



Mating

Norman Rush

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The narrator of this splendidly expansive novel of high intellect and grand passion is an American anthropologist at loose ends in the South African republic of Botswana. She has a noble and exacting mind, a good waist, and a busted thesis project. She also has a yen for Nelson Denoon, a charismatic intellectual who is rumored to have founded a secretive and unorthodox utopian society in a remote corner of the Kalahari—one in which he is virtually the only man. What ensues is both a quest and an exuberant comedy of manners, a book that explores the deepest canyons of eros even as it asks large questions about the good society, the geopolitics of poverty, and the baffling mystery of what men and women really want.

Mating Details

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Author : Norman Rush

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From Reader Review Mating for online ebook

Megha says

Cover Design: The design on the cover is a detail from Hieronymus Bosch's painting The Garden of Earthly Delights. (Middle panel, blue globe in the middle of the lake.)

Higher Resolution Image

Vincent Saint-Simon says

Dear Sirs and Madams,

This book could have easily received five stars if Mr. Rush knew how to stick a landing.

M,

V

John says

A brilliant exploration of the limits of human analysis in the face of natural forces. Along with Infinite Jest and Middlemarch, one of the few books I've read that are so impossibly intelligent they seem written by a higher life form. Yes, the vocabulary level seems pretty insane, but given the narrator's education level and insecurity, is completely appropriate.

Jeremy says

Mating shouldn't work on any level. A first person narrative about a young failing female anthropologist falling in love with an older American man who has founded an egalitarian feminist commune in the heart of Southern Africa is just too cutely exotic, too cheaply high concept to work.

But somehow, Norman Rush manages to make her and her narration into a stunning reflection and examination of intellectual and romantic life. Like a lot of other "big" novels from the 1990's, Mating touches on a dizzying array of themes and ideas (what it means to be a modern woman, Western privilege/guilt, the pitfalls of 3rd world development, how to help a post-colonial society without becoming just another colonist, the impossibilities of romantic love, the impossibilities of its opposite, etc.) And all of it is filtered through the unnamed narrators endlessly inquisitive musings, doubts and second thoughts. She's like a character from David Foster Wallace or Philip Roth, but with half the despair to block her perpetual

self inquiry.

I can't believe that this is Rush's first novel, that people even think up situations like this as a starting out point for a nearly 500 page book of fairly realist fiction is a remarkable testament to the flexibility and sincerity of literary writing.

Erika says

I did not expect to be giving this book only three stars. It had a lot going for it-- first of all, the fact that the narrator is a neurotic, egregiously overeducated female doctoral student adrift on another continent with a floundering dissertation and a nagging feeling of emptiness certainly made the book easy to relate to (indeed, Rush pulls off the female voice, and particularly the female graduate student voice, so well) Furthermore, the sparkling effervescence of the prose, bubbling over occasionally to humor, made the first 200 or so pages and the last 70 or so a truly addictive read (in particular, the scene where the narrator realizes the depths of her depression when seated by the Victoria Falls is both utterly believable and truly memorable).

The narrator's obsession with avoiding "assortative mating" -- the universal tendency towards unions of "physical envelopes" --- in favor of a highly demanding kind of "intellectual love," a true marriage of equal souls-- and the resulting sacrifices such a desire entails was also highly appealing. At one point she says: "What beguiles you toward intellectual love is the feeling of observing a mental searchlight lazily turning here and there and lighting up certain parts of the landscape you thought might be dubious or fraudulent but lacked the time or energy to investigate or the inner authority to dismiss tout court. The searchlight confirms you."

How very true!

Sadly, however, the entire 200 pages in which the narrator's infatuation with the charismatic Nelson Denoon, professor-cum-founder-of-utopian-colony-in-Botswana, comes to fruition-- the very raison d'etre of the novel-- completely failed to grab me (until, that is, the very end where things began to fall apart). Perhaps this is a personal problem of mine. That is likely.

