

BOOK REVIEWS

The curse of the romantic philanderer

Naomi Gryn

Howard Jacobson, *Who's Sorry Now?* (London: Cape, 2002, £16.99)

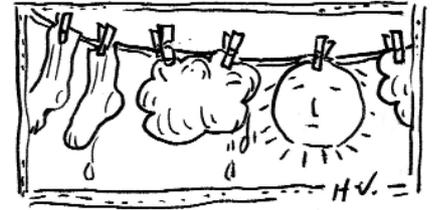
SQUISHY-HEARTED Marvin Kreitman sells leather purses and handbags. He loves four women – his mother, his wife and their two daughters – but he's pathologically afraid that he might be abandoned, so he also manages to maintain five mistresses. Every week he meets up with his best friend, Charlie Merriweather, who has been constant and faithful to the same woman all his married life, and they try to decide whether it's better to be nice or a cad, and who is the unhappier.

Marvin's father, Bruno the Broygis, also sold purses. He was gruff, petty, dishonest and angry. He walked around as if there was a shit under his nose and no one cared when he died, not even Marvin's mother, Mona, who took up with another man just six weeks later. Perhaps that's why Kreitman Junior

developed his skills as a charmer, why he became addicted to women and fell in love with his wife, Hazel Nossiter, when he recognized a note of sadness in her laughter. Marvin is split between his insatiable appetite for hard sex and his clamouring for affection, unable to unlock the contradictions inherent in being a romantic philanderer; he has never known what it feels like to smile after having sex.

Charlie, meanwhile, grew up with an icy mother and a hen-pecked father. Despite his brute of a penis, Charlie was gawky, awkward and unlucky in love until he met his wife, Charlotte Juniper: 'At school dances girls shied away from him, put off by the avidity with which he stared at them, frightened of his big hungry face, repelled by the odour of his virginity.'

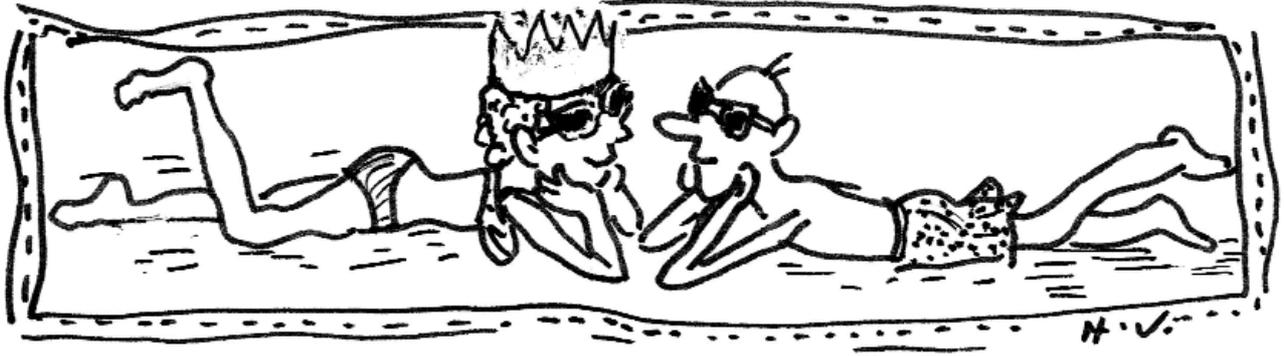
Charlie is the only man with whom Chas has ever had sex, apart from a near miss with a professor who made a mess all over her essay on Chekhov. Charlie and Chas have two kids; they enjoy a successful collaboration writing books for children under the trademark C. C. Merriweather; they have nice sex and are symbiotically enmeshed with each



other. Chas is lanky, flat-chested, cheerful and brisk. She provides Charlie with an endless supply of his favourite lemon meringue pies and the mothering that he missed during his own childhood. But now everyone seems to be having more fun than Charlie, despite Chas's protestations to the contrary.

Since we first learned to tell light from dark, humankind has engaged in the arts of categorization and differentiation. Charlie tells Marvin that he and Chas didn't *feel* opposite, 'we felt the same. We weren't reconciling differences in sex, we were confirming congruences. In bed together, sometimes, I wouldn't have been able to tell you where I ended and she began.' Charlie reminisces how, once, he and Chas were kept up all night listening to

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Marvin and Hazel fight and fuck like tigers. Charlie would like to explore the badness that his wife could never reflect back to him, that elusive attribute that devotees of self-help literature might call their Inner Bitch.

The four leading characters in *Who's Sorry Now* weave in and out of each other's lives like a handwoven rug. One fateful evening in Soho, Charlie proposes to Marvin that they should exchange their women. Then Marvin is accidentally knocked down by a bicycle and all their lives are turned inside out. When Marvin regains consciousness, Chas is sitting at his hospital bedside, while Hazel and Charlie are having breakfast with Nyman, the Teutonic cyclist. Nyman is double-jointed and can make his eyes squeak, but for Marvin 'no man could be less dazzling than Nyman. He did not emit light, he absorbed it. He was a black hole, and by the magic of physics, all sources of light sought their extinction in him.'

I love Howard Jacobson's lush use of language. He has an elastic imagination that lets him reach for spicy metaphors that other chefs would shy from. The plot keeps twisting and turning until it giddily reaches its shocking conclusion.

I marvelled at how Marvin found the time between his exhausting lovers' trysts to run a successful luggage business, but there are real-life Kreitmans littering every woman's path to emotional fulfilment. Men like Marvin Kreitman can be fatally attractive. Their bleached-tooth smile dazzles their vic-

tim, while their eyes twinkle with promises of secret adventure and untold excitement. But their most deadly weapon is a sly glance of appreciation that makes a woman glad that she's worn her black lace padded push-up bra or hip-hugging leather skirt, like a flower which unfolds its petals and offers its nectar as it senses nearby the vibrating hum of a bumblebee.

