

# Memories of agoraphobia, betrayal in *Housebroken*

**Housebroken**  
by Leona Gom  
NeWest Press

review by Paul Morigeau

**L**eona Gom's first novel, *Housebroken*, is an enjoyable and sometimes provocative story of power, trust, and betrayal within a love triangle.

The novel's strengths are in the characters, (who, for the most part, are both engaging and repulsive) and the insightful use of, and commentary upon human memory processes. The weaknesses lie in the author's heavy-handed use of similes and metaphors, and a conclusion which, because of the lack of character development of one key character, is muddled and disappointingly hollow.

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The story begins with Ellen receiving the cat, journals, poems, and plays of her recently deceased friend and neighbour, Susan, from the woman's husband, Whitman. Ellen, who narrates the story in the first person, must sort through the writings, deciding what is worth keeping. As we hear Ellen's reactions to Susan's writings, her task becomes one of sorting through her own memories of her relationship with Susan — deciding what to retain of it and what to discard. Memory is revealed as both a healing process and a painful detriment to sanity.

Ellen is a seemingly straight-faced, middle-aged widow who lists casual sexual affairs as one of her resolutions, along with getting more exercise and mowing the lawn. Susan, in her own words, "nearly shit," herself when she heard about this resolution, and ironically this resolution will prove to affect more than just Susan's bowel movements.

Susan is a delightfully wacky character. She is full of irreverent comments and courageous actions: she names her cat Dong and suggests that her husband's fellow bank

workers form a union. These qualities add zest to a story set in the hypocritical bible town of 1983-1984 Chilliwack. Susan, who "will have to be pulled kicking and screaming" out of the '60s, represents everything that Chilliwack is not, but she is trapped both by her past and the town.

The author manages Susan's breakdown very well. Susan's journal entries become more and more disturbing. She is depressed by the lack of activities in the town, her unfulfilling marriage to Whitman, her increasingly restrictive agoraphobia (a fear of open places), and a secret from her past about a boy, Freddy, whom she maintains she loved and was prevented from marrying.

It seems that her only happiness comes in the form of her attentive neighbour Ellen, who, while bringing her meals and visiting with her, is carrying on a torrid sexual affair with the dowdy Whitman. Susan's journal entry of her first agoraphobic attack occurs at the same time as Whitman and Ellen's first sexual encounter.

The affair between Whitman and Ellen continues as Susan retreats more and more from the world outside her own home. Ellen's prudish demeanour is destroyed, along with most of the empathy the reader has for her. Although it is difficult to listen to a protagonist who acts so odiously, the character's weakness for Whitman's sexual prowess (contrary to Harlequin Romance, Prince Charming is not always the best in bed), is what makes her truly human and interesting. Her sexual abandon may be explained by the fact that her last two partners were so inadequate: a fat bald man with a tattoo of the American flag on his right buttock, and her former husband who would make love with her once a week after the Mary Tyler Moore Show.

The novel's commentary on memory is most poignant as Ellen tries to reconcile her guilt for betraying her trusting friend to herself. Ellen tries to face the truth the best she can and try to see the good with the bad and move on from there; Susan, however, actually knows of the affair but tries to pretend that it never happened. She never mentions the affair in her journals, but Ellen later learns of Susan's self-deception with regards to this and other more shocking events from Whitman and Susan's mother.

The conclusion, however, is very disappointing both in the climactic revelation and the author's inability to construct a plausible ending. Whitman, who throughout the novel is merely an inarticulate sexual dynamo and a sullen stick-in-the-mud, is suddenly revealed to have dealt with the dark secret of Susan's past with subtlety.



Leona Gom's first novel, *Housebroken*.

Although this revelation may serve to explain Susan's agoraphobia, Whitman's newly expanded role is inappropriate so close to the end of the novel.

There are many instances in the novel in which the author's overwhelming reliance on similes and metaphors is distracting. For example, Ellen describes her stepson's sexual advances towards her in the terms: "I can see his huge moist mouth, like an airplane

the bomb bay opening, a lumpy tongue ready to drop." Too many comparisons like this can have a dulling effect, in spite of Gom's subtle and humorous comments throughout the novel.

Aside from these problems, Leona Gom's novel is an enjoyable, interesting read. Irreverent humour, believable characters, and the author's skillful use of memory make *Housebroken* a novel worth reading.

**Total of \$105! in prizes!**

**LITERARY CONTEST INFO:**

**Deadline for all entries: 4 pm Feb. 12**

All entries must be typewritten and doublespaced, with name, address and ID number on a separate page.

Maximum Lengths:

Short poem: 25 lines    **Note: poems counted by lines!**  
Long poem: 200 lines  
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Submit entries with self-addressed stamped envelope to:

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**Only 2 entries each for poetry categories**  
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