Jess says

I think the author was trying to see how many fancy SAT words he could fit into one book. He fit in a lot, and it was meh.

Alexandra says

Maybe I am shallow and narrow and lack the brainpower to fully appreciate this book, but to me it is the best love story. I reference it mentally almost everyday. To cross the Kalahari for the mere chance for a connection! To be a planless drifter in Africa--to be too cutting and smart and still see this chance for love. She is my hero. Endlessly quotable. And the end cracked my heart. I'm gifting it to a boy who would do well to heed Nelson Denoon's example.

Marjorie says

This book was really engrossing, at the same time it basically presented me with a vocabulary lesson unlike no other. Literally--I finally just started keeping a list of the words I didn't know, because cracking the dictionary every time got to be a chore. It became an exercise in picking up meaning from context. And *still* it was an utterly fabulous read.

Imagine my amusement when right after revisiting *Mating* after many years due to putting together my Goodreads list, I came across it discussed for this very reason on the Paper Cuts blog at the New York Times:

<http://papercuts.blogs.nytimes.com/20...>

"After praising "*Mating*" as "aggressively brilliant," Updike took Rush to task for his "aggressive modernist designs on conventional reading habits," epitomized by his ostentatiously arcane vocabulary. (Yes, lots of brilliance and lots of aggression here.)

"The action is simple but stately," Updike wrote,

a curve of neediness, attraction, pursuit, capture, fulfillment, disillusion, and departure which is traced through close to 500 pages bristling with such recondite terms as "tonus," "makhoa," "tallywhackers," "lustral," "samoosa," "suigenerism," "cornucopious," "lanugo," "superfices," "je m'en foutisme," "cothurni," "karosses," "lolwapas," "idioverse," "noetic," "ketosis," "vitromania," "inter pocula," "rubiconic," "uchronia," "watchership," "toriis," "langur," "ovaldavels" (from "rondavels"), "utlitariana," "sternocleidomastoids," "pygmalious," "stimmung," "credulism," "megrim," "dagga," "bogobe," "cryptomnesia," "urticaria," "elenchus," "entelechies," "geniusly," "crescive," "evanition," and "bromeliad."

Uh, Yeah!!

And even funnier, that blog referenced a blog by Rachel Donadio, in which she quotes Norman Rush from "*Mating*" regarding literary deal-breakers:

"There are certain quagmires to be avoided with people," Norman Rush wrote in "*Mating*." "You can find yourself liking someone who appears intellectually normal and then have him let drop that his favorite book of all time is '*The Prophet*.'" Touché, Mr. Rush, touché."

Um, I feel you Rachel, but another literary dealbreaker might just be not being able to read the book at all due to the arcane vocabulary! too funny...

Ben Loory says

brilliant and often hilarious; 500 pages packed with fascinating insights and ideas and jokes and facts and

stories. one of the most overwhelming books i've ever encountered. at times it felt like i was drowning. why, why, why so much. how do i get out of here. will it ever end. how old will i be when it ends and what will be left of me, how will i be changed, will my brain still work, will i be an insufferable human being. but then it ended. and i was pretty much the same. it gives you a lot to think about, but (esp for a love story) surprisingly little to feel. there was one moment (when she heads out alone into the desert after him) where i began to feel a feeling in my innards. but then that was rapidly headed off at the pass. can't say i was ever particularly concerned about how or whether their relationship would work out. frankly if they'd both died i don't think i would've been too bothered. emotional involvement was about zero. but intellectually, a lot going on. really a dazzling mind, a dazzling voice. can't say i ever want to read another book by norman rush. but i'm glad i read this one. and glad it's over.

