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# Ruby: A Novel



## Synopsis

The epic, unforgettable story of a man determined to protect the woman he loves from the town desperate to destroy her - this beautiful and devastating debut heralds the arrival of a major new voice in fiction. Ephram Jennings has never forgotten the beautiful girl with the long braids running through the piney woods of Liberty, their small East Texas town. Young Ruby, "the kind of pretty it hurt to look at," has suffered beyond imagining, so as soon as she can, she flees suffocating Liberty for the bright pull of 1950s New York. Ruby quickly winds her way into the ripe center of the city - the darkened piano bars and hidden alleyways of the Village - all the while hoping for a glimpse of the red hair and green eyes of her mother. When a telegram from her cousin forces her to return home, 30-year-old Ruby Bell finds herself reliving the devastating violence of her girlhood. With the terrifying realization that she might not be strong enough to fight her way back out again, Ruby struggles to survive her memories of the town's dark past. Meanwhile, Ephram must choose between loyalty to the sister who raised him and the chance for a life with the woman he has loved since he was a boy. Full of life, exquisitely written, and suffused with the pastoral beauty of the rural South, *Ruby* is a transcendent novel of passion and courage. This wondrous pause-resister rushes through the red dust and gossip of Main Street, to the pit fire where men swill bootleg outside Bloom's Juke, to Celia Jennings's kitchen where a cake is being made, yolk by yolk, that Ephram will use to try to begin again with Ruby. Utterly transfixing, with unforgettable characters, riveting suspense, and breathtaking, luminous prose, *Ruby* offers an unflinching portrait of man's dark acts and the promise of the redemptive power of love.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Cynthia Bond writes beautifully. Her novel is poetic, mystical, and magical. Her writing sang to me. She is definitely a writer to be watched. This story is about Ruby, a mulatto woman who grew up in Liberty, Texas. She was abandoned by her mother and given to a white woman to clean house. She was treated brutally from childhood and her history of abuse colors her future and poisons her life. Ruby has spent most of her life in Liberty except for some years in the 1960's when she went to New York City. There she mingled with the literati and rich people but also sold her body to the highest bidder. Ephram is the man who has loved Ruby since she was a girl. He is a bagger at the Liberty supermarket and has been raised by his sister, Celia. Ephram's father was murdered by lynching, and his mother has been a patient in Rusk Mental Hospital since she attended a picnic stark naked. Both Celia and Ruby compete for Ephram's heart and Ephram hopes he can save Ruby from herself and life. The novel is infused with a lot of voodoo and gris-gris which are metaphorical for much of the pain and despair that the characters feel. However, I feel like there is too much of it as it obscures the story at times. The language in the novel is lovely. "She felt a thousand lavender flowers erupting from the edges of her fingers. She felt them playing a delicious melody that scented the wind and called striped bees and hummingbirds." The magical realism evokes similarities to Alice Hoffman and Isabel Allende. The book goes back and forth in time. The reader sees Ruby's life in the present when she lives in her own filth and is obviously very mentally ill. We also see her in New York during the time that Martin Luther King's march on Washington was held.

RUBY, a powerful and disturbing debut novel from Cynthia Bond, opens with kindhearted Ephram Jennings asking his sister Celia to bake him a white angel food cake to take to a sick friend. The sick friend turns out to be Ruby Bell, who lives on Bell land, all the way on the other side of town. Now 47, Ephram has known and loved Ruby from childhood. He fondly remembers her as "the sweet little girl with long braids. The kind of pretty it hurt to look at, like candy on a sore tooth." Ruby is currently in her early 40s, and since her return 11 years earlier to her hometown of Liberty, Ephram has watched her steadily slip into madness. She now walks into town with her hair caked with mud. Blackened nails as if she had scratched the slate of night. Her acres of legs carrying her, arms swaying like a loose screen. Her eyes the ink of sky, just before the storm. Long considered the town whore, Ruby is used by the town's men and shunned by the

town's women. No one other than Miss P, the owner of the P&K Market, shows her any mercy or kindness. She always gives Ruby food to eat, and for 11 years Ephram has watched: "Every day he wanted nothing more than to put each tired sole in his wide wooden tub, brush them both in warm soapy water, cream them with sweet oil, and lanoline and then slip her feet, one by one into a pair of red-heel socks." • Ephram sees Ruby not as the crazy town whore, but as his soul mate, and the day he asks Celia to bake him the cake for her is the day he decides to leave his predictable life behind and help Ruby start to heal from a life filled with horrific mental and physical abuse. The ghosts from Ruby's past are many, starting with the mother whose abandonment of her as a child leads Ruby to being sold into a life of prostitution, working at a brothel run by Ms.

Set in a small, rural town ironically named Liberty, which seems decades behind the times, the story surrounds the life and times of the enigmatic Ruby Bell, a child conceived in violence, born colored and beautiful in a time and place when those qualities often attracted the wrong kind of attention. As a girl she was loved and admired by many including the smitten preacher's son, Ephram Jennings, who had a good heart despite his mental shortcomings. Ruby, abandoned by her mother and orphaned at a young age, was coveted and exploited just like her mother and aunts. Her fate was tied to theirs in a dark, perverted cycle of abuse which pushed her into utter madness until one day, Ephram decides to court her to the shock and chagrin of the townsfolk, especially his sanctified, controlling sister, Celia. Although the term "lyrical prose" may be overused in describing works of literature, in this case, it is spot on in describing the author's style. Filled with symbolism, I was reminded (a little) of Toni Morrison's work. For example, anyone familiar with *Beloved* will note the numerical and superstitious significance of Sethe's home Cincinnati address was 124 Bluestone Road (the sum of the house address equals 7, a number representing completion and blue stones were revered by slaves and represented safety and good luck). In *Ruby*, the Jennings home address was 8 Abraham Road. The number eight has been associated with themes of self-destruction; eight on its side is the symbol of infinity which is often linked to reincarnation. Abraham, leader and father, was willing to sacrifice his son at the request of his god and sure enough, there was a parallel of sorts with Ephram and his father, Reverend Jennings, but not for the reasons shared by the Biblical character.

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