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World and the atom make an uneasy, metaphor-rich marriage

BY **LIZZIE SKURNICK**

SPECIAL TO THE SUN

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 28, 2005

An **Atomic Romance**, By Bobbie Ann Mason. Random House. 288 pages.

When we begin Bobbie Ann Mason's **An Atomic Romance** - the author's first book in a decade-the life of hero Reed Futrell, ladies' man, chemistry buff, and outdoor enthusiast, is, both metaphorically and literally, up in the air. The self-dubbed "**Atomic Man**," a longtime employee of a uranium-enrichment plant, has just found out that his workplace may or may not have stockpiled its own employees with neptunium and plutonium. His girlfriend Julia, an amateur biologist, may or may not have completely called it quits with him, peeved not only at Reed's blind trust in his superiors at the plant, but at his choice of a contaminated camping ground for their recent romantic excursion. His mother, widowed after his father is killed at the same plant where Reed now works, has just suffered a stroke, while his high-school buddy Burr, hopped up on beers, is as likely to preach the gospel as to request a bailout at the local jail during his late-night calls. Left to ponder the mysteries of his life on his own, Reed, like some

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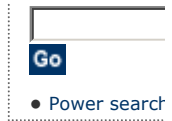
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ancient mariner, looks to the night sky for answers, gunning his motorcycle out into the woods in the wee hours or clicking his mouse through a computer program that lets him search all the known galaxies in the universe. Either way, he's a solar system junkie, burning a streak past planets with the same names as the deadly elements that may be making their way through his own system.



In one of his musings, we learn that Reed and Julia, at their first meeting, flirted over Stephen Hawking's explanation of space-time, and their intellectual courtship with the source of humanity's essence - both biological and nuclear - affects their "**Atomic Romance**" deeply. Earthy Julia, who wants to go into molecular biology to research natural cures for diseases, won't touch cholesterol, brings Reed fennel toothpaste, and, appropriately enough, drives a Beetle. Reed wonders whether her objection to his work at the plant is even accurate - does nuclear weaponry cause war, or prevent it? When he shows her his digital galaxies, she observes that the delicate filigrees look a lot like anthrax under a microscope. At first, it seems a toss-up which one has the better handle on the forces that threaten their relationship - and the world at large. But as Mason lays it out, the question answers itself. Reed, in his own estimation, may have a "core of heavy metal" where his heart is supposed to be, and feels a sort of "radiation sickness of the spirit."



It's no mistake that Reed's favorite retreat out-of-doors - Fort Wolf State Park - is not only an abandoned munitions factory but dangerously contaminated by TNT residue and nuclear waste. The wilds that should serve as a sanctuary instead have become the stage-set for the folly of war. Even Reed's last name - Futrell, an amalgam of Future and Futile - yields up the author's not-so-gentle slap at the **Atomic** Age. There's a similar bent to Mason's metaphors, which point toward the uneasy marriage of commerce and nature in a technologically based world. Clouds are "like fleecy foam insulation blown from a hose," while pup tents spring open like "flowers." At the mall, Reed observes a woman trying to buy worms for fishing at the Live Bait machine. It's wet enough for her to dig worms herself, Reed tells her - and the same rain has made the five-dollar bill so wet that the machine won't take it.

For the **romance** that Mason writes about is not just between Reed and Julia, but between the world and the atom - an uneasy dance that may result in a miracle or a holocaust.

To drive the point home, as the book ends, Reed and Julia meet at the University of Chicago's statue honoring Enrico Fermi, the first person to split the atom, twisting the lyrics of the familiar tune, Reed wonders if he and Julia are "The Atom and Eve of destruction." Instead, he listens with incredulity as Julia tells him that she's pregnant. "I'm a criticality in your life," Reed kids. "You're critical in my life," she responds.

Unfortunately, this intricate universe of symbolism - spangled, like Reed's constellation, by bodies, both heavenly and otherwise - lacks the requisite air for the characters to breathe. For all of Julia's quirks, she, like her deadly microbes, is trapped under glass. And Reed, humorous, wry, and quick-witted though he may be, is more an assemblage of pertinent symbols than a man. As his name suggests, he works well enough on the page, but Reed, like the orbiting Pluto, can be seen only from afar.

Lizzie **Skurnick** is the editor of Old Hag, a literary blog.

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