Tim says

Not a full review, just a few thoughts in the moment of rereading...first of all, it is still somewhat jarring how different this is from *Whites*, his short story collection, although there are traces of the novel in the earlier collection--an analogy of *Dubliners* straight to *Ulysses* while bypassing *Portrait* might be apt, not in terms of experimentation with language but in terms of density of thought, consciousness. Midway through this rereading, I am struck not so much by how much richness Rush devotes to developing character (though the characters are indeed fully-wrought, at once ample and supple), but to the mission of the novel itself, which seems to be constructed as carefully and with as much openness as Tsau, the utopian outpost where the two main characters come together. As ham-handed as some of the literary opinions of Tsau's architect, Nelson Denoon tend to be (he gets poetry humorously wrong, and his views on Shakespeare seem to miss any literary dimension of the plays), it's hard not to admire his energy and his equal commitment to physical and intellectual tasks, the deltas where these tributaries of sweat come together. And in the end I come away with the distinct sense that the novel itself might be more terrain than object, a space in which to deliberate over the relationship between the political and the aesthetic, the extent to which we remain flagrantly animals, the responsibility of the artist, reader, traveler, lover, the how and why of who we become--in short, to implicate the reader in the grand questions that the book stirs up and refuses to resolve.

Jenny says

Mating is super smart. On every page, Rush casually name-drops obscure philosophers, touches on long-standing academic debates, and refers to brainy books. It makes you feel smart when you get one (Like, wow! I got that Wallace Stevens reference!), but it makes you feel dumb when you don't (WTF does perihelion mean again?). Reading this is like reading the encyclopedia, except with more funny. It did feel a little pretentious at times but it taught me words like evaginated, which does not mean what you think it means.

I was bothered by the love interest of our main character. He's supposed to be this brilliant man, a feminist, who is creating a Utopian, matriarchal society and giving impoverished African women agency but this model society is based on Western ideals. For instance, he has the town summarist, kind of like a town crier, read aloud to the residents dead white male literature. That's something that bothered me about Denoon. He pushed his agenda but did it covertly through his female allies. But what's cool about this book is that it shows the complicated layers of power in play.

But *Mating* is, above all, a love story. And it's hilarious. Case in point: "All the missionaries I stayed with showed a certain interest in my, shall we say, spiritual orientation. I don't think I teased them. I didn't misrepresent myself, but I didn't give them the full frontal, either."

Last thing: The band couldn't play because John Coltrane forgot the quatrain.

Audrey says

It appears that many folks really love this book. I have to admit that I was mostly bemused. A white male author writing in a female voice about Botswana; pretty ballsy. His protagonist is not someone with whom I'd like to have a cup of coffee. Of course, I don't expect every book's heroine to be someone I'd like to hang out with, but this is a female William F. Buckley; using monosyllabic, obscurely sourced words very deliberately, it seemed. She speaks of her humble beginnings and I was left wondering if her verbosity was less than authentic. And she goes after her prey, Denoon, the male protagonist, in a curiously passionless manner. This is obviously Rush's feminist archetype, but she's so willing to sacrifice her own academic career, her own morals, her own life even, that it's hard to see her as a whole, authentic person. I kept thinking of Alexander McCall Smith's overly sweet "Ladies Detective Agency" books, also written from a female perspective and also set in Botswana. Smith's books are like a nice big piece of cake; comforting, but not nutritious. Rush's *Mating* is like those first vegetarian meals from the 1970s; overly chewy, with lots of bulk, weird, crunchy things, and in the end, difficult to swallow.

Daniel Polansky says

I didn't love it. Rush is very smart, and this is an ambitious novel, but it didn't fundamentally come together for me. The narrator, who might be unnamed or whose name I just might not remember, is a reasonably brilliant female academic working in Botswana who decides to fall in love with a more brilliant male academic working in Botswana on a secret experimental city in the hinterlands where woman hold all political power, with the notion being the twin narratives intertwining to make a profound statement about male/female relations. This is the sort of novel in which the protagonist is a very smart person and the narrative consists mostly of her engaging in elaborate intellectual conversations, either with her partner or just acting as her own interlocutor. It reminded me a bit of some of the denser Saul Bellow, but then again I haven't actually read a book by Saul Bellow in probably ten years so that's not real useful. Anyway, I found the protagonist essentially believable as a character, which is a difficult accomplishment given the style of the book, but I was also bored a lot, and I think probably just tend to prefer a tighter aesthetic. In practice, it seemed like an awful lot of intellectual effort for relatively little pay off, and I don't really think I'd recommend it. Drop.

