

'ROSE OF NO MAN'S LAND,' BY MICHELLE TEA

## *Day Tripper*

By Lenora Todaro

March 26, 2006

### ROSE OF NO MAN'S LAND

By Michelle Tea.

306 pp. MacAdam/

Cage Publishing. \$22.

MICHELLE TEA'S books read like wee-hour confessions of debauchery, delivered in a street-smart literary voice that growls and purrs, gnashing about fakery, crooning about lust.

Tea, who is 35, has already published four cultish memoirs. Her first, "The Passionate Mistakes and Intricate Corruption of One Girl in America" (1998), described her adolescent transformation from a "goth 'n' roll" party girl to a 20-something lesbian prostitute, a period she detailed further in her illustrated book, "Rent Girl" (2004). In "The Chelsea Whistle" (2002), she gave an account of her blue-collar Catholic girlhood in Boston (raised in a hardscrabble suburb by Mom, abandoned by Dad, a Polish postal worker), and in "Valencia" (2000), she explored the radical sex lives of Mission District lesbians.

But compared with "Rose of No Man's Land," a riotous coming-of-age novel about a misanthropic girl's sexual self-discovery, Tea's previous works seem like acts of preparation -- apprenticeships in the badlands of memoir, lively, sprawling animals, unfettered by the pesky ball-and-chain of plot. Here, for the first time, the narrator is not named Michelle and the narrative is not allowed to unravel, even as the characters do.

Tea telescopes her literary vision into a day in the lives of three misfits: a drinker, a loner and a 14-year-old girl named Trisha Driscoll. Trisha just wants a friend, but most people disappoint her, beginning with her hypochondriac mother and her hairdresser sister, whose bedroom, plastered with posters of supermodels, is a "church of the female stomach." After being fired from a mall clothing store shriekingly named "Ohmigod!" she meets up with Rose, a fellow cynic and outcast, and is smitten. Over the course of 24 hours, Trisha gets and loses her first job, smokes her first cigarette, snorts her first crystal, kisses her first girl and gets her first tattoo. Some of the supporting characters seem familiar: the popular girls in

cliques like "Russian nesting dolls," the leering drug dealer in his "beachfront creepshack." But Tea's wisecracking voice and eye for physical description drive them beyond the humdrum. "She was born malnourished and grew up stunted but Rose looked like she swung from trees," Tea writes.

That Trisha discovers so much about herself in a single explosive day strains credibility, but infatuation propels the story forward as if from a slingshot. Trisha's spoken dialogue appears with every first letter capitalized, conveying a girl on the edge of a scream: "I Love This, I said to Rose. I Love This. My downstairs felt wild and whirling and I reached out for Rose's head, pulled it down onto mine and kissed her. I split her mouth with my tongue like a shard of glass."

Tea's writing is guided by unapologetically raw voices: the punk poet Eileen Myles, the novelists Dennis Cooper (without the overt sexual abuse) and Mary Gaitskill (without the maturity). In close-ups, the fluorescent glare of Nan Goldin's outsider photographs can be felt ("Rose's crumpled sneakers were held together with a scab of fibrous duct tape").

With "Rose of No Man's Land," Tea is trying to do for working-class teenage lesbians what S. E. Hinton's "Rumble Fish" and "The Outsiders" did for greasers and street-brawling tough guys in the 1970's and 80's: to let them be heard and felt. Writing for young adults, Hinton shaped morality plays; writing for adults, Tea creates war stories with herself as intrepid reporter. She is sometimes unreliable, with a perpetual chip on her shoulder and an open valve to righteous indignation when the moment calls it forth. There are clear similarities between Tea's memoirs and the protagonists here, with their wild-child ways and malaise. But with this novel, Tea moves forward into her imagination, reining in her story so it can buck free.

'Rose of No Man's Land,' by Michelle Tea Lenora Todaro is a former editor of The Voice Literary Supplement.