

# Looking for love

Kirsten McDougall

## 52 Men

Louise Wareham Leonard  
Red Hen Press, \$36.00,  
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I felt deeply sad upon finishing Louise Wareham Leonard's new book, *52 Men*. Its constituent 52 parts tell a story that fits right into our Tinder-times, even though Leonard is reporting back from the age before apps supported hook-ups. Dating can be a perilous business for the mind, heart and body, and it was both fascinating and sobering to read through the 52 encounters. But this book is more than just about dating 52 men; it is a book about the power dynamics that exist in our society between a rich man and a comparatively less wealthy woman; a famous man and a non-famous woman; a girl and an older man. The complex layers of sexual desire, emotional torment, fun and recklessness are all in here; but there is not much love to be found. The final story explains why that might be so. And this left me sad.

Leonard was born in New Zealand but grew up in New York, where most of the action takes place. *52 Men* is a formal departure from her two novels *Since You Ask* and *Miss Me a Lot Of*. *52 Men* is presented in two parts, which we are invited to read as memoir. The first part is 52 short paragraphs describing men that the narrator, Elise, has been involved with. Some of these relationships are sexual, some not, and the sections move around in time, backwards and forwards, much the way memory works. The second part is much shorter, self-contained and untitled, and tells the story of Elise's relationship with her stepbrother, eight years older than her. A prologue describes the work as a "work of memory and imagination; stories, actions and events have been changed to protect the living."

I like the description of memoir as a fluid mix of memory and imagination; and this fits with recent first person narrator memoirs that tell "life stories" complete with details that have to have been creatively imagined (or I must have the worst memory in the world). Books like Karl Ove Knausgaard's bestselling *My Struggle* autobiographical novels, and Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*, attempt at length (Knausgaard) or with brevity (Offill and Leonard) to contain in language a version of "what happened when". Depending on one's beliefs about the concept of truth, you'll either go along for the ride, enjoying the story and style of the writer (all these writers tend to be concerned with language as an art form), or be irritated by the fictionalising of "what happened". I sit with the former. Furthermore, I don't believe that a tidy narrative, in the novelistic sense of the word, has really helped me make sense of my own life, although it works for many. Leonard's short, sharp sections in the first part of the book fit with my own sense of life as episodic, not even necessarily chronological, when reflecting on my own experiences.

There is an icky glamour about the life that Elise lives in these pages. Some of the 52 men are rich (a Greek yacht owner and donut magnate), some are famous ("Michael is a rock star" and Jonathan is "the world's most famous North American novelist"), and some of them are dead by the time of writing. Elise is wine and dined. The men come and they go. Where, I can't help but wonder, does she meet these men? And how? Perhaps this is what life is like in New York, if you're part of a certain set. Michael tells her that "you remind me of everything I hate about women", and Bob tells her that she has the

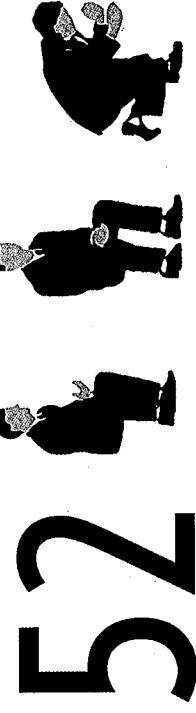
body of a 19-year-old: "I love that; I want to marry that." "That?" I repeat. "Yes," he smiles, "That." When Elise asks Bob, what if she doesn't always have the 19-year-old's body, Bob says "But you plan to, don't you?" Every reader is allowed to cringe at Bob's absurdity, his conventional and limited notions of what a woman's (read: girl's) body looks like. We have all run into Bob, even if we haven't shared our beds with him.

Despite Bob, however, there is a refreshing absence of shame in these 52 encounters. In some quarters of society, the binary role of the virgin/slut continues to be dragged out when discussing female sexuality. Leonard's book straddles a heterosexual spectrum of female sexual exploration without evidence of sex-shaming, and this is something to be celebrated. Elise is self-aware, she is up for adventure and, mostly, in control of it. Seduction is a game she knows she's good at. In section 52 she says, "As usual, I decide to win him over."