Stephen Witt says

A 55 year-old man writing as a 32 year-old woman is a conceit that seems destined to fail. But the narrative voice overwhelms you with its startling combination of neurotic insecurity, hyper-literary pretension and genuine academic insight. About a third of the way I began to wonder if I hadn't stumbled across some sort of post-Nabokovian masterpiece.

Then begins the heart of the story, which details her infatuation and love affair with a boring, quasi-messianic, intellectual narcissist. At this point I started to lose interest. The next 200 pages were a slog, and I kept thinking to myself "Honey, you could do better."

But then came the story's denouement, in which the narrator's total supplication and abasement seemed so grossly out-of-character that I wanted to throw the book across the room (I would have too, except I finished it on an airplane where this wasn't really an option). I suspect it may have been the author's intention to provoke this sort of reaction, but still it seems a shame to degrade and humiliate this brilliant character he just spent 450 pages building up.

Anyway, it confirmed my suspicion that no, a man can't really write as a woman in the first person. But for all that, the author is a major, major talent.

Edit: Two years later, I find Rush to be my favorite writer, but oddly I still don't really "like" either of his novels in a conventional sense. Maybe every great, ambitious book has to be flawed like this, like Moby-Dick or Huckleberry Finn. Not changing my 3-star rating, but read this book.

Jafar says

This is the story of a cerebral, overanalyzing woman who doesn't want the mediocre or the nearly-great and sets her eyes on the one great man that she finds. She's an anthropology student, working in Botswana on a failed dissertation. He's an overachieving and well-known intellectual who's running an experimental matriarchal-utopian village in the middle of the Kalahari. She risks her life to get to him – to get to the "intellectual love." What follows is an insanely good introspective and analytical narrative – not just on her love, but on so many other things.

This is not a typical love story. I don't know how a typical love story is, but I'm sure it's not anything like this. This book is long and hard. It challenges your education. It's told by an erudite woman about her fixation on an erudite man. They're both exceedingly gifted. They won't slow down to explain the literary/political/historical/sociological/anthropological/etc. background of what they're talking about. Not only do you need a dictionary in hand, you also need Wikipedia and Google on standby. Unless you're encyclopedic like its characters, this book will just go over your head at times. But hang on tough. This is a rare gem worth struggling for.

Koharjones says

I fall on the love side for this book.

First, a confession: I read it after spending a semester in a West African nation studying that nebulous concept of "international development." Power, powerless, white black man woman city farmer, lack of water underlying all attempts at societal change.

This book expounds (propounds? sermonizes) on one man's vision of development, as viewed by an enamored woman, in a much more readable manner than the text book that was assigned to me that semester did. We get sex AND water storage. We get utopias--personal, societal--gone bad.

Yes, the book starts with a lecture.

But the story building utopia is compelling.
Yes, human nature makes things fall apart.
Sadly the book falls apart with it.
Nevertheless, an impressive feat for Norman Rush.

Wendy says

This is one of my favorite books, but I am afraid to read it again and am always afraid to recommend it to other people. Many people dislike it, and it's certainly extremely pretentious. I think it mostly depends on whether you understand and buy that the character is pretentious. I don't know - when I read it, it rang true, particularly the main character's relationship with her ambitions, her strange relationship, and her body.

Sps says

Most pages of this book contain not only wondrous English but also some French and Latin, with frequent use of Setswana and Afrikaans, though there is a glossary for the latter two. In fact the verb *venir* on the last page changed my understanding of the whole preceding novel. So, ok, read it with the your Larousse and your OED (which should also serve for the Latin) at your side.

