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# JILLY COOPER

sex, socialising and survival



Between the Covers

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# Between the Covers

## sex, socialising and survival

Jilly Cooper



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To the late Godfrey Smith
With love and gratitude

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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

Nineteen sixty-eight was a miracle year for me. At thirty-one, I was poised to give up my job in publishing, because my husband Leo and I were about to adopt a longed-for baby boy.

Then, at a dinner party, I sat next to the glorious Godfrey Smith, ex-president of the Oxford Union, great journalist, author of many fine books, one of which, *The Business of Loving*, was a Book Society Choice. Godfrey was also editor of the *Sunday Times* colour magazine. During dinner I regaled him with tales of how disastrous I was domestically as a young working wife. I cited one occasion when my red silk scarf strayed into a launderette wash, so my husband Leo's rugger kit came out streaked like the dawn, and he boasted of being the only member of the rugger team with a rose-pink jockstrap.

Godfrey laughed a great deal and asked me to write a piece about it, which he published in the colour mag in early 1969.



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This was enhanced by a very flattering photograph of me joyfully holding our new baby, Felix.

Imagine my excitement when a week later Harold Evans, the great overall editor of the *Sunday Times*, summoned me and offered me my own column to write about anything I liked. The column amazingly lasted for thirteen years through the seventies and early eighties, often chronicling my chaos as a wife and mother working from home, and our lunatic but hugely enjoyable social life.

*Sunday Times* readers did tend to like or loathe what I wrote, with my first column upsetting them so much, Harold Evans was able to fill my next week's column with their furious letters.

I am therefore delighted that my dear publishers Transworld are reissuing a collection of some of my favourite columns. You will find the selection covers among other things our London life in the sexy sixties and seventies and our move from Fulham to Putney Common.

What I love most about the book is that it brings back, not only my macho, forthright, funny husband Leo, who died of Parkinson's disease in 2013, but also my children Felix and Emily as they were growing up, my sweet parents and so many friends and adventures.



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On the other hand, rereading the pieces, some fifty years later, I wonder: *Was this really me, so up myself and so utterly obsessed with sex? Did I really dare write that?* But I do so hope that readers both young and old enjoy them.

Lots of love,
Jilly Cooper CBE xx



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# The Young Wife's Tale

Looking back on the first fraught year of my marriage, I realise we lived in total screaming chaos. I spent most of my time in tears – not tears of misery, but exhaustion. I couldn't cook, I couldn't sew, I had no idea about running a house, my knowledge of sex was limited to Eustace Chesser and Lady Chatterley – yet suddenly I was on trial: sexually, domestically, commercially, socially, and aware that I was inadequate on every count.

My husband's remarks, like: 'Do you really think the book case is the right place for a mouldy apple?' would wound me to the quick – or that despairing 'Let's start as we mean to go on' as he looked at the flotsam of clothes strewn over the bedroom, and resented the fact that I had already appropriated five and three-quarters of the six drawers and three out of four of the coat hangers.

As we made love most of the night, I found it impossible to get up in the morning, cook breakfast, do my face and get



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out of the house by 8.15. Then followed an exhausting day at the office, only punctuated by one of those scurrying, shopping lunches. I was seldom home – due to the caprice of London Transport – before seven o'clock. Then there was the bed to be made, breakfast to be washed up, the cat to be fed and chatted up, the day to be discussed and supper to be cooked. This was a proper supper (garlic, aubergines and all). The way to a man's heart was supposed to be through his stomach, so there was no getting away with pork pie or scrambled eggs. When I cooked moussaka for the first time we didn't eat until one o'clock in the morning.

We were very gregarious and were asked out a great deal. My husband also played cricket and rugger at weekends, so as a besotted newly-wed I was only too happy to abandon the housework and watch him score tries and centuries.

As a result the flat became dirtier and more chaotic. The only time we ever really cleaned it up was when in-laws or relations came to stay, and my husband would then say that it was just like a barracks before the annual general inspection. 'How pretty those dead flowers look,' said a kindly aunt. 'Have they become fashionable in London?'

The only other possible moment to clean the flat was on my husband's occasional TA nights. Then I would hare



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round like a maniac, dusting and polishing; hoping, for once, to welcome him home scented and beautiful in a negligée with a faint smell of onions drifting from the kitchen. It never worked. Invariably he would let himself in unnoticed to find me tackling a mountain of dust under the bed with my bottom sticking out.

It was only after nine months, when the ice compartment wouldn't shut, that I learnt for the first time about defrosting the fridge. Things in the fridge were another headache. There were always those nine reproachful bowls of dripping, the tins of blackening tomato purée, the fish stock that never graduated into soup and the lettuce liquidising in the vegetable compartment.

Laundry was another nightmare. It took me months to master the mysteries of the launderette. Very early on in our marriage, a red silk scarf found its way into the machine with the rest of the washing. My husband's seven shirts came out streaked crimson like the dawn, and for days he wore cyclamen underpants and claimed he was the only member of the fifteen with a rose-pink jock-strap. Once the washing was done it lay around in pillowcases for ages, waiting to be ironed. My mother-in-law once slept peacefully and unknowingly on a pillowcase full of wet clothes.



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In fact my ironing was so disastrous that for a while we tried the laundry. This presented insuperable problems. One week we were too poor to get it out, the next weekend we'd be away, the next they'd shut by the time we got there, then finally we found they'd lost all our sheets. One laundry, we discovered afterwards from the butcher next door, was notorious for 'losing' sheets.

Our own dinner parties were not without incident. The first time my mother came to dinner the blanquette of veal was flavoured with Vim, and the chocolate mousse, left in the fridge all night, was impregnated with garlic and Kit-e-Kat. The cat once ate his way through two large packets of frozen scampi and, the night my husband's boss came to dinner, stripped the salad niçoise of its tuna fish and anchovies.

