

Arts

**Short stories, long career ; More than 40 years after Edith Pearlman published her first story she is finally being celebrated by the literary establishment**

**Leah Hager Cohen**

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1028 words

[The Boston Globe](#)

English

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"I like this place because everything they have can kill you," Edith Pearlman says, perusing the menu of a Brookline pub on a recent gray afternoon. The remark proves fitting introduction to both the septuagenarian author and her work: at once mischievous and mettlesome, with a twist near the end.

Despite publishing over 250 short stories and four prize-winning collections over the past 40 years, Pearlman has long eluded the attention of all but a modest, ardent cadre of readers. That changed when her fourth book, "Binocular Vision," was lauded last year on the cover of The New York Times Book Review. It went on to garner more splendid reviews along with a bouquet of awards (National Book Critics Circle, PEN/Malamud, and Edward Lewis Wallant), prestigious nominations (National Book Award, Story Prize, and Los Angeles Times Book Prize) and, perhaps most gratifying, a wider audience.

The typical Pearlman story unfolds in a straightforward manner only to reveal -- perhaps not until it's over -- a lambent lining. She treats her subjects seriously without ever being self-serious. Her compassion for her characters is leavened with clear-eyed pragmatism. Even the gravest of her stories are marbled with wit. And their range of subject ("I love to write about what isn't me.") suggests an unfettered intelligence and capacious appetite.

Speaking of which: "I'll try the lamb burger," Pearlman tells the waitress. It comes with red onion jam and handcut fries.

At 75, Pearlman is frankly pretty. A wife and mother of two, with a 7-year-old grandson, she has dark, amused eyes, a close cap of luminous hair, and an expressive mouth that breaks readily into a smile. Born and raised in Providence by a Russian father and Polish-American mother, she has lived around Boston since her college days at Radcliffe. Although books were important in her childhood -- as soon as she was old enough to ride her bike to the library, she began reading her way through the children's room, and remembers the thrill of being permitted to "cross over" into the adult section when she was 11 -- Pearlman did not begin writing until she took a couple of courses at Harvard, where, she says, students were encouraged "to play."

She found she excelled: at rearranging words on a page, at imagining the lives of others, at learning to pay attention. Her relationship with her characters is one of thoughtful curiosity rather than intimate presumption. "I observe from a remove," she says. "I don't feel I inhabit their skins." To readers, too, she affords uncommon respect, treating them as capable and intelligent - - as collaborators, even. "I depend on the reader to work with me to some degree."

Despite her professors' encouragement, she didn't envision making a living as a writer. Yet after graduation, she went on a TV quiz show and won "seven or eight hundred dollars" -- enough to subsidize six blissful months of the writing life. Pearlman recalls lying on the grass in front of her Central Square apartment, reading books in the sunshine and penning her first published stories, for the Cambridge Chronicle. One was about a racehorse whose diet consisted solely of artichokes. Pearlman's fee was \$10.

For the next decade, she supported herself as a computer programmer, a job she left when she married. Her husband, a psychiatrist and amateur musician, supported her writing spiritually as well as financially. "He was a renaissance patron of the arts," says Pearlman with a flash of dimple. "I was his court writer. We were a team."

Her other great teammate is her writing companion of 30 years, the Cambridge author Rose Moss. They met through a writing group Pearlman characterizes as "much too kind." Recognizing in each other a "certain ruthlessness," Moss and Pearlman formed their own group of two, meeting monthly. "It is enormously satisfying," says Moss, to see her friend "at last getting the recognition she has so long deserved."

Heidi Pitlor, series editor of Best American Short Stories, recalls, "Every year we'd say, 'Check out Edith!'" Yet somehow, "everyone knew about her -- but no one knew about her." In the introduction to "Binocular Vision," novelist Ann Patchett writes of the "secret-handshake status" Pearlman aficionados have long shared. Small presses kept championing her work, while the literary establishment kept overlooking it. Until now.

Emily Smith, executive director of Lookout Books, the fledgling press that made "Binocular Vision" its launch title, says having a shoestring budget compelled creative marketing. "If we loved a book," she says, "we would find a way to sell it." Yet as much as the publishers believed in the book, no one was quite prepared for its breakout success. Ben George, Lookout's editorial director, who first approached Pearlman about this collection, says when the National Book Award finalists were announced, he fell out of his chair. "Literally. Onto the floor," says George.

In the wake of recognition the book has already received, speculation about the Pulitzer seems unavoidable (winners and finalists will be announced April 16). "I know enough about prizes," says Jill Kneerim, Pearlman's agent of 22 years, "to know they're wanton in a way, subject to the tastes of each year's panel of judges." And yet. She adds, "A lifetime's work by a master is collected in this book."

Though warmed by all the acclaim, Pearlman insists, "It won't last." This suits her fine. "I'm looking forward to getting back to more stories." She has published a dozen since the "Binocular Vision" release. "It's very important for a writer to be unnoticed. As quiet and unnoticed as possible."

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