

Rita Mae Brown

Author of LOOSE LIPS and BINGO

Six of One



US, PASSIONATE, AND FUNNY. WHAT A PLEASURE!"

—*Washington Post Book World*

SIX of ONE



RITA MAE
BROWN



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SIX OF ONE

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

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*

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*

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

For

Julia Ellen Brown née Buckingham

Born March 6, 1905

Apparently Immortal

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I solemnly swear never to write in any acknowledgment such sentiments as: “And to my dear wife for bringing cups of coffee, mowing the lawn, and enduring my absence from routine duties, my gratitude is boundless.” Even if I acquire a wife I promise never to write that.

However, certain individuals helped enormously in shaping this book. Diana Williamson spent months in the library looking up strange tidbits such as when zippers were first marketed. She also caught my spelling errors and sent me packing in the direction of my dictionary.

Sylvia Kaneko, Susan Smitman and Elaine Spaulding provided me with useful comments after reading the first draft.

Marty Gibbons and Sharon Deevey haunted the Library of Congress on my behalf. They also told me I could do anything, and I believed them.

Colleen Moreland and Linda Damico lent me money so I could eat and keep a roof over my head while I wrote.

Baby Jesus, my aging cat, daily brought me a mouse to prod my labors. Knowing what a valuable gift that was by her standards, I was truly inspired. Frip, my other hairy friend, chewed many of my research materials, thereby making invention a necessity.

I do not acknowledge the person who typed the manuscript. She got paid well enough.

Since this is my book and I can put in anything I want, allow me to exhort the following people to write their own books. That way you don't have to depend on me for all your reading matter: Dr. Annella Brown, Charlotte Bunch, Amy Gross, Sally Ann Harrison, Arnold Reisman, Tanya Slover, Tina Smith, Elaine Spaulding, Gloria Steinem, and Joan Tewkesbury.

SPECIAL MENTION

This work was supported by a Creative Writing Fellowship grant made by the National Endowment for the Arts.

The Massachusetts Council on Arts and Humanities awarded me a fiction grant, which was crucial to my being able to continue work.

I hope the federal and state governments expand their programs of assistance to the arts. It's time we stopped puritanically treating artists as though they were both a luxury and a necessary evil. American artists are a national resource and critical to our spiritual/cultural life. There is no rebirth without art.

SIX of
ONE
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MAY 21, 1980

I bought Mother a new car. It damn near killed Aunt Louise. Those two have been fighting like banty roosters since 1905, the year Mom was born. The first big blowup that both recall involved a multicolored hair ribbon, 1909. Juts (Mom) says Celeste Chalfonte gave it to her because she was such a pretty, sweet little darling. This made Louise jealous. Things have been sliding downhill between them ever since.

Louise trumpets a different version of this earth-shattering event. She says Celeste Chalfonte made a present of the ribbon to her because she was such a pretty, sweet little darling. Juts, that jealous devil, snatched it clean off her head, getting some hair by the roots in the bargain. Being seven, Louise refrained from beating her younger sister to a pulp. Instead she reported the theft to their mother, Cora Hunsenmeir, in the hopes she'd do it. Cora, justice personified, returned the ribbon to Louise. Ever since that day Juts has been eaten up with green envy. Louise swears this for a fact.

In May of 1980 I still can't untangle victor from victim. It changes regularly like night and day as each sister revolves around the other. The front door just slammed. It's Aunt Wheeze (Louise).

"Juts, you steeping pickled eggs, I see."

"You see fine. Want one?"

"No, you put in too much sugar. I like my eggs a bit more tart."

"Figures."

"Hells bells, I can't say anything around you—or that damn kid you picked off the streets in 1944."

"Louise, she's my daughter sure as if I bore her."

"Ha! You never will know what it is to be a mother. You have to give birth. Blood of your blood, bone of your bone. It's all so mystical and spiritual—but then I don't expect you to understand. You wouldn't listen to me in 1944 and you won't listen to me now."

