

It hurts to cheat in love

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THE OTHER WOMAN

Twenty-one Wives, Lovers,

and Others Talk Openly

About Sex, Deception, Love

and Betrayal

Edited by Victoria Zackheim

Warner Books, 276 pages. \$31.99

Women will do anything for love.

That much is clear in Victoria Zackheim's revealing - and riveting - collection of female-authored essays in *The Other Woman*.

What isn't as clear is the answer to the question: Why? And even more so - as we get to know the men beloved by these wives and lovers - why with this lot, none of whom comes across as the charismatic Cary Grant in *An Affair to Remember*, but rather as cads, really, who lie as easily and as often to their lovers as to their wives, betraying them not only to each other, but with Other Other Women.

The power behind Zackheim's collection is in the rich, multifaceted perspectives that can make us feel as sorry for the Other Woman (or at least pity her) as for the wife,

though not - and perhaps this is the flaw of the book in not including essays by men - sorry for the philandering husband.

Consider Aviva Layton, long-time mistress of the late Canadian poet Irving Layton. In *My Life as a Muse*, she recounts arriving in Montreal from Sydney, Australia, at 21, "longing to meet the literati." In short order - and "shamefully" without thought for his wife, she admits - she is involved with Layton. Barred from socializing with other writers, lest their romance be discovered, she's brought out like a toy only for Layton's pleasure, her own sense of self derived from such small - and small-minded - victories as successfully seducing Layton for last-minute romps before he returns home, so he can't perform with his wife.

Are these the spoils of the Other Woman, that only she can - in all senses of the verb - be "screwed"?

And Layton's not alone in confusing loving and "winning," though these "prizes" seem as worthy as those found in *Cracker Jack*.

Such is the case of Pulitzer Prize-winner Jane Smiley. While the publisher's notes suggests her essay, *Iowa Was Never Like This*, "recounts how age and wisdom aids in enduring a tangled relationship," her descriptions of the humiliations she endures to win "Jack" - who is torn between Smiley and a troublesome former lover - appear demeaning. "Women who were trouble came to seem strange to him while I, a woman who was no trouble, came to seem feminine." What is heart-rending is that in this age of feminism, "He" must be "won" with feminine wiles and cunning, even by a woman as worthy as Smiley.

But there are victories in this collection, too - from both an Other Woman, Dani Shapiro, and a wife, Canadian TV personality Mary Jo Eustace - if only in outing the outrageous behaviour of their men, as Hollywood screenwriter Nora Ephron outed former husband (and Watergate reporter) Carl Bernstein in her 1983 bestseller *Heartburn*. Delicious.

Though Shapiro is every wife's nightmare - young, bright and beautiful - we worry as she describes how her friend's stepfather, a powerful attorney, seduces her. "Here, in no particular order, are some things Lenny told me: that he and his wife didn't sleep

in the same bed; that they hadn't had a 'real marriage' in years; that she was undergoing electroshock treatment in a clinic outside Philadelphia; that he had cancer and had to fly to Houston three days a week for chemotherapy; that his youngest daughter, aged three, had a rare form of childhood leukemia. That he could not get a divorce for all of the above reasons. That he was heartbroken that he could not leave his wife and marry me."

If her accusations sound fantastical, you've missed the absurdity of being presented with these boilerplate propositions in bars, on business trips or by your husband's best friend. But Shapiro's lover has the money to cover his lies, even taking staff on vacations so they can cover for him when Shapiro calls. And like Layton, she's isolated: "I am a physical being, living on the other side of a clear, thin membrane that separates me from anything to do with the world."

Speaking from the other side, Eustace describes the cowardly - and ridiculous - way her actor husband ends their 13-year marriage (only three weeks after they'd adopted a daughter and two months after they'd moved to California for his career at the expense of hers), not with rancour, but humour and self-deprecation.

"We're soulmates," he says of his three-week affair with actor Tori Spelling. "She loves me unconditionally."

