

WRITERS MOSAIC

Fiction Prescriptions: The manosphere

Ella Berthoud and Isabelle Dupuy

[Intro music]

Isabelle Dupuy (ID): Hi, welcome to *Fiction Prescriptions*. I'm Isabelle Dupuy, and I'm a writer.

Ella Berthoud (EB): And I'm Ella Berthoud, and I'm a bibliotherapist. This episode, we're going to be talking about the manosphere. And we have a question from a listener, John, in Nottingham, who asked, 'What does boredom have to do with the manosphere?'

ID: Very interesting question. We were talking before starting about episodes in our lives where we've tried to understand what this manosphere is. And I was recalling to

Ella a story that my son told me about over 10 years ago. He was in secondary school, and he had a very strange day. He came home, and he said, 'Mumma, something very strange happened.' I'm like, 'What happened?' So, there's this girl in the class – and they're about 14-years-old – and this girl is quite strong and tall for her age, taller and stronger than most of the boys. And she is the leader of a group of girls. So, the boys are intimidated by her, and they like to tease her, not in a very nice way. They say things to her like, 'You're too big. You're too ugly. We're never going to go with you.' And the girl, at some point, turns around to them and says, 'I don't really care what you think because I am bisexual.' And this disturbed my son. He came home, and he said, 'You know what, this is very strange she said that. And I felt like we have no chance. There's nothing going to happen because I can't go to school and say I'm bisexual because if I say that, it means I'm gay. But she can say that, and it just means what it means, that she has a choice.' And I thought, *times are changing*. And I thought, *how interesting*. And I wasn't sure how to interpret that. What do you think?

EB: Yeah, that's really interesting. I similarly had a lot of such discussions with my girls when they were at school. And the whole coming out thing is a whole different experience now. Anyway, they didn't have such a positive experience of coming out, I have to say. But also, what I felt was very relevant to this whole idea of the mansphere, for them, was that it seemed that everyone they knew had terrible first

sexual experiences because of porn. And I think that is a really big thing now which affects young men, and it's not just Andrew Tate podcasts, it's also the prevalence of porn. Apparently, 80% of people watching porn are under 18. So, it's pretty terrifying.

ID: That is pretty terrifying. And I was thinking about what happened to my son and to the other boys in the class, and I thought, *is this about power? Is this about men who feel like they've lost some of their power because the women have more options, or at least that they voice them now? And how do they handle that?* And I guess that the link to boredom in this is if you feel like you don't have so many choices or so much power to make choices, is that where the boredom begins in a way, right?

EB: Yeah, that's true. And I think it's something which is very much reflected in all the books that we've chosen to talk about.

ID: We have a very good selection today.

EB: A great selection. And we're going to start with a really good pair of books which are both about this phenomenon of the trad wife. So, one of them is actually called *Trad Wife* by Saratoga Schaefer, and the other one is called *Yesteryear* by Caro Claire Burke, and they were both published at roughly the same time. *Trad Wife* is a kind of

horror book, and it's about a woman who is an influencer and a trad wife. So, she lives the dream, seemingly, wearing beautiful clothes, having seven children, living on a farm, and being an influencer, having thousands of followers on Instagram. But in order to actually become a proper trad wife, she has to have lots of children, and the book starts with her having none. So, she's on Instagram all the time doing her pregnancy tests and trying to look really happy and positive, but she's not getting pregnant. And one day, she goes into the woods outside her house, and she comes across this old, crumbling well, and she sees this kind of angel or demon coming out of the well. And to cut the story short and give a little bit of the game away, she has sex with that angel demon and gets pregnant because she can't with her—

ID: Husband.

EB: Husband. And then the baby grows very quickly, like in two months, and pops out. It all becomes a little bit beyond reality. But she has the baby, and this is when it turns into horror because the baby has a lust for blood. And it's actually hilarious and awful and brilliant. But what I love about it, because I'm not normally a horror lover, is that she is ultimately really empowered.

ID: I was wondering in terms of the manosphere, what does *Trad Wife* say about the manosphere?

EB: Well, she is pandering to the manosphere desperately by trying to live that life of being the perfect woman who has all the kids, does everything her husband wants, doesn't work, makes fabulous food every day, and has the babies. The thing is, he can't produce the babies.

