The Trouble With Women

Tim Lott analyses male emotions with a rare and uncomfortable honesty in The Love Secrets of Don Juan, says JULIE MYERSON

The Love Secrets of Don Juan
by Tim Lott
304pp, Viking, £14.99

"GROWN women who have soft toys need a harsh punishment," declares Spike, the grumpy, middle-aged, all-but-divorced narrator of Tim Lott's extremely funny and likeably dangerous new novel. It's not a line that's going to win Spike (or Lott) many friends - not female ones anyway - but it certainly made this (female) reader laugh loudly.

This savage little declaration highlights what I most admire about Lott's work: he wants to explore genuine emotions, he's intensely interested in the reality of people and he absolutely refuses to contrive to make himself cuddly. Lott is hard-core - relentlessly, unswervingly honest. He writes from the complex, unresolved centre of his heart, whether or not it's comfortable, and whether or not it sits well in this era dominated by the female emotional agenda.



Spike is stuck in a miserable situation. He's living alone in a bedsit, his career in advertising on the slide; he's in the process of separating from his wife of 10 years, struggling with mediation, guilt, fury. But he's also trying to be an adequate father to his young daughter.

Knowing he's messed up, but also terrified of life without a woman, he puts a suitably witty, arm's-length ad in a lonely hearts column and sets out on a series of blind dates with ever decreasing optimism. As each turns to disaster, he begins to dissect his past relationships with women. How can he change? How can he stop himself making the same mistakes all over again?

These former relationships - described with aching, often humiliating bluntness - make up the core of the novel. The women are all convincingly real, and Spike's baffled attempts to engage with them are reliably comic and chaotic. But they are also suffused with love and longing. From the moment when, aged 13, he first puts an astonished finger inside a girl and discovers "that place was where you escaped yourself, where you shook free from the lead-weighted dense aloneness", Spike grasps that these are mysteries worth trying to solve.

Many years later, when he falls in love with a woman because of the polite way she laughs in the wrong place at a joke, you understand that there is great tenderness here: Spike is hypnotised and enraptured by the swervy unpredictability of the opposite sex. Noting that this last woman wasn't even very good in bed, he adds: "I didn't mind. I felt I was with someone - I don't know... not better put together than me exactly, but her raw materials seemed to be of higher quality." When this woman leaves him after a year or so for someone wealthier and stupider, it breaks his heart. "What lesson can I learn from this? The most fundamental for any man. Be watchful. Never, never take a good woman for granted. The price of love is perpetual vigilance."

A pessimistic part of me believes this kind of eager, blunt honesty may drive even more female readers away. But it would be a terrible shame. For, more than anything, this is a novel about love and hope, fear and panic, sexual warmth - the undying impulse men and women have to try to understand each other. I can't remember when I last read a more meticulous and impassioned account of man's desire for feminine company, for that elusive union between the sexes.

Beneath all the bluster and wit, Spike is trying to get a hold on the whys and wherefores of his most fundamental desires. "There is no complete fulfilment outside this," decides Spike, "underlying all that messy human stuff, there's a near-unbreakable bond, a connection that comes from a little packet of energy around that space in the chest where the heart is located." It's easy to fall in love - but how to stay there?

This is a question that Lott wisely resists answering. Instead, Spike offers his small daughter a final, tough secret about grown-ups: "We don't know what we're doing. We don't know where we're going. And we don't know what we think." And sure, you think, that may be true. But at least this passionate, witty and tender novel makes us feel it might be worth trying to find out.

Source: *The Guardian*