

## Bernice Rubens: *Spring Sonata: A Fable*

by

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Bernice Rubens is a challenging writer. Sometimes less widely read than her more popular contemporaries because she is considered too "difficult," she remains nonetheless a quietly significant voice in twentieth century British literature. Lacking appeal for the beach crowd that buys soft covers for a quick summer read, Rubens offers fare best fit for the fireside and a more contemplative audience. In *Spring Sonata*,<sup>1</sup> published in 1979, she is at her thought-provoking best, but in a comedic form that even the seaside vacationer might find difficult to resist.

Subtitled *A Fable*, the novel comes as something of a shock to the reader brought up on Aesop and other writers of that genre. While it is indeed, as the definition suggests, a brief story with a moral, the only animals in Rubens' tale are of the human type, and an attentive reading proves that she, like Chaucer, is far more satirist than fabulist.

When the novel was first published, one critic condemned its "vulgarity of style" and noted that Rubens, "a gifted novelist, seems to have settled for downright silliness."<sup>2</sup> Others, more perceptive, acknowledged the book's originality, but found "the novelty" (i.e., the idea of a foetus as protagonist) "rather heavy-going"; at the same time, they could not deny the high interest level elicited by Rubens' dramatic portrayal of this "set of unpleasant family relationships."<sup>3</sup> Now, almost two decades after the fact, the surreal world the author creates seems not nearly so shocking as it undoubtedly was when first published, while the characters she creates and the themes she deals with have displayed the timeless

quality that defies the passage of years.

The first section of this paper will offer an analysis and commentary on the plot structure. The second section will examine several of the techniques Rubens employs, paying special attention to the problems of characterization and point of view created by her unusual choice of main character. The final section will explore some of the major thematic elements of the book and the techniques she uses to develop them.

### I

Dr. Brown, a "simple, straightforward doctor," in the course of an autopsy discovers and later transcribes a journal, written in the womb, by an unborn child. The child, called "Yascha" by his mother, but "Buster" by the doctor/narrator, was conceived on the Jewish Day of Atonement. His mother, Sheila, a painist, decides he will be a musician, the very field Buster would have chosen--had he any voice in the matter. He had in fact been a child prodigy in his earlier life, until his brief career as a violinist virtuoso was abruptly halted by a careless taxi driver.

But as Buster's new body begins to take shape, his joy and excitement start to dissipate as he gets to know his family. His great-grandmother (Mrs. Singer), his grandmother (Mrs. Joseph), his mother (Sheila), and his father (Bernard), all have loud and conflicting claims on him, and plans for him. Sheila even arranges for her friend and concert partner, Clarissa, to bring her treasured Guarnerius violin to the hospital to play during the birth, in hopes of ensuring that Yascha has "a good start." Buster's only hope for support from an understanding adult

rests with Sheila's hippy brother, Robert, the family black sheep, but even that hope evaporates when Robert drops out of sight to serve a two year prison term for drug dealing.

By the end of nine months of eavesdropping, little "Yascha" has not only heard enough to be wisely wary, he has also had enough to not want any more. Overwhelmed by the burdens placed on him by his emotionally needy family, and realizing he will never be allowed to follow his own path, he finally determines to skip his "debut" and stay in the womb. When the attending obstetrician makes an incision to force the birth, Buster hides from the probing hand. But the deepest impulse of his musical nature is not to be totally denied: before the incision is stitched up, he manages to swipe Clarissa's precious Guarnerius and the bow, as well as a physician's notepad and a pencil. Now he can keep his journal, and develop his musical talent in "no one's image but my own" (122).

For the next three years, his mother's body grows ever larger until she can be moved only with great effort, by wheelchair. Still, she becomes ever more attuned to the child within, and believes in it wholly, though everyone else quite logically denies its existence and begins siding against her. Doctors speak ominously of phantom pregnancies, and family therapists stare with fascination through tinted glass as the family members attack one another--except for Sheila, who like Buster, increasingly withdraws from the fray.