ID: Maybe this is where it meets with *Yesteryear*. So, *Yesteryear* is a story about a young woman, who's very smart and ambitious and Christian. And she is one of those people who has pride, and that is probably eventually her downfall. So, she thinks she wants to be a trad wife but only because she doesn't really see how she can compete successfully in a man's world. She's very imbued with this idea that the cards are rigged against her, and she's quite pessimistic about the women that she does see trying to compete out there in the man's world. And so, she decides then to play the trad wife. And she meets a man who's basically like the spoiled brat son of a rich political family. And he looks good because he's been groomed to look good. But inside his head, there isn't very much. So, he finds himself to be quite attracted to manosphere ideas. And she is definitely disappointed by him, realises that she's a lot smarter than he is, despises him, and emasculates him to a large extent through her trad wife ways. And

she makes this whole make-believe world out of a farm, pretends to be living like some kind of a frontier woman in the 19th century. Of course, all fake. She has three nannies and every modern technological instrument you can think of. But the farm is made to look very old-fashioned. The kitchen is made to hide any modern appliances. She has a lot of children.

And there's an amazing twist in *Yesteryear* that I will not reveal because I really think everyone should read this book. It's a fantastic book. And I think it's about to be made into a movie. It reminded me a lot of the Phyllis Schlafly story. I don't know if you know about her. So, she was a woman in the '70s who became a big campaigner for Ronald Reagan in his campaign, and he seemed to value her very much. And she prided herself because she was a physicist and a trad wife and promoted trad wife ideas. Was very beautiful, very disciplined woman, just like the character in *Yesteryear*. And her husband accepted everything. She was from Chicago. But then when Ronald Reagan won the election, he pushed her to the side. She never got what she thought she was going to get, basically a cabinet position or at least a real position in his administration. But no, he just used her.

EB: Wow, that's interesting because actually in *Trad Wife* as well, the horror version, she's a scientist, and she totally turns her back on the science. It's really funny when

she gets pregnant because she's kind of saying, 'Oh, I'm a scientist. How is this happening that I'm suddenly going through gestation in two months?' She's acting all stupid and innocent, but actually, she knows exactly what's going on. That whole juxtaposition of being actually very clever but acting like you're a bit of an idiot in order to pander to the manosphere.

ID: Is this about gender roles as well? And how real are gender roles?

EB: Yeah, definitely. And in both of these books, the men are completely emasculated in different ways.

ID: Although the whole premise of these stories is the glorification of the men.

EB: Yeah, because the man is meant to be the provider and the big man with lots of sperm to make all his eight children. And in both of these books, they're emasculated in different ways because in *Trad Wife*, he can't create the children so a demon has to do it for him, and in *Yesteryear*, he becomes this kind of bimbo cowboy, who just—

ID: He's fake. He's fake throughout the book.

EB: Yeah, he's just running around on the farm looking pretty and not really doing anything.

ID: And being unhappy.

EB: Yeah.

ID: Which is why he ends up with one of the nannies who knows the truth about him, who says, 'This is who he is. I know him. You don't know him', when she confronts the main character.

EB: Yeah.

ID: Now, this takes us to our next book, which is *I Who Have Never Known Men*. So, this book is an interesting one. It was written by Jacqueline Harpman, who's passed away, who was a Jewish lady from Belgium who lived through World War II, did not go to a concentration camp, although I think by osmosis she did. She ended up a refugee in Morocco with her family to escape from the Nazis. And she wrote this book. And when the book came out, it wasn't very successful, but it's come back.

EB: It's been a huge TikTok sensation.

ID: It's been a huge sensation. Now, this is a very dystopian novel, science fiction novel. And it's about a world where—it begins with 40 women locked in a cage. You don't know where they are. You don't know why they're locked up. They don't know why they're locked up. They don't even know how they got locked up; they were all drugged. And one of the 40 is very young, so she has no recollection of the world that the other 39 women come from. The other ones, they were all adults when they were taken, so they had lives, they had lives in the universe in the world that we know. They had professions, they had children, they had husbands, they had homes, they had parents, they had communities, they had towns and cities. But now, they're all together in this cage. And you think, *okay, is this the story?* But then, they escape from the cage, and they escape into a world that they have no idea about. It's like a desert. There's nothing there except a few low hills, a few shrubs, and some rivers. No food, no roads, no towns, no people. All they saw, if they ever came across anything, were dead people. Eventually, with the years, the 39 older women die. Everybody dies except the youngest one. And I was convinced that once she was all by herself in this strange planet, if you want to call it that, she would find the one surviving man, and then she would have a reason for this title: *I Who Have Never Known Men* and now know you. But Ella disagrees with me.

