

# Rita Mae Brown

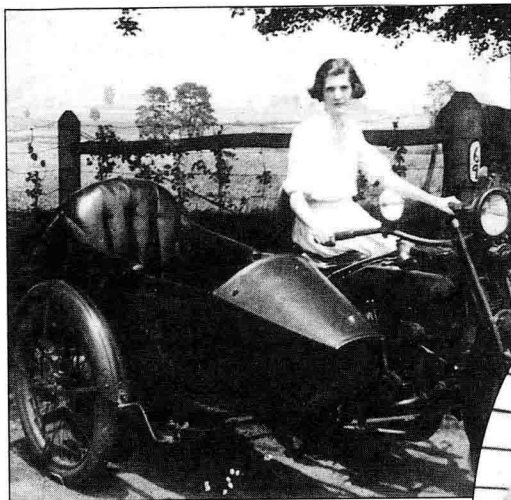
Author of BINGO and SIX OF ONE

## *Loose Lips*



WINNER...LOVING [AND] LAUGH-PROVOKING."

—*Library Journal*



# LOOSE LIPS

RITA MAE BROWN

BANTAM BOOKS

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LOOSE LIPS  
A Bantam Book

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*Praise for Rita Mae Brown's delightful novels featuring  
the unforgettable Hunsenmeir sisters . . .*

## LOOSE LIPS

"[Brown] does an admirable job of portraying the effects World War II has on a small American town. . . . [The] characterizations of Louise and Juts are acutely realistic." —*Arizona Republic*

"Brimming with Brown's comic sense of social posturing and missteps, her rich novel lets readers laugh with her at the personal foibles that seem to loom so large in small-town settings." —*Booklist*

"Time has honed Brown's literary skills but not lessened her love for these characters." —*Library Journal*

"Surprises . . . come from Rita Mae Brown's comic timing and her affection for eccentrics." —*Seattle Times*

## SIX OF ONE

"Joyous, passionate, and funny. What a pleasure!" —*Washington Post Book World*

"No matter how quirky or devilish, Brown's people cavort in an atmosphere of tenderness. . . . It is refreshing to encounter this celebration of human energy." —*Chicago Sun-Times*

"Brown has some of the same effervescent yet secure trust in her local characters that Eudora Welty feels for hers. . . . When history nicks them, they slap right back." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"A lively and very lovely book." —*Publishers Weekly*

## BINGO

“This is vintage Brown.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Delightful . . . Rita Mae Brown is still a hoot.”

—*Philadelphia Inquirer*

“*Bingo* beams with Brown’s fondness for her characters and her delight in the oddness of the world of Runnymede.”

—*Boston Herald*

“Joyously comic.”

—*People*

“Longtime fans will welcome back Nickel Smith, this time coping with a surprising passion. . . . New ones will flock to *Bingo*’s vividly drawn characters (like the lustful Hunsenmeir sisters) and tart, loving humor.”

—*Self*

“Hilarious, superbly written fiction.”

—*Booklist*

“Genuinely funny.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

*Books by Rita Mae Brown  
with Sneaky Pie Brown*

WISH YOU WERE HERE  
REST IN PIECES  
MURDER AT MONTICELLO  
PAY DIRT  
MURDER, SHE MEOWED  
MURDER ON THE PROWL  
CAT ON THE SCENT  
SNEAKY PIE'S COOKBOOK FOR MYSTERY LOVERS  
PAWING THROUGH THE PAST  
CLAWS AND EFFECT  
CATCH AS CAT CAN  
THE TAIL OF THE TIP-OFF  
WHISKER OF EVIL  
CAT'S EYEWITNESS  
SOUR PUSS  
PUSS 'N CAHOOTS  
THE PURRFECT MURDER

