

Sympathy For The Devil Wears Prada

I'm lounging in the hammock, devouring a darkly hilarious novel called *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, when my friend Jennifer* calls me in tears. "My editor wants me to totally rewrite my book," she says. "He says the main character isn't sympathetic enough."

"Oh, honey. That's just *wrong*," I say, sympathetically. Jennifer's book is breathtakingly written, brilliantly conceived. The only problem I had, reading it, was wishing that I'd written it myself. "I loved your main character. She's smart and feisty and complicated and hot."

"That's exactly the problem, according to my editor," Jennifer says. "But how can I change her? My main character is *me*."

What's wrong with this picture, I ask myself. Why do so many of my friends who write literary fiction have a story like Jennifer's to tell? X's first novel, *title*, was rejected by a publisher because its female protagonist didn't "triumph over all adversity," thereby providing the requisite happy ending. XX's *title* sold to a German publisher for six figures, but American publishers refused to buy it unless she made her lead character "more remorseful" for having a passionate fling. An editor of XXX's *title* said that although readers would be "haunted and moved" by her protagonists, she should turn them into characters that readers would regard with "genuine affection."

Compare and contrast. The novel in my lap stars Marshall, a raging narcissist who first hopes his wife died in the 9/11 attacks, then spends three hundred pages making her life a living hell. Yet somehow, despite the absence of a likeable hero, the book earned great reviews in *The New Yorker*, *The Washington*

Post, and *Salon*—and a coveted nomination for the 2006 National Book Award. Marshall, it strikes me, is no anomaly. A plethora of other unlikable male characters by bestselling male authors springs to mind: those of Hemingway, Norman Mailer, Phillip Roth, and Brett Easton Ellis, to name just a few.

In the parallel universe of “mass” or “popular” fiction (those thick paperbacks purchased at supermarket check-out stands), impossibly perfect, impossibly villainous, impossibly one-dimensional characters abound. Their purpose is entertainment, not erudition nor enlightenment; a different set of rules applies. But why, in the highbrow world of literary fiction, is a “nice” heroine equated with book sales, when so many blockbusters feature heroes who are anything but? Does it make me a conspiracy theorist, or worse yet, a raging feminist to suspect that in literature, as in life, women are expected to be “more sympathetic”—more conventional, more understandable, kinder and gentler—than men?

Are male and female writers and characters judged by separate and unequal criteria? Are my women friends’ experiences the exception or the rule? I decide to embark on a little literary archeological dig to find out. My first stop: Ken Kalthus, author of *A Disorder Peculiar To The Country* and the master of the unsympathetic, yet successful character.

“No one in publishing has ever said my characters aren’t likeable enough,” Kalthus tells me. “And I don’t think a character has to be. Humbert Humbert is one of the best characters in literature, and he’s a child molester. Philip Roth has made a career of creating sympathy for unlikable characters. It’s all about the writing—the proximity between narrator and reader, narrator and

character. If you're telling a story in an engaging way, the protagonist could be Jack the Ripper."

But could the protagonist be Jill the Ripper? "I don't think there's a double standard for male versus female protagonists," Kalthus says, and his editor, Tim Duggan of Ecco/HarperCollins, agrees. "The conventional wisdom in publishing is that books that will sell have likeable characters," Duggan says. "But I've never followed that rule. I've never asked an author, male or female, to make a character more sympathetic."

Dana Spiotta, author of *Lightning Field* (Scribner, 2002) and *Eat The Document* (Scribner, 2006) was Kalthus' fellow finalist for the 2006 National Book Award. "Some readers expect women writers to create emotional novels with feel-good redemptive features," she says. "And that includes "likeable" protagonists. Sentimental sells. But I never think in those terms. I want people to be disturbed."

Spiotta has drawn heat as well as praise for her approach. "In *Lightning Field* my protagonist had a detached attitude about her extramarital affairs," she says. "I was surprised by how many people considered that attitude 'male' and were upset by it. I think they expected the book to be chick-lit, and it was much darker than that."

Like Kalthus, Spiotta has never considered—nor been asked by her editor to consider—her characters' likeability. "My editor is very respectful of my vision," Spiotta says. "In fact, she embraces it."

Not all writers are so lucky. When memoirist XXXX submitted her first novel, *title*, to her editor, "He told me to change my protagonist to make her 'more appealing to my female base,'" XXXX recalls. "He wanted her to go shoe

shopping, take bubble baths, gossip with other women on the phone. I've been a woman for forty-five years, and I don't do those things. I found his suggestions sexist and insulting."

Rather than turn her lead character into a caricature, XXXX took drastic action: she cancelled her contract, returned the money she'd been paid, and took her novel back. "It's hard to write a bad-ass woman and not offend peoples' sense of femininity," XXXX says. "But an obnoxious man? No problem. Take Portnoy, for example—what a misery. Can you imagine a female character behaving that way?"

