

Cordova: "So much of the New York I knew is gone": an interview with Libby

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AN INTERVIEW WITH

LIBBY CUDMORE

BY

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Libby Cudmore is an alumna of Binghamton University, where *Harpur Palate* has been published for the last fifteen years. She worked at video stores, bookstores, and temp agencies before settling down in upstate New York to write. Her short stories have appeared in *PANK*, the *Stoneside Collective*, the *Big Click*, and *Big Lucks*. We are grateful that she has taken the time to share her insight on her first novel, *The Big Rewind*, some of which takes place in Binghamton itself. *The Big Rewind*, which has received a starred Kirkus Review, is forthcoming with William Morrow in February 2016.

In *The Big Rewind*, Jett Bennett moved to New York to become a music journalist. What she found was a temp gig as a proofreader, but at least she's fitting in with the artists and musicians in the tragically hip Brooklyn neighborhood she calls home. But when Jett opens up her mail and finds a mix tape meant for her neighbor KitKat, a local queen bee renowned for her "enhanced" baked goods and retro videogame collection, everything changes. Jett drops off the cassette and discovers that it's game over for KitKat: someone bashed her head in with a rolling pin...and left her pot brownies burning in the oven. Kit Kat's boyfriend, Bronco, is MIA. Her sister is so desperate for answers that she asks Jett to snoop around. Then there's that mix tape. Jett didn't know KitKat well, but she knows music, and a tape full of love songs from someone other than Bronco screams motive—sending Jett and her best friend, Sid, on an epic quest through

record stores, strip joints, vegan bakeries, and basement nightclubs to find KitKat's killer, a journey that resonates with Jett, and her past, in unexpected ways.

MJC: Thank you for taking the time to talk with us. The opening chapter of *The Big Rewind* has one of the most intense and exciting images of the entire novel—Jett discovering KitKat's dead body splayed across the floor while pot brownies burn in the oven. From there, we're taken with Jett on an investigative journey filled with tension to find her killer. After starting so dramatically, how did you work to keep that energy moving? What narrative considerations do you make before you begin writing?

LC: The detective novel is all about movement—the detective is constantly asking questions, and each of those questions takes her to the next place, the next question. I gave her little quests—find a tape player, find her high school ex—so that in every chapter she was on the move.

But this wasn't a novel that I planned out, chapter by chapter. I start everything in notebooks, so I wrote the opening scene on the bus on the way home from work. It just came to me while listening to Sid Straw's "CBGBs," and when I had written it out, I thought this is actually a genius idea and I'm going to roll with it. I didn't know who KitKat's killer was when I started. Sid's whole storyline was lifted from a short story that never got published. I rarely plan longer projects much past the first few scenes, so all I knew was that Jett had a mix tape that was going to lead her to find her friend's killer. The rest worked itself out on the page.

MJC: *The Big Rewind* has a connection to a wide variety of locations, especially around New York City. What sort of research do you do about these places to accomplish this successfully? How did you see place expressing itself as you wrote?

LC: I spent a lot of time in New York City as a kid with my grandmother Rivkah, who was the influence for Jett's grandmother. Later, I lived in Brooklyn Heights, right off Montague Street, (just like in Bob Dylan's

Cordova: "So much of the New York I knew is gone": an interview with Libby "Tangled Up in Blue"). And I still visit frequently, so those were like little research trips so I could get streets and subway lines right.

But so much of the New York I knew is gone. An early draft of the chapter "(Looking for) the Heart of Saturday Night" had Jett and her friends going to Grey's Papaya after the club, but halfway through writing, that location closed. I went back and changed it even though it broke my heart. The club that they're at is modeled after one I used to dance at, Luke & Leroy's, and that's gone too. St. Mark's Place is unrecognizable. Pomme Frites burned to the ground four days after I was there during my bachelorette party weekend. So while New York is often expensive and frustrating to her, I wanted her to have the same sort of romantic wonder about it that I did when I was living there, so I made Barter Street in the spirit of the New York City I remember—fun and strange and bright and wonderful.

MJC: At the outset, Jett introduces us to her New York City neighborhood, where she's been living in her grandmother's rent-controlled apartment. She describes it as "the Barter Street district of Brooklyn, just east of Williamsburg and, judging by how people dressed, slightly beyond Thunderdome," which not only shows Jett's wry sense of humor, but also something significant about the culture in which she's living. Bartering is a mainstay of this community, and Jett uses it to her advantage while sleuthing. What was it about this lifestyle that compelled you to include it in *The Big Rewind*? What role do you see Jett playing there and how did that influence you when developing her character?

LC: I was trying to be as sarcastic about the hipster lifestyle as I could possibly be, and nothing says "I have so much money that I never need to worry about it" than paying for goods and services with whimsy. But the idea grew on me, and I realized that I could use it as a tool for Jett. She's broke, so it's a system she can work to her advantage not just to get information, but to make friends. She's new to this neighborhood and a little shy, but at the end of the book, she's forged these intimate connections with all these different people through Billy Joel records and Blackadder DVDs. In the genre, there's this tendency to introduce a character who can give

the detective information, then we never see them again. Not so in *The Big Rewind*. I wanted to make these people, for all their quirks, to be people she can rely on even after the story ends.

