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### **Historical novel takes too many liberties with Emily**

BY PATRICK MCGUIRE

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is America's most mysterious poet. It is not her poems so much that incite almost voyeuristic curiosity, but her reclusive life as a New England 'spinster'. That a person could live so socially cut off and still create what may easily be called the most extraordinary poetry in the English language staggers our imagination. Poets, critics, biographers, dramatists and novelists have long sought to solve the enormous mystery of this 'Nun of Amherst'.

With *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson* (Norton \$24.95), Jerome Charyn uses a keen novelist's eye and a thorough knowledge of Dickinson's poems and letters to create his Emily. Charyn adheres to the general facts of his character's life. Her time at a Puritanical boarding school for young women is followed by years at home, trips to Washington and Philadelphia, ramblings through her hometown, Amherst. We see how deeply she adored both her dog and her dad. We learn of the sickly mother and the family's shrewish Irish maid. Slowly, through measured narrative leaps, Charyn's Emily evolves into the wraith who haunts the upstairs of her house, dressed in bridal white. His prose is rife with allusions to Dickinson's poems. Charyn has done his homework.

But maybe he has done too much. His view of Emily is informed as much by theorists and critics as it is by the biographical facts. For example, a large question in Dickinson studies has to do with the poet's sexuality. Did she have a lover? Was the lover male or female? Charyn makes her polymorphous, fantasizing marriages to both men and women. Similarly, Emily's profound adoration for her father was good meat for Freudians some 80 years ago. Again, Charyn doesn't go as far as they, but he has Emily picturing herself as her father's bride. Both the Freudians and the love theorists make conclusions on circumstantial evidence, at best.

The Dickinson that we know from her poems and the Dickinson that Charyn gives us, finally, do not mesh. Dickinson was not a prude by any means, but she was a proper woman of the 19th century. So when Charyn has her sit on a young man's lap and then write about how she could feel Vesuvius rising—well, it seems a stretch beyond the appropriate. It pulls us out of the narrative with dismay. When she talks often about wanting to slap the face of this or that person or child, it seems so out of character. Dickinson's penchant for using alcohol as an image in her poems is 'validated' in Charyn's fictional account with Emily going to a tavern and drinking quantities of rum. Did the real Emily actually transform every man she met into a fantasy-wedding mate, as Charyn would have it?

Charyn is an award-winning novelist and PEN/Faulkner finalist, and *The Secret Life of Emily Dickinson* is a fine work, but it is wrong-headed. If it were a novel about a fictional poet, it would be marvelous. The writing is clever and wise; the characters are interesting and various; relationships are explored with a balance of details and overviews. And the final 25 or so pages are truly wonderful. What fails to convince is that this Emily is our Emily.

Dickinson was a lover of Shakespeare's work, and Charyn rightly shows her preference for Anthony and Cleopatra. But this novel and the famous Billy Collins poem "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes" remind me of Hamlet's accusation to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "You would pluck out the heart of my mystery."

It is a just rebuke.