

# Aritha Van Herk: good and getting better

by Suzanne Lundrigan

Award winning novelist, Aritha Van Herk, and I have something in common: we both took a course from Professor Maurice Legris.

Van Herk's hand flies to her head, "You took a course from Legris... God, he scared me shitless. Our class was at eight in the morning. I remember one morning he stood up and said 'Get the hell out of here and buy yourselves some coffee. Come back when you are all awake'."

Van Herk looks over, "And he talks about me... what does he say?"

Yes, Dr. Legris certainly does talk about Van Herk and rightly so. She is one of this university's brightest literary luminaries. Van Herk has achieved a great deal and at a remarkably tender age.

At twenty-four she won the Sea Book First Novel award of \$50,000 for *Judith*, causing a furor in the U of A English Department. "The book (*Judith*) was my masters thesis. I was due to defend it a couple of days after the prize was announced. The jurors didn't quite know what to make of it," chuckles Van Herk.

Her eyes roll skyward, "I remember Rudy Weibe asked me about J.D. Roberts; he's a Canadian writer I absolutely hated, so much so that I refused to study him."

Van Herk left the U of A, Masters degree in hand.

Born in the town of Edburg, Alberta, Van Herk always knew she would write. "I couldn't do anything else. I was a bookworm. I don't remember not being able to read. Though as a kid growing up in Canada I never ran across anything in literature which satisfied the Canadian in me."

Three novels later, Van Herk is making sure that Canadian kids will never again feel lost in the literary landscape.

Van Herk has had intimate experience with those landscapes particular to Canada. "One year I was determined to get some writing done, so I went up



## I wear running shoes, like you.

north to work as a bush cook. The crew taught me how to shoot a gun, and left me during the day to my cook tent and typewriter."

The crew chief became quite protective of Van Herk's manuscript.

"On the day we were to break camp, I had left some notes on a barrel. The helicopter arrived as scheduled... and the notes were blown all over. All of a sudden, the crew chief came charging

out, waving the helicopter away... those things are expensive by the hour. I asked him what he was doing and he shouted 'Your novel, your novel, it's blowing away.' In fact, my novel was safely in my possession. I guess the crew chief had watched me slave over the typewriter for months on end and he didn't want to see it go to waste."

On tour to promote her latest novel, *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Jour-*

ney, Van Herk is exploring yet another landscape, "I wanted to look at the lives of women in the lower class: maids in hotels, women bus drivers. It is time that someone told their story."

The central character in *No Fixed Address* is Arachne, a lingerie saleswoman. Arachne was raised in the lower class and she is struggling to find a place in the middle class world.

"I wanted to create a character who could go out and do all sorts of wild things and not repent; I basically turn all the travelling salesman jokes on their heads. The idea of women who travel alone is a new one. Even when I say I'm taking a trip alone, people look at me and say 'You're going alone?'"

Arachne visits the small towns of Alberta, plying her wares; small towns which Van Herk has seen. "The small towns of this province have a mythology all their own."

Van Herk looks at her shoes and sighs, "I'm on a book tour, usually I wear running shoes like you." She shrugs her shoulders, "Young women these days are much less selfconscious of their bodies." She nods her approval.

Politically a feminist, Van Herk separates her art from her feminism. "Your art is your art; I'm not going to make my books into feminist tracts."

Occasionally Van Herk intimidates her interviewers, "especially male reviewers. They have me pegged as a feminist and look for proof of that in my work."

Of reviewers in general, Van Herk says, "I really appreciate a thoughtful review and interview. I hate it if people ask me what I had for breakfast. I'm not discouraged by negative reviews. If writers were discouraged by those bad reviews, they would stop writing; that doesn't happen."

Very much a nationalist: "My parents chose to come to this country; this is the most wonderful country in the world." Van Herk treasures all those things specific to Canada.

And for her writing, "I've been terrifically lucky. As well, I'm good and I'm getting better."

cont'd. from page 4

take a chance with their germs. Red plastic just doesn't measure up to bone china.

"Welcome back. Tax reform... Click click click click click..."

"Taxes were on the agenda today in the Senate."

Ah, wonderful. NBC. Tom Brokaw, Show yer legs, son.

"...and will virtually eliminate loopholes for both individuals and corporations..."

Hope they don't start taxin' my soup bones. I don't need both the German Shepherd next door, and the government goin' after 'em.

"American and Soviet negotiators were back at the bargaining table in Geneva today to discuss the disposal of obsolete missiles by both sides..."

Funny how those obsolete U.S. missiles always remind me of lamp-posts. And the Russian ones look like fire-plugs, what with all that red paint...

"Drug possession trials continued today for several baseball players..."

Good. I could fetch the ball better than most of those outfielders on drugs. Sure am glad they make bats out of aluminum now. The wooden ones were a waste of good trees.

"...closing arguments will be presented tomorrow. On the lighter side, cartoonist Charles Schulz was announced today as the winner..."

Yea! I like him. He draws Snoopy. Snoopy's my hero.

"Curse you, Red Baron!" Oh, yeah. Great stuff. Better than Garfield any day. Course, Marmaduke's o.k. too...

"Coming up next: Chrysler's new cars."

But they won't be any fun to chase.

"Pepsi. The choice of a new generation."

Soda pop makes me sneeze.

"New Swanson's Hungry Man Entrees. Feed 'em to your hungry man."

How about your hungry dog? Those things look even better than Puppy Chow! Whoops, the news is back on.

"...joint project with Maserati. The cars are out now, and Chris Wallace has this report..."

Hey, those would be fun to chase after all. The bumper's right at tooth level. Don't really know what I'd do with one if I caught it, though... it'd be harder to bury than your average bone...

"Edward Kennedy stated again today that he will not seek the Presidency in 1988..."

Good. I wouldn't even vote for him for dogcatcher. Course, I can't vote. Kennedy's got nice fat bitable legs, though. He'd be even more fun to chase than one of those new Chryslers. Too bad he isn't our mailman.

"On Commentary tonight, John Chancellor takes a look at the Olympics."

"Thank you, Tom. In a couple of years, the Olympics will be back. The winter games will be held in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, and the summer games will be in Seoul, South Korea..."

Did he say South Korea! Grrr. They eat dogs over there. Why should barbarians like that be allowed to host the Olympics? Hmpf. Olympics, indeed. I'd like 'em better if they had some real sports, like dog-sledding in the winter and Frisbee-catching in the summer.

"Thank you, John. And that's the news for tonight. From all of us at NBC news, good night."

Boring, as usual. What's next? Oh, yeah. Wheel of Fortune. At least they give away some ceramic dogs now and then...

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