

Angie Abdou Tells it Like it Is

Anything Boys Can Do

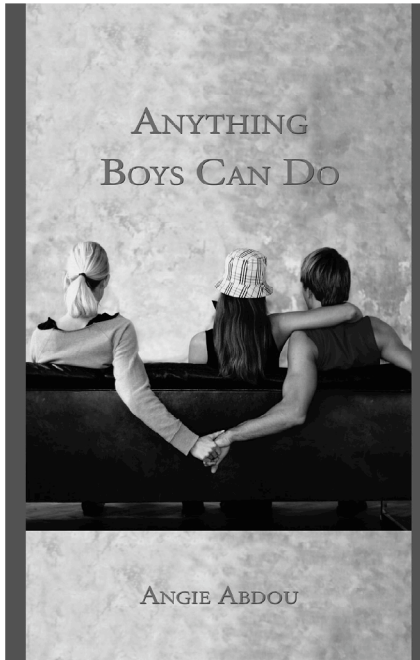
by Angie Abdou
Thistledown Press
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Review by Margaret Tessman

FERNIE WRITER ANGIE ABDOU writes about real women: independent, co-dependent, dissatisfied, spontaneous women. Their frank and rather jaundiced views of male-female relationships, be they father and daughter, husband and wife or lover and object, are tempered with the upbeat optimism of the survivor. The women in Abdou's first collection of stories, *Anything Boys Can Do*, are less like fictional characters than people you've known all your life.

"Teachers always tell beginning writers to 'write what you know,'" says Abdou. "I would take that advice further; you write not just about what you know but instead about what absolutely obsesses you. I wrote the stories in *Anything Boys Can Do* in the years preceding the breakup of my first marriage," Abdou continues, "and I was indeed obsessed by heterosexual relationships, particularly by perfectly nice people doing perfectly awful things to each other in the name of sex or love."

Abdou's characters veer between



obsession and disappointment with the men in their lives and the emotional honesty of the stories makes these women easy to relate to, whether you like them or not. Trapped by impulsive decisions or by the inability to say no, they often seem more like girls, looking for themselves while they're still on the lookout for a good time.

Many of the stories are propelled by the same anxious energy that fuels the characters' lives. These are women ready to take their next step but not sure what direction to go. They are trying to find a reason to stay or leave and use their sexuality as a way of pushing the envelope. They long for commitment and love, but does settling for what's familiar and comfortable mean you're stuck forever?

The men they choose to love or leave aren't perfect either. Boozing ex-boyfriends, emotionally absent partners, manipulative lovers, cat-killing fathers, they are flawed in very human ways. But if you're a woman who's been sold a bill of goods on romantic love (even though you know better than to believe it), those imperfections can grow big enough to blur your judgement and leave you running for cover.

Abdou is interested in examining the unresolved conflicts in her characters' lives but she never settles for the quick fix or the happy ending. Most of these people remain as ambivalent and confused by the end of the stories as when we first meet them. Abdou sometimes creates tension with undercurrents of death, violence, separation or loss, but the overall tone of the writing is buoyant and rich with details that lighten the mood.

"My favourite description of *Anything Boys Can Do* came from Elisabeth Harvor who referred to the stories as 'hilariously unromantic and refreshingly bitter,'" says Abdou. "That comment allays my fears that the collection is too dark, too cynical. My least favourite description of the book comes from my husband who calls it my 'male-bashing book.' It's true that men don't come off looking too great in this collection, but neither do women."

In Abdou's next book, a novel called *The Bone Cage* to be released in July 2007, she heads into different territory to write about amateur athletes (wrestlers and swimmers in particular) with a focus on issues of body and identity and aging. Her next project is about B.C. ski towns, a novel partially inspired by Hal Clifford's *Downhill Slide*.

Below is an excerpt from "Shady Valley" by Angie Abdou from *Anything Boys Can Do* (Thistledown Press, 2006).

Excerpt

The car is quiet as they stare out the window. It's beautiful. Alexandra wonders—not for the first time—how anyone could not see the prairie's beauty. In the summer.

The sky is huge, enveloping them whole in a turquoise blue more brilliant than any tropical ocean. You can see and see and see and see—no trees or mountains blocking the view. The land rolls in a lullaby covered with bright yellow canola, everything blue and yellow, like something out of a child's

colouring book. The miles pass in a comfortable silence.

"A mountain-top view without the mountains," says Alexandra.

"Yes," says her dad, "it's pretty."

"God, where is everybody? We haven't seen a car in twenty minutes. Not a soul."

Nothing. No horses. No cars. No people.

"This used to all be family-owned farms. Entire towns have disappeared. The small farmers have all been bought out by

massive farming operations."

It's eerie to see so much land un-lived upon.

Dust rises on the road ahead of them like a cloud that's lost its place, and finally a car approaches. They see the dust rising from its tires long before they see it. Both cars slow and move to opposite sides of the road to pass. The drivers wave.

"Damn traffic! We must be getting close to the metropolis now."

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the art and craft of writing

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Alexandra allows a smile and even meets her dad's eyes. She remembers this humour from his more relaxed moments in her youth.

As they pull into town, she can't help remarking, "This is it? You've got to be kidding me! It's like a ghost town. Something from a movie."

They park the car in the dusty street and walk toward the first building. The store her father's father had operated and lived in is still standing. Her dad points to the posts in front. "That's where the farmers would tie their horses when they came in to get supplies."

Alexandra rubs her hand along one of the splintered horse posts. She can almost smell the dust and sweat of the over-worked animals, thought it's probably been decades since any were tied here. The store windows are boarded over, but other than that her dad says it looks just the same. They peek around the boards and her dad points out the front till, the seeding counter, the rooms off to the side where they used to sleep. They walk around back and even the outhouse is still standing.



Angie Abdou

No one comes out to see why they're snooping about. The whole town holds its breath.

Alexandra's shoes are a pain on these dirt roads but she doesn't let on—forces herself not to limp. She briefly considers taking them off and walking barefoot but knows that will elicit one of her dad's disgusted glares.

The old schoolhouse still stands, though today's kids, if there are any, probably go into the city for school. Alexandra points to the building next to the school. "That's the cutest little church. If only I had my camera! Some black and white film and it could be the 1940s!"

"And what use would you have for a church like this? You

and your Buddhism and God knows what else!" Alexandra's experimentation with religion has been a source of irritation for her dad. When she first came home enthused about Buddha's teachings, he shook his head and clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth. The most hateful of his noises, Alexandra thought, a sound that started a dull ache in the base of her spine, an ache that would slowly make its way up to her scalp.

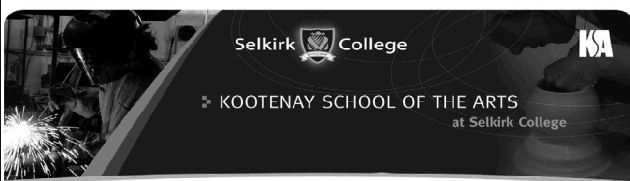
Later that week, he introduced her to his friend who'd come by for a drink after golf. "This is my daughter. She's Buddhist. *This week,*" he laughed.

"You were married in a church like this though," he says now. "Fat lot of good that did." He shakes his head and clicks his tongue on the roof of his mouth.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asks, fighting the familiar ache.

"Means I don't see a husband anywhere."

She thinks of saying that her parents' marriage never showed her how to accept love, never prepared her for a happy marriage. "I'm just on a holiday," she says instead, pushing the ache away, even managing a smile. "A holiday home to see my dad." ●



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