

## Book Review: 'A town of Empty Rooms'

by Brett Yates

In the opening scene of Karen E. Bender's novel "A Town of Empty Rooms," an ordinary woman decides, almost without thinking about it, to ruin her life. In a haze of grief following the death of her father, Serena Hirsch steps from a crowded Manhattan sidewalk into Saks Fifth Avenue and purchases an expensive bracelet with her company credit card. Then she wanders into Tiffany's and Bendel's, with similar results. It doesn't take long for her to lose her job as a corporate speechwriter. After a few months, it becomes clear that nobody in New York will hire her.

She and her family move to the fictional city of Waring, North Carolina – a smaller, crummier Wilmington (Bender teaches at UNCW). Ostensibly, they've chosen Waring because it's the only town that will, at least, offer employment to Serena's husband, Dan; more importantly, however, it provides for them – big-city



people, both Jewish – an externalization of the alienation that dominates their inner lives and, indeed, much of this novel.

Serena's breakdown has left Dan confused, unsure whether he truly knows her. He is "afraid of his wife," and they cohabit in near silence, aware that their "marriage was in some ways a form

of theater." Serena struggles to find her bearings in Waring; she gets lost whenever she drives. They both seek safety in institutions known to them from their childhoods: for Dan, it's the Boy Scouts, which he joins with their five-year-old son, Zeb; for Serena, it's Judaism, which she rediscovers after stopping for directions at a small local synagogue.

These ventures are initially successful

– Serena gets a secretarial job at the congregation and, furthermore, earns a seat on the Board of Directors – but, even within these wholesome organizations, menace lurks. Strange, controlling men, devoted and imbalanced, preside over the two groups. Not much comfort is gained.

"A Town of Empty Rooms" is a novel powerfully infused with psychic pain. The pain is not always explicable through plot; the book seems simply to take place in a universe pervaded by loneliness, bereavement, anger, and bewilderment. Bender inhabits these emotional states without fully clarifying them; there is a respectful degree of opacity in all her characters – her descriptions of their heartache stay faithful to the muddle and mystery of human feeling. It is the type of prose in which the words "somewhat," "in a way," and "in some way" are (perhaps necessarily) employed nearly every page. There are moments of great precision, but these lead only to further ambiguity.

Bender's depiction of the South, on the other hand, is sketchy, all creationism and Waffle Houses. And, lacking inner

lives worthy of attention, the children in the novel are ghostly presences, only half there. Serena's daughter Rachel – who, at 3 years old, probably ought to occupy most of her mother's time – appears just a handful of times; one wonders what happens to her when Serena runs off to long meetings at the synagogue. The story never achieves a strong physical reality – it's set not so much in North Carolina as in Serena's head.

This is an odd and sometimes unpleasant place to spend 300 pages, but one must admire Bender's commitment to the complexity of mental distress. It's this complexity, the incommunicability of our pain, that makes us unreachable to one another – which, in "A Town of Empty Rooms," is the most painful thing of all. "It was the great curse on all of us," writes Bender, "the fact that we did not know each other's thoughts." This novel conveys the problem; it is also, in its unsentimental sensitivity, a kind of corrective.

*Brett Yates moved to North Carolina from Vermont in 2011. He lives in Durham and works in Chapel Hill.*

## Carol Peppe Hewitt authors 'Financing Our Foodshed'

By Susan Bridgers

Chatham County knows the nurturing nature of Carol Peppe Hewitt. She's the organizational force of nature running Mark Hewitt's pottery business, and together they have grown their business tremendously in the 30 years they've lived here.

When not at the Hewitt Pottery home office, she connects to local causes and looks to where she can make a difference. "I've always been an activist," she says. "I especially want to support our local economy and, like others, would like to do that in a significant way." With that impetus, she attended a talk in 2010 by Woody Tasch, a proponent of nurture capital investing, a concept he named Slow Money. Slow Money works on the tenants of slow food, the idea that by sourcing locally and buying locally our lives are improved nutritionally, economically, and culturally. Similarly, Slow Money participants loan and borrow to support food businesses locally.

Now Hewitt is announcing a new book release for April 2013, "Financing Our Foodshed", which showcases stories of Chatham County entrepreneurs and their backers using the Slow Money concept. The passion and commitment of each person profiled in the book makes it a deeply touching yet easy read. The stories come from Hewitt's most recent nurturing efforts. Three years ago Hewitt co-founded Slow Money NC, a network of lenders and borrowers putting their energies into local food businesses. The biggest obstacle, she found was that people hadn't seen it done yet. "We hadn't either, but we knew we wanted to make it happen. Now I just meet people, lots of people. Both potential lenders and borrowers and I introduce them to one another," she said. Farmers, bakers, and restaurant owners needing seed money or bridge money connect with Slow Money NC to grow their vision. At one of her talks in the fall of 2011, a New Society Publisher editor approached Hewitt asking her to write a book. "Financing Our Foodshed" was written and edited in less than six months, as Hewitt



Hewitt's book showcases the Slow Money NC concept she co-founded.

worked in this writing project around the pottery studio Kiln Openings and family holiday events. Pittsboro photographer, Bett Wilson Foley took engaging photos for the book at Slow Money NC loan recipient locations.

Chatham County residents will recognize many of their food purveyors like Angelina and John of Angelina's Kitchen. When they expanded their Greek restaurant in 2011 it was two Slow Money lenders who helped them avoid amassing a large credit card debt. Angelina is known for using locally produced meats and vegetables in her recipes. Likewise, Donna Bianco of Bella Donna Restaurant in Pittsboro is upfitting her new location supported by Slow Money NC lenders. Tucker Withington of Lilly Den Farm in Goldston was able to purchase a much-needed skidsteer with the help of a affordable Slow Money loan. Heeks Farm in Rougemont, NC is expanding from one to three acres, producing winter vegetables. They received a Slow Money NC loan to purchase a precision seeder and another walk-in cooler.

"I want to wake up every day and make something happen," Hewitt says. "I want to be satisfied I've made a positive difference in my community."

The capital from these local microloans can make or break these businesses and change lives. They change families, neighborhoods, towns, and lucky for us, Chatham County. Hewitt also connects people across the state. Ultimately these nurtured connections secure our local food sources and support our food purveyors. We consumers benefit in multiple ways—when money stays locally, people shop locally, taxes get paid locally more often. Best of all, consumers know their food sources. Hewitt is looking to connect more people through Slow Money NC, for as she says in her book, "Much good will come of this."

Slow Money NC builds networks and nurtures those relationships, aiming to making a difference with food businesses, beginning here in Chatham County. As Hewitt repeats just often enough to let the message become real, "It's not complicated. It's simple." Many opportunities exist and Hewitt would love to connect with you.

"I find it exciting to be collaborating like this with people here in NC, as well as throughout the U.S.," Hewitt says. "There is joy in this—finding the generous people who want to make loans." Find her book at <http://www.financingourfoodshed.com> for download or shipping in paperback. On <http://www.slowmoney.org> fill out the online form to lend or search for a lending source. There you can also read the list of her appearances during her book tour. Read about the Slow Money concept at <http://www.slowmoney.org>. There are many entry points into using Slow Money to make a difference. Financing Our Foodshed is one of the blueprints now available to show us the way.

*Fellow Chatham County writer, Susan Bridgers has known and collaborated with Carol over the last ten years on several delightful projects, and is herself a passionate proponent of the local food movement.*

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