Meanwhile, Buster continues to listen and practice his violin--in silence, of course--until one day, touched by his mother's suffering, her growing alienation from those around her, and her fears for her own sanity, he is suddenly moved to console her and begins playing aloud. She is genuinely filled with joy. And now she can prove she was right! She gets him to play for his father.

Bernard, filled with joy for his own reasons, immediately begins arrangements for an international concert tour, one that promises to bring in enough

money to let him forget completely the depths of personal anguish he had earlier felt at his impotence, his wife's disgusting bulk, and her embarrassing apparent madness. Mrs. Joseph, also joy-filled, revels in the certainty that at last she will be acknowledged as the grandmother of a genius and can demand the public respect long denied her by her own children's inadequacies.

Buster, however, discovers in the middle of an inspired performance that he has been tricked into playing for an audience and that even his mother has been an accomplice (though an unwilling one) in the betrayal. Filled with despair, he ceases to play on the instant, and using the *détaché* bowing technique he has practiced so diligently over the past three years, he severs the umbilical cord, causing the death of himself and his mother. In an epilogue, the doctor/narrator clears up some few details concerning the autopsy and appends a brief story recounted in Buster's journal that he had somehow (implausibly) missed in his earlier perusals:

"Central on the upper lip of every human being, is a small mark of indentation, a birthmark as obligatory as the navel. It is said, that when we struggle into birth, an angel presses his finger on our lips and seals them from retelling of our pasts. That indentation is his fingerprint, and it condemns us to repeat our former follies, and to live out once again our human frailty. We must, for if we dodge that finger, we would, all of us, be gods"(215).

## II

By the end of the novel, Dr. Brown, the narrator, is not the only one who feels that much has been needlessly lost by the demise of the young protagonist. Using a variety of techniques, Rubens cleverly engages our sympathies as well, making Buster the most attractive character in a world of generally unattractive people.

She has set herself a difficult technical problem:

how to characterize a foetus, starting at the moment of conception. The usual methods must be tossed out. A foetus can hardly carry on conversations with or about other characters; it certainly can't alter its geographical locus. It is without social, psychological or emotional history or context. Practically speaking there is no opportunity for it to interact with others, it can only react. In short, the usual methods of revealing character have been severely restricted.

Rubens rises to the challenge, not only accepting the physical restrictions created by the womb, but even playing off them. She creates an omniscient narrator and grants him access to Buster's personal diary; she provides the foetus with selected memories from a prior life; she creates a parallel between the foetus and one of the main characters in the "outside" world; and she even provides a foetal environment rife with conflict.

Her first step is to provide a voice for Buster. The device of the journal serves this purpose nicely, while adding an appropriately surreal touch. Though the journal itself is not begun for some nine months, the doctor/narrator blithely fills in that large time gap, claiming that he first studied the journal, sorted through the material, and then simply "used the novelist's license to offend chronology for the sake of clarity"(19). A narrator who is so casual about rearranging essential evidence cannot be expected to have many qualms about imagining what is running through his subject's mind. In no time, Dr. Brown assumes an omniscient third person point of view that allows us to grasp the essentials of Buster's personality even as we are being treated to an early version of today's currently popular fictionalized biographies.

Rubens is at pains to ensure that everything Buster learns about his family comes from listening to their conversations through the womb wall. Her frequent use of the term "eavesdropping" establishes this activity as clandestine. It also implicates the reader in the clandestine activity and indirectly serves to ally him or her with Buster. The conversations he

hears are often laden with painful emotion, the very sort of rude, spiteful exchanges that truly thoughtful adults would take pains to keep a child from hearing. The result is that these overheard exchanges, some actually set up on the page like a dialog in a theatrical script, distance us emotionally from the speakers, underline the dramatic tensions between them (and Buster), and enlist our sympathy for this small captive audience of one, who cannot interact, but only react.

A brief but typical example occurs at one point in the Rosens' rapidly deteriorating marital relationship, when Sheila, pleading exhaustion from the pregnancy, rejects yet again her husband's attentions in the bedroom. Buster listens through the womb wall:

He heard his father stirring. "Perhaps after it's born we can go on holiday together. A second honeymoon," he said, with a painfully apologetic giggle.

