and make use of the money, but he does not do this. When he finds the first suitcase he merely holds it up and says, "not a scratch on it . . . It's Samsonite! We could do a [bleep] commercial" (Barry 25-38). This peculiar behavior calls into question whether this plot thread ever existed. Nonetheless with this theoretical motivation the father packs his butcher knives and leaves his wife. Blood has played an important role in the father's life.

Although he spent time in the Navy, being a butcher was his work as a butcher that he believed that he would achieve success. He takes pride in the work he does and has hopes of challenging even the big packinghouses and that stores were going to come back and buy their meat from

Rohbeson's Slaughter House (Barry 25). At the end of a workday he and his clothes were often covered with blood. He is devoted to his knives and goes so far as to name them. Little Debbie is his favorite and he gives it to Roberta to protect herself. The nature of the father's profession was inherently violent.

The violence manifests itself throughout the novel. He kills people in a variety of ways including homicide by car and shooting people. When Roberta is injured and receives a small cut on her finger that becomes infected, he casually uses Little Debbie to remove the finger at the knuckle while promising that Roberta " would not feel a thing: (Barry 198). The name of the combination slaughterhouse, restaurant, and bar where they stay for a time is the Knocking Hammer, presumably a reference to a notorious method of killing beef about to be slaughtered by hitting them in the head with a hammer.

The violence in the father's life also occurs in Roberta's world. Shortly after the father amputated her finger Roberta found herself thinking about killing the father and the others who live at Knocking Hammer (Barry 214). Shortly afterwards Roberta uses Little Debbie to cut the throat of the deputy sheriff while he is driving her to the institution where her father has committed her. By the end of the novel Roberta has killed her father by slicing his throat with the knife named Sheila. She also killed the others staying at the Lucky Chief Motel.

Roberta has become a serial killer. It is unclear whether or not examining the father helps understand his blood thirst. By the book's end the two plot threads have virtually merged and it is no longer clear how much of the

events in the novel actually happened. It appears likely that the thread where Roberta gets grounded for dropping acid is true. However, it is less clear the other thread occurred at all. It may be the acid induced hallucinations of Roberta. It may be a story made up to entertain her friend Vicky.

Both threads may be the imaginary world of a teenager trying to get back at her parents for grounding her for a year by imagining one of them an unfit mother and the father as a homicidal, alcoholic maniac. The novel works in all of these fashions and leaves the reader unsure just what is what. In any case the world where Roberta lives, whether it is real, imaginary, or the product of drug-induced delusions is a violent one. Works Cited Barry, Lynda. *Cruddy: An Illustrated Novel*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.