" 'What conditions?' I scream. 'You've only known each other three weeks.' "

Then Eustace wonders: Would he have ended it if she weren't wearing a ratty old bikini?

There are bitter lessons in this book, too, for TOW. When Layton finally wins her man, a new Other Woman takes her old role.

Emerging from the wreckage of this collection, we learn TOW is a soul-destroying force, even when she doesn't "win."

"Here's the thing about the other woman. She lives inside your head," Pam Houston writes in *Not Istanbul*. "She may live on the next street or in the next town or halfway around the world; she may be five-two or five-nine; she may be rail thin (never skinny) or voluptuous (never fat). But however big or small she is, however

much space she takes up in the world, will never compare to the amount of space she'll take up in your brain."

Zackheim, a novelist (*The Bone Weaver*) who teaches creative writing at UCLA, says she's never experienced the Other Woman or been one - but her cautionary tale, *The Phantom Wife*, could easily be about the Other Woman, the one who haunts us. The one who is, as Houston describes her, dangerous precisely because she is so ethereal: "She will never bleed or fart or hurl a Vlasic dill pickle jar across a sparkling American kitchen. ... She will remain his constant, excretionless muse."

Zackheim's collection is both piercingly analytical - none of these women hides her faults or humiliations - and timely, arriving when we are apparently fixated on the Other Woman. How else to explain the endless analyses of Brad, Angelina and Jennifer? Or Leanne Domi, wife of former NHL player Tie, actually naming former MP Belinda Stronach as the Other Woman in divorce papers? Or this week's assault charge against Canadian Olympic medalist Lloyd Eisler's mistress, Kristy Swanson - of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fame - after she allegedly attacked his ex-wife?

Written by top writers, these modern tales from the marriage crypt are grippingly paced and rich with social analysis and insight. From Eustace: "Looking back, it's funny the things you notice just before your life is about to change: nothing."

But if there is an overall cautionary note to these tales, it is this: Closing the book, one is left with an impression not of an affair's *frisson*, but rather of the utterly ordinary dreariness of deception.

Clearly, the power of TOW lies not in her rarity, but, as Zackheim notes, in her power to make "us feel frumpy, old, stupid, and frigid." By that measure, readers will thank Zackheim for producing a collection that demystifies the Other Woman as surely as hearing what the authors describe as her whiny voice on the phone, or seeing her utterly ordinary visage in person.

In the end, this book isn't about good or bad women, but women looking for love - and men only too happy to help.

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Related Reading

EAT PRAY LOVE

By Elizabeth Gilbert, 2006

This is the bestselling account of what every woman wants to do after a divorce ... only Gilbert does it in style, in Italy, India and Bali. The best part: There is indeed life - lots of it - after divorce.

A ROUND-HEELED WOMAN

My Late-Life Adventures

in Sex and Romance

By Jane Juska, 2003

Juska proves it's never too late for love by putting an ad in the New York Review of Books that says: "Before I turn 67 ... I would like to have a lot of sex with a man I like. If you want to talk first, Trollope works for me."

THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN

By John Fowles, 1969

In Victorian England, Sara Woodruff, the so-called French Lieutenant's woman - or "whore," as her genteel neighbours call her - will have you rooting for the Other Woman, and against her stuffy, priggish opposite.

ANNA KARENINA

By Leo Tolstoy, 1873-'77

The Other Woman as tragic heroine, in what is considered the greatest novel of all time. Need we say more?

DOCTOR ZHIVAGO

By Boris Pasternak, 1956

Lara is the much younger Other Woman in this sad epic about the separation of families and lovers, paralleling the betrayal of aristocrats, revolutionaries and peasants alike during the violence of the Russian revolution.

LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES

By Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, 1782

Two French aristocrats create a game of seducing others. When the Vicomte de Valmont seduces, then cruelly rejects, the virtuous Madame de Tourvel, tragedy strikes for all. Chilling.

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