

Reflections on *Lace* (1982) by Shirley Conran

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In July 2021, I travelled for a family holiday to the sleepy, largely rural Shetland Islands (population 22,990) in far northern Scotland. My chosen holiday reading was Shirley Conran’s far less sleepy debut novel *Lace*. Following a recommendation from a friend, and anxious not to run out of reading material, I decided that Conran’s 741-page novel would provide adequate entertainment for the week-long trip. I had finished it by day 3.

Centred around the lives of 4 friends—aristocratic Maxine, carefree heiress Pagan, newly-wealthy Kate, and down-to-earth American Judy—the novel follows the women’s lives from Swiss finishing school to Paris couturiers, to marriage, children, and successful careers. From its first chapter, the appeal of *Lace* is evident. In 1978 New York, the four women travel separately to a meeting for which each has received a mysterious invitation from Lili, a glamorous and famous film star in her late twenties. Upon arrival, the women are startled to see each other and even more surprised when Lili emerges from another room, filled with “rage and fury,” to demand “which one of you bitches is my mother?” (26). Probably the most famous line in the novel, the answer is not provided until page 705. The intervening pages provide a series of scandalous and shocking events, including a sex act involving a goldfish, multiple sexual assaults, affairs, marriages, and friendships that endure “through sick and sin.”

Looking back at text messages I exchanged with my friend at the time, I am struck by how increasingly hyperbolic my reactions become. At page 130, when asked if I was enjoying it I reply “I think so?” The next day, on page 400, I declare “I think this book may change my life.” By the time I finished the book, two days later, I remark mournfully “I can’t believe I am not going to be able to read this for the first time again.” My response was remarkably similar to readers at the time. On the back of the Canongate 2012 reissue of the book, British author India Knight comments “There was life before *Lace* and life after *Lace*, and nothing was ever the same again.”

This novel, and this particular reading of it, catalysed an academic interest in what is referred to as the ‘bonkbuster’ (wildly popular and often lengthy novels, filled with explicit sex and dramatic events), and its position in the history of romantic fiction. At the end of the

author's note, Conran writes that "*Lace* lies waiting for another generation to discover it" (751). What has struck me, in the two years since reading this text and starting to explore the genre from an academic perspective, is how many similarities there are between myself and the first generation to read *Lace*. Reading this book for the first time as an adult made me realise that I was accessing a text that had defined romantic reading for a generation of women before me. What became obvious was that these women, who appeared sophisticated, knowing, and frankly 'grown-up' relative to my teenage self, had once been as curious and as clueless about sex and relationships as I was.

As recent focus group interviews I have conducted with women who read *Lace* in the 1980s made clear, texts like *Lace* were instrumental in the development of their understanding of sexuality, especially the possibility of female pleasure. In an author's note titled "Lace: The True Story," Conran tries to account for the global success of her novel. She writes: "women felt that they could not talk aloud about their sex lives to anyone they knew. When I wrote *Lace*, the average man thought the clitoris was a Greek hotel and the average woman didn't know how to enlighten him" (750). She goes on to say: "My Hollywood producer described *Lace* as an enormous, creamy meringue that is somehow good for you. What she meant was that *Lace* is a book that not only describes sex, it explores the feelings, the emotional aspects of sexual encounters, relationships and love" (750).

The lack of sexual education for women is something Conran highlights in *Lace*, pointing repeatedly to the dangers presented by men when women are unaware of their own agency or ability to consent. Huddled in conversation at their finishing school, seventeen-year-old Maxine is the girls' "unquestioned and respected authority in sexual matters" (60), "shar[ing] her information after lights-out" (61). The conversation is tinged with humour—as is much of the book. Outlining the "rules of sexual etiquette" (61), Maxine, when asked "what happens [when he touches you] under the underclothes?" Maxine replies "The boy strokes the fur," [at which] "There was a further silence while in the dark they all furtively stroked their pubic hair and felt nothing" (61).

Maxine similarly shares, "In some mysterious way a man couldn't control himself, so if he went berserk with sexual passion, it was your fault for being so attractive, which was called 'leading him on'" (60). In case the reader has missed the satire here, Conran contextualises this discussion by remarking "Their sexuality had been programmed and warped" (60).

The text is firm in its resolution that women are often victims of male sexual violence and men who take advantage of them. Before the start of the first chapter, a *Prelude* describes an abortion being performed on a "thin, thirteen-year-old girl" (3) in 1963 Paris. The novel's opening line reads "Scrape, scrape, scrape" (1), as "cold hard metal dug deep into the child's body" (1).

At its core, *Lace* is about female friendship—as Conran puts it, "It shows that close women friends can share important life experiences and support each other in ways that a man cannot" (751). The epilogue, one of my favourite parts of the book, offers a definition for lace, which acts as a coda for the themes of female friendship and of feminist progress.

LACE: a delicate, decorative fabric woven in an open web of different patterns and figures: a cord or string drawn through holes: to lace: to fasten: to add a dash of spirit: to interlace: to join together (fingers, patterns): to intertwine: to mingle or blend in an intricate way: to intersperse, to diversify, to change the patterns [emphasis in original].

My understanding of *Lace*, since that 2021 reading, has been further informed by my interviews with readers. *Lace* is an important book in the history of women's romantic reading, particularly in the UK. While *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) is often pointed to by romance scholars and readers as a watershed book for more open discussions of female sexuality, it's clear that *Lace*, ten years later, was providing a similar moment for its readers. Yet, I was astonished to discover that as of December 2023, there is no Wikipedia entry for *Lace*. From the vantage point of 2023, I can explore how *Lace* fits into the wider landscape of women's popular culture, sharing common threads with soap opera, and fewer than we might expect with chick lit (although Helen Fielding is cited on the back cover of my edition of *Lace*). While not strictly a romance novel, the genre of the bonkbuster, associated with Conran but also Judith Krantz, Jackie Collins, and Jilly Cooper, among others, is a key, and overlooked, chain in the historical development of women's romantic fiction.