

READER'S GUIDE

Bottle Rocket Hearts by Zoe Whittall

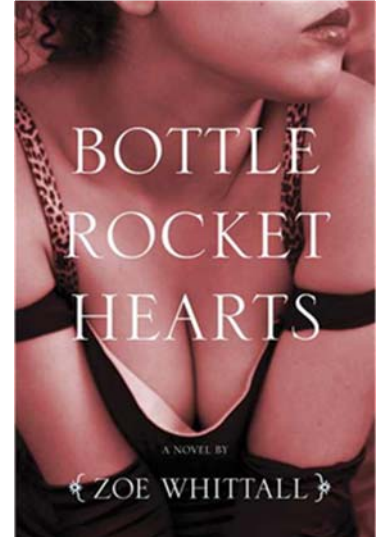


Cormorant Books Inc.

INTRODUCING *Bottle Rocket Hearts*

Welcome to Montreal in the months before the 1995 referendum. Riot Grrl gets bought out and mass marketed as the Spice Girls, and gays are gaining some legitimacy. At the same time queers are rioting against assimilation, cocktail AIDS drugs are starting to work, and the city walls on either side of Main are spray-painted with the words Yes or No. Revolution seems possible when you're 18, like Eve.

Moving out of the suburbs, into the city to be near her mysterious, older, non-monogamist girlfriend Della, Eve also meets a new family of friends, including Seven, a homo-core sweetheart who defies all clichés, and Rachel, type-A activist and motivated poet. On the night of the 1995 referendum politics and romance come to a head and Eve's naïveté begins to fade.



IMPORTANT THEMES

First Love

Eve's coming-of-age is marked by her queer identity. The fraught emotions of first love are universal; her anticipation, excitement, and inevitable devastation are familiar to all readers, gay or straight. In the beginning she is optimistic and in love: "I will be fine with our ultra postmodern relationship." Even in the beginning though, Eve is aware of the complications that arise when one is in love. When she is bored with her school work she picks up a pen and goes on and on in her margins about "love being a terribly boring preoccupation, a convention, a construct." She also notes that she sometimes feels like she's "a bug caught in her lover's net."

Identity

The novel is about Eve finding herself. Her quest for self is juxtaposed with Della's self-constructed identity. While Della has invented herself, Eve eventually seeks out an authentic identity, outside of her relationship with Della. Through her relationship with her roommates, and her best friend from childhood, Eve attempts to figure out who she is and what is important to her. She discovers that while the music, art, books and activism she engages in are aspects of her identity, ultimately the relationships with the other authentic people around her are the most important.

Politics

A major theme of the novel is the Referendum, providing a framework for Eve to set about her explorations in a dichotomous world. Many of the characters are political activists as well, lobbying for gay rights and women's rights. These issues come to the fore when Eve and her friends are confronted with homophobia.

Violence

The theme of violence appears throughout the novel: The Montreal Massacre is commemorated by Eve and her friends, Eve narrowly avoids a threatening confrontation on a walk home, and a violent, hateful act changes Eve forever. Eve has come from a sheltered suburban setting and is finding out what it means to be a woman, a queer woman, in a society not entirely free from discrimination and inequality.

Q&A WITH ZOE WHITTALL

1. You lived in Montreal during the Referendum. How much of the novel is based on your own experiences during that time?

I was in university at the time and lived on the Plateau, like Eve, but I wasn't that engaged in what was going on. The details from the scene at Sky bar were told to me by a friend who had been there. I was actually dating someone from Ottawa who wasn't, like a lot of people outside Quebec, very concerned about it at all. I had some nervousness about what would happen if the Yes side won. It was the first time that I worried about things like what would happen to my parents' jobs and their security, one of the first times I stopped thinking like a self-obsessed teenager (I was 19 at the time). Other than memories I have of living on a farm in Bloc country until I was 13, I didn't really know anyone who was going to vote for separation. On the night of the Referendum I went to my parent's house to watch the results on TV with my mom. I remember getting bored and flipping channels, and then feeling some relief at the outcome. It was really only after I moved away from Quebec that I became interested in researching the history of the separatist movement. Nothing like living in Toronto for a year to make you realize how distinct Quebec really is.

2. Where did the idea for the novel come from? Did you intend for it to focus on the time of the Referendum from the beginning?

The character of Della came first, and she is based on an ex-lover of a friend of mine. At the age of 18, my friend fell in love with her teacher. The teacher was an interesting character and my friend told me some funny stories about her, and I re-wrote one of the stories about how she'd tried to kill herself by drowning in a river, but decided she wanted to live and doggy-paddled to the other side. So I started developing this character around the first story. That story didn't make it into the book, and I ended up shifting the focus onto Eve. The novel was originally a short story, or many short stories about the same group of characters. One was about the Referendum from the beginning, and I built it into the larger narrative. It made sense to use it as a backdrop in that reflected the emotional dichotomies in the characters and it was a good way to highlight the differences between Eve and Della.

3. Are the characters in the novel drawn from people you knew in Montreal?

The character of Montreal is the way I remember it from 1995. There are a few side characters from the community at that time that appear for just a few moments and who are based on real people. But the main characters are fictional, and there's a bit of me in each one. The character of Rachel was a good opportunity for some self-parody of the desperate emerging writer. Seven shares some traits from the gay men I worked with during my years as receptionist for Xtra magazine, but when I was in Montreal I was actually better friends with punk rock dykes and straight boys. My first girlfriend was kind of crazy, but not in the same way Della is.

