

Introduction Lionel Shriver

The first Lionel Shriver book I read was *Double Fault*, in the late nineties. I just started law school at the University of Amsterdam, which turned out to be as boring as I should have known, but it was not hard, so it gave me lots of time to party, to work in bars and spent my earnings on traveling, quite often to New York, my favorite city at that time and home to my dad, who I missed a lot.

I also had a boyfriend who was good looking yet needy and clingy. He was a little mean too, but he made me laugh and that goes a long way.

During one of those visits to New York, I wandered into the Barnes & Nobles on Broadway and 82nd street, picked up *Double Fault*, read the first page and could not stop. That happened with every book by Lionel Shriver I have read since then: first page, hooked and, until the moment I finish it, spending my days not just in my own world, but in the stories and the characters she creates, even when not actively reading but grocery shopping, biking or whatever. That, by the way, is what I don't understand about all the people who never read literary fiction: why miss out on the chance of living two lives at once for a while.

Anyway. The protagonist in *Double Fault* is Willy Novinsky, a 23-year-old tennis pro who is on her way to a congratulatory encounter with the duke and duchess of Kent on the Wimbledon center court. A natural since the age of four, Willy has rebuffed everything in life except tennis. And, like the writer herself and most, if not all female protagonists in her work, she is honest, intense, steadfast, sharply funny, and fiercely intelligent.

After ending a sexual affair with her coach - she breaks up with him because he wants to fool around in bed instead of heading to the court pronto after waking - Willy meets Eric Oberdorf, a Princeton graduate who discovered tennis at the annoyingly late age of 18. Though he has a more make-it-seem-effortless flair about it, Eric is as ambitious and competitive about the sport as she is. They fall in love and get married, planning a dual high-flying career, winning tournaments all over the world. Unfortunately - for them, not for us - the whole thought-out structure starts to crash down when Willy suffers a serious knee injury which knocks her off her game.

Obviously, *Double Fault* is not about tennis; it's about love, marriage, authenticity, de/independence and about the balance of power and score keeping in relationships which can turn them into slow moving accidents. I started reading the book at my dad's kitchen table, ripped through it on the plane and wanted to finish it as soon as I got home, but, alas, clingy, winy, slightly malicious boyfriend was all over the place, and I could no longer catch

any sight of sexy and wittiness. Three days after I finished the book, I finished the relationship. Probably I didn't need the book to realize I was better off without him, but it certainly helped. Thinking needs fuel and Lionel's books have given me plenty of that over the years.

Some ten years later, I read *The Post-Birthday World*, a novel that tracks two realities: one in which Irina, the protagonist, has a passionate affair with a snooker player who she and her husband have been friends with for years, and one in which Irina decides to forgo on the first kiss and therefor on the affair. In both scenarios Irina does a lot of irresolute yearning, which made me feel sad and better at the same time. Or as Ariel Levy wrote in her wonderful *New Yorker*-profile of Lionel Shriver: "agonizing and yet oddly reassuring." The message of the book is: it doesn't matter. Whatever decision you make, will have its rewards and its costs, and you will sometimes be tormented by the alternative, because to be human is to doubt. I like books that move my mental furniture a little, and Shriver's novels do that. You don't have to agree with everything she does with the furniture. Maybe you conclude that your couch is fine where it is, thank you very much, but when you read her work your mentals will not be like one of those robed-off rooms in an ancient castle, plastic food from way back when glued to the plates on the unmovable table.

In Shriver's debut *The Female of the Species*, the protagonist - a middle aged, famous anthropologist doing a documentary in Kenya where she falls hopelessly in love with a young assistant - says at some point: 'That was one thing you could say for a life of complications: it made good stories, though someone has always suffered for them.'

A slow-moving accident. Maybe that's what life is - or also is. The trick is to snatch some perks, big and small, along the way. For me, one of those perks is reading intriguing stories, like a Lionel Shriver novel.

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