Buster waited hopefully for his mother's reply, but there was only silence, except for a long inward sigh that only he could hear (68).

It is through eavesdropping that we and Buster are able to deduce most of the basic facts about his family: that his great-grandmother has been salted away in an old folks' home, that his grandmother is a selfish and self-pitying shrew, that his mother has inherited the family tendency to establish unrealistic expectations for their offspring, that his father is distressingly weak.

Buster is further personalized by descriptions of physical details especially appropriate to his foetal state. While his mind is apparently fully developed from the moment of his conception, it is amusing to watch the manner in which Rubens charts his body's growth. The first mention comes quite early on: Buster "stretched the beginnings of his limbs and considered his first day" (34). The next mention occurs as he listens to his mother and Clarissa practicing together and yearns to be able to play again

himself. He looks at "his tiny span of fingers. Hardly a minor second" (44). And so his prenatal progress is repeatedly measured in terms of his musical hand span, as he grows to a major second, then an augmented second, an augmented fourth, and so on. We aren't the least surprised when he finally picks up the bow and plays aloud; his physical capacity to do so has been well established by the size of his hand. At the same time, Rubens has been cleverly preparing us to give full attention to the emotional content of that gesture.

Emphasizing his highly restricted world, Rubens frequently employs the word "little" in describing the child's diminutive stature and very limited range of activities. Buster presses his "little ear" to the uterus wall, thinks in his "little mind," and curls up to sleep in his "little cell." She has deliberately chosen this conventional way of talking about an infant to heighten the contrast with, and increase the impact of, the sometimes darkly humorous references to other aspects of the foetal ambience. In one instance, for example, Buster gets a "milk shower" as soon as Sheila learns she's pregnant, and "...the prospect of of some forty weeks of milk douches did not please him"(37). In another case, Buster awakens to some unpleasantness. "Sheila's spiteful train of thought had unleashed a bilious fluid. Buster sniffed himself awake, recognizing...the sour odor of sacrifice"(46).

Another technique Rubens employs is allowing Buster to bring with him the personality he possessed in his previous existence. From the beginning, his chief pleasure comes from music: "his fingers itched for playing" as he listens to his mother and Clarissa practice. As Buster listens, their music brings to mind specific musical memories from his earlier existences, memories which both sustain him and encourage him to go through with his coming "debut." In some of those existences, he led a long, full life and died an old man; in others, such as his most recent, he died very young. And though he might forget the concert hall or the name of a certain accompanist, he still remembers quite distinctly his own "particular reso-

nances" or "his own idiosyncratic phrasing." These memories help him come to terms, at least temporarily, with "the pain, the joy, the anger and bitterness that regularly filtered through the protective membrane"(44); he reminds himself that such emotions are as necessary to his art as the technical skills he silently rehearses each day. Though Rubens could have used the notion of past lives to earn easy laughs, she instead restricts its use severely, dealing mainly with musical and cultural memories that lend depth and weight to Buster's character and aspirations.

The book's narrator, Dr. Brown, like Swift's Lemuel Gulliver, is a simple, straightforward, decent sort of man who serves many of the same narrative purposes as Swift's hero, by his very ordinariness lending an air of verisimilitude to an utterly preposterous premise. Like Gulliver, as well, he provides a convenient mask for Rubens, the satirist. Much of the novel's rich vein of irony is mined directly through his narrative and indirectly through his commentary' on that narrative. For example, the doctor's choice of incidents and adjectives makes quite clear that the normal condition of this family is a state of war. Grandmother wants one name for the baby, great-grandmother wants another. Sheila wants to register the child for a public school; Bernard insists a state school is good enough. A simple conversation between Bernard and Sheila, or Sheila and Robert, or Mrs. Joseph and anybody, becomes a verbal skirmish, a power struggle between adversaries. The war imagery is introduced on Buster's first day in the womb, ironically enough as he is listening to the cantor's prayer in the synagogue. Presumably like any baby, he wants to get to know his new family: "He would evaluate his future needs for defence or attack. He would learn their cunning, decode their lies, spy out their weaponry. In short, he would arm himself for his debut. He settled down to work out his strategy"(24). And the war imagery continues to weave its way through the relationships: Sheila needs her brother Robert "as a bridge or a defence"(99); Robert's jail sentence will undoubtedly launch another attack as his family unsheathes "their shame and humiliation in the only fight that ever seemed to matter to them. What other people

would think"(78). Even the unborn innocent becomes "a tangential target for their blame"(78); it is no wonder Buster frequently refers in his journal not to his birth, but his "sortie."

