Men Will Be Men, In Literature and in Life

A female reader ponders the similarities in a blend of memoir and literary criticism

Anne Roiphe

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FOR RABBIT, WITH LOVE AND SQUALOR
An American Read
By Anne Roiphe
Free Press; 222 pages; $23

Reviewed by Sarah Coleman

Readers who dislike a particular novel often complain that they didn't like any of its characters. The writing may be gorgeous, these readers say, but without an empathetic character it's all just so much verbiage. Seems reasonable. But what if, on the other hand, empathy is so complete that the reader falls in love with a fictional character?

Literary crushes are a necessary byproduct of reading, argues Anne Roiphe in "For Rabbit, With Love and Squalor: An American Read." In 50-plus years of reading, Roiphe writes, she has fallen hard and fast for some of the most complex male characters in 20th century fiction: from the disaffected Holden Caulfield of "A Catcher in the Rye" to "For Whom the Bell Tolls'" idealistic Robert Jordan, from the once-brilliant Dick Diver of "Tender Is the Night" to ever-mediocre Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom. These men taught her about love and loss, about how men think and interact. They "were not actual participants in my fate but they were real participants nevertheless," she writes. "They served as my friends, my counterspies in the gender wars, my distraction."

Half-valentine, half-lament, "For Rabbit" is also an intriguing blend of memoir and literary criticism. It's the kind of hybrid book that might strike literature professors as extravagantly self-absorbed, while others will see it as a dazzling merger of two different genres. The truth probably lies somewhere in between.

Certainly, Roiphe has some sharp insights to share about her favorite heroes and their place in popular culture. Holden Caulfield, despite his widespread appeal, "suffered from the self-righteousness of adolescence" and offered no viable alternatives to phoniness. Rabbit Angstrom might have been "a stand-in for America's failure of moral courage," but he remained sympathetic because he continued to search for a human connection through sex. "Pitiful is Rabbit in his physical thrashings and yet glorious is his questing," she writes.

Roiphe is also good on the relationships between authors and their creations. In Rabbit, she points out, "the author's own literary mind and Harry's duller, dirtier mind merge," while Nathan Zuckerman acts as Philip Roth's conscience, calling him on "all the omissions, elisions, posturing fakeness that always appear when we tell each other the 'real' story." These two extended relationships with a fictional alter ego enable Updike and Roth to dig into their own psyches, and Roiphe sees readers as the beneficiaries of their archaeology.

As she analyzes her relationships with various characters, Roiphe links them with her real-life romances. We learn that she was dazzled by her first husband's Dick Diver-like brilliance, but overlooked the fact that "alcohol was the heart pump of the whole package." Sure enough, her spouse's early promise fizzled out, as did Diver's: If she'd paid more attention to her source, Roiphe implies, she might have avoided a messy divorce.

More optimistically, she relates her current husband's courage to that of Robert Jordan, even if, in today's terms, courage means being there "when a woman loses a breast, loses a baby, loses a job."

In general, though, Roiphe notes that as she has matured, she has abandoned the idealistic heroes of her youth. In their place have come survivors like Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe, whose bravery stems from "his existence program of just getting through, making it from day to day without a fuss, without a crack-up."

A troubling pattern emerges round about here. Roiphe has already admitted that her favorite heroes are "men who require propping up, sewing back together, not just standing behind but holding up." Perhaps, as she suggests, this is a common female fantasy, but the way she wallows in it still provokes discomfort. "Dick Diver, boy wonder . . . the mother in me wants to save you," she gushes, and "Oh Nathan, if you were my son I would take you back under my coat, warm and safe."

When Roiphe announces that, as Rabbit's wife, she would have baked him cookies and "set the table with a candle each night," she begins to seem hopelessly out of date. One wonders, for instance, whether daughter Katie Roiphe (known for her books on date rape and sexual mores) would follow Mom's lead in defending Rabbit's serial adulteries.

Another issue that isn't quite resolved is Roiphe's discussion of her Jewish identity. Slice it or dice it, she can't get around the fact that some of her favorite writers are anti-Semitic, and she deftly shows how this manifests itself in their characters.

But then she concocts revenge fantasies where her heroes are forced to confront their prejudices. These are fun to read (particularly the one where self-hating Jew Zuckerman is kidnapped by pro-Zionist South Pacific terrorists); what isn't clear is how far they're supposed to erase her previous adoration.

