

Author Anne Lamott: Still lovable with her latest work

By MATTHEW BUDMAN
Special to The Times

A dozen pages into any Anne Lamott book, you desperately want to be her best friend. Once you've read pieces, you'll want to not only meet her but take her to lunch. Her nonfiction work, including bi-weekly drop-dead-funny journal entries in the online magazine *Salon*, is nakedly personal; it's no wonder readers feel as though they know her and her son Sam intimately, from her misadventures with publishers to her candid admissions of past offenses to her continuing adventures in single motherhood.

Lamott's four novels (two fantastic, one inconsistently stunning, one not so good) earned her

Matthew Budman, who lives in Highland Park, is managing editor of a Manhattan business monthly.

a dedicated San Francisco area following (she lives north of the city) in the 1980s, but her next two books, both nonfiction, *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year* and *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, were national best-sellers — brilliant and insightful and moving and laugh-out-loud delightful, ideal for reading aloud to spouses and partners, frequently purchased several copies at a time to pass on to friends.

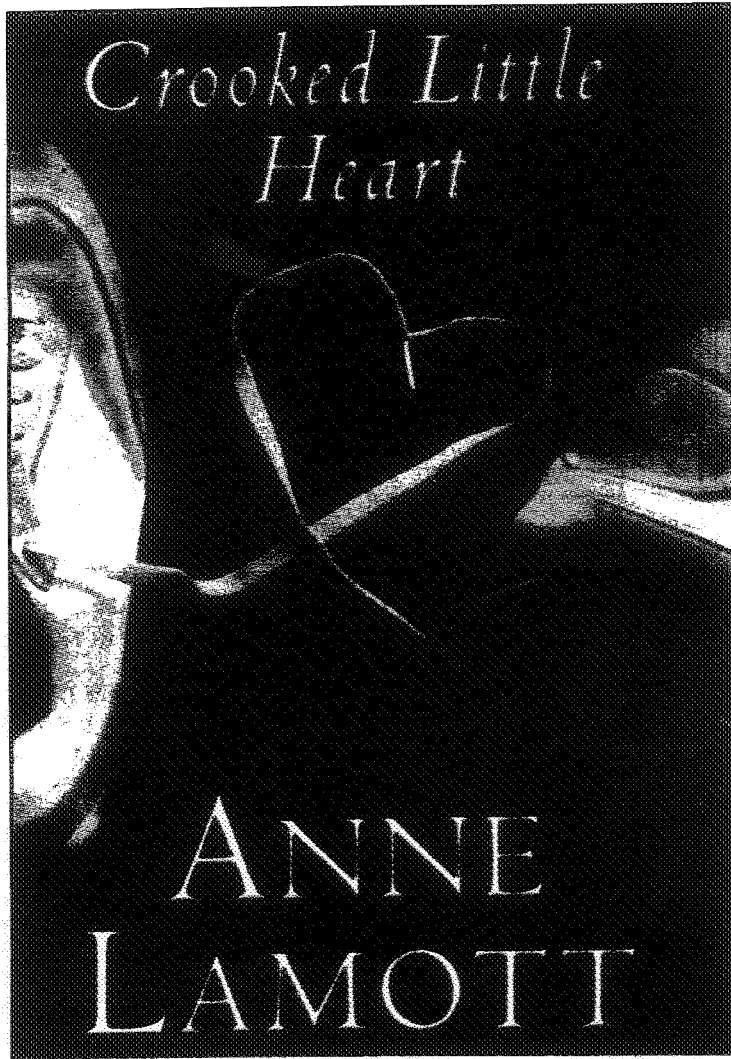
In her 40s, after years of struggle, she's become a public figure, with her third consecutive best-seller, *Crooked Little Heart* (Pantheon). She's not handling success all that well. "I'm in a really emotional, kind of terribly vulnerable, pathetic state right now which I'm not enjoying," she says, "and I'm wondering how much of it has to do with this book's doing so well, and my getting attention I didn't get before."

Lamott is spending an hour on Manhattan's Upper West Side talking about her life and new

novel. She's been dropped off in the lobby of the Opera House Apartments by novelist Scott Spencer, with whom she's staying. She speaks in a weary singsong, delivering a blur of conversation and anecdote that sounds like, well, Anne Lamott, only unedited. It's all there — her trademark wry humor, pointed self-deprecation, and emotional openness. All that's missing are the painstakingly crafted similes and metaphors that dot her published work. Her frizzy, Afro-like hair, a subject of frustration in *Operating Instructions*, is braided, strikingly, into dreadlocks.