Additionally, Rubens uses the doctor to raise the broader issue of societal values. Brown's personal response to Sheila and Buster stands in dramatic contrast to the "professional" reactions of his medical and psychiatric colleagues. Rubens makes it devastatingly clear that their dealings with a client they consider delusional are not likely ever to be a model case study in professional ethics for future medical students. At the same time, by contrasting Brown's basic response--that of the humanist--with that of the apparently unfeeling scientific community, she implicitly draws into question the values of a society so completely deficient in feeling for its members.

If Dr. Brown provides us one perspective from which to judge Buster's world, his uncle, Robert, provides another equally important one. Early on, as Buster tries to size up the new family he has drawn in life's lottery, he realizes his is an unlucky draw. He knows from previous lives the damage that can be done a child in the absence of pure love, so he is dismayed at what his family has already lined up for him--Gender: male. Name: Yascha. Profession: violinist. School: Eton or Harrow. "He listened as they toasted his future fame, wealth and happiness, and he shivered at their order of preference"(49). His last chance for finding love without expectations and without conditions rests solely with Robert, since "he could discover no one else who might welcome him solely for himself, for his own person, whatever his potential"(79).

Buster's feelings of kinship with Robert are inevitable and thematically significant. Rubens has shaped Robert to be Buster's counterpart in the "real" world. Even as Buster is trembling under the weight of family expectations, Robert has already failed to live up to their expectations for him. Robert has several strikes against him: he refused to go into his father's business, he turned his back on

the family, he went off to India, he practices some obscure religion, he dresses disreputably, he has long hair, he goes barefoot. And now he is going to prison for drug dealing.

Robert has been pushed to the brink of rebellion by a society that emphasizes the pursuit of material success at the expense of personal development. Alienated from his domineering mother and weak father, he opts out of their world and seeks one that allows room for personal growth, one that will, as Buster puts it, value him for his own person. The only family member Robert has any kind of relationship with is his sister, Sheila, and that relationship is a tenuous one, as she alternates between love for him and guilt and pity for the pain his perceived shortcomings cause their mother.

Several aspects of Buster's situation parallel Robert's. Both find themselves on the fringes of a fearsome world, forced to be at odds with society if they are to persevere in the search for self. Both are reeling under the weight of family expectations, recognizing not only the unfairness of them but the utter impossibility of meeting them. The family, which should be a source of support, is instead the major source of pain for both, and only their semi-relationship with Sheila offers any relief from that relentlessly oppressive atmosphere. Finally, both of them are prisoners, engaged in a cycle of guilt, shame, pain-giving, pain-suffering and atonement, which they both recognize and struggle against, but only partially understand. Robert's decision to disappear and leave his family behind after his release from prison becomes a clear foreshadowing of the choice Buster will make. Rubens sets up and maintains a convincing parallel between the two characters throughout the book. As a result, our appreciation of Buster's character and plight deepens in proportion to our understanding of Robert's.

### III

Prisons as a metaphor for the limitation of human potential constitute a major theme of this novel. From the beginning, Rubens subtly indicates Buster's plight. As Dr. Brown is puzzling over some

random numbers in the journal, he musingly speculates that possibly "the writer was simply ticking off the days of his gestation, rather as a prisoner etches away his sentence on the walls of his cell"(8). From that point on, the womb that houses him is often referred to as the "cell" or the "little cell." Though Buster is locked in, he is fortunate that his family is at least temporarily locked out, because "This was no doubt a family of 'shoulds', 'oughts', and 'musts', and each terrible monosyllable shuddered across the door of his cell like a triple lock"(49). Their moral imperatives impose limitations even more restrictive than the steel bars of Robert's cell.

