



Eat My Heart Out

Zoe Pilger

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Meet 2014's most outrageous, funny and shocking anti-heroine: Ann-Marie. She's 23, her life has collapsed, and she's blaming everyone but herself. Heartbroken, skint and furious, she's convinced that love - sweet love! - is the answer to all of her problems, until she meets legendary feminist Stephanie Haight, a woman who could be her saviour - or her final undoing.

From neo-burlesque pop-up strip clubs, to ironic Little Mermaid-themed warehouse parties via ritual worship ceremonies summoning ancient power goddesses, disastrous one night stands with extravagantly unsuitable men, naked cleaning jobs, a forced appearance on Woman's Hour and baby boomer house parties in Islington, Ann-Marie hurtles through London and life, urged on by Stephanie, who is convinced that if she can save Ann-Marie she'll rescue an entire generation from the curse of ironic detachment.

Fiercely clever and unapologetically wild, Eat My Heart Out is the satire for our narcissistic, hedonistic, post-post-feminist era.

Eat My Heart Out Details

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Author : Zoe Pilger

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From Reader Review Eat My Heart Out for online ebook

Kaiva Koenig says

Absolute fucking garbage.

I'm not even going to apologize for that. Sorry, I'm not sorry. The blurb calls this a *feminist* novel? Feminazi, you mean. And no, not the good kind.

LOL no.

The main character is a weak-willed young woman who sways from one thing to the next, not knowing what to do with her life. She is dominated by *everyone*. She is dominated by another woman, an older woman who is *bat-shit crazy*, abusive and controlling. This woman takes her in and becomes her mentor (or, *mentrix*). She forces her to go through humiliating experiences that are the literary equivalent of disgusting hazing rituals, and the main character just goes along with it, because apparently one must 'suffer' to become an 'artist', and this crazy old bag will show her the way...

Halfway through the book the main character gets into a twisted relationship with (view spoiler)

This book survives on shock factor alone. It's one big mind fuck after the next, and bizarre sequences of events that don't even remotely make any sense. It's so highly eccentric that it's completely remote from anything that could even closely resemble real life, or even hope to be a satiric commentary on modern day attitudes or social life.

If you do read this, read it for the hilarious unabashed foul language and sexual innuendo and the (view spoiler) that happens at the end. If you're into that.

Elle Shoel says

Virginia Woolf on MDMA. Exceptional.

<http://www.xxymagazine.com/zoe-pilger...>

Vienna Famous says

I finally found a book that does what I want to do and it was...underwhelming. The first half promised so much, a headlong plunge into the melee of London's art scene through the eyes of a headstrong but foolish art student. The book utilises a deceptively light farcical tone to grapple with the big ideas of the moment (fourth wave feminism, gentrification, how the hell we can all live well in this post-moral world). But two thirds of the way in I stopped caring enough to make sense of the increasing melodrama. A novel of ideas and feelings, both come unmoored and flap around wildly in the narrative winds. But still, Eat My Heart Out is much more entertaining and challenging than anything else I've read this year, and my criticism is only so

strident because I want to write something similar and can see the flaws I would hate in my own work.

Antonomasia says

[2.5] As with *The Dinner* by Herman Koch, I'm not sure that a satirical novel about highly disturbed characters is a good way to critique complex social and media trends and their possible effects. Because, uh, these things simply don't make most people behave that way. And when they do contribute in some individuals, there are also all kinds of other things involved: upbringing, epigenetics and miscellaneous (socio-)environmental factors peculiar to that person's life.

Eat My Heart Out has had a lot of positive coverage in the UK press. (Zoe Pilger is the daughter of serious political journalist John.) Most articles make it sound like quite a different book from the one I read, something funnier, a *Nathan Barley* for the Tumblr / fourth-wave feminism generation – though it has a few moments like that (the Super-8 films re-enacting literary suicides, the Disney's *Little Mermaid* warehouse party). Some press reviews make comparisons with Kathy Acker; I've never read more than a few pages of hers, but this seems to lack the punchy verbal directness, favouring a more ostensibly conventional style combined with a “what the fuck happened?” morning-after nauseating chaos. It's a disturbed, disturbing, exhausting soap about recent graduate Ann-Marie, her better-off arty hipster friends, and an older feminist writer, Stephanie Haight, whom she talks into “mentoring” her, all doing scary stuff less or more adjacent to the London art & media scene.