EB: I never sensed that happy, potentially fairytale ending was going to happen. I think from the beginning, it seemed to me that it was an incredibly depressing and rather doomed book. I think it's just the whole rhythm of the way it's written. I think there's hints as well that she's all on her own at the end. So, I wasn't waiting for any big, exciting revelation. There were men at the very beginning when they're locked up, so they meet the guards, but then they just disappear. I was thinking she might find at least another cage of women who have escaped. That was my more likely scenario that she'd find another woman who'd managed to survive.

ID: But the funny thing about this book is that although quite a few of the 40 women end up as couples where they make their village, since why not, there is a lingering feeling in this book: there's not a real reason to survive.

EB: No, and also we never know the reason for why they were locked up in the first place. But it's so depressing. It's a really depressing book [laughs].

ID: I don't think so. I think it's a very high concept book.

EB: It is beautifully written.

ID: It's beautifully written. It's gripping. You can't put it down.

EB: I did enjoy reading it, weirdly enough.

ID: I think, in a way, it liberates you because it actually confronts something that I think we as women are always afraid of confronting, and perhaps men as well, which is what would it be like if our other sex disappeared? Because that means we know it's the end because we cannot reproduce ourselves. Even if we can find love with each other, there was some finality to this story that I thought was very original and very striking because it was—all of life really felt pointless. They survived because that's what you do, and they lived their lives for as long as they could until it was unbearable because of illness and old age, and then they died.

EB: Yes, and it was her job to help them die.

ID: To finish them off, the 39 women.

EB: And actually, it is interesting in terms of boredom because she is completely on her own, she could be incredibly bored, but she's writing everything down.

ID: But they were all bored. But they were all bored without any men around. That was my take on this book because they found everything to survive, that was the key of this book. It wasn't like they had to stress about what we're going to eat tomorrow. They never had that stress because in this dystopian universe, these bunkers—

EB: There's limitless food, weirdly enough.

ID: —with all these dead women were full of these super, super strong freezers that never went out of power.

EB: The power was always on in these bunkers.

ID: There was always electricity in these bunkers, mysteriously. And they always could find food to defrost. So, they didn't have a food stress. They had some stress about making clothes and shelter, but they solved those quite easily. But they were bored. And it wasn't even that—even the couples, the couples that were made up only of women, they were also bored. There was a general sense of futility, of malaise, of boredom to all their lives, which meant that it wasn't that sad, actually, when they all passed away.

EB: And they all die quite young.

ID: Not really, do they?

EB: Well, 60s. I think that's quite young [laughs].

ID: Yeah, I guess. I guess so.

EB: You could say it's a cross between Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* and *The Road*. I think *The Road* is really interesting to compare it to because it's such a masculine novel about a similar dystopian nightmare, and that's a much more violent and male novel. We won't go into it now.

ID: And there is no violence in this book.

EB: No, that's true.

ID: The only violence would have come from the guards.

EB: Yes.

ID: And that happens before the book begins.

EB: Yes, and in fact, when our heroine, who's unnamed, has to dispatch the people that are coming to the end of their natural life, it's done in a rather loving, if unpleasant, way.

ID: I think it pushes the argument to the extreme about if there's only one sex left, the powers of boredom.

EB: Yes. And she does talk about her womb quite a lot, just thinking about that whole idea of I who have never known men and that whole fact of having a—

ID: There's a great line at the end where she's like, 'My womb became rotten', because she never used it.

EB: Yeah, a wounded womb.

ID: Yeah, strange. Strange. But interesting about how, yeah, we need both. So, from here, we go to *Flesh* by David Szalay, Booker Prize winner. So, Ella, tell us about what you think about István.