But Buster and Robert are not the only prisoners. Buster's grandmother, Mrs. Joseph, had her own mother committed to the close security of a "twilight home" for seniors. There Mrs. Singer counts off the days, measuring carefully the length of her daughter's neglect, righteously honing this last feeble weapon with which to attack her. Her fellow inmate, Mrs. Spengler, is not only a prisoner in the rest home, but she is also trapped in the dim mists of her past, replaying insistently the faulty memory tape of a long ago incident--"They took away Daddy's shop"(56).

Perhaps Mrs. Joseph herself provides the ultimate example of futile imprisonment since her mind-forged manacles are based primarily on public opinion. So concerned is she with what "they" might think, she is unable to recognize that there is an "I" that warrants respect in her own son and daughter. It is this failure to recognize and honor the independent existence of each child that leads her to blur the lines of distinction between them and herself. In her mind, it follows naturally that what she wants, they should want. But it also seems to follow, unfortunately, that such demands create quite the opposite effect. The inevitable consequence of this unwinnable battle is the alienation of the combatants.

Rubens, the satirist, brings this entire prison motif to a crashing climax in the final surrealistic scenes when the mistrustful Bernard locks his own bulky

wife and three year old unborn son in the bedroom to make sure they will be available when he needs them to perform for his commercial advantage. They are literally prisoners in their own home. The situation is so absurd that we almost fail to realize the even greater absurdity of the large concert audience he has assembled in the living room--they are locked in total silence. Buster will not play for anyone but his parents.

Just as Rubens uses prisons to explore symbolically the ways in which human beings limit, restrain, and impose their wills on one another, she uses theatre and performance imagery to underscore the dangers of excessive regard for public opinion. The fact that Sheila and Clarissa are performing artists who play public concerts offers a logical starting point for the development of this theme, but all the characters in this novel are involved in one way or another in performing for the public. Even the religious establishment is pressed into service as a theatrical backdrop. When the family goes to the synagogue for the Day of Atonement, it is a given that Robert, the family black sheep, will show up for the services in order to pay his respects to his deceased father. Rubens describes not only his entrance, his hippy costume, and his quiet performance of the prayers, she also details the heads turning to watch him, the whispers rippling through the gallery at his exit and the sense of shame and humiliation which assails Sheila and Mrs. Joseph. It is a scene played in public and fraught with pain, especially for his mother.

Later, after Robert's trial and incarceration, Mrs. Joseph goes with Sheila to see him at Strangeways Prison. The pain she feels on this occasion is also rooted primarily in the public nature of the visit, a fact made clear when she is too embarrassed to tell the taxi driver where to take them. Once inside the prison, they are ushered to a waiting room where she herself becomes an unwilling actor in a scene peopled by the wives and mothers of the various prisoners. On the one hand, this group of women acts like a chorus in an ancient Greek tragedy, condemning the nature of Robert's crime, and offering advice and encouragement to the two protagonists.

On the other hand, they show a definite kinship with the clowns in a Shakespearean play, their easy banter and rapier logic delighting the reader even as it cuts Mrs. Joseph down to size and deflates her superior airs. But Mrs. Joseph cuts a tragic figure; she will not--she cannot--hear their message.

The session at the Family Therapy Clinic, set up as a last desperate measure to somehow shock Sheila out of her alleged phantom pregnancy, provides a particularly potent opportunity for developing the theatrical theme. The physical setting is an actual auditorium; the various doctors, anthropologists, social workers and so on constitute the audience. The course of the therapy session has been carefully plotted, including stage positions of the actors and even intermissions, disguised as coffee breaks. The audience observes the action from their seats behind a one-way glass mirror, but the actors, i.e., the Rosen family, are all acutely aware of the invisible audience. This is Mrs. Joseph's world view writ large: the public opinion she so desperately fears is here manifested in the audience which she cannot see but knows is present. The family is performing for "Them" even more than for themselves. But it is important to note that though "They" can watch and talk and opine, they are an audience and remain separate, essentially unable to affect the central action. We are left with the unmistakable conclusion that Sheila's pregnancy is "real" and it is actually Mrs. Joseph who is haunted by a phantom--the phantom of public regard.

