The Big Dream
by Rebecca Rosenblum

Reviewed by Bob Armstrong

We tend to think that the American Dream, or its Canadian cousin, is a subject for a novel, rather than a work of short fiction. Portraying our great big world, bringing to life success and failure, youth and age, wealth and poverty – that’s the job for the novel, and not just any novel: the “social novel.” Toronto writer Rebecca Rosenblum may make us re-examine that assumption with her short story collection The Big Dream. Call it, perhaps, the “social short story collection.”

The 13 stories in the collection are set in and around the offices of Dream Inc., publisher of a series of magazines (Dream Sailing, Dream Wedding, Dream Baby, etc.) offering, like most such magazines, a dream of a perfect life. The stories range in tone from satire to elegy, and cover virtually the entire operation, from the lowly customer service representatives in the call centre to the company’s CEO and the CFO of the American parent company.

There are many individual stories in The Big Dream, but they’re all part of the collective story of the collapse of the company, and a big part of the economy. Early on we get a sense of the rot affecting the company, when we encounter a tech support worker on temporary contract who is suffering a toothache while he waits impatiently to go on full time and get his dental benefits. In the same story, the tech support crew needs to take action because the building is infected with mice who are gnawing away on cables. It’s a very clever way of symbolizing the rot and decay that’s eating away at the whole company.

In later stories the problems become more explicit. One focuses on the one remaining member of the company’s research department to survive a round of layoffs. Two others deal with executives trying to break the news to employees that they’re contracting out jobs to a firm in India.

It’s interesting that Rosenblum sets her stories in a magazine, that go-to destination for escapist chiclitz. How many times have we seen a magazine as a glamorous setting where no actual work seems to be done, but where our heroine triumphs through spunk and a pure heart? Rosenblum’s magazine could not be less like those settings. For one, it’s not in a high-style modernist skyscraper, nor in a restored heritage building in a funky arts district. It’s located in an industrial park in Mississauga near Pearson Airport. For another, more significant thing, we don’t see people doing glamorous work. Her stories focus on the people who work in the call centre, deal with tech support, oversee hiring and firing, or spend all day, on a good day, tweaking a new logo.

Characters in the stories live their lives around their work, coming home exhausted to deal with a dying mother or a marriage in crisis or engaging in a workplace affair that is doomed to go nowhere.

Serious as many of her themes are, Rosenblum can also be very funny when she shines a light on odd aspects of workplace culture or misunderstandings and cultural clashes among the people at Dream Inc.
Here’s one example of the collection’s comedy. Mariska and Grig, a pair of Slavic-immigrant roommates – one a waitress and the other a Dream Inc. customer service representative – are talking about the food and weight obsessions of Canadian middle-class office women.

“But the women who come to the restaurant . . . they worry about skinny. They don’t eat bread, don’t eat croutons, talk talk talk about the yoga. They put their mats under the table to trip me.”

“Mats?” he asks, trailing her to the front door.

Mariska rolls her eyes; she was like a sister he couldn’t yell at or shove. “Skinny rich bitches are lazy, but still they must exercise, so they do exercises lying down. Is like exercise nap, to get stretchy. For princesses, for rich girls.” (41)

Sure it’s funny, but like a lot of the humour in the book it also highlights the comedy, sometimes tragicomedy, of daily working life.

In an interview with the poet Ariel Gordon in the Winnipeg Free Press, Rosenblum described her rationale for getting away from what she calls “The confectionary idea that I see in a lot of fiction, that life happens after six and on weekends.”

This focus on real life as separate from work, she said, “is not true to me, nor to anyone who has ever faced unemployment in a bad economy, or overheard a colleague crying in the bathroom, or had a really excellent night at the holiday party. It all matters, it’s all real life — I wanted to show that.”

The Big Dream is real life. For readers who want fiction that engages with the world we live in, Rosenblum’s work matters. ♦

Bob Armstrong is the author of the comic novel Dadolescence (Turnstone Press).

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