

# A Story of Marriage and Escapism

Adam Ross

IN THE THRILLING DEBUT NOVEL, *MR PEANUT* BY ADAM ROSS, REALITY TWISTS AND TURNS AS THE PAST COLLIDES WITH THE PRESENT.

*Mr Peanut* is the debut novel from American author, Adam Ross. It is an elaborate study of marriage with a structure that mirrors the qualities of a Möbius strip and layers of narrative that echo the twisted perspective of an Escher print. Fans of Hitchcock will notice the big influence his films have on this book, while readers of Murakami and Calvino will appreciate Ross's grasp of the surreal. His dissection of marriage, more specifically marriage in crisis, takes the form of three stories; one of which is the overarching narrative which drives the plot, while the second and third, as well as being tied into the first storyline, provide two further angles on Ross's unifying themes of love, identity and escapism. Together, these three tales offer a cautionary lesson on the vicissitudes of modern marriage, wrapped up in a detective novel that keeps the reader guessing until the last page.

*Mr Peanut* took Ross 13 years to write and was inspired by an extraordinary family fable, as he explains: "The novel's genesis came when my father told me a suspicious story about my cousin, who was morbidly obese, suffered from severe depression and nut allergies, and committed suicide, according to her husband, the only witness conveniently, by ingesting a handful of peanuts at their kitchen table on the heels of an argument. The story left me thunderstruck, I was sure he'd killed her, and in a single sitting, I wrote three chapters that closely resemble what's in the book now. But then I pulled up, because I'd written my way into something I didn't understand yet. That was back in 1995." Ross describes the writing of his novel as a "painfully organic process", compounded by the fact that he chose to structure it on a Möbius strip (a one-sided, one-edged surface that gives the appearance of two-sidedness). The winding plot includes improbable timelines, flashbacks and even a character called Mobius who both features in the main narrative and introduces the more central of the two sub-plots.

The contrivance of the looping structure won't be to everyone's taste and means that on first reading the plot doesn't stand up to close scrutiny, but for Ross this was part of his plan: "I intentionally shaped the novel as a Möbius band, having it loop back on itself, since marriage, like that oddly shaped figure,

is an institution where two people are supposed to be walking on the same side of the street, but oftentimes appear to be on completely opposite sides [and] in writing *Mr Peanut*, I tried to construct a text that would also reward re-reading." It is true that the complete picture is unclear until after the astonishing finale but that doesn't necessarily detract from the enjoyment of the novel as whole. Ross is adept at employing dramatic hooks that propel the reader towards the climax of all three of the stories and in turn all three of the marriages.

The marriages explored in *Mr Peanut* are those of David and Alice, Sam and Marilyn and Ward and Hannah. The first, that of David and Alice, forms the narrative that opens and closes the novel and arches over the other two relationships. David is accused of Alice's murder (her death is an exact replica of Ross's family fable); Sam and Ward are the two detectives called in to investigate. Rather surprisingly, and at first incongruously as the novel is set in contemporary New York, Sam is the infamous Sam Sheppard accused of murdering his wife Marilyn in the 1950s. It is a testament to Ross's skills as writer, however, that he manages to include this well-known and established story in his novel without detracting from his own narrative. Although it is impossible to ignore the incongruity, the story of Sam and Marilyn Sheppard is absorbing from the start. Ross also had good reason to include it in his novel: "In my initial drafting, the two detectives I'd started with were so obviously allegorical that I decided I needed a grey-area figure who embodied the whole continuum of guilt and innocence within marriage. With the Sheppard story you have a murder mystery and a marriage that you can research until Kingdom Come, but are still forced, in spite of all the evidence, to speculate about Sheppard's guilt or innocence, to make an imaginative leap. Something we do all the time and quite cavalierly about other people's marriages."

It is undoubtedly true that we all like to speculate about other people's marriages, but it is hard not to judge when a relationship is laid bare as the three are in *Mr Peanut*. Each is a marriage in crisis, for different reasons, with distinctive personalities coming to bear on the issues in question. Ross does not hold back when it comes to displaying the darker side of human nature with



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all its foibles and weaknesses; but quite where our sympathies lie will depend on the mindset (and possibly gender) of the reader. Love is a universal theme throughout history and art, but in Ross's hands it is more than just a theme, it is the answer to what makes us behave the way we do when we choose to share our lives with another human being. David and Alice have been married for 13 years, David adores his wife, but the novel opens with him fantasising about her death. When that fantasy becomes a reality, the story of how he came to be dreaming of ways in which his wife could die is gradually revealed and the narrative becomes a treatise on love and hatred and what happens when events or circumstances beyond our control impact on our relationships.

"I feel like so much of the time we have to smack ourselves and say, 'Snap out of it. Life is right in front of you.' Egoism is our default mode of escape, and this is particularly true when it comes to those we're sharing our lives with – wives, husbands, children. Sad, but true, and I wanted to explore that in the novel."

The second overriding theme in Ross's novel is that of escapism, which is inevitably linked with our sense of ourselves, both as individuals and in relation to others. Means of escape, of wanting to be someone else, are explored in many different ways in *Mr Peanut*, from David's gaming avatars, to Sam's philandering, from Alice's desperate need to lose weight (and therefore to change) to Marilyn's fantasies of running away with her unborn child. However, too many of these modes of escape eventually lead to tragedy and destruction of everything the characters hold dear, including life itself, and as such the novel serves as a timely reminder of how important it is to accept who we are and what we have, as Ross points out: "I feel like so much of the time we have to smack ourselves and say, 'Snap out of it. Life is right in front of you.' Egoism is our default mode of escape, and this is particularly true when it comes to those we're sharing our lives with – wives, husbands, children. Sad, but true, and I wanted to explore that in the novel."

Not all of the marriages end in disaster, the shorter of the two sub-plots, the story of the second detective Ward and his wife Hannah has a happy ending, despite its rather bizarre exploration of just how far one woman is prepared to go to get her husband to notice her. Ross points out that "it was a shorter, more comic way of looking at marriage's ruts and impasses – couples' crazy Mexican standoffs. To my mind, Ward and Hannah are the heroes of the novel because they manage to work out their problems without collateral damage." However, this particular story fizzles out in the first third of the novel and is distant memory by the time we reach the tragic dénouements of both David and Alice and Sam and Marilyn's stories.

Certainly with David and Alice's marriage, the reader is left with a stark reminder of what can happen when couples stop communicating with each other and simply co-exist, sharing a space but not a life.

Happy marriages and functional relationships may be reassuring, but they don't make for riveting

drama nor do they provide material for a page-turning thriller as exhilarating as *Mr Peanut*. Whether Ross's view of modern marriage is pessimistic or realistic, at a time when divorce rates in the US stand at around 50% of first marriages, perhaps there is an important message to be gleaned from all the stories presented here. Ultimately honest communication, however difficult or painful, is key to any relationship. Without the ability to talk and listen when others talk to us, no marriage is going to survive. When embarking on a lifelong commitment, people are often if not always reminded that relationships take work and cannot be taken for granted; while we work at our own we can enjoy escaping into Ross's creation and experience an alternative reality, one that we can easily return from.

*Mr Peanut* is published by Jonathan Cape in July. [www.adam-ross.com](http://www.adam-ross.com).

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