

THE HERDSMAN'S WIFE



Bel Mooney



The Herdsman's Wife by Bel Mooney



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I saw him on television last night. It was the first edition of a new arts programme presented by Melinda Miles, who's been promoted from presenting the weather. Marcus was in his element. He flirted with her, of course. The encounter was charged with sex as they discussed his new novel. As usual he presented his trademark cold front as she lapped at him in phrases like, 'As a cult novelist...', and 'Since your runaway success with 'The God of City Life'....'

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This god of city life used to be my husband. Strictly speaking, he still is, although I have not seen or heard from him in four months. The cheques come, because (as he wept the last time we met) he does genuinely love his children and would not want them to suffer. When we were first going out together ten years ago he told me how much he wanted a family. I suppose you could say it was a part of our deal - that I would, in time, give up my job and bring up a family. That bargain I accepted, because (it happens) I was in love. Saturnine, aloof and clever, Marcus was the epitome of cool - something hard about him adding to his allure. We read to each other, then made love for hours. With him I lost all shame.

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Now my shame *is* that love.

Listen - he's on the radio now. This programme is sharper; since the medium is blind, and Frances Rowe knows books. She asks to what extent it is morally permissible to use your private life as a source for fiction. Marcus replies that all writers have done so, throughout the history of literature and cites George Eliot 'using her own illicit relationship with someone else's husband to show the limitations of marriage'. The presenter does not contradict this crass rewriting of

history. He goes on, 'The difference is that writers like Eliot deal in an outdated morality, her novels tell you what *not* to do -whereas the function of modern fiction is to *enable*, by pushing out the boundaries'.

'So, the writer can do what he likes?'" Rowe asks.

'I don't deal in morals. I don't deal in sentiment. I deal in reality', Marcus replies.

*

No sentiment on the farm in Northumberland, where I was born - my childhood marked out by the old rhythms of tuppung, lambing and market. The testicles of bull and ram were no surprise to me; my first sight of a man was something of a disappointment. Sex and death are the two great subjects of literature, Yeats wrote, and they're the key to farming as well. My father used to say, 'Where you've got livestock you've always got dead stock', as he hefted the spade and turned to dig a hole for the dead ewe and her two lambs, deep so the foxes wouldn't dig them up. I remember helping him and Tom Janner to drive an old cow into the trailer - *Garn, garn, garn*, thwack, thwack - and how her rolling, cancerous eye peered through the slats at me, as if she knew. 'That old girl's had a good run', was all he said, and I knew I had no business to weep since this was reality.

City people understand nothing of this. Their meat comes in plastic, or on restaurant plates.

*

Marcus's new book is talked about in restaurants. It caused controversy, just like his previous two. His words were stones rattling on a window, edgy and frightening, summoning you out into the dark where unknown predators waited. The novels were a success, even though one or two reviewers raised doubts about their content. No - *because* they questioned his addiction to harshness and pain his success became guaranteed. A bleak landscape indeed, but Marcus's feeling for the *zeitgeist* was unerring. 'Misery's the coolest riff - the one the big guys play', he quipped, and they put it in 'Sayings of the Week'. He became an overnight success, his short stories appeared in literary magazines. We were on the road together, he said, and we balanced my role as breadwinner against his desire for children. He was planning 'The God of City Life' already. 'This'll be the biggie, Sal', he promised, 'and when I write the movie we'll be made'. He was proved right of course. He always got what he wanted, and I knew that when he hefted me it was not through passion any more. This tugging was as instinctive as the

countless acts I had witnessed in the fields. Procreation was what drove Marcus now. He wanted children.

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The literary programmes never ask him about his children. He's on the radio again, this time with Seamus O'Leary. Asked about the new novel's title, 'The Ice Axe', Marcus explains it refers to Kafka, who said that a book should act like an ice axe to smash the frozen sea inside you.

O'Leary - So, that refers to the function of literature - presumably, extending the boundaries of compassion?

Marcus - Well - pushing out boundaries, anyway.

O'Leary - Not of compassion?

Marcus - I don't think compassion's got anything to do with literature. Save that for the agony aunts and lady columnists who....

O'Leary - One or two of whom have argued that it's something approaching tastelessness - let's call it that rather than cruelty - for you to write a thinly disguised account of the break up of your own marriage and present it as fiction.

Marcus - Look, man, this is a *novel*, y' know?

O'Leary - But a novel which, as various people have pointed out, has close parallels with your own life.

Marcus - And like I said before, that's par for the course. Nora Ephron wrote 'Heartburn', and nobody pilloried her for that. Let's get grown-up here.

O'Leary - OK, point taken. So carry on with the Kafka - Ice Axe image.

Marcus - This book's about destruction, in its very essence. It's a dark thing, sure, but literature's is about darkness more than light. It has to be - what else is there? So the Ice Axe cuts through the frozen sea, opening up channels to lives people never thought they'd reach, and my narrator knows it's only through the destruction of his marriage that he'll be able to grow, to move on.. Of course it's tough, but who said fiction was about giving people a soft ride? Yeah - things do have to break. Be broken. That's one of the first rules of existence. If you don't accept that you might as well curl up and die. And - like - that's not my style.'

Masculine laughter in the studio - a brief clatter, a flurry of hail. Then the details of the book are given, and I know people will buy it, especially as his publisher is astute. This trade paperback is like cheap, fast food: you can snack on the end of my marriage for less than ten quid.

*

Marcus lived fast. Small wonder he resented daily chores, and had no appetite for the chatter and whine of little voices, the relentless pull of small hands. What he liked was invention: the wildest games, the silliest escapades. Jake and Tabitha loved that, of course - all children do. They would wait for him to return from a few days at a literary festival with such impatience it brought tears. My tears. How to match the sheer glamour of this father? It was impossible, so I settled for what I had: the house in south London, the children he wanted so much, a few friends, a bit of freelance editing - and Marcus Ahern. It was reality. I did not know I was sliding into a bad dream.

