

THE PROS AND CONS OF COMPLICATED WOMEN

A complex woman is an interesting one. A difficult woman, however, is trouble. Ariel Leve and Andrew Mueller go head to head over whether “complicated” means hidden depths or angst-plagued airheads

ARIEL LEVE HER VIEW

I went out with someone once who said I exhausted him. When I pressed for more detail, he said, “See? This is what I mean.” People love to say nothing in life that’s worth having comes easy — until it applies to relationships. Men are willing to endure hard work in certain circumstances provided there’s a finite outcome. Fixing a damaged TV is fun. Fixing a damaged woman isn’t fun. It’s scary. Men don’t have the tools in their box for situations that require emotional dexterity. And therein lies the problem. Because initially, men are drawn to women who are challenging, charming and unpredictable. They find this exciting. Then, what happens is what was once exciting becomes tedious. Why? Because complicated women have layers and depth, and beneath every complicated woman is often a really wounded woman. It’s a package deal. Only once he realises he can’t repair what’s broken, he doesn’t know what to do. That’s when she becomes too much hard work.

I love it when men complain that their artist girlfriend is really difficult. That’s like going out with an accountant and complaining she’s too orderly. What’s tricky for women is that rules that apply to real life don’t necessarily apply to relationships. For instance, in real life we’re told that if we want something, we shouldn’t be afraid to ask for it. But I have yet to ask for something I need without being told I’m demanding. Unless “I need” is followed with “sex”, men panic. There’s no question I’m complicated. I require things like conversations about where the relationship is going and, when we

discover it’s going nowhere, I like to ask why. I like to investigate and examine, dig deep and dissect. Every conversation should be a discovery. What’s wrong with that? Here’s what’s wrong with that. There are four words no man wants to hear. Even worse than “your penis doesn’t work” is “we have to talk”. A penis can be fixed. A discussion will only lead to unresolved emotional differences and you’ll be confused.



HISTRIONIC DIVORCE PLAYLIST

You’re sleeping in the car and takings are up at the local offy. What’s on the iPod?

- MARILLION “KAYLEIGH”** — Classic passive/aggressive half apology for a chap whose Travel Lodge adultery has just been rumbled.
- HEART “ALONE”** — When the chorus crashes in, time it precisely with punching out your reflection in the bathroom mirror. The bathroom at your mum and dad’s house that is.
- JOHN WAITE “MISSING YOU”** — Perfect for the angry, denial phase that sees you making calls to her at 1am. From a bush in her front garden.
- PHIL COLLINS “AGAINST ALL ODDS”** — The sound of someone watching Richard Hammond’s Biggest Cranes and eating an Ocean Pie for one off his lap.

In my experience, responses to “we have to talk” range from an agitated, “again?” to a terse, “about what?” Although one ex told me talking is overrated. His version of how the relationship should work went along the lines of, if I woke up and he wasn’t there, I’d know it was over. My version of knowing it was over was when he said this.

I’ve been told that there are women out there who choose to be complicated to make themselves seem more desirable. I have yet to meet them. Maybe they hang out with the ones who wear chunky eyeglasses to appear more intellectual. Truly complicated women are not acting. They wear their scars with pride and are unafraid to show who they are. They want to be appreciated for their opinions, not rejected. They have the capacity for conflict because they are invested — and this is what makes them a viable and equal partner. If you want it to be easy, then don’t complain when it’s dull.

ANDREW MUELLER HIS VIEW

Men Are From Mars, declares the title of the book. Women Are From Venus. This is not true. Nothing in any manual of human relationships is. Because absolutely nobody in the field of relationships has a clue what they’re doing — if we did, there wouldn’t be a quid in writing books about it. However, reading Leve’s defence of the “complicated woman” did make me wonder from which planet she has descended. It contains several errors so fundamental that they could only have been made by a relatively recent arrival on Earth. Her crucial blunder is the declaration that “complicated women have layers and

depth”. In this writer’s (occasionally bruising) experience, women tend to project or create complication precisely to compensate for their lack of layers or depth. It’s a tributary of the same truth that the most dramatic, volatile, angst-plagued people you’ll ever endure are teenagers — who are, by and large, unworldly and uninteresting.

I’m well aware my own gender contains legions of feckless, self-absorbed jackasses, and I’m certain you wouldn’t need to leaf long through my back pages to find someone entitled to describe me as such. Let the record show also that all the women to whom I have ever felt meaningfully attracted have all been smart, accomplished, opinionated, curious and independent. I’m sure there are men who are looking for a pet that it is legally and socially acceptable to sleep with, but, as few of them read Esquire, they need not concern us here.

