

Introduction of Amy Bloom

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Of course all writers who come for a talk at the John Adams Institute are special. But Amy Bloom, whom we are going to meet tonight, well, she's *really* special. I used to think that I was the only one who loved her work, but the last couple of weeks have made me reconsider that notion. Many people whom I told I was going to interview Amy Bloom enthused: 'Wow! She's my favorite writer!' And when I wanted to pick up a magazine at the airport this summer the first thing I saw in the bookshop there was a stack of her new novel, *Lucky us*, labeled with stickers saying: Book of the Month. So I'm not the only one who loves Amy Bloom. There is some hope for the world.

Reading and rereading Amy Bloom's work this summer some things struck me. Her stories and novels are immediately recognizable as her own. How does she do it? Is it her specific style: understated, sometimes ironic, to the point? Let me illustrate this with some of her first lines, because Amy Bloom is the queen of the first sentence. The first story of her first collection of short stories, *Come to Me*, starts with: 'In the middle of the eulogy at my mother's boring and heartbreaking funeral, I began to think about calling off the wedding.' The first sentence of her most recent novel, *Lucky Us*: 'My father's wife died. My mother said we should drive down to his place and see what might be in it for us.' Lots of things are suggested here. The reader is immediately pulled into the story and wants to know more.

Or are her characters what makes her work so typically Bloom? They always seem to play by their own rules. They are capable of amazing self-invention and self-reinvention. They suffer a lot of hardship, but nevertheless often consider themselves lucky. Whatever happens, and in Bloom's novels many things happen, they pull up their cotton socks - to quote one of her characters - and get on with it. They do not whine.

Perhaps it is the elliptical way she tells her stories? In Amy Bloom's work some events are played out, others are hardly mentioned. Some characters in her stories reappear again and again. Ms Bloom was a psychotherapist, but as a novelist she doesn't psychologize a lot. Still she seems to show every little thing her characters feel. She doesn't judge. Her slim novels are huge in

events. She knows how to tell big stories in few words. She doesn't apologize, doesn't explain, but lets the reader fill in the gaps. Her subject is love and she finds it in strange places.

Or is it all of this? Probably. For me, her work is comforting and uplifting at the same time.

Who is Amy Bloom? Reading her biography it seems that she has some personal experience with reinvention. She may or may not have started out as an actress, but I know for sure that she worked as a bartender for a long time and was a psychotherapist. She made her debut as a writer in 1993 with a collection of short stories: *Come to Me*. In 1997 her first novel, *Love Invents Us*, was published. Since then she has alternated between publishing collections of short stories and novels. I also enjoyed her non-fiction book *Normal*, in which she writes about cross-dressers and transsexuals. For me it was, among other things of course, an eye opener to read about the rough deal the wives of cross-dressers get. As one wife said to Bloom: 'For twenty years he couldn't help with the dishes because he was watching football. Now he can't help because he's doing his nails. Is that different?'

In total Amy Bloom has now written three novels and four collections of short stories. Two years ago she published her first children's book, *Little Sweet Potato*. She has been nominated for both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her stories have appeared in numerous anthologies, and she has written for such publications as *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine* and Oprah's magazine, *O*. She lives in Connecticut and teaches writing at Wesleyan University.

This summer her third novel was published, the one I saw at the airport. *Lucky Us* is a splendid example of a Bloom novel, with lots of changing fortunes, surprise love stories, jazz music; a wonderful mix of tragedy and comedy. When Amy Bloom was asked last week to describe her novel in three words - this was on Twitter, of course - she said: 'love, pain and damn funny'. Set in the decade that included the Second World War, from 1939 to 1949, we follow the half-sisters Iris and Eva on their cross-country journey through the United States. Both are motherless: sixteen year old Iris's mother has died; twelve year old Eva's mother has abandoned her. Iris is full of ambition and plans, Eva - the main narrator of the story - is more 'hey-nunny-nunny', as their father Edgar says. Together they run away from home to go to Hollywood, where Iris wants to become a star. Without giving too much away, I can say that this doesn't work out, so it's time for a change of plan. The sisters, by now miraculously reunited with their father Edgar, decide to move to Brooklyn, New York, together with Francisco, Iris's favorite Hollywood make-

up artist, a gay Mexican. They end up with the wealthy Torelli family on Long Island, for whom Edgar - who used to be a teacher - works as a butler and Iris - the would be actress - as a governess. Next Iris falls in love with the Torelli cook, who is married and is longing for a baby. Iris undertakes action - with heartbreaking results. Meanwhile Eva reads Tarot cards in a Brooklyn beauty parlour and finds some fame as a psychic. A meeting with a 'real psychic' puts an end to that. By the way: this 'real psychic' is called Henk Croiset - which sounds very Dutch to me. I would like to know something more about that.

“... Part of the pleasure of reading [Amy Bloom] is simply keeping up with her. You won't know where *Lucky Us* is headed until, suddenly, it's there,” Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*-critic, wrote in her review of the novel. It's true. The story moves from boring Ohio to homophobic Hollywood, from Long Island to Germany to post war London. Apart from Iris and Eva the reader gets to know a lot of interesting characters, including Gus, 'a man's man', one moment safe and sound in Long Island, the next a displaced person in Germany during the last days of the war; a little Jewish boy stolen from an orphanage and an Afro-American lounge singer suffering from vitiligo. I myself was quite fond of Mrs Gruber, the girls' immigrant landlady in Hollywood. 'When she was a young person just arrived in this country, Mrs Gruber said she would cry from rage and frustration, because she couldn't kill the people she wanted to kill. Sometimes, she said, men, who were often the people she wanted to kill, would misunderstand and try to comfort her.' Haven't we all been there?

All of these characters have one thing in common: an ability to reshape their experience and to reinvent their lives. If something doesn't work out, they try something else. Which comes in handy because, boy, is this a trait they need in this novel. Characters die suddenly, senselessly, people are abandoned, people are picked up; love affairs implode; cities are destroyed. All kinds of terrible things happen, but that does not make this a tragic novel. On the contrary: *Lucky Us* is mostly positive, celebrating the human gift of survival and reinvention.

It's about luck—good as well as bad, about the fluidity of identity and about what makes a family. And about love, of course, as always.

These are the subjects I should like to discuss with Ms Bloom. But first she is going to read from *Lucky Us* - seldom has a title been so opportune. Ladies and gentlemen, it's an honour to introduce you to Amy Bloom.