MJC: Music in *The Big Rewind* is, naturally, of primary importance. It shapes everything from the organization of the book to the emotional states of the characters. Mix tapes are messages, memories that unfold as Jett progresses through the book. Her best friend Sid describes their importance:

“I can’t even remember the last time someone made me a mix CD, let alone a tape. But when you hear the first song and your heart soars and you know...” He sighed. “It’s the best feeling in the whole fucking world.”

A mix tape also serves as a clue for Jett as she tries to solve KitKat’s murder. Jett’s insight into the music industry puts her in a unique position of utilizing that evidence more than the police could. Since it wasn’t intended for her, what do you see as solidifying Jett’s intense connection to KitKat’s mix tape? How did you make the selections for it? In what ways do you envision people who aren’t as familiar with musical history engaging with that aspect of the novel?

LC: Jett’s own romantic history is wrapped up in music, so she’s naturally curious about KitKat’s. It’s something that she wished they had shared when KitKat was alive, so she feels a certain level of protectiveness around these songs. And then there’s this song she can’t find anywhere, and we’ve all had that moment where we hear a fragment of a song and it we desperately try to hold onto it until we can look it up, the notes dissipating with each passing moment. I’ve discovered some of my favorite songs that way. Jett feels like this song has all the answers she needs, if only she can track it down. It cements that connection between her and KitKat, even if it’s something that KitKat never got to hear.

The music is probably the single most personal aspect of this novel. Jett’s favorite artist is Warren Zevon, who, coincidentally, is my favorite

artist. Imagine that. I have almost every single song mentioned in the novel in my collection, and a lot of them were on these incredible mixes people made for me over the years. As I was writing, I thought about songs that meant something to me in moments like the ones the characters on the page were feeling, and plugged them in accordingly. There were times where it turned my heart inside out to write, but when the tears were wiped away, I was proud of those paragraphs.

And honestly, if I could include a CD with every copy sold, I would. But barring that, my hope is that people will make their own mixes for this book, that they'll go seek out artists—Tenpole Tudor, The Vapors, The Magnetic Fields—that they hadn't listened to previously. We have access to seemingly every song recorded in the history of music, so there's no excuse to putting down this book and snarking "I don't know who Steely Dan is."

MJC: I love the idea of including a CD with every copy. Readers will have to settle for tracking the songs in the novel, and there are a ton of great ones. Reading the book made me create my own playlist!

Except for the murder-mystery part, Jett's situation is a common one among Millennials particularly—she's a college grad seeking both work and meaningful relationships. In the book, she balances these things like spinning plates. What was the process of expressing that aspect of her life as distinct from her investigating KitKat's murder? How did you decide which plates to add to her hectic life and which to crash?

LC: Solving this case gives Jett purpose, but in order to solve it, she needed to expose herself to the life going on all around her. She had to go outside of her apartment, explore beyond her neighborhood, make friends, face a past she's been running from. The two storylines run parallel, they inform each other. And with this, I ended up removing scenes that I liked, just because they were merely window-dressing. They weren't informing the main story, KitKat's case, so they had to go. I don't like to waste words.

But I didn't want Jett to be perfect, so I had to crash a few of those plates. She doesn't get everything she wants. People are jerks to her. She's a jerk to other people. She screws up and she has to confront real mistakes

that cost her dearly and sometimes they don't work out the way she thinks she wants. That's life, and I wanted to make Jett's life as real as possible on the page.

MJC: Who are your literary influences and in what tradition do you see yourself working? What are you working on now that we can look forward to?

LC: Raymond Chandler is probably my biggest influence. Obviously, the title is an homage to *The Big Sleep*, but the original title was *No Awkward Goodbyes*, in tribute to *The Long Goodbye*. Chandler's prose was so sharp and bittersweet and beautiful; when I'm writing, I try to keep those three things in balance. It's very easy to be caustic and it's very easy to be gauzy, so I strive to write sentences that hit you and kiss you at the same time. It's hardboiled, sure, but it's not ugly.

Obviously, Warren Zevon is all over this book, much for the same reason. His songs are so dark, but sung with this sardonic cheer that I just love. Zevon's music has been with me my whole life, so naturally, he's going to be a big piece of my first novel, right down to the opening quote.

Currently I'm working on a series of short stories for Nick Mamatas over at *The Big Click*, which previously published my story "Late Night on Rt. 17." I'm also working on a new novel, as well as a book with my writing partner, Matthew Quinn Martin, author of *Nightlife*. I keep busy.

Harpur Palate would like to extend many thanks to Libby Cudmore for her time and generosity. We are excited about her future projects, and look forward to seeing *The Big Rewind* on shelves across the country in February.