



Photographs by CHRISTINA HOFFER For The Times

**VENUE CHANGE:** The Dutton's courtyard closed with the bookstore, but the former owner's backyard was available.

# A Dutton's reading

Nancy Spiller was determined to have one. The bookstore closed, so she found the owner's house.

IRENE LACHER

Doug Dutton seemed like a boxer, off in the corner preparing for a bout. He fortified himself with a sip of Prosecco and turned to Lise Friedman, who organized readings at his eponymous Brentwood bookstore until it closed in April. "Are we coordinated?" he asked.

And then it was done: Dutton was back in the ring.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say he was back in the backyard, his own in Studio City. That's where the former bookseller was about to introduce Nancy Spiller, there to read from her new book, "Entertaining Disasters: A Novel (With Recipes)."

It's a ritual Dutton performed for countless authors during the 24 years he oversaw his bookstore, whose ample, reading-friendly courtyard helped make it a nerve center for L.A.'s literary community.

Spiller had anticipated her own coming-out party there during the seven years she worked on her novel, a literary stew of recipes and ruminations. So when Dutton's closed, she declared her new dream in an epitaph for LA Weekly: "I will do whatever is necessary to find Doug's home address so that I can do a reading on his front lawn. . . . Together we can make magic, we can avert tragedy — just like Dutton's Brentwood used to do."

Dutton was flattered. "The idea that I wasn't entirely forgotten, that this might have something to do with a book community that is a continuous book community was very appealing to me," he said, "and it sounded like a fun way to spend a Saturday afternoon."

On Saturday, then, Dutton's lawn was taken over by 50 of Spiller's friends and fellow writing group members, savoring her literal moment in the sun. They sat on lawn chairs and ledges around Dutton's pool. A



**WRITING HER FUTURE:** Nancy Spiller expressed her desire to read at Doug Dutton's house in LA Weekly.

lectern and microphone were set up next to it, along with the wooden platform emblazoned with the Dutton's bookstore logo that authors used to stand on, turned on its side.

"The idea of the courtyard is something we've replicated here," Dutton said. "The courtyard was an extraordinary metaphor for what it was all about. Anybody could sit there, and it didn't matter what your politics or religion were, you were part of this community."

As Spiller read, there were tables near the garage topped with the lemon and opera cakes described in "Entertaining Disasters," and another table piled with copies of the book.

"Making oneself available is the greatest gift you can give a hostess," she told the gathering, quoting her unnamed narrator. "So I want to thank you all for making yourselves available this afternoon."

"Entertaining Disasters" is the saga of a food writer who has a column chronicling all the fantastic dinner parties she gives — only she doesn't actually give them. When an important editor comes to town and requests a frantic week trying to put a real dinner together.

The story is peppered with dark memories of growing up with a divorced, mentally ill mother in San Francisco's socially arid East Bay suburbs during the 1960s.

The result is a kind of California noir, anchored as it is in a Glendale home abutting Forest Lawn. But it's leavened by

Spiller's puckish view of the universe. Humor was one of the survival skills the author picked up as the youngest child in a troubled family, so was taking on the role of observer.

Like her character, Spiller grew up with a mother who suffered from mental illness, and "Entertaining Disasters" was born seven years ago out of her earlier writings about that, "the darkness I felt I had to deal with," as she puts it.

Over the years — as she took part in writing workshops with Kate Braerman and Janet Fitch and spent time at writers' retreats — the book evolved into autobiographical fiction; the narrator's mother, described as "a burned out schizophrenic," serves her children rotten food and laughs to herself when she's alone, as she descends into madness.

"There were certain truths I wanted to get at that I felt I could only get at through fiction while people were alive," Spiller said. "I felt an honest memoir would be too honest for these people, and taking it on as fiction opened it up to greater possibilities."

A petite brunette with a heart-shaped face that registers quick flashes of emotion, Spiller is a third-generation Californian who lives in Pacific Palisades with her TV director husband, two cats and a playful Tibetan terrier named Dalai Lama, whose doppelgänger appears in the book.

In a former life, however, she was a feature writer for the San Jose Mercury News and the defunct Los Angeles Herald Ex-

aminer. She used her reportorial skills to investigate her childhood, imbuing "Entertaining Disasters" with her research into "the epidemic of mental illness among women in the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s." (The book is dedicated to her late mother, Marguerite.)

"When I started researching," Spiller said, "I discovered that our family was not alone. Women in the great first wave of suburban life became isolated in their homes with children and the television. My mother had an interest in cultural things, and it wasn't necessarily shared by neighbors. And other women in the community were left by men — they were divorced. It was a time when women got the house and the children and the men went off and had other lives."

Spiller's research also delved into the history of food; the novel is stuffed with morsels such as the story of Grains of Paradise — "the seeds of a flowering West African plant used in medieval Europe as an inexpensive alternative to the precious black pepper of South India's Malabar region."

But even more, "Entertaining Disasters" evokes the dual life of the narrator, the dread she feels about her dinner party, the sense of being taken over and consumed.

"While my guests were on the premises, I felt occupied, infected by their presence, resenting them as if they were an invading army. . . ." Spiller writes. "What would they think of my cooking it, once they were trapped by the trellis like specimen insects pinned to a display board, I scraped the remainders into their gaping, groaning mouths? . . . I'd wash it down with a glass of arsenic-laced, entrée-appropriate wine and dessert them with brandy and an exploding cigar."

Fortunately for those at Spiller's reading, such violent fantasies are one place where fiction is not based on fact.

"I also had problems giving dinner parties, and that informs this," she told the crowd. "Now I give fewer dinner parties, but they're much better. And it's far less dangerous than it used to be."

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