

# RECORD REVIEW

VOLUME 23, NUMBER 20

FRIDAY, MARCH 30, 2018

REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

The official newspaper of the towns of Bedford, Pound Ridge and Lewisboro

## Coming of age novel explores heartbreak in the age of AIDS

By EVE MARX

A native New Yorker, Katonah-based novelist Deborah Batterman lived in the city during the AIDS crisis and was personally affected.

“My husband and I had just gotten married,” the author recalled. “He and his partner in design were just opening a store in East Hampton. The partner lived in Sag Harbor. He was a gay man. Within months of signing the lease, he was diagnosed with AIDS. I was working at the time for a foundation involved in AIDS. I wrote their newsletter. But even with my husband’s work partner diagnosed and my writing about it, none of us at the time really knew what was happening.”

Ms. Batterman’s new book, “Just Like February,” is a novel spanning the years 1969 through 1986. “1986 was the year the Challenger exploded,” Ms. Batterman said, referring to the 10th flight of the space shuttle Challenger, which on Jan. 28 of that year broke apart 73 seconds after takeoff, killing all seven crew members.

“I always reference events in history to help me tell my stories,” Ms. Batterman said. “For me, the ‘60s didn’t really start until the end of the decade and into the ‘70s.”

Her novel opens in 1974 with the wedding of her main character Rachel’s parents when she was 5, and ends in 1986 with Rachel’s sexual awakening just as her beloved Uncle Jake, a gay man, is dying of AIDS. A poignant coming-of-age story, “Just Like February” unfolds as Rachel is forced to reckon with a home broken by the stormy love between her mother, a social worker, and her father, a Vietnam veteran, and a heart broken by the realities of homophobia and AIDS.

The book is scheduled for release by Spark Press April 10.

Ms. Batterman has been a writer, editor and teaching artist. A story from her debut collection, “Shoes Hair Nails” was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Her stories and essays have appeared in a number of literary publications.

The title, she said was inspired by the novel’s character, Jake, the uncle at the heart of the story, who was born Feb. 29. “The title is intended to suggest a certain randomness in the way our lives pan out,” she said.

“February is also the month on the cusp of seasonal change — daylight is noticeably longer, and one day you’ll get a whiff a spring, followed by a snowstorm,” she added. “As the shortest month of the year, February is evocative of a life cut short.”

Ms. Batterman said her primary character, Rachel, came to her quite naturally. “I saw her born in the summer of ‘69,” Ms. Batterman said. “The moon landing was that year. As a writer, you hear a voice and



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

**Deborah Batterman and the cover of her new book, “Just Like February.”**



*‘I like to listen to the music of the period while I’m in the writing process. There’s a scene in the novel where they go to a bicentennial party on the Upper West Side and “White Rabbit” by the Jefferson Airplane is playing.’*

— AUTHOR DEBORAH BATTERMAN

you see something possible.”

She said defining moments in the country’s history, such as the 1976 bicentennial, and the “Son of Sam” serial killings in New York around the same time, gave shape to her story’s timeline. “I like to do research. I like to extrapolate key moments in our collective conscious that help us remember where we were at that time.”

One of her writing techniques is to immerse herself in the music of the times.

“I like to listen to the music of the period while I’m in the writing process. There’s a scene in the novel where they go to a bicentennial party on the Upper West Side and ‘White Rabbit’ by the Jefferson Airplane is playing. In another scene, they’re listening to the song ‘Y.M.C.A.’ I could listen to ‘YMCA’ right now and cry. It’s one of the most upbeat songs ever and then look

what happened.”

When Ms. Batterman’s character Rachel learns her beloved Uncle Jake is gay, she keeps that information to her herself. Handsome and mysterious, Jake fills Rachel’s life with stories, sends her postcards and brings her gifts from his exotic travels. He’s so much more fun than her parents. But when he becomes sick, she doesn’t dare speak of it even to her best friends.

One day it dawns on her that secrecy does more harm than good.

Ms. Batterman, her husband and their young daughter moved to Katonah from Brooklyn in 1991. They rented a charming cottage before purchasing a home in the Increase Miller neighborhood. Their daughter, a John Jay High School graduate, works in the film business and lives in Los Angeles, California.

“We were looking for a place out of the city, but it had to have three things,” Ms. Batterman said. “It had to have a bookstore; there was a bookstore in Katonah called the Bookworm. It had to have a health food store with a bulletin board and a funky café. There was a health food store in Katonah and also the Baker’s Café. Katonah had all the requirements, including a library.”

She added, “I was working freelance, so I could live any place, and my husband had a business that didn’t require us to be in the city. But I needed to be able to get to the city easily.”

As a novelist, the value of looking in the rear view is you get to see how things have changed and how they haven’t, Ms. Batterman said.

“We’re living in a pretty dark time now and some of the things we’re visiting are things we thought we’d already gotten past.” For example, the author said she sees parallels between Rachel’s reckoning with her uncle’s sexuality and social attitudes today. “Homophobia is almost as bad now as it was back then,” she said.

“So looking back is a way of seeing if we’ve made progress and if we haven’t. It’s also a chance to remind us of the stories that inform us as the people we are now,” she noted.

In addition to writing fiction, Ms. Batterman also publishes a blog, which she describes as an exploration of all the big and small things that impact our daily lives. To find out more about the author, visit [deborahbatterman.com](http://deborahbatterman.com).