Leve’s suggestion that men enjoy repairing things is peculiar. Do any of us get pleasure from trying to fix a television? I don’t know or care how my TV works. I do like the fact that it can inspire, inform, stimulate, amuse or distract me. And if it ceased to do those things for reasons which weren’t readily comprehensible, it’d end up at the dump.

Romantic relationships are supposed to be fun. It’s love, not an assault course. And a reasonable, decent man, which is — or so we keep reading, despite mountainous evidence to the contrary — what women want, will swiftly find himself thinking, as he’s halfway up the rope ladder, shins barked and fingernails shredded by previous obstacles, “bollocks to this”. Life is short, and tough enough. The world heaves gratifyingly with women who are fascinating, charming, beautiful and basically quite nice with it. Why buy trouble?



ARIEL LEVE’S THE CASSANDRA CHRONICLES (PORTOBELLO) IS OUT NOW

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Over the next couple of weeks, with these words of warning in mind, I went on half a dozen dates in uptown wine bars, mid-town hotel lobbies and downtown sushi-fusion chill-out concept lounges. The women were, as promised, attractive, intelligent and successful. One ran a Long Island art gallery and complained that she only ever met lesbians; another, improbably, was a marriage guidance expert who had left three husbands in her wake. I thought I was on the set of *The Sopranos* with one date, who eventually confided that men were often scared off by the fact that her ex was a New Jersey mobster — though I think her moustache had something to do

I thought I was on the set of *The Sopranos* with one date. Her ex was a New Jersey mobster

with her single status. I could be picky and complain about the woman who’d had so much plastic surgery and was so generically good-looking that I spent the entire evening wondering if I could ask to see a “before” photograph and who talked a great deal about finding the “real me”, or that one of them ordered three courses (which, naturally, I had to pay for) and only ate two mouthfuls. I was also a little taken aback by being asked directly what my salary was, which was followed by a brief pause as she mentally transferred pounds into dollars, as I was by the girl who spent half the meal talking about the last person she’d been out with and how, in retrospect, perhaps she should have slept with him on the first date. I’m not the complaining type, though, and the truth is that I enjoyed myself. It got me into the swing of dating, and I even went on a couple of my own, set up by friends.

I might not have found love, but I was sufficiently encouraged, on my return, to take up the offer of joining the exclusive London-based dating agency Berkeley International, which has offices in Mayfair, Cannes, Monaco and New York. It wanted to set me up on a series of blind dates. I say blind, because — just as in America — you do not get to see photographs. After a confidence-boosting

(“Ooh, you’re lovely”, “Your voice is so sexy”, “I can’t believe you haven’t been snapped up yet”) meeting with the delightful Mairead Malloy, who runs the company and boasts a huge network of personal contacts, the team decides who might be suitable for you.

Despite the inherent difficulties in bringing people together, especially wealthy and successful ones, Malloy remains refreshingly romantic. “Too many people have forgotten what real life is,” she muses. “Money has taken over, and while it’s good to have plenty of it, it doesn’t buy you happiness in any form. OK, she can buy a stylist, liposuction, a boob job, etc, but when you go home to the converted barn with the white sofas and white carpets, the freshly ground coffee and the sun-dried tomatoes on the rice cake to stay thin, what do you have? No one.”

She too, thinks people are generally in too much of a rush, make hasty decisions based on perceptions that are not always accurate, and do not take the time to get to know each other. Still, she remains optimistic, based on her success stories, of helping people find love if they can try not to make snap judgements, or be too demanding and just be themselves. This last bit of advice is, of course, difficult when you’re painfully aware, over a cocktail and a plate of mezze in a West End members’ club, that you are being sized up, assessed, judged.

“The advantage of our way of doing things,” Malloy says, “is that you get to meet people who you wouldn’t ordinarily meet, and the ones you do have been carefully selected.” She does warn though that dating requires a strong nerve.

“You have to be able to reject and be rejected.” More than once she’s ended up with people pouring out their hearts. Just as well, then, that she’s studying for a masters in psychology.

My therapist would approve of the steps I’m taking to exclude my own warped instincts as to who I should go on dates with. I also believe he would approve of my public confession of loneliness. It is, he says, the final taboo. People will more readily admit to inter-species romances than they will to loneliness. And I’ve done it. In print. Of course, I’m not forgetting that those in relationships get lonely as well, that it is part of the human condition, but, on reflection, I think I’d rather be lonely with someone than on my own. ☎ (www.berkeley-international.com +44 20 7665 6651; www.premiermatchmaking.com +1 212 448 1141)