

Laughing and Looking for Love

by Roz Warren

“Sexually, I’m More of a Switzerland” is the second collection of personal ads from the London Review of Books, and a more entertaining series of outrageous little paragraphs you will never encounter.

Culled by editor David Rose from among that weekly’s more ordinary adverts, these seekers of love are smart and literate (there are footnotes!); their clever, lighthearted prose is equal parts courtship and comedy. Most of these scribes are middle-aged and older, with a few “youngsters” in their thirties weighing in. Which makes perfect sense -- if you regularly read the LRB, chances are you’re neither young nor stupid. You’re older and wiser, and capable of penning a little gem like:

“Man, 46. Animal in bed. Probably a gnu.”

Or beginning an ad with:

“All humans are 99.9% genetically identical, so don’t even think of ending any potential relationship begun here with “I just don’t think we have enough in common.”

These voices are erudite, witty and, frequently self-deprecating. Where the average personal ad is packed with lies, these folks not only refuse to hide their flaws, insecurities and eccentricities -- they lead with them:

"I'm not as high maintenance as my highly polished and impeccably arranged collection of porcelain cats suggests, but if you touch them, I will kill you."

"Tax-evading, nervous asthmatic (M, 47) seeks woman not unused to hiding under the kitchen table when the doorbell rings."

"Think of every sexual partner you've ever had. I'm nothing like them. Unless you've ever slept with a bulimic German cellist called Elsa."

There's an impressive range of human experience here, from the "angry organic window farmer" and "Scottish historical battle expert and BDSM fetishist" to the "scintillating sex monkey," as well as the more modest "someone who knows how to stop the oven from beeping." What do they seek in a mate? Everything from a "dangerous, tank-top wearing chemist" to "a bloke who doesn't spend 15 hours a day pretending he's a heroic blacksmith killing stuff in some other-dimensional village resembling Cottingsley, West Yorkshire, circa 1902."

Many of the ads are self-referential:

"I'm placing this ad against my better judgment. But then the last time I listened to my better judgment, it told me the only way to find a well-read articulate man over 45 was to hide in a bin outside his flat until he arrived home from work, then lunge at him as he struggled to put the key in his door."

It's a diverse crowd. Men. Women. Straights. Gays. What they all have in common is the desire to find that special someone. And a good sense of humor.

"I wrote this ad to prove I'm not gay. Man, 29. Not gay. Absolutely not."

"I'm not Edith Wharton, but then this isn't the Riviera."

"Some men can only beloved by their own mother. Not me, I've got Mr. Snugly Panda. Male, 36 and Mr. Snugly Panda, also 36."

"If I wear a mask, will you call me Batman? Just asking."

Some of the ads are so silly I wondered if the writer was actually looking for love or just clowning around. Probably a little of both. But, really, who cares? If you must look for love with a personal ad, why not have a little fun with it?

"I am Mr. Right! You are Miss Distinct Possibility. Your parents are Mr. and Mrs. Obscenely Rich. Your Uncle is Mr. Expert Tax Lawyer. Your cousin is Ms. Spare Apartment on A Caribbean Hideaway That She Rarely Uses. Your bother is Mr. Can Six You Up A Fake Passport For A Small Fee."

The ads may be playful, but it's easy to sense, between the lines, a serious longing for connection. When you've laughed your way through this little book, you'll put it back on the shelf hoping that all of these folks will find true love.

Or at the very least, a fabulous fling with a nervous asthmatic or a Scottish historical battle expert.

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