Much later-

After reading *Mortals* now too, the passages in here that are directly 'about' mating stand out:

What was not good enough was the usual form that mating takes. I had to realize that the male idea of successful love is to get a woman into a state of secure dependency which the male can renew by a touch or pat or gesture now and then while he reserves his major attention for his work in the world or the contemplation of the various forms of surrogate combat men find so transfixing. I had to realize that female-style love is servile and petitionary and moves in the direction of greater and greater displays of servility whose object is to elicit from the male partner a surplus--the word was emphasized in some way--of face-to-face attention. So on the distaff side the object is to reduce the quantity of servile display needed to keep the pacified state between the mates in being. (173)

Just then I was trying to see the relationship between Nelson's cynical observation that the meaning of life in every formulation seemed to reduce to finding or inventing a perfect will to be subject to, the relationship of that to scanting remarks about *la femme moyenne sensuelle*--which we agreed I was not, of course--finding her *raison d'etre* in the love of a male as close to alpha as she can get. (389)

Before reading-

I've been meaning to read this for at least 10 years, and only because I think some family members were

reading it. But what if I was wrong all this time?

En passant-

This book is immense. It has tannins and notes, body and bouquet and all the rest. Which, coming from a nondrinker, is basically meaningless, so consider it another example of Rush exposing the inadequacy of my vocabulary. Delight upon delight.

Jennifer says

Mating reminded me a bit of Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* in that it took me fifty or so pages to realize that the unnamed narrator was supposed to be female, and only then because she spent a page or so lamenting the width of her hips. I recognize that many other readers found this an extremely convincing portrait of womanhood, but as far as I'm concerned the only thing Rush nailed was the level of obsession over an ex-boyfriend that we can occasionally bring to bear, and I'm honestly not sure if that was an intentional theme of the author's or simply a side-effect of this book about a woman being all about a man.

Rush's novel is a fairly unrelenting slog - 477 pages of text rarely broken by paragraphing, let alone by the sweet relief of dialogue - narrated by an unlikeable and frankly unreliable woman who meets a guy she doesn't even really seem to like at a party and then stalks him across a desert because she has absolutely nothing better to do with her life. There's a scene shortly after she arrives at his compound (he's a supposed genius trying to start a feminist society) while she's still recovering from Kalahari-induced delirium in which he sneaks into her room to beg her not to reveal that they've already met in the outside world, lest it throw off the delicately balanced power between the sexes in his Brave New World and call into question his vaunted celibacy. You could read this straight, but if you consider that the whole thing was likely a fever-dream on her part it puts a fantastically creepy spin on the evolution and eventual dissolution of their relationship, and on the novel's final lines.

Upon completing this novel, I actually had to go back and look to see what else was up for the National Book Award in 1991, as by that point I half-suspected the publisher of having just slapped an unearned award seal on the cover to drive sales. (Not the case; it was apparently just a really thin year for literature.) I suppose the rationale was that Rush's work was *intellectual* - for my part, I found the novel to be more like it's narrator, simply pretentious and dull.

Mara says

"It always surprised me how few pygmalious, polymathic men had ever been interested in sprucing me up, given that I'm so interested and available, and that, as everyone notices first about me, I remember everything."

I do love our unnamed narrator, uncomfortably, the way one loves a friend who grows tedious gushing about her new love. I love that I had to look up words and that even if I can never say "inter pocula" to describe someone who is inebriated without feeling a little pretentious, it's a nice phrase to have in one's arsenal. I love that Victoria Falls is now at the top of my life list of travel destinations when I'd not had much interest

in Africa before.

And I entertain myself by coming up with subtitles for the book: Love Makes Smart People Stupid, He Just Isn't Into Remaking Himself for You the Way You Just Did for Him, Allegedly Great Men and the Women Who Love Them, and Why You Shouldn't Get into Relationships with Anthropologists.