EB: I couldn't bear the book because it's so depressing, sad, and full of boredom. It really is full of boredom. The way it's written is also full of boredom. It's very sparsely written. The language is very simple, devastatingly simple, you might say. The characters are constantly saying, 'Okay. Okay.' They don't have that much interesting dialogue at all. The young boy, who's the hero of the story, is 15, and he's seduced by one of his neighbors who is 43, I think. And they have sex over a period of time for a few months. And that is totally born out of boredom from both the woman and the boy. And I just found it so depressing [laughs]. And that really sets the scene for the rest of the book because every sexual experience he has he's very passive, I felt, and it just seems to happen to him. He does become incredibly wealthy and successful during one period of the book, but again, that's kind of by accident. It seems to me really a story about passivity, but you made the point that you thought it was more of a passive aggression, which is interesting. I'd love to know more about what you mean.

ID: Because I thought it was quite subtle the way that István expresses power and his own will. For example, in that first story, the beginning of the book, which in a way is

repeated in a very strange way at the end of the book, there is a symmetry to this novel, he does kill the husband of that neighbour.

EB: Yeah, it's pretty shocking.

ID: And it twists his life forever from there. And then in the end of the book, he ends up—after all kinds of stories—he's married, but the wife has had a terrible car accident;; it's killed his son. It's a bit of spoilers here. But he ends up now in bed with the housekeeper that they have, who is married, but she's in love with him. She's a kind woman. And he wants to take out all his anger on her, so he can't stop sleeping with her and being a little bit cruel to her. And again, it feels like it's the symmetry, like he's now with her the way that neighbour had been with him in the beginning. She's more naive. All she knows that she's got this crush or this infatuation with him, and he's exploiting it because he is so downtrodden. He's so shaken up by what's happened to him. It's very hard to know what he thinks about women, but he needs them. And everything that happens in his life, like Ella says, does happen through women. But his feelings towards them and his ways of expressing his power with them changes around the book but always in a bit of a passive-aggressive way.

EB: Yeah, I know what you mean. I mean, it's interesting talking about it again because when I read it, I found it really boring and depressing. But now that we're remembering what actually happens, there's a lot of drama: deaths, a murder.

ID: But it's not told in a way that makes it rise from the flat surface of his general attitude to life.

EB: Do you think it's a little bit like reading Albert Camus' *L'Etranger*?

ID: It's a bit like that, yes. There's a bit of an alienation between him and his actions, and him and the world outside. Neither of these books are celebrations really of love as we would understand it. That's why there's so much boredom here.

EB: Yeah, they're not life-embracing books, I have to say.

ID: So, from there, we're going to go to the Nobel Prize winner, J. M. Coetzee, and this very famous little book called *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which is also a bit of a fable, set in a country that we don't know. It sounds like it could be maybe Afghanistan, but we're not sure. He is South African. And this is a book about power, empire, men, women, sex, and torture. Torture plays a big role in this book. And basically, the story is

that there's this man, and he's a magistrate, and he represents the empire. And he is positioned in a town that's on the frontier of the empire, far away from the capital and far away from the metropole in Europe. And things have been rolling along quite well because they've been a bit forgotten by the big centres of power. So, people seem to be getting along with the 'barbarians', who are the natives. And the town, there hasn't been any violence for a long time, for about 20 years. There's not much intermingling either. And of course, the natives are poor and nomads and on the outskirts of the magistrate's world, which is the ordered, European, miniature universe of this town. But things are as much as they can be in such a situation of colonialism, they are pretty peaceful.

And then one day arrives very masculine, very macho, very alpha male soldiers from the capital, full of muscles and nice uniforms and blonde hair. And they come, and they say, 'We hear there is trouble on the frontier, and we've come to put it down.' And so, they go out, and they capture a bunch of barbarians randomly, including a young woman and her grandfather, and they torture them until they admit to whatever it is that they were looking for. The magistrate is outraged by this. He's very upset, he's very angry, and he realises how much he hates the empire. Although he is a product of it, although he's benefited from it and has had a very nice life out of it, but for some reason, he can't stand it anymore. And he becomes a man, in the sense that he doesn't

go with it anymore. He rebels. He decides to protect the barbarians. He goes into some kind of an excursion to warn them about something. And they catch him, and they torture him, and they stick him in jail. And at the end, he becomes a bit of a vagrant. And he talks about what all of this means.

