



“I was taking a normal-ish situation and taking it far beyond anything I’ve encountered”

EXCERPT FROM *EAT YOUR HEART OUT*

The sky was still black when the butchers began unloading the pigs from their vans at Smithfield Market. It was five in the morning. I had been to a party nearby. There he was, loitering across the road. He was watching the meat with terror and awe.

His black hair was lank, and, as I approached, I could see that a military medal of some kind was pinned to his beige crochet jumper. He was freakishly tall, about six-foot-seven. He wore a red hat and he was shaking with cold.

‘Hi,’ I said. ‘I’m Ann-Marie. I’m twenty-three. How old are you?’

He seemed shocked that I was talking to him. ‘Thirty-six.’

‘That’s a good age.’ I shoved my hands deeper into my vintage structured tweed and asked him if he wanted to go for a coffee. ‘Maybe we’ve got something in common,’ I suggested.

‘I doubt it.’

Booksellers may request early reading copies, available in December, from: readallaboutit@profilebooks.com

The Bookseller interview Zoe Pilger

Cross my heart

Zoe Pilger’s satirical début looks at the love lives of modern twentysomethings, and asks what it means to be a woman today. **Felicity Wood** reports



Ann-Marie is a little girl lost. After failing to graduate from university, she is working for minimum wage in a restaurant, spending far too much time getting drunk with her gay best friend Freddie and torn between obsessing over her first love, ex-boyfriend Sebastian, and her new sexcapades with operations manager Vic. She is clueless, unhinged and slowly unravelling. Zoe Pilger’s début, *Eat My Heart Out* (Serpent’s Tail, January), is a romantic comedy without the romance; clever and biting, it is a satirical look at the narcissistic lives of twentysomethings in our post-post-feminist era.

Looking for guidance, Ann-Marie becomes obsessed with the second-wave feminist icon Stephanie Haight, and her new book *Falling Out of Fate*. A chance meeting between the two results in the development of an unhealthy relationship, with Stephanie sure she can save Ann-Marie by exposing her to the stages of “hyperfemininity”—knitting, stripping, cleaning, gathering, degradation and child-caring—in order to help her discard each one.

Ann-Marie is subsequently sent out on small missions around London—from poledancing at a neo-burlesque pop-up strip club to extreme ritual worship ceremonies at Stephanie’s house, via doomed one-night stands and yuppie house parties in Islington. As these two very different but

equally flawed women come together, they question each other’s world view.

Eat My Heart Out started life as a short story and Pilger has come to think of as Ann-Marie, “as my alter ego, which is quite dangerous as I’m keen to push away any autobiographical responses to her. I don’t want to take responsibility for any of her escapades. With this book I was taking a normal-ish situation and taking it far beyond anything I’ve encountered in life, or beyond anything that is even remotely reasonable. That was lots of fun.”

Serpent’s Tail is pitching Pilger’s début for fans of Muriel Spark, Sheila Heti and Lena Dunham, the creator of “Girls”. Pilger says that she: “enjoyed the first series of ‘Girls’, but I think what was missing was that element of anger... I think Ann-Marie is really angry in a very undirected, unfocused way. That anger is really legitimate, it is something that is in the work of a lot of earlier, more experimental, female writers. I felt very angry when I was that age [23], it’s a mixture of growing up and gender politics and thinking about what your place is and what’s expected of you.”

“I think it is often the case that men like women that don’t threaten them in any way, and Ann-Marie’s caught up in all of those contradicting demands on her. Should she be pretty and passive and polite? She’s quite strong in a way, she’s quite imperious a lot of the time and has these great, quick put-

downs. She’s not a wilting wallflower, but she is very insecure and desperate for that one true love, because she’s bought into all those notions of romantic love that have seeped in from romantic comedies.”

Critical thinking

Pilger is an art critic for the *Independent*, and alongside her work as a journalist she is researching a PhD on romantic love and sadomasochistic power relations in the work of French artist Sophie Calle at Goldsmiths, University of London.

“I’m not actually a pseudo-masochist myself... I’ve had a few strange experiences with people assuming I am. But, I wanted to write about romantic life in terms of femininity and how since the 1960s romantic love has been used as part of a regressive discourse about women. The idea of waiting by the phone for someone to call you, these are all things that have seeped into the public consciousness with TV shows like ‘Sex and the City’, and I wanted to try and understand

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what that is all about.

“It doesn’t have to be as explicit as whips and chains. Subliminally there are more subtle sadistic and masochistic power relationships—I’m looking at why women put themselves in that position.”

“My thesis is very much *Falling Out of Fate*—I’ve just made it a lot madder. I’m not really a proper academic, so that was really fun. I loved it—because it’s a comedy it is quite freeing.”

The developing relationship between two characters gave Pilger a chance to discuss some of the ideas around feminism in a non-dogmatic way, and she explains she “always wanted to find a way to put ideas into fiction, which is very difficult.”

“Unless you as an author have a real agenda to push, it can be offputting to the reader. The relationship between these two characters was a way of me being able to talk about a lot of feminist ideas; I wanted that dialogue between them because they are the two sides of my own psyche in a way.”

PERSONAL FILE

1984 Born in London
2004–07 BA, Cambridge University
2009–present MA, then PhD, at Goldsmiths, University of London
2011 Winner, Frieze International Writer’s Prize
Jan 2012–present Art critic for the *Independent*