"Piss on your teeth! Walking around like a bloated toad don't make no woman a mother. Mothering's in the raising up of the child."

"Well, a fine job you did of it. Nickel left the church, left the town, left you, and now she writes books that disgrace the whole family."

"If you don't want no one to know your business, keep your mouth shut."

"How was I to know that brat would remember everything?"

"Wheeze, the last thing to die on you will be your mouth. You don't just tell Nickel stories—you now got a goddamned CB radio and tell anyone who tunes in."

"Liar, liar, your pants are on fire!"

I can't stand it. I'm going out to referee. "Are you two at it again?"

Aunt Louise whirled around to greet me. "You got gall, Nicole Smith, showing your face in this house."

"Why? It's Mom's house."

"Writing stories that make fun of me, Grand Regent of the Catholic Daughters of America for the Great State of Maryland. I'm so embarrassed I could die."

"I doubt we'll be that lucky."

"Nickel, don't you talk that way to my sister."

"Jesus H. Christ on a raft."

"See, Juts, see—that's what comes of her leaving the church. Just throwing Jesus's name around like it was salt."

“Your Aunt Louise is right. Show a little respect.”

“I am going back to the sunroom. You two are impenetrable. Mom, can I have a pickled egg?”

“Get it and get out. Me and Louise are talking business.”

As I shut the door behind me I heard Louise ask in a deafening whisper, “Impenetrable? What’s that mean—that we’re dumb?”

“I never know if I’m being insulted or not. It’s hell having a daughter that went to college.”

Two pairs of feet hurried over to the big dictionary Mom keeps stashed under the coffee table. I heard the pages rustling.

“Louise, look under *i*, not *e*.”

I can picture those gray heads bending over Webster’s. Once they find “impenetrable” they’ll soon start in on each other with renewed vigor. Seventy-five years is a long time to love and hate.

MARCH 6, 1909

Celeste swirled in the kitchen like a fragrant tornado. Louise and Julia Ellen looked up from their picture book.

“The birthday girl! Julia Ellen, here is something for your pretty head,” Celeste handed the child a bright ribbon.

“Thank you, Miss Chalfonte.”

“Miss Chalfonte, don’t forget my birthday’s in three weeks.” Louise wanted to make sure.

“I know. How was school today?”

“Yashew Gregorivitch got a whipping.”

“How exciting.” Her right eyebrow arched upward. “You two

play. Mother will be here as soon as she's done with the silver." Celeste disappeared through the kitchen door, leaving her scent behind.

Julia attempted to tie a bow smack on top of her head, toothache style, but her little fingers weren't nimble enough. "Wheezie, help me."

Once the ribbon was secure in her hand, Louise began trading. "I'll tie you the best bow ever if you let me wear this to school tomorrow."

"No."

"I'll let you play with my glass beads."

"No. Gimme my ribbon."

"Don't grab, Julia. It's so unladylike."

"You tie a bow or gimme my present back."

"Selfish."

"I am not selfish. It's my birthday."

"Think how happy you'd make me if I can wear this tomorrow."

"You can be happy on your own birthday. Gimme my ribbon." Julia grabbed Louise's arm and rubbed her hands over it to make a burn.

"Stop it!"

"Gimme my ribbon."

"Don't you know nothing? We're Christians. That means we gotta share."

"Gimme my ribbon."

"Do you want to go to hell and have a red tail stuck on your heinie?"

This threat caused Julia to let go. "On my heinie?"

"A bright red tail like the devil."

"Louise, you are making that up."

"I am not. Ask Mother."

Julia tore out the kitchen door and found Cora polishing the last of the forks.

“Mother, Louise says if I go to hell I’ll have a red tail stuck on my heinie!”

“Are you planning on leaving anytime soon?”

“Is it true? Do people have red tails?”

“Child, don’t worry me with this stuff. How do I know what fashions are in such a warm climate?”

Perplexed, Julia walked back into the kitchen. “She don’t know.”

