



Difficult Women

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AN American young man, a novelist, settles in London in the early 70's and pursues the friendship of much older women, who are either themselves literary or have entree to the literary life. It is a given that these women will be complicated, stubborn, strong-willed, and that the relationship between each of them and the novelist will be tricky, even suspect. If this were the 1870's, the circumstances would provide a Jamesian subtext fulfilling, only very slowly, some psychologically unforeseen purpose; but as it is the 1970's, the entire matter is at once laid self-consciously before us, and we are free to decide how much or how little it all means.

By Vivian Gornick

Difficult Women Details

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Paul Wilner says

I think I read a different book than that reflected in some of the comments here. This is a tough love account, most definitely, with an emphasis on the tough part, but it is also a love-hate story, seemingly on all sides of this unlikely triad.

I don't think Plante was quite done with these women - even after writing this - but the details, while specific and sometimes damning, are also compelling (and, in the case of Greer, high-spirited). Plante seems as tough on himself as on these ladies. Scott Spencer's introduction was incisive, and made me want to read Plante's other work.

This is far and away better written - there are wonderful sentences about driving cross country with Greer - than, for instance, Capote's long-awaited "Answered Prayers," which turned out to be just catty. I give Mr. Plante points for telling his truth; I suspect that each of these three women were tough enough to take it, and perhaps even appreciate the portraits (or parts of them).

James Murphy says

My interest in this book began with my thinking it's biographical portraits of 3 women: Jean Rhys, Sonia Orwell, and Germaine Greer. But the book isn't that. It's a memoir of David Plante's interactions with each of these women. Not their total relationship, either, but "slice of-life" snapshots of his friendships--for that's what they are--with them.

Did he betray their friendships? Maybe he did. I was aware of the book's reputation for putting forward harsh, even mean-spirited portraits of the women. Perhaps he was harsh. My impression is the friendships weren't fleeting ones and yet the slices-of-life he chose to remember, especially those of Rhys and Orwell, aren't complimentary. So we move, as we read, from the alcoholic Rhys to the waspish and contemptuous Orwell to the no-nonsense Greer. Did he have to show Rhys so helplessly unable to take care of herself in the bathroom? Did he have to write Orwell so small-minded and combative? Do we have to know Greer wore no underwear? Probably not, but I also think he wrote the portraits from his own notes or maybe a journal, and that's what he recorded. Are they difficult women? Well, I don't know. Plante thought they were.

Scott Spencer, in his "Introduction," asks the question why the portraits are unpleasant. He thinks the motivations lie in the 3 women having more money than he did and his trying to rationalize living off the generosity of Rhys in London, Orwell in Italy, and Greer in Tulsa and Santa Fe. Perhaps. Spencer also points out that Plante exposes himself as much as the women. Though familiar with him through his trilogy *The Family*, I didn't know he's homosexual. The women know it. I think the knowledge of it hangs between Plante and the women in their individual socializations with him, as they regard him and he them. I only remember Greer referring to it.

I did like the book. I liked it more the longer I read in it. The section on Rhys is painful, Orwell less so, and Greer the most interesting as well as the most kind. Closing it all out is a 21-page alphabetized listing of the women's traits and opinions. This is perhaps the most honest picture of the 3 Plante gives us.

Gabe says

Because he doesn't explain himself, the reader is left to decide what to make of this: morally reprehensible or...something else. But no matter where you fall in the argument, this, a "memoir" of Plante's relationship with Jean Rhys, Sonia Orwell, and Germaine Greer, is an undeniably fascinating book. To me, the Germaine Greer section is extraordinary--I already know I'll reread it.

Daniel Polansky says

A rather waspish depiction of three (semi?) major literary figures. Reading between the lines one gets the sense that, basically Plante was a handsome parvenu who managed to implant himself in the affections of older, highly regarded female writers, then turned around and wrote fairly scathing portrayals of them. I mean that's kind of shitty and if I was, say, Jean Rhys's friend I might smack the shit out of him if I saw him in a cocktail party but as a reader my main complaint about Plante is that the experiences he recounts are mostly dull and not expressed with any particularly burning cleverness. God spare us all from sycophants and false lovers.

