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Introducing Rita Mae Brown

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Introducing Rita Mae Brown

The Loft at The Mill, Lincoln, Nebraska, June 21, 2004

Good evening

I am Paul Royster, the Director of the University of Nebraska Press, one of the co-sponsors of tonight's reading event.

I want to thank **Jonis Agee** for arranging for us to participate in the **Nebraska Writers' Conference**, and I want to thank the **Friends of the Library** for helping us to sponsor this particular event. And our friends from **Lee Booksellers**, who will hopefully help supply the demand for literature that we want to help create. And I want to thank all of you here for coming out and helping make this a memorable event.

I used to think it was an honor to appear as one of the preliminary acts before a famous person and speaker like tonight's guest. But as I've gotten older, I've come to realize the secret agenda behind these matters. You always want the opening act to be as bad as possible—not so bad that they drive away the

audience, or put them to sleep, or in a bad and unreceptive mood. But it helps if they are slightly boring, a little pedantic, and certainly insubstantial—so as not to spoil the appetite for the evening's main course. It's my intention to meet all those requirements.

I'm here, as a co-sponsor, with an unashamedly commercial message, and it is this: the University of Nebraska Press supports good writing of all kinds, and offers books in many, many subjects to meet all your reading needs. From *Andy Adam's Cowboy Tales* to Stephen Zweig's *World of Yesterday*, we publish outstanding books in Western, Native, Jewish, sports, military, creative nonfiction, fiction, womens' studies, photography, art, social sciences, and young adult subjects. We had two books that were finalists for the PEN/Faulkner Awards this year; and we have had finalists for the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers award the past two years. There are many, many more, too numerous to mention here, lest I fill my duties too enthusiastically.

Finally, I want to say it is a great honor for me personally to speak at an event featuring tonight's

author, Rita Mae Brown. Believe me, it is much more fun when you've actually read the author's work, and very, very much more so when it has stuck with you over a long, long term of years. My own encounter with *Ruby Fruit Jungle* came about 27 years ago, and there are parts I have never to this day forgotten. That speaks volumes for the writer, because I have trouble sometimes remembering what I read last week. The part about the "smart pills" and the part about the grapefruit are burned into my memory. But beyond that, the overall impact of the book on me then, a naïve young person from the provinces lately landed in the turbulent wicked world of New York City, in the 1970s, at the height of the so-called sexual revolution. Ostensibly I was there getting a Ph.D. from Columbia in literature, and one thing that made Ms. Brown's book so powerful to me was the degree to which it had everything in common with works such as Jonathan Edwards' *Personal Narrative* or Cotton Mather's *Life of John Winthrop*. What, you may ask, does a radical lesbian *bildungsroman* possibly have in common with Puritan spiritual autobiography, or as my advisor called it "auto-American-biography"? Well, it is this—that a life story is not about achievement, but about self-discovery and self-realization—about

becoming what you always already were to begin with. And that there is something about this nation, or American culture, that makes the close identification between the individual and the nation the key to it all. The best example I can give is from the Free Speech movement days in San Francisco, and the story of the black homosexual standing up demanding "When is America going to come true for us, baby?" Now, I can assure you that the Founding Fathers and the Puritans before them were not at all interested in America being about black homosexuals—but what they did, in equating personal fulfillment with national identity, was to let a genie out of the bottle that can never be got back in. Rita Mae Brown makes it patriotic to be who you are. It is your civic and national duty to demand your right to your identity, and no one can tell you otherwise. The fictional autobiography of Mollie Bolt is every bit as American a classic as the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, and just as memorable. It is as political a document as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*; the personal is the political, and literature should never get too far from that fact.

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Now, that should cover the pedantic part of my remarks. For my own part, I came to realize that my true self was a middle-aged guy in bad suit, and after many years of struggle and self-realization, I'm proud to say that's where I am today.

Thank you.