The flat, as I have said, got grimier and grimier, and the same week that a fungus began to grow under the sink I overheard someone say at a cocktail party that we lived in 'engaging squalor'. It was the last straw, and we hired a daily woman. It was not a success. I spent far more time than before cleaning up before she came, and after the first few weeks the standard went down. Then my husband came back one lunch hour and found her in our bed with the electric blanket and the wireless on.



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The cats – we soon acquired a second – did not add to the ease of our married life. Whenever the doorbell rang I used to drench myself in scent to cover the smell of tomcat, and in summer there were fleas. The landlord forbade pets in the house, so the day he came to look over the flat the cats were locked in the wardrobe.

In spite of the 'engaging squalor', our spare room was permanently occupied; girls who had left their lovers or husbands who had left their wives, people who came from abroad or up from the country, all found a flea-bitten home there. The hall was always full of carrier bags full of knickers or the cornucopian suitcases of birds of passage. One man came for two days and stayed for four months. One drunken Irishman who started rampaging lustfully round the flat in the still watches of the night was locked in his bedroom. Next morning we found him in the kitchen making coffee, and the imprint of his huge sleeping body remained outside on the long grass we called our lawn.

'When I was first married,' said a friend wistfully, 'I could never make mayonnaise. Humphrey kept kissing me and the oil would go in great dollops instead of drips, and the whole thing curdled. Now we've been married five years and can



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afford a mixer, and I make perfect mayonnaise every time now – it's my marriage that has curdled.'

We have been married seven years now – I still can't make mayonnaise – but we're not itching, and our marriage hasn't curdled. Even so I asked my husband to name, after seven years, the things that irritated him most about me.

His answers came out pat and immediate: using his razor on my legs and not washing it out; not putting tops back on tonic or soda water, or the ice tray back in the fridge; those little balls of Kleenex everywhere; the eighteen odd socks in his top drawer; the red rings of indelible lipstick on his handkerchief; running out of loo paper/soap/toothpaste; forgetting to turn off lights/fires/the oven; and, of course, my friends.

'OK, OK,' I said crossly. Then I remembered a poem by an American poet called John Frederick Nims, which my husband had sent me when I was feeling suicidal early on in our marriage, which had suddenly made everything all right:

> *My clumsiest dear, whose hands shipwreck vases,*
> *At whose quick touch all glasses chip and ring . . .*
> *Forgetting your coffee spreading on our flannel,*
> *Your lipstick grinning on our coat.*
> *So gaily in love's unbreakable heaven*



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*Our souls on glory of spilt Bourbon float.*
*Be with me, darling, early or late, smash glasses,*
*I will study wry music for your sake.*
*For should your hands drop white and empty*
*All the toys of the world would break.*



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# Losing Face

I was sitting in the car with a teenage friend the other day, when a girl in a green shift and long blonde hair sauntered by.

'She's pretty,' I said, thinking narcissistically that she looked faintly like me.

'If you like that sort of thing,' said my teenage friend, shifting her chewing gum to the other side of her mouth.

'What sort of thing?' I demanded.

'Oh, those draggy clothes and that old-hat make-up. I mean, no one looks like that any more.'

I digested this and craned my neck to look in the driving mirror. Was I out of date, too? Did no one look like me either? I picked up the evening paper when I got home and found a feature on eye make-up. 'This is the face of 1971,' said the headline. 'Lashings of false eyelashes but chuck out that eyeliner.'

Charming, thought I. Eyeliner is the only thing that transforms my eyes from very piggy to not so piggy, and the only



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time I wore false eyelashes one of them fell off during dinner, and my host stamped on it, thinking it was an insect.

After a night of brooding, I rose early and took a bus to the West End. In one of the big department store windows were large notices announcing: 'Monsieur Claude Duval, the expert international beautician, is over for a week from France to give free advice on make-up and introduce his new range of cosmetics.' That's my boy, I thought.

M. Claude turned out to be a miracle of rare device in lilac suiting, with fixed velvety eyes, white hands that drooped like snowdrops and a rose-petal complexion. A crowd of women shoppers, resting their swelling ankles, were watching him at work.

'Remove Madame's make-up,' he told a minion as I settled into the dentist's chair. When all traces of the face of 1960 had been removed, he peered at me through a magnifying glass and gave a deep sigh – the sort of sigh that Hercules might have given when first confronted with the Augean stables.

'Madame's skin has been totally neglected,' he said.

Starting to weed my eyebrows ferociously with a pair of scissors, he regaled his enraptured audience with a list of my imperfections.



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There were red veins, open pores, whiteheads. Madame also had a combination skin, and to deal with both oily patches and ultra-dry patches she would need entirely different kinds of cleansing cream, moisturisers, toning lotion, skin food, night cream, morning cream, etc.

The minions bustled round, assembling bottles on the counter. Madame, M. Claude went on, would also need anti-wrinkle cream for beneath her eyes, and soothing lotion for puffy eyelids. Madame had problem hair, too, greasy with a trace of dandruff. She must have medicated lotion.

There were now enough bottles on the counter to open a chemist's shop. Was it necessary to buy all of them? I asked nervously. M. Claude was horrified. What was the point of his giving me free advice, if I didn't buy any of his products? My skin was in a very serious condition. Did I want to look like an old woman by the time I was thirty-five?

'It is very difficult,' he told his audience with a sigh, 'to paint over an imperfect surface.' He started painting huge circles round my eyes, dark blue, now yellow – 'to reflect the yellow in Madame's eyes' – now pink, now white.

Why hadn't he perfected a lacquer that would spray an expression of permanent amiability on to the face?



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