I've been struggling to review this for weeks. This is perhaps my fourth attempt. I've read several interviews with the author. I kept looking back at the book page, hoping that someone would have said enough of the same things so I didn't have to bother. They haven't, but the average rating has been on the slide – it's currently under 3.0, and there's an impression online that the book leaves plenty of readers with an “urgh” feeling and not necessarily enough to compensate.

The breakthrough was reading Sebastian Horsley's autobiography *Dandy in the Underworld*. Before that, I thought my first paragraph possibly the work of a po-faced pedant. But Horsley had a very fucked-up upbringing, no evident opportunities to make things better before he grew up, and several generations of highly troubled antecedents. AND he was a real-life media person who did extreme things very similar to Ann-Marie and her friends' most outlandish and frightening behaviour, the sort of stuff even most messed-up people thankfully never experience. Early-twenties characters smear cake and later shit on walls of their accommodation; Horsley, at around the same age, once smeared shit on himself as some kind of philosophical experiment, but it sounded as though he at least did so in private and cleaned up afterwards. Ann-Marie has a long scene in which she, unprovoked, holds a former one-night-stand hostage at knifepoint; Horsley waved a loaded gun around in the presence of prostitutes visiting his flat, playing Russian roulette on himself and on one occasion narrowly missing getting shot by one of the women, who didn't believe it was loaded. There are other, less immediately scary, similarities with Horsley's story, such as characters lacking boundaries around friends' money, and the wealth and low-quality conceptual art of some of the supporting characters. (Ann-Marie herself is not well-off and has little idea of a career.)

Given that this is meant to be a book about the current generation of teenagers and early twentysomethings, Z.Pilger** seriously missed opportunities to make more of the internet. Ann-Marie says she isn't on Facebook or Twitter, and doesn't appear to use newer alternatives. There are a few instances of people taking pictures and making films to post online, but an eminently satirisable sense that characters might be living their entire lives or creating themselves with an (invisible) audience in mind is way too abstract or maybe

even not there. There are pre-internet novels which do this better, e.g. Nicola Six in Martin Amis' *London Fields*, not to mention other recent works from Z.Pilger and Ann-Marie's own generation such as Marie Calloway, or even Sheila Heti in her mid-30s. There's frequent mention of "the generation who grew up on internet porn" but little or no development of this allusion. Recently reading an old Black Lace novel from the late 90s (*Dreaming Spires* – which also features a fictional Cambridge college), I noticed a scene in which a student character thought about herself in the context of what boys – particularly a university fresher – would probably have encountered previously, in the form of lads' mags, and her confidence that he "wouldn't know what hit him" when she initiated stuff that, if various accounts are to be believed, would now be widely considered tame by youngsters of the 'online porn generation'. It was presented there simply as part of a character's inner thoughts, but in a satirical novel with the remit of *EMHO*, I was expecting a contemporary version of such stuff, exaggerated, critiqued, made to look ridiculous, whatever, plus more on this highly controversial topic, unintentional mass-experiment of sex-ed via porn. The burlesque scene addresses this in a way, but that's designed to be public performance – it doesn't go into the way people feel performative (in all kinds of ways, not just sex) when they are not designated as a performer, even when they are alone.

The book also, I think, loses out by taking place almost exclusively within its own hyped media goldfish bowl. There are scenes in which characters obviously look stupid, but a huge part of critiquing all these tendencies should be the rest of the world's reaction to them, especially when it's eye-rolling, boredom or plain incomprehension. As a friend's review of another book put it, "don't assume that everyone else sees magazine pictures in people"** - narcissism, especially of the type satirised here unconsciously assumes that its audience is other narcissistic people, judging it in the same ways it judges, thinking the same things important, and, often, that it's right to have those priorities - when there are still a lot of people who feel and see the world quite differently. I would have liked the book better had it shown some other people reacting negatively to the behaviour of Ann-Marie and her crowd. At times it feels like part of the same problem it's trying to criticise.

