

# Judy Budnitz: Flying Leaps

*Fiction that makes real situations suddenly strange*

by ELIZA WILMERDING

**I**n *Nice Big American Baby*, the newest collection of short stories by Judy Budnitz '95, the author considers mothers and babies—and the uncertain boundary between them. “Flush” tells of a mother (with a mysterious ability to disappear) and her daughters, who work so hard to protect and care for each other that they begin having mammograms in each other’s stead. “Where We Come From” describes a pregnant illegal would-be immigrant (ostensibly from Mexico) determined to sneak across the border and have her baby on American soil. She tries again and again, telling herself, “American baby. Nice big American baby.” Repeatedly caught and deported to her own country, she delays giving birth for four years until “her son is so big, she imagines he fills her completely. His arms fill her arms, his legs fill her legs. She is a mere skin covering him like an insect’s carapace, soon to be flaked off and shucked away.”

Budnitz puts believable characters into unrealistic situations; she may give them unusual powers or exaggerate one or two aspects of reality. “Magical or horrific or impossible things might happen in my stories,” she’s said, “but the characters are always guided by the same human emotions that we all share.” She explains that “There have been times when I’ve said to myself, ‘OK, I want to try to write something with no tricks, where nothing crazy happens. Just have it be about character.’ It’s hard for me! I’m just not interested in writing vaguely autobiographical stories



**Author Judy Budnitz writes “contemporary fairy tales,” novels and short stories that twist reality in surprising ways.**

about typical twenty-, thirty-something people in their lives and their relationships.”

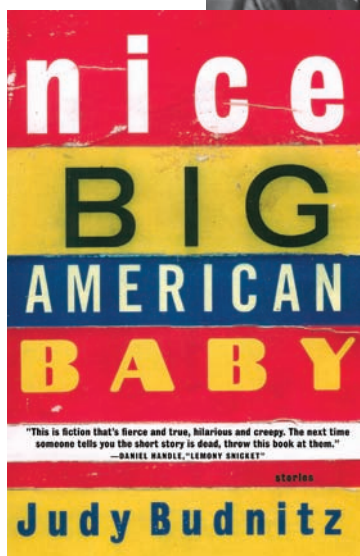
Budnitz embeds social commentary in her tales—she parodies colonialist attitudes, or uses postnuclear or futuristic landscapes void of water and trees. “Nadia” is as much about xenophobia as it is about a man and his mail-order bride and the provincial, gossip group of interfering females who serve as a mob-like, collective narrator. The women poke and prod and eventually learn that Nadia left her 12-year-old daughter in a war-torn country with a name they can’t pronounce or remember (“I looked it up—one of those places with the devious names that sound nothing

like they’re spelled”) and know little about, save the seemingly unreal images they glimpse on TV. “[W]e asked if she was different from the women here, if she had a way of walking, an extra flap of skin, a special smell. Did she smell of cigarettes, patchouli, foreign sewers, un-bathedness? ‘I think she has some extra bones in her spine,’ he said. She seemed to have a lot of them. Like a string of beads. A rosary.” (An excerpt from “Nadia” appears at [www.harvardmagazine.com/goto/Nadia.html](http://www.harvardmagazine.com/goto/Nadia.html).)

In the futuristic story “Sales,” a young girl watches her brother catch and corral salesmen, like dumb animals lured from a desert landscape. “My brother puts the new one in the pen out back with the other salesmen. ‘They just don’t ever learn, do they,’ he says mournfully as he yanks home the latch and notches up one more on the gate post....I like to walk past and hear their voices hooting out at me. I like to pretend they’re calling out for my hot body. ‘Set of seventeen knives for the price of twelve! And I’ll throw in a free melon-baller!’....My sister-in-law likes to stand in windows naked....That is why so many salesmen stop by.”

Readers have characterized Budnitz’s stories as “contemporary fairy tales,” “riffs on the gothic,” and “surrealist political allegories”; their characters are pushed to explore unconventional, often grotesque means (cannibalism, for instance) to survive. “The further Budnitz gets from reality, the more beautifully she writes about humanity,” said the *Portland Oregonian* in 2005. “The new collection [*Nice Big American Baby*] is ripe, humorous and full of life—to put it aside is to wake from a strange, deliciously inventive dream.”

Fairy-tale, myth, and folk-tale motifs make Budnitz’s strange stories more accessible. “I like the fairy-tale structure because it’s all plot—a character goes on a



journey and is forced to make decisions, deal with the consequences, and keep moving,” she says. “I like that relentless cascade of events. That headlong speed keeps the story’s illusion afloat, keeps the reader looking ahead and prevents him from doubting or questioning what’s going on.”