*Books by Rita Mae Brown*

THE HAND THAT CRADLES THE ROCK  
SONGS TO A HANDSOME WOMAN  
THE PLAIN BROWN RAPPER  
RUBYFRUIT JUNGLE  
IN HER DAY  
SIX OF ONE  
SOUTHERN DISCOMFORT  
SUDDEN DEATH  
HIGH HEARTS  
STARTING FROM SCRATCH: A DIFFERENT KIND  
OF WRITERS' MANUAL  
BINGO  
VENUS ENVY  
DOLLEY: A NOVEL OF DOLLEY MADISON IN LOVE AND WAR  
RIDING SHOTGUN  
RITA WILL: A MEMOIR OF A LITERARY RABBLE-ROUSER  
LOOSE LIPS  
OUTFOXED  
HOTSPUR  
FULL CRY  
THE HUNT BALL  
THE HOUNDS AND THE FURY

In memoriam  
Johnny Holland  
June 14, 1983–January 2, 1999

# PART ONE





Life will turn you inside out. No matter where you start you'll end up someplace else even if you stay home. The one thing you can count on is that you'll be surprised.

For the Hunsenmeir sisters, life didn't just turn them inside out, it tossed them upside down, then right side up. Perhaps it wasn't life whirling them around like the Whip ride at the fair. They upended each other.

April 7, 1941, shimmered, a light wind sending Louise's tulips swaying. Spring had triumphantly arrived in Runnymede, which straddled the Mason-Dixon line. The residents of this small, beautiful town, built around a square before the Revolutionary War, waxed ecstatic since springtime warmth had arrived early this fateful year. Probably every year is fateful to someone or other, but some years everyone remembers. On April 7, though, Fate seemed far away, shaking up countries across the Atlantic Ocean.

Julia Ellen, "Juts," slammed the door to her sister Louise's house. She pursed her lipstick-coated lips and blew a low note then a higher note, like a towhee bird. Snotty bird-watchers like Orrie Tadia Mojo, Louise's best friend from her schoolgirl days, called it a Rufous-sided towhee. Juts always pronounced it two-ey, since it uttered the note twice.

Hearing no response, Juts whistled again. Finally she yelled, "Wheezer, where the hell are you?" Still no answer.

Juts had celebrated her thirty-sixth birthday on March 6. She'd always possessed megawatts of energy, but as she zoomed through her thirties she accumulated even more energy, the way some people accumulated wrinkles. The only person who could keep up with her was Louise, four years older; since Louise lied shamelessly about her birthday everyone "forgot" her exact age except Juts, who held it in reserve should she need to whack her sister into line. Cora, their mother, remembered also but she was far too sweet to remind her elder daughter, who was having a fit and falling in it over turning forty. This momentous occasion had just occurred on March 25. Even Juts, out of pity, pretended Louise was thirty-nine at the birthday party.

Both sisters roared through life, although they roared in different keys. Juts was definitely a C major while Louise, an E minor, could never resist a melancholy swoon.

Juts stubbed out her Chesterfield in the glass ashtray with the thin silver band around the edge.

"Louise!" she shouted as she opened the back door and stepped out.

"I'm up here," Louise called from the roof.

Julia craned her neck; the sun was in her eyes. "What are you doing up there? Oh, wait, why should I ask? You're singing 'Nearer My God to Thee.'"

"I'll thank you to shut your sacrilegious mouth."

"Yeah, yeah, you walk on water. I came over here to take you to lunch at Cadwalder's but you're such a pill I think I'll go by myself."

"Don't leave me."

"Why not?"

Louise hesitated. She loathed asking her younger sister to help her because she knew she'd have to pay her back somewhere,

sometime, and it would be when she least wanted to return a favor.

"Oh." Julia tried to conceal her delight as she spied the white heavy ladder behind the forsythia bushes, a rash of blinding yellow. "Gee, Sis, how awful." She started walking away.

"Julia, Julia, don't you leave me up here!"

"Why not? I can't even crack a joke around you but what it gets turned into a spiritual moment by Runnymede's only living saint. Oh, let me amend that, by the great state of Maryland's only living saint."

