

Bourne
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creative writing
workshops

The Reader

by Janie Reynolds

When not spying on her boyfriend Frank, as he worked in the study of his London Victorian terrace (*Balham*, if it is important to you), Gilly slunk, sloth-like, around the shadier, less lived-in, parts of the house. Stunned into submission by an existential nausea, as debilitating as were she to be suffering from an extreme case of Covid itself, she had grounded to an existential halt (*really horrible for her*, if it is important to you.) She could no longer neglect her abysmal suspicion that Frank, her newly co-habitant partner since lockdown, was not, in fact, the man she had thought him to be.

Gilly was, herself, a natural beauty, with a head of marvellous red locks that glowed in the light all the way down to her shoulders. She was an enthusiastic and ambitious young poet, while Frank was a copy-editor at a celebrated literary agency in Wardour Street (I put Wardour Street for effect as, however gentrified it has probably become these days, you might not have been as impressed by Frank's job if I had said it was in Walthamstow.) Given Franks' revered profession, Gilly had naturally assumed he was a man of given intellectual ability and mental prowess. One to be seen with, coupled with, harnessed to and, eventually, married to.

But, oh, the horror of it all. There in the deepest, darkest, months of lockdown, Gilly found herself, frozen and immobile; ear glued to Frank's study door, eye peering through its keyhole, trying to hear or to see what wasn't there. (Yes. 'Wasn't'. You will understand what I mean in a bit.)

Before Covid (B.C. she called it) Gilly would only see Frank at weekends. They would meet for dinner on Saturday evenings, or go to a film or concert or comedy night. They would go back to Frank's and after a lie in and brunch on Sunday mornings she'd return home on the train, sexed up and loved up at the thought of her cultured and solvent boyfriend.

They were very different, it was true. She was an extrovert, he was an introvert. He was a good listener, and she was a great talker – or so he would like to point out! When he did talk, it was resplendent, always about the fascinating manuscripts of new writers he was working on.

Gilly considered that his commitment to the unveiling of new literary talent and his immersion in the critique of new literature showed immense responsibility on his part. She felt honoured to be privy to unpublished fiction. Each work he had copy-edited bestowed him with a superiority, with even devotional qualities. And there *she* was, just an amateur poet, her mouth filled only of her own naïve, uneducated thoughts. Not those of the hottest new writer or a candidate for the shortlist of the Booker prize.

But, now, inside the four walls of the respective rooms within the four exterior walls of the Balham house, lockdown was shining an intensely bright and disturbing light upon Frank's attributes. What Gilly had discovered, since moving in, was that Frank didn't come out of his study, except to excrete, eat or sleep. And if she entered his study during daytime, he would not move the manuscript he was reading away from his face.

He didn't do anything except read.

He didn't start any conversations or engage in any that she did.

He didn't express any opinions, didn't answer any questions, didn't suggest things to do or say *anything interesting*, unless she asked him about the manuscript he was reading.

'He must be superior', she had thought at the beginning. 'It must be me. I should start more open and interesting conversations with him.' She'd tried talking about her family, her friends, her thoughts and her feelings. About places she had been and places she would like to go to – with him perhaps?

But he would not speak. He did not say ANYTHING.

As a budding poet who needed enthusiastic, intellectual discussion and outbursts of sentimentality to survive, Gilly felt more and more abandoned; left to pickle in the stale air of his house, from moment to boring moment, her thoughts unmet by another's. And all in deafening silence. Her radiant young face started to fade and her blossoming heart to wilt. Rootless and wavering, her life could not carry on like this.

And not only did Frank not say anything, but he didn't leave *any* time between the manuscripts. As he placed one back cover down, he lifted the next front cover, as if that piece of literature had had no effect on him; one that might be translated into reflection, or contemplation, or action or interest or empathy or, God forbid, a random act of kindness. Stories were ushered through Frank's brain like pieces of cheese on a quality control, factory conveyor belt.

'The man doesn't do anything except read', Gilly realised as we neared the end of lockdown. 'But filling your head with other people's words doesn't make you a great person. Entertaining yourself with others' inspiration doesn't make you interesting, because it's the other person's ideas that are the subject. Reading books, nor listening to music for that matter, doesn't ennoble a person; just like the Nazis weren't ennobled by the Wagner they listened to.'

Gilly looked through the keyhole for the last time. What she saw was nothing but a dull and useless bloke. She was no longer deluded by the manuscript he held to his face. He was using the writings of other people to camouflage an wholly empty mind. He was hiding behind wads of important papers out of shame for his lack of intellectual ability. He could not say to any one, nor to the world, nor to himself, what he wants these books to say for him – that he was an interesting man.

She stormed into the study with a newly found prowess.

'You are the most boring person I have ever met!'

'You make me want to vomit, in fact I am almost vomiting just looking at you. I will leave the key on the kitchen table, I'm out of here and do not ever contact me!'

And guess what he said?