

THE LIKEABILITY PROBLEM

Charlotte Wood asks whether we really need to relate to characters.

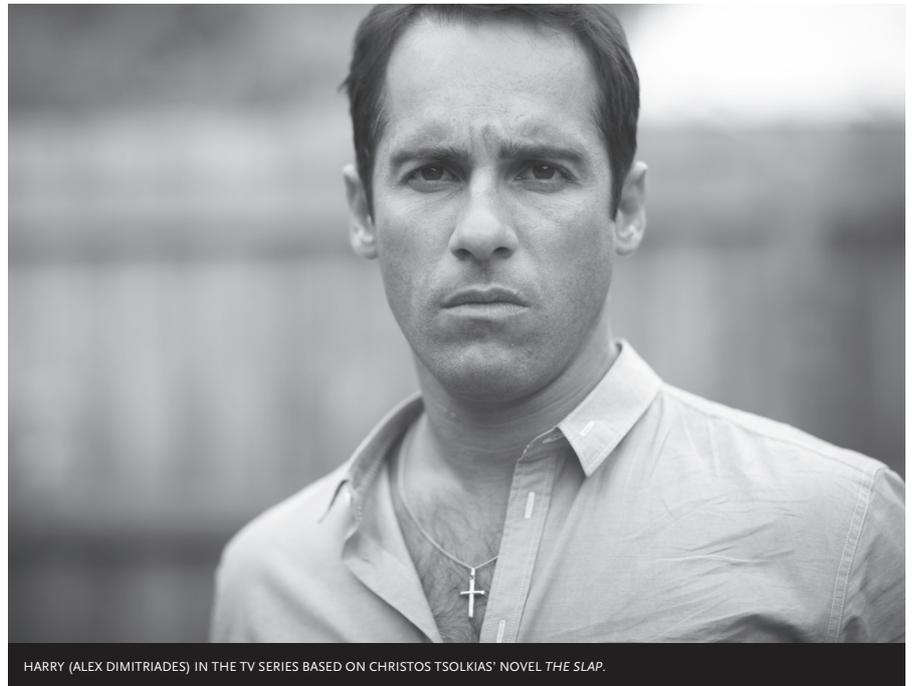
When Lionel Shriver finished her now-legendary book *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, her agent wrote to her: 'For the life of me, I don't know who is going to fall in love with this novel.'

The subject matter was too dark, the agent said, and the characters were *unsympathetic*. The book was rejected by around 30 publishers before it was finally accepted. Well over a million sales later, on the release of the film version, Shriver wrote: 'Many objected that its narrator, Eva, is "unattractive"... Rife with difficult characters and climaxing in a high-school massacre of the sort Americans are rightly ashamed of, *Kevin* was a poor commercial bet from the get-go.'

This isn't just a gratuitous dig at those who rejected her. Shriver is pointing out a phenomenon that has troubled me for some time: the way some readers, and perhaps more depressingly, literary agents and publishers, wish to find a character *likeable* before they can love a book.

In the early days of my novel *Animal People's* publication, I detected a whiff of the complaint that my protagonist Stephen — an unambitious, slightly bumbling 39-year-old man making his way through a single hellish day in his very ordinary life — was not very *likeable*.

This vibe came mainly from a particular kind of woman — capable, smart, non-nonsense, with a forceful personality. I can understand these frustrations, and mostly find them amusing. One woman took me aside after a talk and admonished me, *sotto voce* and with a kind of prim disapproval, that she



HARRY (ALEX DIMITRIADES) IN THE TV SERIES BASED ON CHRISTOS TSOLKIAS' NOVEL *THE SLAP*.

had found Stephen 'very frustrating' in my previous novel, *The Children*, and expected to do so again. I snickered inwardly at this, because I was still very much carrying Stephen around in my head; it was all I could do not to say, 'And I know *exactly* what he would think of you.' But she also sort of missed the point. While I find him completely lovable — as, judging by some of the letters and reviews I have had so far, do many readers — in some ways Stephen's purpose in the novel is to do exactly this, to frustrate and irritate, even infuriate, with his oblivion to social cues, his mistakes, his lack of direction. I have found it rather revealing how many reviewers (even those who love the book) have called him a 'loser' — a word I find troubling, but one that reveals much about the attitudes of those using it. My novel is partly an exploration of how we define success or failure in contemporary masculinity. For many, a man like Stephen — with no career ambition, no real estate and not much courage — represents Failure with a capital F. The fact he's also kind, intelligent, witty, observant and loving counts for not very much in contemporary city life, it seems.

My other books, especially *The Children*, have often been accused of being about 'dysfunctional' people and families — dysfunction being another version of the likeability problem. Luckily for me, other readers have responded to the novels because of, rather than despite, those

exact same character flaws. But this points to another common response in contemporary reading: the tendency for some readers to summarise characters' personalities in pseudo-psychological terms like 'commitment phobia', 'dysfunctional', 'post-traumatic stress disorder' and so on.

Some editors, even, fall prey to this reading-as-counselling phenomenon. One editorial report I received for *The Children* expressed disapproving irritation that the mother and adult daughter didn't have a more harmonious relationship (hello?), while another report — about a friend's tender, delicate novel — berated the writer for her main character's middle-aged passivity. The fact that the central theme of the novel was the lifelong paralysis caused by grief seemed to pass the editor by. Both reports suggested helpful remedies for making the characters better — nicer? — people. Both were ignored and more sophisticated editors found.