Rubens has also set up the final scene of the novel in such a way that the theatricality reinforces the absurdity of the scene. It is a bizarre presentation of a cheap circus sideshow disguised as a main event. Bernard has traded his role of Father for that of Stage Manager; this event is only the first of a series he has planned to put his freak son on display. A most amazing cross-section of society (talent scout, businessmen, psychiatrists, ex-prisoner, etc.) comprise the audience. Rubens piles one irony atop another. For example, this time, not only can the audience not be seen, it must not be heard by the main performer. And of course the head-liner they

have all assembled to see can't be seen, either. Further, the supporting actress is so bulky she must herself be supported by a wheelchair. Finally, Clarissa, whose stolen violin Buster is playing better than she ever possibly could, is so distressed by the unfairness of it all that she cries aloud, revealing to the star himself that an audience is present, and bringing the performance to a disastrous halt. It is the ultimate irony. This family so governed by what other people might think has finally lost its bearings completely and become a public spectacle.

It is the desperate need to keep up with the Joneses and earn their regard that drives Mrs. Joseph to such extremes. Like most bullies, she is driven by her own impotence and lack of self-worth, together with excessive feelings of self-importance. As a result of her insecurity, the entire family is subordinated to her main standard of "What will people think?", a standard which for her carries the weight of a Platonic idea. She has assigned life goals and roles to her children, and any failure to measure up she takes as a personal affront. Then the bullying begins. Sheila hasn't been practicing the piano? Her mother swings into action: "How's the piano getting on?...All that promise...Such a disappointment"(16). Sheila ends up in a rage...practicing.

But the bully doesn't automatically win. When, for example, Mrs. Joseph decides the child should be named for its grandfather, Sheila at first listens to her rationale, but declines her advice. Pushed still further, however, she flies into a rage and flatly refuses. It's time for her mother to try a new tactic. Force having failed, she transforms herself into the victim and proceeds to bully with her victimization, trotting out her signature line: "What did I do to deserve it all?"(67). In another key incident, Mrs. Joseph goes to visit Robert for the first time since his incarceration, and it's his turn to fly into a rage. "D' you know her first words to me?" he queries his sister. "She came all the way to Manchester to say to me, what have I done to deserve this"(98).

She is intolerable, as most bullies are, and though few readers will feel pity for her, she is finally her

own most pitiable victim. Rubens keeps her this side of human--barely--by occasionally giving her a moment of self-doubt or letting her essentially mis-directed love show through. But it shows only momentarily and even then only in the most primitive form. Then again, she is not intended to be a sympathetic character. She is essentially a grotesque, a humour character dominated by one exaggerated characteristic, who would feel quite at home in a play by Ben Jonson. Finally, when all is said and done, Rubens has made her the model of everything a mother should not be or do.

Another image which appears repeatedly throughout the novel is that of scars received on the battlefield of life. In the first chapter, Mrs. Joseph, recovering from a botched hernia operation, contemplates one scar and a newer, still unhealed, wound. Prior to the surgery, she got no sympathy from her mother, who also bears the scars of an ancient hernia operation. In a series of gradual disclosures, we learn of several other parallels: Mrs. Joseph tells her mother that Sheila has had a miscarriage, only to discover that her own mother had had one too. Mrs. Joseph was born by Caesarian operation, Sheila must undergo the same procedure. Later, the doctors declare Sheila's is a phantom pregnancy. Not an impossible situation, according to Mrs. Singer, who should know: she too happens to have had a phantom pregnancy.

The repetition of physical problems through the generations is emblematic of the repetition of even more crippling spiritual problems. Mrs. Singer threatened and bullied her daughter, and Mrs. Joseph has done the same to Sheila. Mrs. Joseph consigns her mother to an old folks home and dreads the day Sheila will do the same to her. Mrs. Joseph has fallen far short of Mrs. Singers' expectations, just as Robert and Sheila have fallen short of hers--and, by implication, just as Buster will fall short of Sheila's. Robert can't bear the pain of his family and opts out; Buster does the same. Rubens is warning us that it is as difficult to escape the repetitive behavior patterns passed along by our families as it is to change our genetic inheritance. It is the dark side of the

angel's finger on the newborn's lips.