Louise seized the moment. “Because she don’t know don’t mean it ain’t true. You don’t want to go there, do you?”

“No—now gimme my ribbon back.”

“You’ll go straight to hell. Let me wear it tomorrow.”

“No.” Juts went for her again. Louise dodged.

“You gotta share. It’s Christian.”

Reinforced by theology, Louise spied a knife by the sink. Before Julia could stop her, she cut the lovely ribbon neatly in half. “There, I’ve saved you from eternal torment.”

Juts took the pathetic remnant held out to her. She sat right down on the floor and cried. Her anguish reverberated throughout the cavernous house.

Cora, with purpose, strode into the kitchen. “What goes here?”

“Wheezie stole my hair ribbon.”

“Liar, liar, your pants are on fire.”

“Stop that, Louise. Did you steal her hair ribbon?”

“No, Mother, look—she has it in her hand.”

“Such as it is.”

“Waagh. She cut it in half.”

“What’s that behind your back? Gimme that hand.”

Louise reluctantly volunteered her hand.

“Open your fist.”

There in the middle of her palm rested the other half of the ribbon, wrinkled.

“Mother, Jesus said: ‘Ask and it shall be given unto ye.’ ”

"What does Jesus have to do with your sister's birthday present?"

"I asked and she wouldn't give it to me, so I took half. This way Julia won't get in trouble with God."

"The Lord moves in mysterious ways, Louise Hunsenmeir, but I don't." Cora walloped her bottom. "There, smartypants. That'll teach you to spoil your sister's birthday. Since your birthday's coming up in three weeks, I'll divide everything in half between you and Julia Ellen."

"No! No!" Louise screamed.

"It is better to give than to receive," Cora calmly pointed out to her.

Juts, refreshed from the sight of Louise's discomfort, threw her ribbon at Louise. "Momma, she got all my ribbon. Now can I have all her birthday presents?"

Louise emitted a piercing squeal. "Never!"

"My God, you're as bad as the other one. I'm done with both of you. Now get your coats on. We're going home."

MAY 21, 1980

What the hell's she doing out there?"

Juts sauntered over to the window to see what her sister was bitching about. "Turning cartwheels in the dandelions."

"That girl's thirty-five, ain't she?"

"Be thirty-six come November."

"Juts, call her in here before the neighbors see."

"Oh, hell, Louise, our dear mother turned cartwheels past fifty."

"Our dear mother wasn't educated. Nickel is."

“Go turn on the TV, then she won’t bother you.”

“By God, you always stick up for that brat.”

“She’s my daughter.”

“You know how I feel about that.”

“Yes, and let’s not go into it again. All of town knows how you feel about Nickel, Jesus, FDR and Amelia Earhart, to say nothing of Sonny and Cher.”

“Mebbe they know what I think, but they don’t see my all. You went down to the square yesterday in hot pants. Orrie Tadia told me.”

“So what?”

“Seventy-five is too old for hot pants. And them glasses you got on your nose are a disgrace—granny glasses.”

“I’m old enough to be a granny—you said so yourself just this minute. I heard you with these ears.”

“Don’t get smart with me, Julia Hunsenmeir. You know what I mean. All the young people wear those glasses. Why you don’t get something conservative like me and act your age, I’ll never know.”

“Your glasses got so many rhinestones on them, when the sun hits you, people are blinded by the light.”

“You’re so immature. I don’t know why I bother to discuss anything with you.”

“Louise sucks green monkey dicks!” Juts relished this childhood insult. Never failed to fry her big sister’s ass.

“I didn’t come over here to be insulted.” Louise peered out the window again. “She’s still at it. Juts, make her stop.”

“I will not. I think I’ll give it a try.” Julia opened the screen door and hollered to Nickel. “Wanna watch an old lady make a fool of herself?”

“Sure, Mom.”

“Julia, don’t you dare. You’ll break something.”

“Fiddlesticks.”

“Julia, when our dear mother died she told me to watch over you. Don’t you dare go out there and show your bottom.”