

## reviews

# Not a ladies' man, but readers love him

**THE ROSIE PROJECT**, by Graeme Simsion. Simon and Schuster, 295 pp., \$24.

BY MARION WINIK  
Special to Newsday

Don Tillman, the narrator of Graeme Simsion's debut novel, "The Rosie Project," is, in his own words, "thirty-nine years old, tall, fit, and intelligent, with a relatively high status and above-average income as an associate professor. Logically, I should be attractive to a wide range of women. . . . However, there is something about me that women find unappealing."

That something is what readers will identify as Asperger's syndrome — Don is long on logic, unpracticed with emotion and challenged by social cues. In the first scene of the book, his philandering colleague, Gene, asks Don to sub for him at a lecture he's supposed to give on Asperger's. "Gene's lecture problem had arisen," Don explains in his signature deadpan

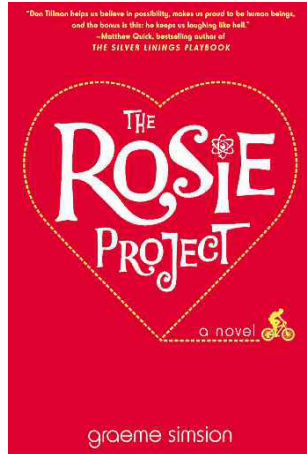


PHOTO BY JAMES PENLIDIS

Graeme Simsion hits the funny bone in his debut novel.

tone, "because he had an opportunity to have sex with a Chilean academic who was visiting Melbourne for a conference."

Once Gene offers a solution to Don's conflict between the time of the lecture and the time Don had planned to clean his bathroom, this capable fellow gets to work preparing the lecture. "I had no previous knowledge of autism spectrum



— at the back?"

He may be found wanting by the ladies, but he is adored by readers. A runaway bestseller in Australia, "The Rosie Project" was published in 40 countries this year, and there's a film on the way. Unlike Mark Haddon's "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time," which is half-serious, half-comic, or the moving young-adult novel "Mockingbird" by Kathryn Erskine, "The Rosie Project" plays Asperger's for laughs — and mostly wins them. Some broad comic strokes in the windup — practicing dance steps with a skeleton, say — will probably work better in the film version.

Don knows that men with partners live longer and gain other advantages, so to kick up his process, he institutes The Wife Project, designing a 16-page survey that will rule out smokers, drinkers, astrology enthusiasts and the habitually late. Then, he meets a woman named Rosie Jarman. She is a total nonstarter by survey standards, arriving at their first date "wearing a

black dress without decoration, thick-soled black boots and vast amounts of silver jewelry on her arms. Her red hair was spiky like some new species of cactus. I have heard the word stunning used to describe women, but this was the first time I had actually been stunned by one."

There ensues a series of events Don labels The Jacket Incident, The Balcony Dinner, The Great Cocktail Night and, most significantly, The Father Project. Rosie's mother died when she was 10, leaving clues but not the identity of her father. She asks Don to use his DNA know-how to help her find her real dad. This quest drives the suspense portion of the plot, which is less successful than the rom-com built around it.

"The Rosie Project" was recommended to me by a friend who read it immediately after a death in her family. It is definitely a take-your-mind-off-your-troubles kind of book, and those who would relish a few hours of sweet, silly diversion will enjoy it.

## this week

Readings & signings on LI

### Tuesday

Former Speaker of the House **Newt Gingrich** signs copies of his new book, "Breakout: Pioneers of the Future, Prison Guards of the Past, and the Epic Battle That Will Decide America's Fate" (Regnery). His wife, **Callista Gingrich**, signs copies of her new children's book, "Yankee Doodle Dandy" (Regnery Kids). At 7 p.m., *Book Revue*, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, [bookrevue.com](http://bookrevue.com)



Newt and Callista Gingrich

## He'd rather be in the woods, thank you

**BROWN DOG**, by Jim Harrison. Grove Press, 525 pp., \$27.

BY ANN LEVIN  
The Associated Press

In 1990, the novelist, screenwriter and poet Jim Harrison wrote a novella about an unforgettable character named Brown Dog.

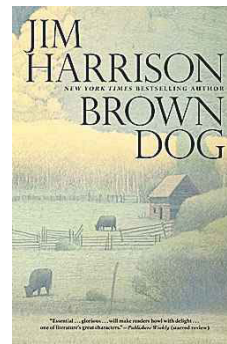
A Native American from Michigan's Upper Peninsula, B.D. is a Bible school dropout who never got a Social Security card, works only when he has to and lives in deer-hunting cabins in the sparsely populated, densely wooded swath of land between Lake Superior and Lake Michigan.

His favorite pastimes include walking in the woods, hunting, fishing, drinking too much, chasing women and making fun of the rich, white people who summer amid his beloved streams and forests.



PHOTO BY WYATT MCSADDEN

Jim Harrison, author of "Brown Dog," a collection of five novellas



Brown Dog may sound like an uncouth, uneducated drunk — and to some extent he is — but one of the messages Harrison telegraphs to readers is not to be fooled by appearances. Brown Dog is, as his best buddy and sometime sex partner, Gretchen, says, "absurdly endearing," a backwoods mensch with the wisdom and compassion of a bodhisattva.

After the first novella was

published, Harrison brought B.D. back for four more installments. Now, Grove Press has collected all the novellas into one volume and added a new one for good measure.

In each story, something deeply strange happens to B.D. — he salvages the preserved body of an Indian chief from the bottom of Lake Superior, steals back a sacred bearskin from a Hollywood mogul, smuggles his mentally disabled

stepdaughter into Canada to keep her out of a state school in the United States.

The stories start off in shaggy-dog fashion — B.D. never met a digression he didn't like. In the end, what seemed to be a tangent turns out to be inevitable, and the stories miraculously hold together.

Harrison has an extraordinary ability to evoke the splendor and terror of the natural world, but is also remarkably clear-eyed about families, relationships, politics, even food. (He's frequently been profiled by food writers.) In the next-to-the-last novella, B.D. has returned to the Upper Peninsula after going on the lam. Spring has arrived in a part of the world that can get 300 or more inches of snow, and tiny frogs are trilling in a nearby swamp. "B.D. had a lump in his throat about life itself," Harrison writes, capturing the quality of this protagonist who keeps readers coming back.