Her 1999 novel *If I Told You Once* weaves fairy-tale tropes into a saga that follows four generations of mothers and daughters from the old world to the new. In an eastern European “winter country,” where timber wolves and bandits haunt the black forest, where people endure continuous pregnancies and hard labor, Ilana, the first of nine children, is born “feet first and blue,” half strangled by the umbilical cord. “Later people said it was an evil omen and I was destined for the gallows.... My mother, who had more right than anyone to call me an evil omen, instead declared that I was a lucky child, twice blessed and twice stubborn, destined to make my own way in the world.”

Such language has the familiar ring of mythic prophecy. Soon, young Ilana is in the woods alone. “The child-in-the-woods scenario is one that’s familiar to all readers,” Budnitz says. “You can rely on readers’ ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ associations and not waste words on setting the scene.”

At Harvard, the energetic Budnitz

wrote prolifically, often churning out whole stories in one long day or night. She also drew cartoons and illustrations and made animated films, one of them based on “Hershel,” her story about a man who shapes, creates, and bakes babies, offering both a social commentary and a metaphor for the creative process.

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In fact, had it not been for Harvard’s intimate creative writing workshops, Budnitz says she might have gone into illustration or animation. Instead, novelist Susan Dodd, for example, cured Budnitz’s “overwriting” problem (“loving fancy words and using every single one you can think of”) by reading one of her pieces aloud as an example of what *not* to do. “It was kind of devastating,” Budnitz says now, laughing, “but it made me stop and rethink what I was doing.”

“She will forever be my shining example of that student who comes in fully de-

veloped artistically and emotionally,” says novelist Jill McCorkle, Budnitz’s thesis adviser. “I knew with the first piece of writing she ever turned in that she was the real thing. Over the next couple of years, all I did was say: ‘Do you have more of this, Judy?’”

Those stories, and others written at the Fine Arts Work Center residency in Provincetown following her graduation, make up her first collection, *Flying Leap*. It appeared in 1998, the same year she earned an M.F.A. in creative writing from New York University. “I don’t know what planet Budnitz comes from, but I’m happy to have her,” wrote a *Newsweek* reviewer. “*Flying Leap* is a tremendous debut—funny, dark, weird, adventurous, slanted and enchanted.” The *New York Times* named it a Notable Book of the Year.

Budnitz has won grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Lannan Foundation, has had many of her stories anthologized, and has taught creative writing at Princeton and Brown. Today, she and her husband, Jeff Linnell (a computer animator, coincidentally), live and work on the first floor of an old Victorian house overlooking Duboce Park in San Francisco. If she’s not reading, telling herself she should start drawing again, or teaching (sporadically), Budnitz is busy with her second novel—and an infant son, her own nice big American baby.

**Wayles Brown asks** whether anyone can provide an exact source and the precise wording for a comment often attributed to Oscar Wilde: “The trouble with socialism is that it takes up too many free evenings.”

**Jessica Pierce asks** whether anyone can provide an exact source and the precise wording for another comment often attributed to Oscar Wilde: “Morality, like art, means drawing a line someplace.”

*Editor’s note:* “Chapter and Verse,” which first appeared in our July-August 1979 issue, has matched “lost words” and half-remembered plots to their respective authors and titles a gratifying number of times, thanks to our readers—but many other queries, including some of the

## Chapter & Verse

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

most lively and provocative, remain unsourced. In an effort to improve their odds of identification, we plan to reprint these as-yet-unattributed fragments, in hopes that new readers—of this magazine and on the Internet—can pin them down.

~Who said of the winter wind, “Just listen to Old Betty Copperteeth!”?

~Who asserted, “It is the secret desire of every slave to have a slave of his own”?

~Who referred to “communists breaking eggs for some great omelette of the future”?

~Who wrote, “Young as the young never are—seasoned with summer...”?

~Who snipped that “the only people who are always at their best are invariably mediocre”? (Many websites attribute this judgment to Jean Giraudoux, but

fail to provide a precise source.)

~What was Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s source for a quotation found in one of her letters: “Let the sisters [sistrums?] be brought and the harps”?

~Who wrote of “chariots of gold and electrum”?

~Who declared that “God won’t ask us whether we succeeded in business”?

~Who warned, “Planning is the substitution of error for chance”?

Send inquiries and answers to “Chapter and Verse,” *Harvard Magazine*, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138, or via e-mail to [chapterandverse@harvardmag.com](mailto:chapterandverse@harvardmag.com).