SHE'S READING at Barnes & Noble at MarketFair in West Windsor that evening — at one point during the interview she thinks of a bit to use during her reading and pulls out a pen to scribble a note on her hand — and some things she says also pop up

• see LAMOTT, CC3



TRENTON TIMES 8/17/97

Lamott

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in that talk, like a little routine she launches into after sneezing: "I've become a middle-aged person with allergies, which I'm completely bitter about. I don't believe in allergies. I don't like allergic people. I mean, I like them, I just always assume they're being neurotic, that they could will themselves out of it if they cared. Now I've become one of them."

Lamott sounds a tad unsettled. It's not just the soaring sales figures for *Crooked Little Heart*, she's flustered because of a brief profile in the previous day's Newsweek. "It's a very flattering, friendly thing from someone I don't know, a guy I did a phone interview with, and it threw me," she says. "Last night, Sam was gone, and I sort of took the piece into the bathroom and stood against the door reading it. It's confusing for me."

Her transition to being "much less financially strung out" is welcome but "confusing." She gets decent advances and bigger press runs now, and "the publicity machine" has cranked up for her. ("You start making money for these publishing houses, and they respect you.") It's affected the author in smaller ways as well: "Sam went out to Brooklyn by a car service today. Before, I would have gotten in a cab, taken him out there, hung out, gotten another cab back."

Even so, Lamott doesn't have much time. When reminded that she once wrote a superb book-review column for *Mademoiselle* and asked which authors she's reading now, she sheepishly admits that her hectic schedule has reduced her to reading "things that don't take great concentration," she says. "I'm sort of ashamed of my reading life. Scott's up there reading the new Philip Roth, and I've got some thriller by this English guy that I suckered a bookstore into giving me. It's called *The Grid*. About every third book I read is something really important. It's kind of my odd secret now — that I read thrillers. I mean, I have some standards. For instance, the night before I came out here I did a reading at a bookstore in Marin County, and somebody gave me this Jonathan Kellerman book, and I literally *couldn't* read it. I really tried. You know, you have to draw the line somewhere."

Outside of her time crunch, Lamott appears to enjoy the trappings of success — though she has no expectations that her star will rise indefinitely. "It's such an arc," she says, echoing one of the lessons of *Bird by Bird*. "It's not like you're on this wonderful plateau, where you finally arrive someplace and stay there. There are ups and downs."

Given Lamott's emphasis on the process rather than the material results of writing, it's not surprising that she views success as just one moment in her journey as a writer. What is startling is her matter-of-fact summation of the quality of her work: "I really, honestly don't think I'm a writer of any real importance. I don't think my stuff will survive. I don't think that I'm writing for the ages. I don't think that I'm Norman Mailer or Cynthia Ozick," she says.

"I think I may stay in print for another 10 years or something, God willing. But I don't even think I'm a real writer. I don't. I think I'm a

talker. I'm a lovable missionary type. But I don't have a gigantic writing talent. I have a really good, solid mid-range talent that I've nursed along and I've gotten so many great breaks with, and I've had wonderful editors every step of the way. The mid-range talents don't stick around.

"This book is going to do well," she says. "It's already doing great. It doesn't have to do any better. But then what'll happen is just called *real life*." (She notes ruefully that a couple of her writer friends, who take their careers "deadly seriously," haven't been able to cope with her newfound prosperity.)

Most of Lamott's readers would dispute her downbeat assessment; after all, in an era of manufactured celebrity and calculated promotion, her books became best sellers organically, through word-of-mouth. Pantheon initially printed only 7,500 copies of *Operating Instructions*; "They weren't expecting it to do well." And her publicists "didn't really want" *Bird by Bird* at all, Lamott says; they thought a novel would be a better career move. "But I really wanted to do this book on writing. I had to really con them and manipulate them into cracking on it, and I had to use all of my dark and evil ways to trick my editor into getting me an advance that was enough for me and Sam to live on. And then they were really surprised. It sold a ton. It sold double or triple what *Operating Instructions* did."