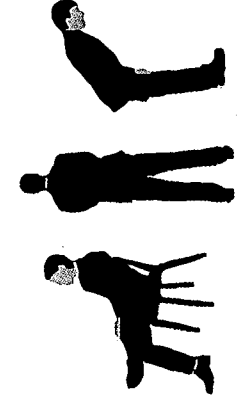
The language in the 52 sections is lean, almost journalistic at times in its descriptions of the men, and the use of the present tense aids a removed style of delivery. The men are described coolly; some of them love Elise, some of them want to possess her in ways that are disturbing, some of them are afraid of her "neediness". She says she wants to help some of them. It is through these 52 men that we begin to accumulate a picture of one woman. Elise is sexy, funny, vulnerable and unstable. We learn she is "away" for a while being "treated". In a later section, Hugh asks her why her hands shake: "My hands shake, I tell him, because I have been through some things."

In Part Two, the tense changes to past, and the story is told as one contained piece. This juxtaposition asks us to read Part Two as a coda for Part One, an explanation of why her hands shake. (Spoiler alert.) It is here that we learn that from the age of nine and for a number of years, Elise's stepbrother, Ben, sexually abused her. The way in which she tells this story is affecting, and full of layers that many women will understand and be grateful for having someone else document. Elise is young and she knows what Ben is doing is wrong, but she also wants and doesn't want his attention and touch. To complicate the story further, Ben and Elise later become consensual lovers, although the dynamics of consent between a former older abuser and a very young woman (17) are, again, complex and fraught with a strange and confusing power dynamic. The way in which Leonard presents the relationship is compelling. From page one of Part Two we know the outcome cannot be good. We are not asked to feel pity for Elise, but to watch what happened, from Elise's point of view. The way in which Leonard tells the story humanises both victim and abuser. She shows that such situations are never simple. She also shows how hard it is for a victim to ask for help.

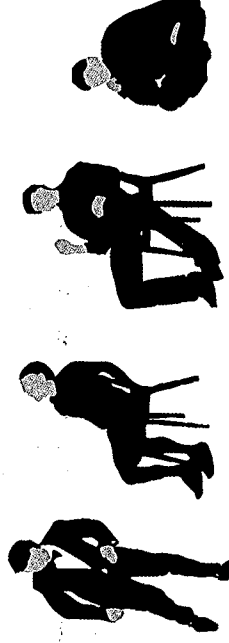
This mixing up of past and present tense is key in this book and forces us to read the book in a certain way. The past affects the present in complex ways we don't always understand. The present tense can have the effect of holding the reader at an emotional remove; it can also feel static; Elise is stuck in the present, because of what happened. Formally, the two styles of Part One and Part Two sit awkwardly together; they butt up against each other in an irregular pattern. This may be the intended effect; it just doesn't suit my own sense of formal elegance. As a fan of the episodic parts, I felt a little betrayed by the return to the conventional narrative style of



# MEN



LOUISE  
WAREHAM



LEONARD

Part Two, while also understanding its importance as a coda.

The final pages of the book carry an appendix titled "Sergio". Herein is a list of sexual slang terms that Elise and a lover wrote one bored afternoon. In a different context, these could be amusing, readers may even wish to add their own. However, as a bookend to Leonard's *52 Men*, it left me thinking about the ways in which men and women objectify each other and use sex as a negative tool for control. Terms like "roast", "rack", "tool", "slut", are ones that say nothing about love, and everything about sexual competitiveness, reptilian brains bereft of human warmth and intimacy. The sadness I'm left with on closing the book is because I wish more for Elise, for all women and men.

*Kirsten McDougall is a writer, and works as a publicist and literary manager. Her book The Invisible Rider was published in 2012.*