"What about Pennsylvania?"

"We don't live in Pennsylvania."

"Half of Runnymede is over the line."

"You mean over the top, don't you?" Julia crossed her arms over her chest.

"You know what I mean." Irritation crept into Louise's well-modulated soprano.

"Pennsylvania is so much bigger than Maryland, kind of like a tarantula compared to a ladybug. I'm sure there are lots of living saints in Pennsylvania, probably in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, but then again—"

Louise cut her off. She knew when Juts was heating up for one of her rambles. "Will you please put the ladder up?"

"No. Mary and Maizie will be home from school in two hours. They can put it up."

Louise's younger daughter, named after Julia Ellen, had been given the nickname Maizie to distinguish her from her aunt.

"Now listen, Juts, this isn't funny. I'm stuck and those noisy kids might not hear me when they get home. Put the ladder up."

"What do I get out of it?"

"Maybe you should ask what you don't get out of it." As Louise edged toward the roofline, little bits of asphalt sparkles skidded out under her heels.

"Bet it's getting hot up there."

"A tad."

"What are you offering me?"

"No more lectures on your smoking or drinking."

"I hardly drink at all," Julia snapped. "I am so sick of you claiming that I drink too much."

"I have yet to see a Saturday night that you don't fill with whiskey sours."

"One night out of seven—it's Saturday night, Louise, and I like to go out with my husband."

"You'd go out whether he was here or not."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you can't live without male attention and if I were your husband I wouldn't let you out of my sight."

"Well, you're not my husband." Julia dragged out the heavy ladder but didn't prop it against the gutter of the roof. "How come your nose is out of joint, anyway?"

"Isn't."

"Is."

"Isn't."

"Liar."

"You expect me to be Mary Sunshine when I've been stuck on this roof for hours."

"What are you doing up there, anyway?"

"There's a bird's nest in the chimney. I removed it."

"Any birds in it?"

"No, although I'd let them stay until they were big enough to fly. Honestly, Julia."

The exasperation in "Honestly, Julia" told Juts it was time to strike. "I'll put this ladder up if you give me that hat you bought last week."

"The one from Bear's department store in York?"

"One and the same."

"Julia, I love that hat."

"So do I, and you have more money than I do. Come on, Louise, I've got to have something to wear to church on Easter."

"I'm not made of money, Juts. Pearlie and I manage better than you and Chessy do."

"Boy, you really don't want to get off that roof, do you?"

"I do. I'm sorry. You know I speak my mind."

"That's what you call it. I call it sitting in judgment." Julia ran her fingers through her honey-brown curls and turned again to leave.

"All right!"

She stopped. "The hat, Louise—the minute you get off that ladder."

"Yes."

Juts heaved the ladder to its feet; it wobbled for a moment, then she pushed it toward the roof, where it stopped with a wooden *thud*. "I'll hold it."

Louise turned over, her hands spread out on the roof. She slid a little but stopped her descent by turning her feet on their sides. She reached over with her foot, found the first rung of the ladder. Carefully, she backed down. Once down she entered the house without a word to her sister. She slammed the back kitchen door so hard that all the ceramic figurines with the nipples painted in red nail polish shuddered in the living room. It was Pearlie—her husband, Paul—who did the painting. Louise said he was artistic. Julia declared with a straight face that most men have a deep craving to paint the nipples on statuary and she left it at that. To Chessy she referred to her sister's home as the Titty Palace or T.P.

Juts opened the door, closing it behind her as her sister tromped back into the room. She thrust a big navy-blue hatbox, with *Bear's* in graceful script across the top, into Juts's hands. "Here, you damned chiseler."

Wisely deciding not to argue about being called a chiseler, Juts carried the hatbox by the crossed heavy ribbon on top. "Come on, let's get a chocolate frappé. On me."

Louise thought about it a minute, realized she was very thirsty, and murmured, "All right."