HER FIRST NOVEL since 1989, *Crooked Little Heart* is no groundbreaker, but it's witty and wise, frequently moving and always funny. The book continues the story begun in her magical 1983 novel, *Rosie*. Nine years old at the end of the earlier book, protagonist Rosie is now 13 and "70 wiry pounds." She's a star tennis player, her dark looks and fierce intensity complementing the "blossoming vanilla beauty" of her doubles partner, Simone.

Still with us are Rosie's mother Elizabeth, who describes herself as "a tall drunk, with a kid and a dead husband and no idea what she wanted to be when she grew up," and her shambling stepfather James. ("We're like some family you'd get at a garage sale," Rosie complains.) Filling out the cast: two mildly dysfunctional best friends, weaver Rae and schoolteacher Lank, and an ominous figure named Luther, a burned-out tennis fan who adds a shadowy, dilapidated presence to Rosie's life.

The stories in *Crooked Little Heart* develop slowly, with drama that gnaws rather than shocks; like most of her work, it's a "slightly goofy, left-wing, black-humored resurrection story of people coming back against all odds." The basic tale is simple, that of Rosie graduating to womanhood and Elizabeth struggling to cope with that fact.

"I really had missed the characters, and I felt like other people were missing them too," Lamott says. "I'd also been drunk when I wrote the first book, and Elizabeth gets sober at the end of *Rosie*, and I had had a child between then and now, and I knew more about being a parent — though I still had to do interviews with 13-year-olds and their parents because I didn't have a daughter, especially a teenage daughter. And I wanted to write about the competitive tennis world, which I had grown up in."

In places, Lamott's real-life writing catches up with her and jerks

the reader out of the story. We know her too well; the line between her real life and made-up lives has blurred. For instance, Rae is a calm-eyed Jesus freak who attends a dilapidated black Baptist church, like Lamott. Elizabeth, like Lamott, is slowly recovering from years of promiscuous drunkenness. There's a slow death from cancer, recalling both Lamott's friend Pammy's death in *Operating Instructions* and her father's illness, fictionalized in her first novel.

And then there's the occasional line that's a bit too familiar. When Elizabeth recalls Rosie getting her head stuck in the spindles of a chair and saying, "I need help with me," Salon readers will recognize the phrase as one uttered by Sam.

"That line is so great," Lamott explains. "And it just sounded like something Rosie would say. And it felt organic enough. I have to just figure that the reader's cagey, and if they're wondering if something is autobiographical, well, you know what? It was. Sue me."

Of course, one reason why Lamott's readers feel as though they know her is that she does indeed cross the line between fiction and reality, and in her nonfiction seems to let people further into her private life. "I don't deliberately do it," she says. "It's just what I love in other authors. And the stuff I write about isn't as personal and intimate as people think; I keep my real deep, unshielded stuff for my very best friends. I don't talk about my relationship. I talk about the intimate stuff of my relationship with Jesus, but that doesn't feel secretive."

Though she certainly edits her life for publication, readers "have a pretty good idea of a big piece of who I am," she says. "They know I'm not cerebral, I'm not left-brain, I'm not organized, I'm not any kind of classical intellectual. I'm very absent-minded; very heart! Ph: much more heart than serious mind." And though she considers herself "extremely well in a lot of ways," her writing often focuses on "the dithering, unwell part," because that part goes directly to readers' feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. It's not only her deepest feelings that Lamott keeps private; she's "very conscious" of leaving Sam alone. "I'm very careful and conscious with his life, and I talk to him before I tell a story. There are things he's said to, and I honor that. I always try to manipulate him; but I'm good most of the time about it."

Whether he wants to or not, though, Sam will play a major role in her next book, a collection of "very short takes on faith" based on her biweekly Salon pieces, a book on faith "kind of in the same way *Operating Instructions* was about parenting and *Bird by Bird* was about writing. It'll be slightly eccentric, slightly out of control; weaving with lots of different colored threads and lumps that I leave in. And then, after that, another novel."

Each of those Salon journal entries, 1,500 words at the most, takes Lamott about a week. "I'm a slow writer; I'm a perfectionist," she says. But when she considers her overall output — "I've published three books that were during my drunk and stoned years and four books during my sobriety" — she's surprised at the volume of work: "God, that's a lot," she says. "I'm actually really prolific. I got sober in '89, so that's four books in seven years."

"That's amazing. I gotta slow down — I'm burning out!"