

newsday.com/features/booksmags/ny-k5818730aug31,0,5771767.story

Newsday.com

Review: 'Emma's Table' by Philip Galanes

BY JOSEPH V. AMODIO

Special to Newsday

August 31, 2008

EMMA'S TABLE, by Philip Galanes. Harper, 288 pp., \$23.95.

We know Emma Sutton - a decorator-turned-media darling, a household name with magazine spreads, books, talk show appearances, "Emma-branded furniture" and, of course, regular segments on "Oprah."

"Her allure had always been easy to see: she was just like you, only better - which was somewhat at odds with the latest feather in her cap, a conviction for tax evasion and lying under oath, complete with a stay in the federal pen."

Hmmm, sound familiar?

"Emma's Table," by Philip Galanes, isn't really about Martha Stewart - just someone Martha-ish. Post-penitentiary, though not penitent.

She speaks of her "difficulties" when recalling prison, and refuses to admit having broken the law. Mannered to a fault - on the outside - her inner world is in no way sugarcoated, or bread-crumbed. She's all judgment - smug, stinging, raw.

As when "a fat young woman" accosts her one day, praising her line of tables for Target. Emma endures the compliments, then beats a hasty retreat.

"Emma needed her fans - especially lately - but she liked them better at a distance."

When we first meet Emma, she's got her eye on an expensive George Nakashima table at an auction, with earnest assistant, Benjamin, in tow. Benjamin works for Emma on weekends; on weekdays he's a social worker at a public elementary school in Forest Hills. He takes satisfaction crossing items off Emma's to-do list, if only because her woes - hiring a housekeeper, finding a rare orchid - are so cross-offable ... unlike what he faces at his day job: families rupturing from abuse, unemployment, shame.

Fold into this mix Emma's prodigal ex-husband (with a secret) and dour adult daughter (with a soupçon of sex addiction). Whip till frothy.

Meanwhile, simmering to a boil on the stove is another plot entirely - of poor, plump Gracie Santiago, a third-grader at Benjamin's school, and her single working mom. Galanes deftly slips back and forth between these two worlds: One moment we're dining on pork roast and cardamom chutney, with sterling and Limoges; the next we're sneaking cupcakes from a stash under Gracie's bed. The tales melt toward each other, and Galanes doles out each story in modest amounts. It seems hard to believe these two worlds could ever collide, but with Ben as the linchpin you know it's bound to happen. But when? Galanes does a nice job building the suspense, and waiting ... waiting ... for just the right moment.

Holding it all together: his smooth, irreverent writing style, evident even from the dedication: "For Lil' Kim and her perjured testimony, and Richard Nixon at the Watergate; for Don Imus and his besmirched female students, but mostly, of course, for me."

Galanes, whose occupation requires lots of slashes - he's a corporate attorney/interior decorator/

new etiquette columnist for The New York Times/author (his debut novel, "Father's Day," came out in 2004) - splits his time between a Manhattan apartment and a glass house in East Hampton. He knows Emma's world.

Her table, too. His passion for interior design shows as he describes Emma's 10-foot table on auction: "Two long slabs of honeyed English walnut, with fluid edges - not all squared off - and a swirling grain pattern, like so many drops of motor oil on a rain puddle, a whirling taffeta made of wood. ... It looked like a 10-foot gentleman."

Gracie exhibits the same cannonball leap of pleasure for cookies and cupcakes. There's something childlike in Emma and all the other constantly self-critical adults. Emma's ex shouts for his secretary, "helpless as a child," on losing a vital set of keys. Her daughter seeks affection from any available body. And likable, eager-to-please Benjamin, mumbling for his coddled generation, is unsure what he wants out of life, women or himself.

"I feel like a kid sometimes," he says, "Just waiting to be told."

Some find answers at the end, albeit too out-of-the-blue. But this book shouldn't be judged by the rushed ending. Like any good gathering, it's the time spent hanging in the kitchen, preparing the meal, that counts.

Copyright © 2008, [Newsday Inc.](#)