XXXX re-sold *title* to Senior Editor *name*, *publisher*. It was published in November 2006—with XXXX complex protagonist intact, and to rave reviews in *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, and many other places. Ironically, the only criticism in an otherwise enthusiastic *San Francisco Chronicle Book Review* was that the protagonist was *too* nice. "...A protagonist must be sympathetic for a novel to work," the reviewer wrote, "...[and] *protagonist* is universally adored to an unbelievable, and therefore grating, degree."

"What I loved best about XXXX's book—the nuanced, multi-dimensional characters—was exactly what her last editor was trying to get rid of," editor *name* says. "I like characters with flaws, and there's definitely less leeway for flawed female characters. The selling point of Ken Kalthus' book was his unsympathetic character. It would be hard for a female writer to pull that off."

Creating more leeway for female writers has been Carole Desanti's *raison d'être* for twenty years. Vice President and Editor at Large of Viking Penguin, Desanti has made a career of publishing groundbreaking, controversial female authors—Dorothy Allison, Terry McMillan, and Ruth Ozeki among them—

whose books become bestsellers although, or because, their female characters break the 'likable' mold.

"Unless they're serial killers, a male character's bad behavior is chalked up to the realm of adventure," Desanti says. "But the minute a female character strays from the path, does something bad or perverse, we're much more horrified by it."

Desanti blames "cynical publishing" for chasing sales by publishing safe bets. "Publishers look for something that's like the last bestselling thing. In the case of women's fiction, that usually means chick lit, featuring a likeable character who has trouble, gets married, and is morally redeemed—instead of books that respond to the genuine material of women's lives." Desanti thinks this bias jeopardizes not just literature, but girls and women.

"There's a relationship between the characters women read and who we think we're allowed to be," she says. "That's why I ask my women writers to think more deeply and broadly about their characters, to explore more than that self-denigrating, perfectionist thing. It's up to writers and editors to challenge themselves, to get beyond what the market thinks it wants at this point in time."

But why does the market—comprised mainly of women, who buy most of the 150,000 books published in the U.S. each year—want what it wants? Does chick lit sell because women relate best to characters like Bridget Jones? Or do women relate to characters like Bridget Jones because the publishing industry feeds them a steady diet of chick lit?

Laura Miller, staff critic at *Salon* and a regular contributor to the *New York Times Book Review*, answers without hesitation. "Women read for hope and inspiration," she says. "They're drawn to icons. They're reassured by characters

like Bridget Jones, because she tells them that it's okay that they sometimes make fools of themselves."

What about the other gender, I ask. "Men don't need that constant reassurance," Miller asserts. "It's okay in this culture for them not to be perfect. They don't feel it's expected of them. Women like characters who are on their level. Men tend to prefer characters they can either look up to or look down on and ridicule."

In her *Salon* review of *A Disorder Peculiar To The Country*, Miller called Kalthus "ingenious" and said that his "might be the best novel yet about 9/11." "Sophisticated readers don't need a sympathetic character," she tells me. "But there aren't that many sophisticated readers."

Harsh words, I say. Just the facts, ma'am, she replies. "The mass audience wants to go to their leisure entertainment for hope and reassurance. It's not an outrageous thing that publishers want to publish books that are likely to delight a wide audience."

I ask Miller if she's concerned, as Desanti is, by the ramifications of the sympathetic female prerogative. "I don't know that a lot of women are willing to surrender the sorts of comfortable, reassuring aspects of femininity that are keeping them down," she answers. She sighs deeply. "What are we going to do—strap women into a chair and spoon Martin Amis into their faces?"

What *are* we going to do? Because despite the exceptions—of which, fortunately for those of us who appreciate complex characters, there are plenty—the rule remains intact. The more women writers I ask about their publishing experiences, the more stories I hear of publishers dicing, slicing, and dissing

female protagonists; the more stories I hear of books languishing, unpublished; jettisoned because their heroines wouldn't or couldn't be shrunk to fit.

What my women friends are going to do—*are* doing—is what a writer must do: write on. Jennifer spent a year recasting her character to make her still feisty, but more understandable. *X's title* was published, and glowingly reviewed. *XX's* second novel became a Bay area bestseller. *XXX's* portrayal of her protagonist was praised in a front-page *San Francisco Chronicle* review as “her sensitive and complex portrait of *protagonist*, whose delicate balance of vulnerability and strength Rosner captures...”

Time, my friends believe, is on their side. “The older we get,” 52-year-old *XX* tells me, “the less we care what other people think. We’re truer to ourselves, and so we’re truer to our characters.”

“There’s more complexity to be appreciated and engaged with,” says 47-year-old *XXX*, “by both writers and reader, as they mature.”

The double standard may not be universal, but it is operational. And if even one woman writer, one woman character, one woman reader, is deprived of the full range of human motion, that’s a loss for literature, and a loss for all of us.

Meredith Maran

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