However, it does (appear to) criticise certain forms/features of feminism that I've not heard anyone relatively liberal speak against before in national media. I was really glad to see this done and I'm sorry to give a low rating to the book because of the other problems with it, when I've waited so long to hear *this* from a source that's listened to in the press. The character Stephanie Haight has a core concept in her work of women as "falling", and a lot of the "excerpts" reminded me, queasily, of the likes of *Bitch* by Elizabeth Wurtzel, a book I read when slightly younger than the protagonist and rather wish I hadn't. Allied to this is Z.Pilger's criticism of the way troubled celebrities are lionised, Amy Winehouse being a lodestone. I am not sure that the mainstream media (as opposed to fanzines or blogs) reports these people in a way that actually celebrates what they do. Not long ago I re-read a collection of old music press articles about Richey Manic – an equivalent for some in my own generation - and what was striking was the journalists' relative neutrality, that he wasn't made to seem especially weird, though mention was made of how some fans were drawn to him because of his cutting. It depends so much on the readers' understanding. The well-adjusted teenager or many older readers would see this as good for not being stigmatising, whilst they already knew for themselves that this wasn't a good way to be going on, and would possibly be scared on his behalf. There could be difficulty, though, for teenagers from messed-up backgrounds who have little idea of normal in this respect, and who start thinking "this is how the coolest, most interesting people communicate that they are feeling bad". The reason I have more antipathy to a certain strand of feminism is because it does actively celebrate this sort of thing in well-known women, who are presented as martyrs to a cause, and discusses it as an inevitable response to societal pressures rather than looking at individuals and a range of causes which apply to women and men, with a knowledge of relevant psychology. It also downplays the stressful effects the troubled behaviour can have on people around them, including who aren't to blame for any root causes, and the associated problems it can lead to in normal life. Feminism often presents itself as addressing vulnerable

young women on a serious basis (it means to be socially responsible in a way that more trashy or detached publications never seek to) but this kind of discussion can make some of them worse than they were before. (cf In *EMHO* Ann-Marie's highly aggressive behaviour to Vic even before she becomes violent, is her interpretation of Haight's and others' advice, behaviour that those same feminists would unhesitatingly label as abusive if from a man.) There was a worthwhile point to be made that good work by some female writers, artists and others had been unjustly overlooked in the past because it was produced by women who were labelled 'mad' and that this should not invalidate the quality of their work, especially by comparison with various angry, alcoholic male artists/writers who were already respected. But that point didn't have to be made the way it was in publications like Wurtzel's. Actions deriving from being extremely miserable are held up by this martyrish feminism as being a female equivalent to the sometimes destructive hedonism or self-focus of creative men. I would approve of telling young women to go out and have fun or live on their own terms, potentially pissing off those who disapproved. But strongly implying this awful unhappy undiluted destruction is cool and some sort of art in itself, and that those who don't actively adore you for it are oppressors, or badly informed, is terrible... I think for Wurtzel at least, it was self-justification. However, Z.Pilger repeats one facet of the problem, as male characters are in the end attracted to, not repelled by, Ann-Marie's behaviour. Some of the book obviously is ridiculous, but when it's not ridiculous enough, it sometimes reinforces what it's against; I think Z.Pilger writes bizarrely enough that she could have created something which didn't do that, without making a cheesy, conservative morality tale.

She has another vague target in the resurgence of girliness, cupcakes, domesticity, pink frilly aprons &c. Her response to it isn't very well-defined – as in the newspapers, cupcakes are nothing but a shorthand for awareness of it. I'm not sure what she wants; I'd just like it to be as okay for a woman to say she doesn't like that stuff as it is for a man to say he doesn't like sport. (Intelligent men are more likely to respect the latter, it's the boors who are the problem – whereas articulate women active in online feminism get out the pitchforks and torches in response to criticism of girlified design aimed at adults. The less theory-focused allow more freedom and difference in taste.)

Altogether (and hello and thank you if you're still reading) a frustrating book that contains stuff I'm glad to see in print and other things I wildly disagree with. But at least plenty to talk about. Also the most tiring, nasty thing I've read this year, left me wanting to a) have another shower and b) be really organised, to banish it. A month later, the description of the pig's head still makes me squirm, though I don't think that was the point of the book. (Perhaps, though, something about meat and lack of empathy, but in that I'd be repeating another friend...) I've got to stop somewhere... It'll be interesting to see more reviews appearing once it's published in the States.

* Mariel's review of *Green Girl* by Kate Zambreno

** If "Pilger" without the Z, I visualise the cover of her dad's book *Hidden Agendas* .

Jessica Malice says

I hated this book but read it really fast. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm filled with rage and quickened. Fuck this book. I don't even know.