EB: So, the tables are turned on him.

ID: The tables are turned on him because he's been exiled from his own country. And so, these are reflections of the magistrate after his downfall. He's watching his fellow European townspeople.

[ID reads from *Waiting for the Barbarians*]

'Without exception they are dreams of ends: dreams not of how to live but of how to die.' [He's speaking of their fear of the barbarians] 'And everyone, I know, in that walled town sinking now into darkness (I hear the two thin trumpet calls that announce the closing of the gates) is similarly preoccupied. Everyone but the children. The children never doubt that the great old trees in whose shade they play will stand forever, that one day they will grow to be strong like their fathers, fertile like their mothers, that they will live and prosper and raise their own

children and grow old in the place where they were born. What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history.'

EB: Very good. That was great. Is there a sense in that book that the barbarians are maybe a bit of a construct of the empire, that they're kind of exaggerated and created in a way to add spice or interest and in a way as a countering boredom, you might say?

ID: The barbarians, I think here, are actually quite passive. And I think he writes them as passive because I think that it is logical to believe that if you've been stripped of all power and you've been tortured, because the only barbarians you meet are the ones that they capture, you don't meet the ones who've never been captured. And so, you understand that you've become very passive, like enslaved people were. You become maybe passive-aggressive if you can, but you do become passive because that's your way of not giving energy to your coloniser. And this affects the coloniser very much. This book is a great example of this. He does fall in love with this woman, this young

woman who's a barbarian, but she won't talk to him. She will not share her existence with him even if she is next to him. She shuts him out. And this is how he starts to understand what has happened. And I wanted to talk about this book and about this quote. The last part about this quote says, 'One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era.' And so, this is not about living. This is about not dying. This is about prolonging beyond yourself. And I was thinking, *this has a lot to do with the manosphere*. The manosphere, I think, is a direct descendant of this type of mentality.

EB: Interesting.

ID: You see, I think that—and I think this is why I wanted this book to be part of this discussion, because there's no space for women in this story.

EB: Yeah, the woman who's in it, isn't she blind? Or she's got something wrong with her eyes?

ID: Yes, she's got something wrong with her foot. The torturers broke her feet, so she can't walk. So, she's very passive.

EB: Yeah, so she's kind of made into a passive creature.

ID: Because she is also very vulnerable and very powerless. And then the other women in the book are basically sex workers. And some are wives, but you don't really get to know them. And so, the women have no power. They have to survive through selling themselves or watching their own bodies be mutilated by the men. And the men, they're alienated as well because they're working for empire. The empire has convinced these men that they are not human, that they are these soldiers of empire. They don't share in the humanity of these 'barbarians', quote unquote, of these people who've lived there forever, and yet they want to make their life there too. So, how do you get through that? And then what is the value of these men? Their value is not in being good lovers, it's not in being kind. Yeah, it's in being able to break the bones of other people.

EB: Yeah, that's really interesting. And you could say that it sounds a bit like the manosphere in that book has been created as a counter to boredom because they have to create these barbarian ideas or the threat of the barbarian in order to have a justification for existence.

ID: Exactly, that's what they're saying. They need to be afraid of something to justify their violence. Yeah. So, from there—

EB: I'd like to take us, perhaps, to the roots of the manosphere. This is a fantastic young adult book, *King of Nothing* by Nathanael Lessor. And this is about a boy, Anton, who is in secondary school— I think he's about 14 when it begins – and he is the king of the school because his dad went to prison for something very violent. So, everyone is terrified of him and thinks that he's an absolute mean bastard, which he is. And he goes around with all his group terrorising the younger kids. So, it starts off really brilliantly capturing that essence of what it's like being Anton, who everyone fears. And he's horrible to the teachers. He's got this real reputation to be mean to the teachers as well. And he's very funny. He's always cracking jokes from the back of the class and distracting everyone.