As they walked toward Runnymede Square, Juts again asked, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter. I was perched on that roof too long. I even thought about jumping off."

"It's a good thing you didn't. You would have ruined your forsythias." Not that Juts believed her. She knew something was nibbling away at her sister.

"Ruined my shoes, too."

"Could have broken your ankle."

"Or my neck—why, I could have been killed."

"Nah." Juts smiled. "Only the good die young."

"You're awful."

"No, I'm Julia."

"You're my awful Julia." Louise giggled as she pushed open the door of Cadwalder's drugstore.

"You girls just missed your mother," Vaughn, the eighteen-year-old son of the owner, called from behind the fountain. "She left with Miss Chalfonte not fifteen minutes ago."

"On foot or in the Packard?" Louise inquired.

"The Packard." A folded towel was draped over one arm. He leaned over the marble countertop at the fountain. "What'll it be?"

"Lime sherbet and a new life."

"Mrs. Smith, you're a caution." He laughed, using an old expression from the 1880s.

"That's not what I call her." Louise cast a baleful eye at the hatbox secure under the counter stool.

"Okay, no lime sherbet until summer, I know. I want a giant chocolate frappé and a hot tea on the side."

"And I want a strawberry frappé with coffee on the side."

"Okeydokey." Vaughn lifted the square black covers and

began flipping ice cream into heavy ribbed glasses. "Isn't this spring something?"

"The best," both women agreed.

"Hard to believe there's a war on."

"It won't last long," Louise airily predicted.

"And what makes you think that?" Juts's stomach growled.

"Because England never loses a war unless it's to us."

"I hope you're right—" Vaughn's voice trailed off as he calmly poured coffee. "We never really finished the Great War, you know?"

Louise blinked. She didn't know, and at that moment she wanted her strawberry frappé, not a reflection on recent history from a kid.

"Vaughn, remind me how old you are," Louise asked.

"Eighteen."

"You're not thinking of running away to Canada and enlisting, are you?" she pressed.

He blushed, making his freckles disappear. "Uh, gee, Mrs. Trumbull."

"I thought so." Louise reached for her coffee before he put it on the counter. "Wait and see. Maybe we can stay out of this one."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What amazes me about war is a bunch of old men start them. Right?" Juts's small audience nodded so she continued. "Then young men fight, get wounded or worse, and the old farts sit back and reap the reward. Makes me sick. Thanks." Vaughn slid her the tea over the counter.

"If you were a man, would you enlist?" Louise asked Juts.

"Sure, to get away from you."

That made Vaughn blush again because he wanted to laugh but didn't want to offend Louise. Everyone in Runnymede knew of her temper; Juts's, too, for that matter.



“Ha, ha,” Louise dryly said and eagerly dug into her creamy frappé.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you, Louise—you haven’t been yourself lately.” Juts smiled. “And it’s a big improvement.”

Vaughn burst out laughing. Louise jammed her spoon into her frappé, brought out a luscious bit of ice cream with strawberry syrup, and flipped it onto her sister’s surprised face.

Julia answered in kind. Vaughn involuntarily took a step back and pleaded, “Ladies.”

“There’s only one lady here,” Louise said grandly.

“Yeah, and she’s forty years old.”

## 2

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Light shone through the Limoges china. It was so thin that it was translucent. At the rim of each piece a thin red line surrounded by a thin gold band circled the cup, saucer, or plate to intertwine in a *C* for *Chalfonte*.

Celeste Chalfonte, beautiful, willful, and in her middle sixties, unfolded the linen napkin on her lap. Across from her, Ramelle Chalfonte—her lover of thirty-nine years and the wife of Celeste’s brother, Curtis—did the same.

The aroma of eggs, sunny-side up, sizzling bacon, and fresh biscuits filled the breakfast room on the east side of the house.

“Do you have the *Clarion*?” Celeste asked for the South Runnymede paper.