Overall, though, "For Rabbit, With Love and Squalor" illuminates some of the complexities of reading, and for that it's worth trawling through some of Roiphe's less felicitous passages. Female readers of this book will no doubt enjoy comparing notes with Roiphe. For men, the primary pleasure might be seeing how much their fictional counterparts get away with. ■

Sarah Coleman is is a writer and critic whose work has appeared in Salon, the Oxford American, Fabula and Photo Metro.

LETTERS TO BOOK REVIEW

Flummoxed By a Fable

Editor -- Alev Lytle Croutier's fairy tale, "The Palace of Tears," begins with these words: "This is a work of fiction. Not only the characters and events but also the historical facts have been sacrificed to tell the story. Do not believe a word of it." Chronicle reviewer Brigitte Frase [Dec. 3] must have skipped that part.

She spent four columns criticizing this lyric, metaphorical fable because she wished it were full of historical fact, plot detail and character development. Would Ms. Frase criticize a cloud because it isn't a trapezoid? A dream because it isn't realistic? A poem because it isn't an encyclopedia? A postcard because it isn't a feature film? The review insults the author and her readers -- not to mention yours.

PAOLA GIANTURCO
Mill Valley

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Editor -- In response to Brigitte Frase's review of my book, "The Place of Tears," it was not "compressed" into a small format but deliberately composed that way. It is not a naturalistic novel. Nor is it a historical novel, which is made perfectly clear in the opening disclaimer. The narrative alternates between Eastern fairy tale and Western reportage to express the East/West tension. Casimir and La Poupée are metaphors, not characters. The blue eye and the yellow eye represent the duality of Turkey. Napoleon's desire to "pierce the isthmus" is a comment about colonial defloration. Suez is the historical theater for this union that established the supremacy of the West.

How come Frase makes no reference to the Eastern story traditions that are the core of the narrative? Or the homage to 19th century Orientalist travel journey a la Flaubert, Loti, Nerval, etc. How come she never identifies the most obvious of literary allusions -- the carriage scene, for example, being straight out of Madame Bovary? Or Shelley's "Ozymandias" in the journey across the desert? The book is crafted with such hidden references, parables, riddles.

Frase almost hits the mark when she compares it to Woody Allen's Zelig, who appears in every "historical snapshot." Exactly; that's the statement I'm making! Each chapter is a postcard glimpse of the way the West has objectified the East. I turn French Orientalism against itself. I'm saying this is what France would look like if it went through the same objectification -- all the intentional cliches: the winemaking, the decadence of the Second Empire, the cameos by Louis Vuitton, etc. She misses the irony.

Finally, the headline "A Royal Mess" is a cheap shot and becomes unnecessarily scathing, raising issues of journalistic integrity. It's depressing to see tabloid journalism insinuating itself to the sacred precinct of the literary rags.

ALEV LYTLE CROUTIER
San Francisco

Don't Forget 'Little Nemo'

Editor -- I enjoyed reading Chris Lanier's review of Chris Ware's "Jimmy Corrigan: The World's Smartest Kid" [Nov. 26]. I thought his comments were insightful, particularly his observation about the transposition of time to space as the "most singular aspect of the comics."

Lanier goes on to say Ware "explodes the notion of time in his work." It is somewhat amazing to me, then, that Lanier makes no mention of Winsor McCay's classic series from the New York Herald, "The Adventures of Little Nemo in Slumberland," to which Ware so obviously owes a debt in "Jimmy Corrigan." Both conceptually and graphically, Ware makes reference to the fantastic record of Nemo's dream world, repeating McCay's line quality and panel patterns. Can this be a coincidence?

REBECCA CHEKOURAS
El Cerrito

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UPDIKE

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by former lovers at literary readings. "Natural Color" depicts the scars of a 20-year-old affair. Both stories progress from chance encounter to hasty seduction to fervid sex with the predictable swagger of second-rate porn. Perhaps Updike is loafing.

When he brings back his most feckless hero for another whirl, Updike seems to be grabbing at straws. But "Rabbit Remembered" turns out to be the collection's shining centerpiece, wisely exploring the way death seeps into the slipstream of family life. Ten years after Rabbit Angstrom fell dead from a game of pick-up basketball, his wife Janice has remarried: "She and Ronnie left alone tended to each other's needs, one of which, never stated, was getting ready for death, which could start any time now. A pain in the night, a sour number on the doctor's lab tests, and the skid would begin."

After 40 years of chronicling the failures of marriage, now Updike ironically hints at its pleasures. In hurried, urgent brush strokes, "Rabbit Remembered" reveals that as old age creeps up on us, only this compact endures. ■