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Love in the personals

By Catherine Keenan
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Between the wit, bluntness, desperation and deceit, some say the personals ad has become a new art form. Others prefer to sit back and enjoy the brilliant lies for what they are.

Jean Seberg lookalike. Only M. And 65. Take it or leave it, Brighton Belmondo.

Seduction and romance are not always easy for writers and academics. Their occupations are solitary, their interests cerebral, and there are limits to the amorous possibilities offered by libraries and warm-riesling-fuelled poetry readings. So just over five years ago, the *London Review of Books* began running personal advertisements, in the hope they would provide a platform for like-minded people to find love, or sex, or at least a suitable reading group.

One might have expected the advertisements to be more literary and erudite than the norm, but no one was quite prepared for the first ad, which read: "67-year-old disaffiliated flaneur, jacked-up on Viagra and looking for a contortionist trumpeter." A cult phenomenon was born.

Today, the back page of this learned journal is a compulsive read, a bizarre and often hilarious competition in wit and intellect and flat-out perversity. For some, it is the main - indeed only - reason to read the *LRB*. Recent offerings include: "Tap-dancing Classics lecturer. Chilling isn't it? (M, 38)." And: "Some chances are once in a lifetime. Not this one, I've been in the last 12 issues. Either I strike gold this time or I become a lesbian. Man, 43."

The *LRB* is by no means the only highbrow publication to run personals. In many ways, the form is particularly suited to writers, academics and intellectuals, who often display themselves to their best advantage on the page, where dress sense and dashing good looks don't count for as much as cleverness and an ease of expression. *The Spectator*, *The New Statesman* and *Harvard Magazine*, an alumni publication, run them, and *The Times Literary Supplement* recently tried to start them up. The only comparable Australian publication, *Australian Book Review*, does not have them, while *The Adelaide Review*, offers some, but they are disappointingly anaemic.

The most established platform for the art form is *The New York Review of Books*, which started its personals column a few years after it was founded in 1963, one of the first reputable publications in the US to do so. It still carries them, alongside advertisements for niche dating agencies ("Better than carbon dating: Science Connection dating!").

The NYRB column has recently been the subject of renewed interest after Jane Juska placed this advertisement: "Before I turn 67 - next March - I would like to have lots of sex with a man I like. If you want to talk first, Trollope works for me." She received 63 responses, classified each as a yes, no, or maybe. She met many of the yeses, and some of the maybes, and had quite a lot of sex indeed, with men from 35 to over 70. One stole her underwear and her champagne flutes; one liked fondling her breasts in public; one broke her heart. She became something of a celebrity after she wrote about these experiences in *A Round-Heeled Woman*, and after she was profiled in *The New York Times*, there was a sharp rise in the number of *NYRB* personals. People now play on her notoriety with ads like: "Boston Juska. If you want to exercise first, biking or sailing is fine with me."

Her example is further proof, if such were needed, that these ads are not just a great read: they do work. Occasionally marriages eventuate, and in a dozen-odd - sometimes very odd - email correspondences with people around the world, I heard stories of loves found and lost, as well as disappointment and disaster. Some were funny, some rueful, some were very, very strange.

I also heard about a proposed conference on the *LRB* ads called "The Chicken in the Basket was an Owl: Narratives of Male Loss of Identity in Contemporary Personal Advertisements" (it comes from a line in a poem by James Fenton). A provisional

submission will argue that the ads are far superior to most modern verse, and have replaced it in our cultural pantheon. Steve Baiocchi, the organiser, will give a paper about "that old chestnut", lonely hearts ads and spies. "This is particularly interesting given information from a colleague, an authority on contemporary security issues, to the effect that the *LRB* ads were subject to detailed attention from Britain's intelligence and monitoring services in the run-up to the Iraq war. Unfortunately my source has subsequently refused to elaborate. More intriguing news on this theme was the July 2002 arrest of a suspected North Korean agent by Japanese police. He was reported to have a copy of the *London Review* on his person, with several of the personals underlined. The man was deported without trial, and I have had no further information on this very curious development."

Find the 10th coefficient in the expansion of the binomial $(1+x)$ to the 20th power. Then love me some more. Mathematical Ms, Cambridge.

The ads in London and New York publications are highly allusive, the touchstones ranging from literary figures such as Camus to philosophy, psychoanalysis, art, and classical music. The *LRB* also features regular references to *Reader's Digest*, '70s Canadian rock group Bachman Turner Overdrive ("You ain't seen nothing yet, ugh, ugh"), children's television presenters and female political figures. There is an alarming number of references to mothers, for instance: "Must enjoy computer battleships, segregated bathrooms and respect my mother by wearing clothes just like hers (cavalry twill, mainly)."