But then he starts actually thinking about what he really wants to do with his life. And it's really cleverly done because there's just a few little moments of a teacher saying something to him like, 'What are you going to choose for your GCSEs?' and then a girl looking at him askance because he's being horrible to the teacher and him thinking, *but I really fancy her*. And he starts rethinking. And also, his mum, who's brought him up as a single mum, she's really worried about him, and she's started making this

refuge for women in the community, and she gets him involved in that. And he meets this really lovely, nerdy kid called Michael, who initially he is a bully to and awful to and treats like a total loser. But Michael is a really sweet boy, and Michael starts to win him over with his cuteness and loveliness.

So, you get this really great transformation, which takes place slowly over the book. And there's quite a few dramatic, awful moments where things are very precarious and go horribly wrong, and Anton has to really kind of step up to the mark and be a bit of a hero at one point. And we also meet his dad and see what he's like and understand where he's coming from. But I just think it's brilliantly done because it's set in this rough school in North London, I think. And it's very funny, well-written, and completely gets into the psyche of the boys that are watching Andrew Tate podcasts. And in fact, those podcasts are mentioned in the book as well.

ID: So, this is sort of a boy who is heading in that direction and who escapes.

EB: Exactly, yeah. So, it's a very uplifting, positive read because you see him descending and then slowly getting out of it.

ID: And would you say it's because he's brave?

EB: Yes, he has to be brave. He actually has to rescue Michael at one point from near death, and that's a transformative moment. And also, he appreciates his mum. Because you see all these other boys in the school being really rude about women, including his dad, who's saying, 'You can't trust women. They're all having affairs all the time. And you can't leave them alone.' You get all these really terrible sexist statements, misogynistic statements, from the boys and the adults. And he just starts questioning it because of his mum and because of lovely Michael, and he's an intelligent boy.

ID: And so, you would say he escapes from boredom because he's brave and because he loves?

EB: Definitely, yeah. And there is love in the story of quite a few different kinds, and that's really what saves him. So, yeah, and the boredom is very apparent at the beginning of the book as well with the boys hanging around at school being mean to the younger kids. They're bored. They don't have any prospects. They don't have any ambitions. So, slowly that gets counteracted. And, yeah, it's a really lovely read, and I thoroughly enjoyed it, and I think it's a great read for any age.

ID: Our poem for the manosphere is a lovely poem by Lucas Jones. I actually heard this poem for the first time in his own voice on his Instagram. And I'm not sure I'll do it justice, but we're going to try, Ella and I, because he sounds amazing reading this poem live. This poem is called, 'I will teach my boys to be dangerous men'.

[ID reads from 'I will teach my boys to be dangerous men']

I will teach my boys to be dangerous men

And pick white flowers for all of their friends

And to think of patience when they think of strength

I will teach my boys to be dangerous men

And if a sister cries, you cry with them

I'll teach them to stop before they descend

Too deep in their pain for those who depend

On us to feel safe, to keep them all warm

And when you feel the cold you knock on the door

And hope someone like you is there keeping watch

To tap you out and make your bed

Then sharpen your sword and kiss your head

And die as a man who knows what it meant

To be remembered for love

And the kindness he spent

[EB continues reading from 'I will teach my boys to be dangerous men']

'I would teach my boys to be dangerous men

In a world where danger is simply the norm

The dangerous thing is not to conform

The dangerous thing is not to watch porn

Not to base love on a paid performance

But in the soft silence of three in the morning

Where their love is safe, sleeping

Just bringing them water

To know that it's not in the wars that you wage

But your choosing love despite all the rage

I will teach my boys to be dangerous men

And not to be naive enough to pretend

That they won't have to fight for the ones they defend

But if you must fight, fight to never again

I will teach my boys to be light when they can

And know in the darkness to reach for my hand

I will teach my boys to be dangerous men

So the danger for all of us finally ends'

[Outro music]

ID: That's it for us. Thank you for listening to *Fiction Prescriptions*. I'm Isabelle Dupuy.

EB: And I'm Ella Berthoud.

ID: And stay tuned next time because our next topic is:

EB: Food.

ID: Indeed [both laugh].

EB: Do send in questions if you have any. We'd love to know your particular thoughts, and we'll be ready and waiting with *Fiction Prescriptions*.

ID: Yes, so please send us your questions. We can't wait to see them.

EB: Thank you.

ID: Thank you.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

© Ella Berthoud and Isabelle Dupuy