*

When Jakey was four he was disturbed by bad dreams. But it was not I who had the power to comfort. Marcus the good father had devised an ingenious game for culling those intruders from our son's imagination. When Jakey called out he would stride into the bedroom, clap his hands and call, 'Come on, all of you!...Come here!'.....and walk around the room, flapping his hands as if rounding up invisible creatures, while Jakey watched, wide-eyed from beneath his duvet. Then Marcus would say, 'It's time to go now, go on -

all of you... Go on, shoo!! Out you go!', walking towards the open door as if driving something before him. Smacking his hands, Marcus would 'herd' the bad dreams through the door to the bathroom, still saying 'Go on, shoo', then call triumphantly, 'That's it now - down you go!', and flush. The nightmares would be dispatched down the pan. It always worked. Once I asked Marcus how he visualised these figments - as ghosts or monsters? He laughed and told me he imagined them as stupid farm animals, and he was glad when the pens were empty.

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Sometimes I'd dream he was there beside me, and wake to find the bed empty. It was the usual thing: the staying out all night, the excuses, and an aura about him when he returned very late, and woke me with the rush of the shower. I lay still, pretending to be asleep. I refused to acknowledge the truth all our friends knew, that he had fallen in love. Tina Walenska, with her frizz of fair hair, pale face, and almond eyes, writes poetic fables of love and exploitation which have already won her a prize for new female writers. Tina Walenska is rich, young, and pictured in gossip columns on the arm of Marcus Ahern. Tina Walenska is the 'fuck' he has to have every night, as he told our friend Brendan Meehan in

the Groucho. Apparently those are the words Marcus used: 'Man, there are some fucks you just have to have every night - so good you'd walk over your wife and kids to get them.'

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Three months ago he cut short his access visit to those kids because Tabby rushed in from the garden and put her arms around his knees, squealing her joy at the sight of him. He grimaced, then whispered he couldn't possibly see the children again because it was too painful for him. Marcus flinches from pain. That's what I learned from Adelaide, where he was performing at the literary festival. When I heard nothing after one week I telephoned. His voice was stilted, as if his words were being overheard - which, of course, they were. I told him news from home, and he affected interest, but I know now the two authors were plotting the next twist to the story. Could you make it up? Marcus Ahern ended ten years in an email:

'My dear Sally, This is the saddest day but I have to be honest at last. I can't go on living with you any more because I'm in love with Tina and know that I have to move in with her. I can't bear the hurt I know this will cause you, but feel I have to move on, and that you will get used to life

without me. The kids too. Kids get used to things, don't they? The truth is, I don't love you anymore and to stay would be to live a lie. God, this is too painful for me -! But it's got to be faced with absolute honesty, even if it seems cruel. There's nothing more to be said, except I'm sorry (of course) and that I hope we can sort things. Perhaps - after a very long time maybe - you can forgive - your Marcus.

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To invoke our favourite Yeats again - you measure the lot, forgive yourself the lot .You have no need of my help, Marcus Ahern. It is I who need help. I who pay ten pounds for a paperback with an icy blue cover. On the back I read, 'In a sustained meditation of controlled brilliance, prize-winning novelist Marcus Ahern lays bare the anatomy of a marriage and analyses - with cool precision - the agony of its destruction.' I go to pick up the children from school, wanting to dump the book in every bin we pass, with the rest of the throwaway urban trash. Feeling his words, like cattle prods. He is everywhere, in print, in sound, beating me from behind, goading me from the sides, waiting up ahead. *Garn, garn, garn*. Thwack, thwack.....through the pens with no escape. He stuns me first, then his axe severs my limbs. I spatter him as I am split., yet he is well protected so it does

not matter. His hook in my back, I hang, exposed in the cold.....

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Way back in the golden days of liberal youth - before this bitter cold I could never have imagined - I used to proclaim there was no such thing as blame. I believed in reality, I said, which meant that people could behave as they wished, with no weighing, no measuring. Now Jakey comes into my bed and whispers that if only he could go to where Daddy is living he wouldn't be a nuisance, he would just go to sleep there one night so all the bad dreams stayed behind, for Daddy to herd. He asks me *why* can't he go there? I reply that as soon as Daddy is ready he will take the two of them for a holiday in his new house; oh yes, I tell my children inconclusive fables that would do the two authors proud. I tell them the truth too: that Daddy has a new lady friend he likes very much indeed and that's why he's living with her, not us.

'Does he like her better than *you*?' Jake asks - as if an innate masculine spirit made its judgement about a woman a man would leave.

'Does he like her better than *us*?' Tabby quivers - learning what some men do. And so I explain to them how people change, how they love in different ways, how Daddy still

loves them. They look at me, saying nothing and I wonder if, deep in their hearts, at a level beyond words, my children judge me a liar and a fool.

*

Beyond words now, I imagine the wind scooping up the rubbish from the street outside Tina Walenska's tall house across the city, flinging the burger boxes against her railings. Maybe you're leaving a restaurant, Marcus, your arm around her slender shoulders as you hail a taxi, ignorant of what ghosts scream at you in the air. Red wine and meat on your breath. Go home, Marcus, go home now...

Garn, garn, garn, thwack, thwack, thwack; farm smells mingling with the stench of fear.

But it is me who is herding now. Prodding mercilessly, beating onwards, I drive the fears of our children towards the new house. I imagine its halls and stairways full of their bad dreams - evil dreams, nightmares so appalling that Marcus Ahern and Tina Walenska wake in the dark, wailing and clinging to each other as the terrifying creatures, grimacing grotesquely, crowd around their bed.



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