In true British fashion, it is generally regarded as bad form to mention one's qualifications or looks, except to talk them down. Terms such as troll-like, crab-faced and pock-marked are acceptable; gorgeous, sexy, and alluring are not. "Public school failure. Inspid, directionless, probably poor in bed. Looking for M or F reason to take life seriously" is an example. Some are so self-deprecating and odd they defy anyone to respond. "I'm fat, thick, 48, still have uncooked semolina between my toes after an Aga-related accident in 1995, and look like the dwarf in *Fantasy Island* who yells 'Da plane! Da plane!' And I live in Ipswich. Any takers?"

I suggested to David Rose, the advertising manager, that perhaps the fact these people are more comfortable putting on displays of verbal dexterity, rather than engaging on a personal level, is one reason they might need to place these ads in the first place. He disagreed. "I actually believe the ads are more emotional than standard ads - revealing one's wit or quiriness or off-the-wall take on life is much more personal and emotive than 'Brown-eyed, 5 feet 11 inches [1.8 metres], would like to meet woman with good sense of humour.'"

The ads across the Atlantic are - with notable exceptions - markedly different, perhaps because of the weight of tradition behind them. Raymond Shapiro has worked for the *NYRB* since its inception, and for years proofread the personals. He estimates that from the 1960s to the '80s he read 30,000 of them, in his own publication and elsewhere, and collated 400 or so into a book, *Lonely in Baltimore*. He says that back then, people were fascinated by the *NYRB* personals. "Many people didn't read about Proust and James Joyce, and classical art, but they did read the personals," he says. Frank in terms of homosexuality, adultery and swinging, they were a bellwether of the culture. "They were very different, in that they had verve, originality. They represented the spirit of the times."

In a sense, they still do, though the times are very different (Shapiro can't say; he gave up reading them). The US is, after all, the country that produced a book about finding a husband using the marketing techniques taught at Harvard, and most *NYRB* ads are relentlessly upbeat. "Resembles a petite Julia Roberts", "the sophistication of Diana Rigg combined with likeness to Lady Diana (cheekbones, eyes, hair)" and "more radiant than Jane Fonda" are some of the descriptions employed. One quickly begins to wonder how there can be so many head-turning, sensual, long-legged blondes out there who cannot find a mate.

As many as three-quarters of the advertisers are women, and many are in their 50s or above. They are articulate about themselves and the partner they would like (financially stable, well-educated, non-smoking, liberal, etc) and more literal than the advertisers in the *LRB*. They will write "with dry humour - a little offbeat", rather than demonstrate it with, say, an abstruse joke about Schoenberg and orchids.

There is also something distinctly American about the fact many of the ads are now written by professionals such as Susan Fox, of Personals Work! For 12 years, she has been penning glowing descriptions of people, often with celebrity references ("head-turning good looks - evocative of Diana Rigg from *The Avengers*" is one of hers). She says she never lies: she is just selective

about what she includes. This is advertising, after all. "They have to, of course, put their best foot forward and not mention that they perhaps have an out-of-control adolescent living at home."

Unfortunately, without a comparable personal column culture, we can only speculate how Australian intellectuals would describe themselves. "For a start," says Morag Fraser, "they wouldn't describe themselves as intellectuals." The personals in *The Adelaide Review* are the nearest approximation, veering between English modesty (no Julia Roberts references) and American self-promotion (sharp mind, hard body).

In the main, they are disappointingly - though perhaps characteristically - straightforward. Fraser suggests this might be because, unlike the Americans, we have very little mail order, and hence no tradition of describing and promoting goods. "The only equivalent we have is the *Trading Post* and that's deeply impersonal: 'One Makita drill, Melbourne.' "

Little wonder then that when it comes to describing ourselves, "Basic, single male, 50, wants liaison on Tuesday and/or Wednesday evenings" is about as interesting as it gets.

Like I've said so many times before here,

"desperate". Do I have to spell it out? D-E-S-P-E-

R-A-T-E. Jeez, what does it take to catch a

20-year-old athletic male in this magazine? F, 67.

But who are these people who advertise? What kinds of encounters do they have? I sent off dozens of emails to find out, and received few replies, all on condition of anonymity (see accompanying story). It is hard to extrapolate too much, as people confessed they had lied about their age, and relationship status, and had met many people who bore no resemblance to their self-descriptions.

The common thread is, of course, loneliness, though one should be wary of overstating this. There is loneliness everywhere, and arguably people who place personals are simply more upfront about it.