The physical world of this novel is in many ways simply a metaphor for its spiritual condition. At the heart of it is a monster, a foetus nearly four years old. But the actions of the father in marketing his offspring render him even more monstrous than the foetus. A mother who in her drive for vicarious self-fulfillment abuses and smothers her children might also be considered monstrous. By way of contrast, however, Buster's own mother, who has become physically monstrous in size by the end of the novel, has almost detached herself from this monstrous world. In coming to terms with her situation, she attains a degree of serenity.

Finally, the single literary device which is most important and most effective in the success of the book is the narrator himself. Dr. Brown is not only a triumph of characterization, but also the vehicle for the thematic heart of the book. Early in his account of his improbable discovery, he assumes the pose of the detached scientific observer, relatively unaware of the true significance of the story. In part, no doubt, he is maintaining such distance from his main character in order to assure his readers that he is indeed sane, this really did happen. He has the journal to prove it. He discusses such items as Buster's calligraphy and his writing style. At the end of Chapter 7, he quotes in its entirety Buster's first journal entry, which comprises the philosophical underpinnings of his decision not to be born. Brown seems to miss totally the import of this entry, focusing his attention instead on the amazing ability of a creature so small to draw musical notes so well. Gradually, one becomes aware that Brown is focusing on such apparent trivia in an attempt to turn away from the unbearable events of the story he is recounting, trying to protect himself from the pain of his tiny, unborn hero. As time passes, he finds that he cannot continue this detachment, and he is drawn ever closer, in empathy and sympathy, to Buster.

By the end of Chapter 11, as Buster's plight worsens, the physician himself takes to his sick bed, suffering from a sympathetic depression. Shortly

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after, unable to manage his growing empathy for the child, he makes a solemn vow to pull back, to eliminate his commentary and let the journal speak for itself. He finds, however, that he is unable to do so. One page later, Chapter 12 begins with yet another note from Dr. Brown. As the book draws toward its conclusion, we realize that Dr. Brown has come to feel a love for this child which no one actually in Buster's life could offer him. Brown is the only character in the book capable of the unqualified, unjudgmental, unselfish love which every human being needs, and for want of which Buster finally despaired and committed suicide.

Brown understands it all. The other physicians declare that Sheila died of heart failure, brought on by overweight, but Brown knows: she died of a broken heart. His own is breaking, too. "I miss him. I miss him terribly"(215), he writes, mourning the death of a human being he never knew while he was alive. Robert was similar to Buster in many ways, and Sheila felt a bland and passive maternal bond, but only Buster's literary executor finally understood the full significance of what it means to be an infant faced with a world so terrible that he refused to be born into it, deprived of the freedom and unselfish love every human must have to realize his individual potential.

Horace Walpole once wrote, "Life is a comedy for those who think, a tragedy for those who feel." Rubens walks the thin line between those two. Her comedic tone in this novel masks a genuine outrage at the suffering perpetrated on human beings by one another. She savagely satirizes the bad parents, quack doctors, greedy entrepreneurs, daft psychiatrists, and anyone else who would profit at the expense of other people's pain. But emotionally she is on the side of the narrator, who voices for all of us the sadness and loss inflicted when one of us fails to achieve our human potential.

### NOTES

1. Bernice Rubens, *Spring Sonata: A Fable* (London: W.H.Allen & Co. Ltd., 1979). References in this paper will be to the paperback edition published by Abacus, London, 1989. A Japanese translation is now available as well: バーニス・ルーベンス著『スプリング・ソナタ』1979年（伊藤節訳：YMS創流社、1996年）
2. Anthony Thwaite, rev. of *Spring Sonata: A Fable*, by Bernice Rubens, *The Observer* 25 Mar. 1979: 39.
3. Mary Sullivan, rev. of *Spring Sonata: A Fable*, by Bernice Rubens, *British Book News*, May 1980.