Amy says

It was almost painful to finish this book. It's like having a conversation with your friend, if she was coked out and telling a rambling story that never really goes anywhere. It sometimes reminded me of Glamorama, but without charm or a storyline that went anywhere. If you're currently reading it, waiting for it to get better, do yourself a favor and stop now.

Ian Mapp says

Quite an interesting book - bursting with ideas and a little bit of humour.

If only we had some sort of story to piece it all together.

Nothing happens to the character - a 23 year old woman, picking her way through 21st Century life in London.

She sleeps with unsuitable men, she goes to pop up restaurants, she has no money. She stumbles from one situation to the next.

And that's the problem - despite the fierce intelligence and passion of the author - there is no narrative arc.

The last 100 pages go past in a blur of nothingness and I was left with a real "so what was that all about" realisation on completion.

Kristi Sawyer says

This 'perfectly pitched satire' was totally wasted on me...I just didn't get it! It was recklessly odd with no real coherent messages that I could relate to.

Megan says

Can't decide if this book was brilliant or fucked up; probably both. It did keep me turning the pages, mostly in a rubber-neck kind of way. The characters, especially the female protagonist, were unlikeable, cruel, and really just not believable as real people. You really have to suspend reality to read this book. I do realize this book is satirical, a commentary on the clash between 2nd wave and 3rd or 4th wave feminism. It did cause me to examine where I myself fall in terms of my feminist identity, and to think about the notion of romantic love and how women change as a result. Really a very strange book, but it would be fabulous for a discussion with a feminist book club.

Renee says

This is the first time I have read a book by Zoe. It was awful, confusing, annoying and I could not wait to finish it. I can see what she was trying to aim for but I think imagination took one step further. I have never felt so annoyed by one book.... Such a waste of time and money

Safiya says

Every time I sit down to read this, I glance at the front cover decorated with reviews like 'super-smart', perfectly pitched satire' and 'very funny'; and for a few more pages, I am spurred on. Unfortunately, the one thing that is stopping me from reading this book, is the book itself. Satire or not, it's really quite irritating, so I think I'm going to have to shelve it for the time being.

Blair says

Can't deal with this sort of book in which characters talk and think and act nothing like real people. I know it's meant to be satire, but... ugh. Feels like the most annoying bits of *How Should a Person Be?* except a thousand times worse.

Thom says

Beginning in a literal meat-market, before careering its way through Soho restaurants, Cambridge colleges and East London pop-up galleries, Zoe Pilger's debut novel is a savage and exhilarating read, managing to parody the conventions of romantic comedy whilst also providing an abrasive commentary on the politics of post-feminism, through the eyes of the protagonist, Anne-Marie.

Ann-Marie is directionless since dropping out of university. Her romantic life has been shattered by the revelation that 'my ex-boyfriend Sebastian was fucking this girl from the home counties called Allegra behind my back'. She shares a flat with her gay best friend, a wannabe director, who films her re-enacting famous literary suicides. Away from the structured life of academia, she feels lost, only able to read 'terrible comic-style-philosophy manuals, and only one or two sentences at a time'. For want of anything better to do, she works as the 'reception bitch' at an awful overpriced restaurant, whose awful patrons say awful things like 'She's a paradigm of selfish fucking neo-liberal individualism, Stephanie.' (shades of William Donaldson's parody of received opinion, *I'm Leaving You, Simon, You Disgust Me?*).

So far, the set-up is structurally similar to the standard chick-lit theme of the unlucky-in-love young woman, looking for the right person to come along and help her to get her life on track (albeit an unsanitised, druggy version, more ketamine than chardonnay). Then, the novel goes down the rabbit hole. During what turns out to be her final shift at the restaurant, she meets Stephanie Haight, an icon of second wave feminism who decides to make Ann-Marie her next project. Acting like a radical fairy godmother, Stephanie forces the younger woman to take part in voodoo rebirthing ceremonies, strip-club auditions and *Woman's Hour* interviews, whilst attempting to introduce a critical framework to underpin Ann-Marie's existence. What becomes clear is that there is an unbridgeable generation gap separating the two. Stephanie is happy to hold forth as an observer of 'this Sadeian generation, raised on internet pornography', but she never really understands her subject, dismissing anything she disagrees with as 'childish provocation'.