Certainly, many are very accomplished in other areas of their lives, but there is a tangible yearning, expressed variously as brittleness, hopefulness or a touching willingness to engage in extended email correspondence with a journalist on the other side of the world.

Jane, an older woman who has been advertising for a year in various publications, has met many men "in the ballpark", but no one she has continued to see. She tends to bypass self-descriptions (too unreliable) and stick with the facts. Do they give their full name and address (an indication of sincerity)? Can what they say about their occupation and so on be validated? Do they fulfil her broad criteria for compatibility?

"I have a doctorate, so if someone has only a high school education I would not reply unless they were an artist," she explains.

If they seem potentially interesting, she tries to limit emails, and go quickly to a phone call or meeting. Loneliness and hope are a potent combination and it's easy for fantasies to develop, especially, as is often the case, when the respondents are good writers.

Meetings can be hugely deflating, often brutalising. It's a little like trying to find a job, she says; much fortitude and determination are required. "A friend of mine who did this for one month quit, very depressed, and said she was tired of being 'rejected by strangers.' "

Over the many emails I exchanged with Jane, I learnt little about her in the way of firm facts (a common occurrence) but built up a clear image of her as kind, cautious, bright, sincere and vulnerable. I feel quite certain that I would like her if we met, but that's probably what all respondents to personal ads feel. Who's to say my picture of her is any more accurate than Susan Fox's?

Still, I feel surer of her than I do of Paul (not his real name), who placed this ad in the *LRB*: "Only if somebody has a dream, and a voice to describe that dream, does what looked like nature begin to look like culture, what looked like fate begin to look like moral abomination. Catharine MacKinnon's brilliant prophecy of women as pure difference makes Richard Rorty produce his finest sentences. It makes me want to shag."

In response to my request to hear about his experiences, he replied: "Of course you are welcome to peruse my records of these encounters, as long as you make a gesture towards guaranteeing our privacy in this project by marrying me."

I thanked him and assured him of my discretion, but got no response. I was starting to get desperate - I couldn't help feeling I was becoming more and more like the people I was writing about - so I replied again with five words: "OK, I will marry you." (You can promise anything on email - ask anyone who's replied to a personal ad.) The next morning, a reply arrived: "Encounter One: After a brief exchange of emails I agree to meet a professor of media studies by the colour copier in the rare books department of the British Library. We bond well and later that evening commit the ultimate act of intimate exchange: she includes my story as supporting evidence in a lecture series she is developing on the Crisis of Masculinity. I find her incredibly alluring, and am able to co-opt part of her anatomy to a minor character role in a semi-pornographical piece I am toying with.

"Encounter Two: A writer of lesbian regency romances mistakes the enticing position I adopted in my personal ad for socialism. I explain I had really been hoping for some stimulating material on early feminism. We grope towards each other in the gloom of pre-industrial Britain only to discover gender incompatibility.

"Encounter Three, which you will of course recognise. Flame-haired Celto-Aboriginal hack impulsively agrees to trade nuptials for copy with dubious writer. She gets dubious copy; I get a future wife, with a walk-on part in chapter six of my ongoing novella. I don't think I'm spoiling things if I admit here that it doesn't last. We were never meant for each other. You turn out to be a grizzled septuagenarian and I, too, have misrepresented my age. At 15 I have yet to learn how to make sex last longer than eight seconds. The Sydney climate brings out my hyperpsoriasis, and the name I propose for you, Sinead O'Shannon, never fully convinces."

At this point, I almost decided I did want to marry him, but thought it prudent to find out a bit more information. I did a quick Google search of the name he gave me, but this yielded only a musician affiliated with Philip Glass, a ballet dancer and a lumber salesman in Louisiana, none of whom seemed likely. I emailed Paul, saying as much, and asked him to tell me more about himself.

He replied: "Why do people always make such sweeping assumptions about those of us who work in the lumber business? Is it really so odd that I should mix an interest in postfeminism with the care and storage of hardwoods?" He continues to write to me in the guise of a southern lumber salesman, talking about his special Creole recipe for a chicken-based Christmas cake, and assuring me that "when you specify cypress, you've made the choice of kings!"

Once started, some of these correspondences are hard to end. But in true *LRB* fashion, I still know absolutely nothing concrete about him. He may be 18 or 80, cruel or kind, ugly or gorgeous, a respected academic or an inmate at an internet-enabled asylum. But I am intrigued. And that - whether you are an intellectual, a writer or a timber expert - is the goal of all advertising.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/01/02/1072908885008.html>