



## Novelist sees her generation 'plagued' by fear of intimacy

By Hunter Drohojowska

"The truth is, it hasn't been a great decade for romance," wryly proclaims Ellen Paul, whose first novel, "Back East," (published by David R. Godine, \$13.95) pairs a female romantic loser with a gay actor. "I wanted to write about the tendency not to commit, not to want to be intimate, not to want to join ... to anyone else's life in any way that could threaten. (The heroine) being involved with a gay man is like the ultimate in that relationship."

On the face of it, such a despairing message would seem to promise scant popularity. But Paul has created a cast of likable, if insecure, characters with problems as universal as love itself.

In L.A. to visit a friend and promote her new book, Paul, 31, explained why her book's central relationship is symbolic of contemporary romance. "People don't marry; they don't seem to settle down," the dark-haired, green-eyed novelist claims. "Even if they do marry, it doesn't last or it goes on forever being rocky. To me there's a plague of that now among my generation."

"Back East" tells the story of Melanie Armour, a singer-songwriter numbed by failed loves and self-indulgence in L.A.'s fast lane. Escaping to New York, she meets a young, aspiring gay actor named Lucian Curry. Under his influence, she gradually allows herself to feel again, developing a new self-understanding that embraces her work, her family and her idea of romance. Melanie falls in love in Lucian.

That a relationship without the potential of sexual contact could produce such radical change seems strictly a novelist's device. And that it is. But Paul's life has paralleled that of her heroine's on many other levels. There is no real life Lucian among her friends, she admits, but that doesn't matter. Her point is that Melanie and Lucian's relationship is a "way of making real, physical and immediate a relationship that exists, in essence, in a lot of heterosexual relationships."

Paul wrote "Back East," she says, during the course of three years in psychoanalysis. "A lot of the issues that Melanie is dealing

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Paul's novel "Back East" pairs a female loser with a gay actor.

Mike Mullen/Herald photo

## Novelist

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with (in the book) are the kinds of things I was dealing with in analysis -- family, work and love. I felt that I was a certain kind of person because of the upbringing I'd had (in Sands Point, N.Y.) and how my parents viewed me ever since I was little. Then I had to say, 'Do I want to live my whole life a certain way because my parents believed in it?'

Paul came to California in 1969, when she married a soldier who was stationed in Monterey. The marriage lasted a year, but she remained for 13 years, getting her degree from U.C. Santa Barbara before returning to the East. "In a way, I grew up and got a sense of myself in L.A. that I could not have done in New York, which intimidates me the way it intimidates the heroine of the novel."

Like the fictional Melanie, Paul gave up commercial writing and songwriting for the more serious business of novels. Once "Back East," which was written here, was accepted by Godine, fiction and fact merged again. "I wanted to move back East for a long time. By sending my heroine back there, I guess I was paving the way. I didn't move to New York five years ago when I started writing 'Back East,' but I might have and now I have. It's not pure chance." She now lives in Montclair, N.J., with a former actor who has three children.

Why Melanie is obsessed with

Lucian is emblematic of what many women seek but cannot find in a relationship. "I don't know if I'm just talking about myself and my friends, but my feeling is that my whole generation has failed to establish comfortable, stable relationships. There aren't a whole lot of well-balanced, generous, kind, capable men wandering around, and furthermore, if that man comes along, a lot of women decide they don't want him anyway.

"I had lots of failed relationships. Sure, I've become desperately infatuated with people who weren't interested in having a committed relationship. Hasn't everyone?"

Paul believes the reasons behind the reluctance to give in to a relationship are cultural, "because for the last 10 years, everybody has been encouraged to work on him or herself, to perfect him or herself. The idea of committing to a relationship has become synonymous with arresting development."

Paul concedes "that's a bind I've gotten stuck in myself (a fear of commitment). So to me, the idea of having a warm, intimate, emotional relationship with a gay man is like the perfect solution, you know?" Such a relationship, she explains, might be effective as a transition, a safe, congenial harbor. "Here you have an actual thinking person who can be the emotional center of your life and yet can never, ever take over. Never threaten you in that way where you have to give up the limits you've drawn around yourself, that keep you comfortable."

The need for women to define limits in their relationships, according to Paul, is, in part, a result of the sexual revolution, when women in their late 20s and early 30s went through a lot of failed relationships. "After a while, you get wary. I think that's why people, especially women, are so reluctant. After all, one of the results we learned from all this experimentation was to quit jumping into things, giving up your apartment, moving in with someone else and six months later realizing this isn't the right person.

"At a certain point, you start to dislike the whole sex. I think gay men are like a hybrid, between really being a man you'd relate to in a heterosexual way and yet, there is a certain amount of sexual safety, some kind of identification sexually that makes this a sort of transition relationship. At least, that's how it functions in the novel. Melanie goes from a series of really cruddy relationships with men to at least a greater self-acceptance of how willing she really is to connect to other people."

Most importantly, Melanie comes to know herself through Lucian by not trying to be someone else. "We're not content with the life that's in us. We try to live in other people's conceptions of what we want to be, and end up mangling it. I've had a lot of trouble with that. Part of the book was showing someone giving in, surrendering to her own personality and flaws. She goes through a kind of coming into herself, which I feel is crucial if you're going to be effective in the world."