But Marvin can never be satisfied for more than a few brief moments and this is bound to create havoc for women who want to please and be pleased. The Kreitmans of this world are always married, because adultery is their only protection against being devoured by the gratitude of women whose fire they've kindled. And when their long-suffering spouses declare that they've had enough, Kreitmans try to keep love at bay by making it clear to their lovers that exclusivity is not an option. Does it sound like I too have been stung? Not half. Once or twice I've cared enough to want to save them, because a ship without an anchor is just a floating raft:

Kreitman's rigid fist was infamous among his women, each of whom began by hoping she would be the one to get him to open his fingers and release his murderous grip on himself.

Meanwhile, the twin revolutions of female emancipation and sexual liberation have created a mutation in our species, forcing a generation of women into becoming monsters of self-sufficiency. Every teenage girl should be

equipped with a copy of Jacobson's masterful insight into the tragedy of a compulsive womanizer as she takes her first treacherous steps into the world of adult sexuality: 'The cruel paradox of Kreitman's life, as he saw it: he was ill with women, but only a woman could make him better.'

However, there are worse crimes than infidelity and, the way I see it, falling in love with a man like Charlie Merriweather can be even more dangerous. If I sound bitter or jaded, it's because there have been times when I've been snared in his script too. At first he seems like a less risky option, with his puppy-dog paws and winning declarations of reassurance. Gradually, and without conscious malice, he clips his woman's wings and strips away her instinct for self-preservation. But when the amphibian projection with which he anxiously clings to everything in his orbit is mirrored back to him, he catches fright, turns back into a warty toad and croaks off into the night, leaving in his wake the shards of broken vows and bewildered devastation.

The Kreitmans and Merriweathers are entangled in a web that reaches deep into the past and threatens to engulf all of their futures. Inseparably tied to our genetic code are the ethical axioms that we've inherited from the generations that preceded us. We each bring into the bedroom a complicated patchwork of our parents' attitudes towards sex and intimacy, along with those strategies we've developed ourselves to accumulate enough loving without being overwhelmed by the psychological dys-

functions unleashed sometimes in our bedfellows.

We learn that Mona Kreitman, an archetypal Jewish mother, has always clutched her son's psyche a little too tightly to her own. Perhaps this is what deformed him, even when he was still deep inside her womb. She still sees him as a sensitive child and tells him that what he likes in women is trouble, but Marvin finally understands that what he's been seeking for so many years is, in fact, his mother's disappointment. When he makes Hazel cry, he reflects narcissistically on his own remorse: 'Dry tears, not sobs, the dry tears every faithless husband fears he is the reason for. I have dried up even her accesses to sorrow, the swine I am.'

Hazel has learnt from her marriage to Marvin that men create the circumstances of their own dissatisfaction, but then it turns out that Hazel would actually like to become more like Marvin herself. Maybe this is what has allowed her to stomach his deceptions and betrayals for so many years. Each of us is directed not by what we are, but by what we lack, and these are the sorts of gaps that drive us:

Of her old discontented habits only one remained – testing the returns policy of every shop in London. She had not been born a taker-back of clothes. Like kleptomania, of which it is a near relative, the taking-back of clothes is a function of despair, and despair had entered Hazel's life only when she discovered that her husband's tears were universal.

Foul language and sexual expletives rip through the first few chapters, keeping at arm's length the reader's curiosity, but this eases up as the flaws are revealed in each player's personality, as well as some of their more lovable qualities. Bit by bit, we discover what sort of adjustments they have each made as compensation for any inherent inadequacies. Jacobson hints at the impact that these vulnerabilities might have not just on the well-being of his characters but also on the welfare of their offspring; there remains a nagging doubt that sometimes the damage goes too deep for redemption:

What had made Hazel weak was not fatherlessness but spinelessness – if spinelessness was the word for always needing a man to lean on and to blame. Not that Hazel was spineless any longer, but you never knew with weaknesses of that sort, whether they were ever completely gone.

Charlotte Merriweather is surely the winner in this intelligent and thoroughly modern fable because she loves and is loved and because she survives Charlie's mid-life crisis without becoming tarnished with cynicism or losing her integrity. As her sister, Dotty, observes: 'You've finally released the pagan in yourself.'

Howard Jacobson's first public reading of *Who's Sorry Now?* was at Joseph's Bookstore in Temple Fortune – one of the liveliest bookshops in London. Some members of the aging, mostly Jewish audience seemed anxious that the book's female characters were thinner, less fleshed-out than their male counterparts, but Hazel and Chas have plenty of biographers of their own and, besides, women need fewer calories to go about their daily business.

Others were disappointed because they'd expected an evening of light-hearted amusement and expressed their annoyance that Jacobson – always a master of wit and irony – chose to share chunks from his book that were thoughtful rather than belly-achingly jolly. Perhaps they were feeling confused because it's a well-known fact that Jewish men make perfect husbands, but Marvin Kreitman is the only Jewish character in this subtle and provocative novel and he is undoubtedly a scoundrel. Or was it because some of the myths that disguise the mediocrity of their own marriages were being unzipped in front of their wing-clipped wives?

Everyone will interpret this book through a veil of their own interpersonal complexities. However, it's not for those who favour grey cashmere sweaters or take comfort in bagels filled with smoked salmon and cream cheese but grow queasy at the sight of salmon sushi.

Naomi Gryn is a writer and filmmaker.