Kevin Adams says

Another great addition to the NYRB collection. This memoir of 3 apparently very difficult women of literature (Jean Rhys, Sonia Orwell and Germaine Greer) is amazing in its depth and its openness. Each of these women is unique in their own way and I would have read even more about them (and will dig into their novels) but I found David Plante a wee bit self-indulging. I'm still not sure the point of his invasion to these amazing subjects. They clearly are in need of someone better than the author as a friend. Fantastic read and well written, check. Perfectly moral? Well, that's for another book...

David Stone says

I was surprised to learn that my local library in North Kingstown, Rhode Island is a repository of some of David Plante's papers. He is from Rhode Island after all, so it is only fitting. Knowing how far Plante had to travel to arrive in the orbits of these three accomplished women adds an undercurrent of amazement to the author's friendship with Rhys, Orwell and Greer. I was reminded of James Lord's superb memoirs as I read, although Plante's style is more jagged and modernist. A sojourn at Plante's vacation home in Italy obliges Plante to deal with two of his difficult women at once, yielding a superb eggplant recipe and the book's most novelistic pleasures.

Sarah says

This is a book like none I have ever read. At once an intimate comparison of three "difficult" women, an honest reflection from and upon the author, and a truly, darkly beautiful story, I smile to think of the controversy it has caused. In fact, I think the confused feelings of others made mine all the more clear. What

right did Plante have to these women? What right to their lives? None, of course, but no more too than any of us.

In Scott Spencer's introduction he writes, "Plante is too expert a writer not to know what kind of attention these pages were going to draw, and too perceptive about human motivations and vulnerabilities not to know that in exposing others he is simultaneously exposing himself." And that is reason enough to honor this work. When David writes of Jean's old age, he too is feeble. When he writes of Germaine's pubic hair, he's made naked alongside her. When he complains of Sonia, he too is intolerable. Everyone is drunk, everyone is profound, and everyone, especially David Plante, is a difficult woman.

A truly equalizing work.

Adam Dalva says

I've never really read anything like this book, which is in some ways as nasty as everyone says, but (to my surprise, based on the somewhat faulty advance press) is also a queer narrative, one whose sexuality is nearly completely effaced but occasionally peeks through, redemptive.

The structure is simple enough: three sections on three famous women who Plante spent time with in the late 1970's, then a totally bizarre, experimental index where he compares his 3 leads. The first section, w/ its alcohol-addled, grotesque portrait of the elderly Jean Rhys gets all the attention, and it is sensationalist and pretty awful to read, whether you like Rhys or not (I love her). And yet, several of her monologues are lovely (her analysis of literature as water, in particular, jumps out), and Plante is as hard on himself as Rhys. He is something of a gadfly and a flirt (he is called a c--t-tease later in the book, an expression I have never seen), and a lesser writer, quite possibly working for fame. The messy question of the non-fiction writer is raised here, more literally than usual. Is he a leech, a predator? At this point his own sexuality was totally invisible, which muddied the question further.

The second section, with Sonia Orwell, is the least interesting, though that might be because I knew less about Orwell (she is a fascinating figure, as it turns out, but in this book is essentially an insecure, ranting, ill bridge between Rhys and section 3). Orwell, too, is given moments of grace, and her death is described sparingly and well, but her narrative seemed more of a structural imposition than something Plante was interested in. Here, Orwell's occasional cruel asides about "homosexuals" gave me an inkling of what was going on, and toward the end, Plante concedes that he has little need of relationships with women.

Perhaps because Germaine Greer was (and is) alive when this book came out, she is treated far better. The reader can't help but be swept along as she explodes off the page, a brilliant, foul-mouthed, whirlwind of a character, one who Plante falls a bit in love with. I was interested that Greer, who claims not to have read the book, described her feeling of betrayal in a *Guardian* article as such:

"I despised him for being so ready to change his work, and also because - though he made a great parade of sensitivity - he had no idea how deeply I would resent being made to utter namby-pamby Plante-speak like a dummy on his knee."

I experienced her character quite differently, and perhaps because Greer is still at the height of her powers, this to be by far the most pleasurable section of the book. Perhaps it's not a coincidence that there is an eruption of sexuality as well – Plante describes going to Central Park and seeing hundreds of men

sunbathing in “thin briefs,” and it’s reminiscent of Forester’s great Beede bathing scene in *A ROOM WITH A VIEW*.

