An ill-used teen’s struggle for freedom

**The Talk-Funny Girl**

*A Novel*

By Roland Merullo

Crown Publishers. 304 pp. $23

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

Roland Merullo sets his 10th novel in an isolated spot of rural New Hampshire, "a granite-and-pine world not reported in the newspapers or seen on television, in a pool of thoughts outside the main current of thought, in wood-heated houses and trailers and cabins."

Although several teenage girls have been kidnapped and murdered along the back roads, West Ober remains a place where "certain things," settled elsewhere by the law, are settled "in other ways."

Beautifully written, suspenseful, and by turns heart-wrenching and heartwarming, *The Talk-Funny Girl* is the story of 17-year-old Margie Richards - and her determination, against all odds, to break free of the anger, fear, and humiliation and the perverse pleasure in the wrong kind of happiness ("the kind that grew in the dirt of someone else's trouble") that consumes her parents. And to shed the dialect that demonstrates the Richardses' distance from and disdain for their "betters" and leads other teenagers to call her "the talk-funny girl."

Merullo's thematic frame is simple and, at times, formulaic. He pits organized religion against spirituality and the appalling, Bible-thumping Pastor Schecht, a cult leader who can't wait to put sinners into the hands of an angry God, against "Sands" Ivers, Margie's handsome young boss, with a past shrouded in mystery. Sands is building a "cathedral" designed to convey "some feeling that life might turn itself around and be lit up with hope."

*The Talk-Funny Girl* is at its best describing the complex (and evolving) relationship between Margie and Curtis and Emmy Richards. Forbidden to watch movies or television, Margie looks at magazines in the pharmacy and school library. Seeing girls her own age dressed in stylish clothes, and reading about "skin problems, boyfriends, making out, and trouble with parents," she is drawn by the prospect of a new life "like the big pale luna moths at my window screen on a July night." As her friendships with Sands and her Aunt Elaine deepen, she becomes convinced she can have it - and is increasingly resistant to the arbitrary, undeserved, and bizarre punishments inflicted by her parents.

Remarkably, Merullo manages to humanize the Richardses. Emmy, he reveals, is "a dark ghost who had rare sparkles of tenderness," but the rest of the time "sucked the world into herself and turned it to ash." Curtis wasn't much better, but "in him at least was a simpleness that could occasionally look like compassion." Despite his viciousness and violence, Margie is able to remember a moment when she was 5 or 6 and he took her to a pond, let her take off her clothes and swim. When she came out, "naked and cool and happy," he turned his head away, took off his shirt, dried her off, and draped it around her shoulders so that she wouldn't shiver.

As the narrative unfolds, Margie learns some important lessons. You can never be yourself, Sands tells her, if you always loop your thoughts "through other people's heads before bringing them back into your own."

But Merullo is too careful a student of human nature and behavior to try to solve fundamental questions about the origins of good and evil, love and hate, nature and nurture. In "certain foolish moods," Margie maintains that if her mother had not been mentally ill, and if Pastor Schecht had not entered her parents' lives, they might have had an unexceptional existence, "eating and chasing small pleasures, growing old." She likes to think that way, she acknowledges, because she wants to believe in her own goodness - and "because there is a certain loneliness that comes from being so distant from the family you were born in."

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