In one telling scene, Stephanie demands that Ann-Marie take part in a form of primal scream therapy, chanting the lyrics to Beyoncé songs over and over until she has no voice left. When Ann-Marie falls to the floor, exhausted, Stephanie thrusts a pen and paper at her, telling her to write, but no words come. Stephanie promptly posts a photo of the empty page to her blog, describing it as ‘a testament to the silence of your generation of women, who neglect to vote despite the fact that your forebears starved to death to win the vote’. The blog goes viral, and the pair are invited onto Radio 4, where Stephanie continues to make ex-cathedra statements about the younger generation. Ann-Marie is anonymous, a bag over her head, a blank slate for the older women to project onto.

Stephanie defines post-feminism as ‘kitsch... the aftermath of true existence’. (‘In the kingdom of kitsch you would be a monster’, Kundera said – a line that would fairly apply to Ann-Marie). The problem of how to construct an identity in a world where equality has apparently been achieved is crucial for Ann-Marie and her social group. They cling to relics of their childhood, like Disney movies, or adopt hipster affectations, talking in Tao Lin quotes. For women, the problem is exacerbated; as Stephanie pithily sums up, ‘you’re caught between the housewife and the whore. That bloody Nigella Lawson has got a lot to answer for’. Images of Amy Winehouse recur throughout the novel like a secular saint, Princess Di for Generation Y. Winehouse has become something of a floating signifier onto which characters can project their own prejudices, turning her life into a celebration of female creativity and myth-making, or the tragedy of a woman who fell for a man and then negated herself by her determination to stay with him; a post-modern icon for a post-feminist culture.

Ann-Marie picks up identities as it suits her, throwing herself recklessly into them in order to test her boundaries. In her first appearance, she appears predatory, an embodiment of raunch culture, full of suggestive chat about adopting pussies, and ‘lounging around on my chaise longue in my red silk kimono’. Later, she demonstrates an equal familiarity with the language of self-help, describing her Cambridge education as ‘a curse and a blessing in a way because when one elevates oneself above the quotidian, one starts feeling terribly lonesome, as though one will never find a soulmate again’. In the absence of a clearly-defined role to perform, she bounces around from one identity to another, ‘trapped in all this freedom’. Her speech rarely rings true, suggesting her own lack of conviction in the characters she adopts.

The sense of identity as a fluid, unfixed commodity is reinforced by Pilger’s magpie style, which borrows scenarios from rom-coms, jargon from academia and stylistic tics from alt lit, such as her way of orientating the reader through constant references to *Stuff – 50 Shades*, magazines, TV programmes. Also familiar from alt lit is the protagonist’s sense of alienation from the events which surround her, and the stream of mooted projects which never come to fruition. *Eat My Heart Out* also comes with a hefty dose of satire, as Pilger skewers the cuteness of ‘post-feminist cupcakes’ and the ‘having your feminist cupcake and eating it’ idiom of London’s nightlife alike: ‘It’s like a neo-burlesque social innovation start-up? It’s a pop-up? It’s not like stripping’.

While there’s plenty of material for readers to get their teeth into, thematically (and the novel clearly encourages this, Pilger inserting a series of closely observed facsimiles of academic literature into the text), *Eat Your Heart Out* is, above all, a genuinely entertaining read. Propelled along at a manic pace, there are some brilliantly observed set pieces. She might not be at Alan Hollinghurst’s exalted level, but Pilger can write a party, the Samuel Johnson Prize dinner and the opening night of a pop-up art gallery being two highlights. There are castrations, literal and metaphorical, there are scenes of outrageous hedonism and horrific comedowns.

The Telegraph has recently identified and branded a new genre, ‘chick noir’ (please god let it never catch on), in which authors chart the break-up of marriages, rather than the build-up. To continue using cinematic

terms, if *Gone Girl* is noir, then *Eat My Heart Out* is a video nasty, provocative, cathartic and full of adrenaline-pumping thrills.

David Brook says

It's good, but frustrating in parts - this is down to the character, not the writing. The writing is sublime.

Megan says

Read this book at the beach on vacation. It didn't make much sense to me. Maybe I didn't catch enough references? No idea why I finished it, I can't even describe what it's about.