I understand why this book gets such a mixed reaction – I love Rhys and it was painful to see her described this way, and Plante’s sense of his own attractiveness is more vexing than fun. But the book got me thinking about many things, and though the writing is not in any way flashy, you’ll fly through it if you don’t throw it across the room first.

Monica Westin says

The mystery of our narrator's motivations behind forming relationships to the three so-called difficult women fascinated me, and the prose is perfectly limpid; but the treatment of these women is deeply cruel in a coldly detached and almost violent way, and in the end, the text doesn't build a bridge from this clinical cruelty to any kind of larger or more interesting point or observation about the types it dissects.

Enya says

This book tells the story of three intelligent women from the eyes of a man who is inexplicably mesmerized by their complex natures. The first woman, Jean, is a an old has-been writer who has only read a few number of books in her life. By the time the protagonist has met her, she was already submerged in a sea of senility and alcoholism. Despite her decaying mental faculties, she tried to impart cynical views about writing to the protagonist who is also a writer. The second woman, Sonia, is Jean's loyal editor. She concerns herself with the troubles of her friends b nutever her own. She organizers parties and invites writers, poets, and philosophers to her parties. Despite her voracious reading habits, she never considered herself a writer; and in the words of the protagonist, "Sonia has killed "it" in herself." The third woman, Germaine is a successful writer, lecturer, activist, and chairman of a woman's literary center. Her success has made her wealthy and unlike the two women who are volatile and prone to anger, Germaine is placidly detached from people emotionally. She concerns herself with the suffering of and injustices of society as a whole rather than on petty, individual suffering.

I think it is rather sad that David (the protagonist/narrator/observer) was not able to glean any learning or self-discovery from his emotional intimacy with each woman. Though I respect his multiple attempts at unraveling their thought processes and habits, an understanding of himself and his reactions to these women would have made it easier to fully digest the ready-made-packages of descriptions he has presented in an attempt to paint their characters.

Nina says

From Parul Seagal:
<http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/201...>

Tosh says

The Jean Rhys part of the book was a painful read. The rest is simply OK. It's an odd book with an odd mixture of women as the subject matter for David Plante. In the end of the read, I didn't enjoy "Difficult Women."

Stephen Durrant says

As others have noted, this book raises questions concerning the ethics of tell-all accounts of "friends," particularly friends who are dead and cannot respond to what they might have regarded as betrayal, as two of these "difficult women", Jean Rhys and Sonia Orwell were when this book first appeared (or, in the case of Orwell, dead very, very soon thereafter). Certainly the portrait of the novelist Jean Rhys (1890-1979) does go a bit too far. That she was a pathetic drunk in her final years and was certain of her own insignificance as a writer may be "in bounds," but certain small incidents, not to be repeated in this review, that Plante passes along, seem to me clearly "out of bounds." At any rate, Plante has written here an engaging, if voyeuristic, book, especially in the chapter on Germaine Greer, who remains very much alive and ever able to defend herself, although I don't think she would find much Plante has said objectionable. Greer has always, as Plante himself argues, made the personal public and even political. The central question raised in this study is why Plante becomes so attached to "difficult women," which he convinces us these three assuredly were. His own answer is not altogether clear: "They could justify me in my body and soul," he says. Okay, fine, this vague comment is better than to say, "I found it strangely flattering that these women of such importance would hang around with the likes of me."

Pascale says

This book is divided into 4 sections. The first 3 describe the author's involvement with, respectively, Jean Rhys, Sonia Orwell and Germaine Greer. Since Plante met Rhys and Sonia Orwell in their later years, after decades of alcoholism had taken their toll on them, they come out as rather pathetic characters. Not that Plante is judgmental. For Germaine Greer, he expresses a great deal of admiration and even love. He was in awe of her phenomenal memory and ability to acquire expertise in very disparate fields. If he found her bossy and unpredictable, he also admired her generosity and unexpected humility. What mars the book is the inane fourth section, which is organized alphabetically, from "abortion" to "vocabulary". Under such headings Plante summarizes what he finds most important about Jean, Sonia and Germaine. The problem is that this chapter adds no new information or insight, and reads more as a set of notes aimed at ranking these women. A very odd way to wrap up an otherwise rather generous book.

Theresa says

He writes about his relationships with three difficult women: Jean Rhys, Sonia Orwell and Germaine Greer. The book is respectful but a little gossipy. He took a lot of flack for the book when it was first published in 1983, but I liked.