4. Why did you write the novel from a first-person point of view?

I like the rhythm of writing in first person. I like the way you can confess the protagonist's secrets in a way comes across as honest and like they're sharing something just with you, the reader — like you met them at a bus stop and they just starting telling you these crazy things. The distances between reader and narrator seem less forced, more intimate.

5. One reviewer noted that because she is queer, Eve must "fight for her right to exist on a day-to-day basis in ways that other teens do not." Can you comment on that?

I agree. I definitely feel that Eve comes to terms with this over the course of the novel, that she goes from a teenaged girl with a relatively safe life to realizing she has to fight to live her life and make the choices she wants to make and be happy, self-aware, and engaged with the world in a way that is fulfilling. I think when you've been queer for a long time in an urban environment you can sometimes forget how much fighting it took to be able to sit around watching *Will & Grace* or arguing about marriage rights, and how much fighting still has to happen for there to be real acceptance.

6. Music is referenced quite a bit in the novel. How is music important to the characters? How is music important to the fabric of the novel itself?

Music and politics are really integrated for Eve. Queer punk bands, riot grll bands, singing about sexual politics and identity, at the time, created a real community. Going to a show meant that she could meet others who were interested in talking about what was important to them, and it created this dynamic place for Eve to discover and be a part of. The soundtrack is a big part of the narrative. These are kids who grew up making mixed tapes with coded emotional messages because they couldn't figure out how to tell someone how they felt. Bands were the way Rachel and Seven could escape small-town homophobia and know that there were others like them, out there, somewhere. Music is very important to the fabric of the novel. The fusion of queer culture and punk rock was really exciting at that time. It made total sense that these two angry and marginalized and sexualized cultures would meet and integrate and represent the political climate at the time. I mean, it was not without its problems, but it was definitely a thriving underground scene that all the characters in *Bottle Rocket Hearts* found exciting.

7. This is a coming-of-age novel. How is Eve's story a common one? And how is it exceptional?

I think Eve's story is common in that everyone grows up and leaves their family home and struggles in some way to discover what is meaningful to them. Everyone struggles differently, and some people don't feel that struggle until they are fifty, but Eve's story is pretty common to queers from the suburbs or small towns who find a home in urban queer settings. It's exceptional in that a lot of terrifying things happen to her in the course of one year.

8. How does the act of violence in the novel change Eve? How does it change her relationship with Della?

I think it makes her aware of her own mortality, aware of the real violence she always thought of as theoretical as an activist, because she hadn't experienced it herself. It really becomes clear and present to her. It makes her tougher, more decisive, but at the same time more anxious. Grief makes her re-assess who is really important, what she has to be grateful for.

It changes her relationship to Della because death makes everything else seem totally insignificant. Like, "So what she cheated on me?" We only have so much time on this earth and we have no control over when that time ends, so we may as well love who we want to. It changes the way you see time. It definitely makes Eve forgive Della for a while, and changes the obsession she has with her. It allows her to see Della as flawed but to still love her — until the level of betrayal becomes overwhelming and impossible.



ABOUT ZOE

Zoe Whittall grew up in the Eastern Townships in Quebec, moved to Montreal, and eventually to Toronto, in 1997. She has published two books of poetry, *The Emily Valentine Poems*, and *The Ten Best Minutes of Your Life*, and is the editor of the anthology *Geeks, Misfits, and Outlaws*.

9. This is your first novel. You have, however, published two books of poetry. How has your poetry influenced your fiction?

I consider myself a fairly poetic writer of fiction and I think that's because I've written poetry for a longer period of time, and I'm a fan of experimental and cross-genre fiction. I like to play with language and not just give the reader a straight-up linear sentence, if it works for the story I'm trying to tell. Some of the sections in the novel started out as poems.

10. What do you hope readers will take from your novel?

The complexities of a certain cultural moment in queer and Montreal history through the eyes of a few oddball kids trying to raise themselves.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The novel is a queer coming-of-age story. In what ways is it different than a straight coming-of-age story? In what ways is it the same?
2. How is the backdrop of the Referendum also a metaphor for Eve's experiences?
3. The novel is ultimately about identity. How is Eve's search for identity different from Della's?
4. What role does the development of self play in the novel? Is it significant that the main character's name is Eve?
5. Does Eve rely too much on the external markers of her identity? Does that change? If so, how does it change?
6. How is Della important to the community Eve is a part of?
7. Many of the characters in the novel consider themselves activists, including Eve. What causes are they concerned with and how does their concern manifest itself?
8. How is Montreal almost like another character in the novel?
9. How is the night of the Referendum a turning point for Eve? What are the other turning points in the novel?
10. What role does violence play in the novel? More specifically, how does violence against women affect the characters in the novel?
11. In what ways is Della a "fiction" for Eve?
12. By the end of the novel, Eve is no longer the naive and idealistic escapee from the suburbs. What contributes to her shift into adulthood?
13. The novel starts out with Eve a bit in awe of Della, but by the end of the novel Eve says, "Della is a story I will tell to reference my last stretch of adolescence." How does Eve's relationship with Della change her? In the end, has Eve grown up more than Della ever will?
14. Discuss Whittall's use of foreshadowing. Did you find key events surprising and inevitable? Can you think of how the novel could have ended differently?
15. What aspects of the novel seem autobiographical? Do they enhance your experience of the story?