

Claire Dederer. *Monsters: A Fan's Dilemma*. New York: Vintage, 2023, 15.30 USD, 288 pp, ISBN-13:978-0525655114.

The “monster” of Claire Dederer’s title is “someone whose behavior disrupts our ability to apprehend the work on its own terms” (43). Her monsters are famous artists, mostly (though not exclusively) men, whose biographies have become impediments to a comfortable appreciation of their art. The question Dederer poses is: what do we do with the art of monstrous men? Can we go on, she asks, loving the films of Roman Polanski or Woody Allen, the music of Michael Jackson or Miles Davis, the fiction of Ernest Hemingway, the paintings of Pablo Picasso, now that we know about their private lives? Know, that is, that they abused and exploited women, raped girls, raped boys? After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

She quotes Ernest Hemingway’s third wife, Martha Gellhorn: “A man must be a very great genius to make up for being such a loathsome human being” (174). But that is not quite right, really, because Dederer is not willing to give genius a pass, to allow artistic brilliance to cancel out the crimes and misdemeanors of the artist. It is fair to say that she never resolves the dilemma, that her wrestling with the problem is more illuminating in its process than in its conclusion.

It is a very personal investigation, starting from Polanski and taking in her love for the jazz of Miles Davis and the prose of anti-Semitic Virginia Woolf and her longing to keep on enjoying them in spite of all. Dederer’s own biography becomes influential – for instance, in her discussion of Raymond Carver’s alcoholism, during which she confesses to her own alcoholic excesses. Similarly, when she comes to address the act of mothers abandoning their children

to obtain the freedom to make art – the examples here being Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark and Joni Mitchell – she makes it clear that they are not at all monstrous in her eyes, since she, too, knows the struggles of trying to balance motherhood and creation. Notice the pronoun: “When women do what needs to be done in order to write or make art, we sometimes feel like terrible mothers” (173). She has not left her children for her art, but it is clear she understands the impulse in a way that she will never understand Polanski’s rape of a fifteen-year-old girl.

Her feminism puts its thumb on the scales only once, in her discussion of Valerie Solanis, the founder and apparently sole member of the Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM) and the author of the SCUM Manifesto, who shot Andy Warhol and another man in pursuit of her program of “global slaughter” (221), that is, ridding the world of men. Dederer writes, oddly, “True, she did shoot a man [actually two men, but only one was famous], but even that seemingly militant act was marbled with vulnerability and unsureness” (221). Woody Allen’s creepy sexual entanglement with his partner’s young adopted daughter, then, is more worrying to her than two attempted murders. And Solanis, we might recall, had not even the justification of genius.

But most of her monsters, not surprisingly, are men. The oddest section is on Vladimir Nabokov, who earns inclusion here not for his self-infantilization and imposition of servitude on his wife Vera, who cut his meat and licked his stamps for him, but for *Lolita*. Does writing that book, which Dederer admires, make its author a monster? She concludes that Humbert Humbert is a monster, yes, but Nabokov is not monstrous for creating him and outfitting him with his sickness.

Her focus is on sexual violence or intimate violence or sexual exploitation of the young. Without doubt, Pablo Picasso was a habitual, serial, and evidently unscrupulous user of women. Polanski was a rapist, Hemingway a batterer. In addition to citing the behavior of Polanski, et al., she includes artist Carl Andre, who was tried for murdering his wife, Quentin Tarantino for brutality in his direction of Mia Thurman, and David Bowie for his sex with

young teenagers. How to respond? Students ask her, “Can I still listen to David Bowie?” (75).

The question lingers and is not finally answered. Near the end, Dederer writes, “we are left with feelings, we are left with love. Our love for the art, a love that illuminates and magnifies our world. We love whether we want to or not – just as the stain happens – whether we want it to or not” (241-42).

In a book rich with ironies, this formulation is essentially what Woody Allen said in justification for his affair with Soon-Yi Previn: “the heart wants what it wants” (31). Long ago, Blaise Pascal insisted that “le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas,” and we have not come much further by 2024.

I do not struggle much with Gertrude Stein’s Nazi sympathies, her recommendation of Hitler for the Nobel Peace Prize, or Miles Davis’s punching Cicely Tyson, because my feelings are not engaged: I do not love their art. With the art I do love, I am saddened by the biographical stain, but I am like Claire Dederer – I read around the stain to go on treasuring the art that matters to me, and so, I suspect, do we all.

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