

PEOPLE
ARE
TALKING
ABOUT

BOOKS



SETTING THE BAR
DOVEY (IN A MOSCHINO
DRESS) COMPLETED
HER NOVEL IN JUST
OVER A YEAR.

the lying days

Part erotic thriller, part menacing political allegory, South African-born Ceridwen Dovey's haunting debut, **Blood Kin** (Viking), is set in the aftermath of a military coup and follows the fortunes of the newly deposed president's chef, barber, and portraitist. Imprisoned in the state's grand summer residence by its new leader, "the Commander," the three men must transfer their loyalty—and their professional skills—to stay alive. In this stripped-down Kafkaesque fable, which takes place in an

With Blood Kin, a fable of power and complicity, South African author Ceridwen Dovey is poised to make the debut of the season.

unnamed country at an unspecified time, Dovey infuses each character with humanity, and brilliantly reveals how banal acts like cooking and shaving can become charged with longing and political intent: "The prawns are gray and succulent, with fetus eyes, and the sea snails have withdrawn into their shells and stoppered them against violence."

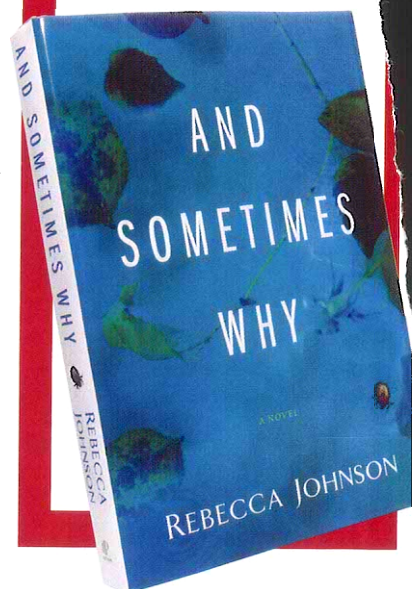
Over a glass of wine in Greenwich Village, the 27-year-old Dovey, a second-year anthropology graduate student at New York University, describes the period of post-college restlessness that led her to writing. The daughter of academics who had left South Africa in 1982 because of political unrest, Dovey moved to Cape Town after graduating from Harvard to research a documentary on President Thabo Mbeki. "He has always been seen as quite aloof, and I thought about doing a film about his chef and his barber." She didn't get very far. "I didn't have any money, didn't have a video camera, didn't know if he even *had* a barber." Nonetheless determined to grapple with post-apartheid South Africa, she turned to fiction. "I needed a creative outlet. Making films had given me that outlet, and I thought I had lost it."

After writing the novel in just over a year, Dovey looked up a few South African publishing houses in the phone book and sent the manuscript out cold. Within six weeks, she had an offer from Penguin South Africa, who, she says, "didn't know me from a bar of soap." Praise by J. M. Coetzee soon followed, as did the honor of her book's being the only first novel nominated last year for Britain's prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys prize.

But *Blood Kin* isn't just a story of men. As the narrative unfolds, we meet the women, who resort to seduction as a means of control and temporary escape. A connoisseur of the stolen sensual moment—"sleep lay heavily on me, an almost physical force pinning me to the bed"—the Commander's new wife begins an affair with the barber in order to escape her horror at the fact that her new husband is rapidly becoming as corrupt as the president he

GOOD GRIEF

With its sharp dialogue and deft character studies, *Vogue* contributing editor Rebecca Johnson's **And Sometimes Why** (G.P. Putnam's Sons) is a sunny, lightly comic L.A. story—until a traffic accident darkens its emotional weather. The victim, sixteen-year-old Helen McMartin, lands in a coma, her grieving parents drift apart, the handsome game-show host who was involved tries to shake off his guilt, and Helen's older sister heads for Alaska with a new lumberjack boyfriend. While cheerfully sending up the ludicrous excesses of Hollywood, Johnson offers a wise and affectingly humane portrait of loss—and the varied ways we find to withstand it.—**TAYLOR ANTRIM**



overthrow. By the end, it's clear that not one of these vivid, mournful voices will escape the novel's harrowing conclusion about absolute power—how it corrupts and then perpetuates atrocity.—**ELIZABETH SCHMIDT**
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