What's behind this kind of therapising reading? Perhaps such readers want to corral and pin down human behaviour in these terms because they believe (I think erroneously) it will help them understand people. Or is it an opposite impulse? Is it that once a person is diagnosed in such a way, one might be free from the obligation to *think* or engage any further — if all behaviour is just part of an almost medical

syndrome, separate from ordinary human existence, we can more easily put distance between the characters' uglinesses and failures and our own.

Whatever the motive, the issue of *likeability* in fictional characters is commonplace in reader responses, it seems. I only realised once I began to write this article that most of my favourite novels are populated by failures, frauds or otherwise deeply fractured protagonists. Paul Chowder in Nicholson Baker's *The Anthologist* comes to mind, or Waldo in Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala*, and Austen's infuriating Emma was always more interesting to me than noble Elizabeth Bennet, for all her intelligent flaws. I loved Anne Enright's new novel *The Forgotten Waltz* for the unsparing evocation of a woman's extramarital affair and her destruction of the happiness of those around her in the name of a crazed love. The truthfulness of it shimmered — and hurt.

Do I love these books because I *relate* better to failures and narcissists? I hope not, for my high school English teachers drilled into me that 'because I relate' was the laziest readerly response there is. If thirteen-year-olds can be educated out of this childish response to reading, why can't adults?

It's this laziness and immaturity that American writer Laura Miller took aim at last year on Salon.com, confessing during a book club discussion about Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* that she had 'grown to hate' reader remarks about the likeability or otherwise of the book's characters: 'It's a wilfully naïve and blinkered way to approach a work of literature,' she wrote, continuing: 'James Wood, in his book *How Fiction Works*, wrote that this complaint implies that "artists should not ask us to try to understand characters we cannot approve of — or not until after they have firmly and unequivocally condemned them." That we might recognise a character's unappealing qualities while simultaneously seeing life through her eyes, "and that this moving out of ourselves into realms beyond our daily experience might be a moral and sympathetic education of its own kind," doesn't seem to occur to far too many readers. Wood calls

this sort of criticism, so common in Amazon reader reviews, a "contagion of moralising niceness."

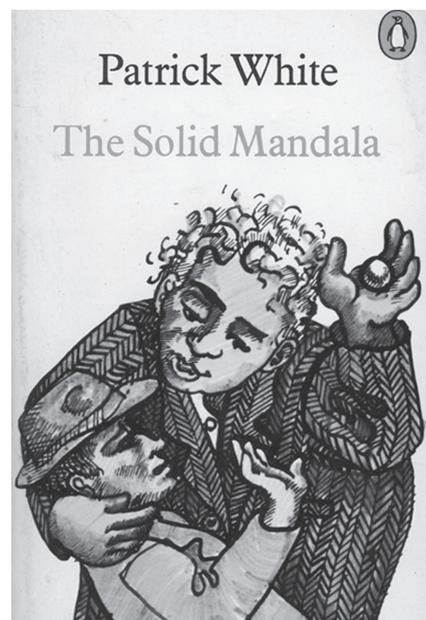
This is depressingly true: take a look at Amazon reviews or <www.goodreads.com>, and you'll find screeds of commentary from readers who seem to base the worth of a novel on whether or not they might be able to make friends with the characters in real life.

On the Australian scene, Christos Tsiolkas' *The Slap* has provoked the likeability debate more than any other book in recent memory, although Malcolm Knox's upper-class jerks in *Jamaica* and previous novels have aroused similar loathing among readers. I confess I found the misogyny of Knox's men in *Jamaica* so repellent it was a difficult read, and the self-involvement of most of Tsiolkas' characters was infuriating to say the least. But did this detract from the worth or otherwise of the books? I don't think so.

Yet both Tsiolkas and Knox have been suspected of misogyny themselves because of the way their characters behave — another high-school-level mistake. As Tsiolkas retorted, 'I think they are confusing the writer with the character. I think there's a laziness now in how we read. We read for confirmation of who we are, rather than for a challenge of who we are.'

I have been discussing the problem of likeability online recently, notably on Twitter and the magazine site *The Hoopla* <www.thehoopla.com.au>. The commentary from readers in these discussions was insightful — and to me, very heartening. For every reader who deplores 'unsympathetic' or 'dysfunctional' characters there is another — hallelujah — who doesn't give a toss about niceness or decent behaviour.

These readers cited *Lolita*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Slap*, *Anna Karenina*, Hilary Mantel's *Beyond Black* and *Gone with the Wind* among many loved books whose central characters are more than a little unpleasant. A character doesn't have to be attractive, noble or even smart, these readers said, for a book to be enriching. More important was truthfulness — that the characters



behaved convincingly, rather than pleasantly. As for morality, a crucial distinction was made between that of a character and the morality of a novel itself. These readers were adamant that the moral position of the novel, not the characters within it, is what counts.

Tsiolkas' point about reading in order to have our self-image challenged is echoed, I think, in the popularity of Shriver's novel. Giving life and voice to repellent or taboo feelings and ideas (that some men despise women, that some women might not always feel love towards their children) not only recognises the complexity of human existence, but surely allows us the freedom to bring into the light and examine the shameful, repellent parts of ourselves. I read fiction for the same reason I write it: to work out how to live. And when, in the act of reading, I become these flawed people — with their evasions and cowardice and selfishnesses — I can bring to the surface these uglinesses in myself, and see them more clearly. This is why I love fiction — it reveals me to myself with a complexity and richness I cannot find anywhere else.

This is the extended version of an article that originally appeared on *The Hoopla* <thehoopla.com.au>

Charlotte Wood's new novel is *Animal People*. Her other novels include *The Children* and *The Submerged Cathedral*, and she will publish *Love & Hunger*, a non-fiction book about cooking, in April 2012.