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THE MEN WHO LOVED EVELYN COTTON

By Frank Ronan

Pantheon, \$16.95

That Evelyn has spent two and half decades searching for love, seldom finding it at all and never finding it for good, sounds like slender pickings for a wise and comic novel. It would be slender indeed if our eye and ear stayed fixed on Evelyn. Instead we find ourselves immediately entranced by the nameless narrator, whose eyes and ears are always focused on Evelyn. He has loved her for 24 years.

Yet, they have made love only twice. The first time, he tells us in the novel's opening line, was 23 years ago. The second was yesterday. For the interim he has stayed her friend and trusted confidant. She has never requited the consuming passion he has felt from a distance. She has instead drifted through five other men, four of them distinctly poor choices.

The first was Simmy at Oxford, the narrator's friend, whose ardor for Evelyn iced over when she told him she was pregnant. Simmy found Evelyn had become "extremely difficult" under the circumstances and moved on to a life that left no room for her.

So Evelyn found what seemed the perfect match: a don who married a succession of single mothers to complete his sense of a normal household. "There have been few marriages as short or as unsatisfactory; though, in a way, they both got what they wanted out of it, for a while." He gave Evelyn and her baby their own room upstairs, demanded no conjugal nor domestic duties of her, left her an envelope of household money each week, allowed her plenty of time to wade into a burgeoning writing career, and finally bored her into leaving him.

Looking for "the next fire within leaping distance," Evelyn met Charles Felix who "stepped into her life at just the moment when she most needed an heroic rescue." A painter whose flat was littered with dirty clothes and splattered paint, Felix at least made Evelyn feel more like a conventional bride. He let her clean up after him. During this time, the narrator came to live with the couple and would sit up for hours with Evelyn waiting for Charles to come home, Evelyn believing he was out drinking, the narrator knowing about Charles' many nubile conquests. When she finally learned what she had married, she made love with the narrator for the first time. But when he asked her to come away with him, she could say only that he was very sweet.

She would instead leave Felix to spend the next two decades with the scheming Julius Drake, Felix's accountant, who specialized in watching and pinching the money of artists. Here, too, Evelyn got something from the relationship. Drake became the model for the macho clods of Evelyn's novels. But both the narrator and reader find themselves hard put to see how she could have stayed with this avaricious egomaniac for so long. "It was peculiarly characteristic of him that he was unaware of his effect on people around

him. He would go through a sleeping household at four in the morning, slamming doors on his way to the bathroom. But he had no idea that he was making a noise, because he wasn't disturbing himself." He was, in fact, the spur that nudged Evelyn into becoming the leading feminist writer of the time. From this chauvinist swine she carved her bacon. But his accounting skill kept it from her. By the time she had enough of cheat, boor and sycophant Drake, Hugh Longford had come upon the scene, the young Irish thatcher who watched Evelyn's misery from the rooftop of the Drake barn.

He became also "the first man to make Evelyn happy" and, as such, wins the affection of the narrator who has long since given up on having Evelyn and wants only her contentedness. Longford was her equal, soon her friend and finally her lover. At last with a good man, Evelyn became part of a couple that got "closer to happiness than most people ever do."

All this while, the narrator has loved her. His life has not been at a complete standstill. He has worked, married, even had children. But he and his wife Sally married "because it seemed to be our fate," not because she was the passion of his life. They merely tread water at the surface of each other's existence while the narrator's heart hangs somewhere around Evelyn's skirt hem. He urges us to imagine his obsessive displacement: "Each of your children was conceived while you thought about Evelyn Cotton."

Will this turn out to be *David Copperfield*? Will these two at long last see they belong together? Don't hold your breath.

Besides, it's too hard to hold your breath while chuckling at the wit and insight far beyond what you might expect of an Irish first-novelist merely 26 years old. *The Men Who Loved Evelyn Cotton* boasts two virtues which mark Ronan as a new talent worth watching: its wry voice and its wonderfully mature blending of male sensibility deeply attuned to a feminine perspective. The novel itself was reportedly written on a dare from a "rather well-known feminist."

These virtues wed frequently as Ronan addresses the reader directly and puts us in his place. After his first tryst with Evelyn, he suggests "it is a terrible thing to look down from that height of ecstasy and know that it doesn't matter if you die now because you will never be happier." But he immediately sobers: "You have no idea that Evelyn Cotton is pregnant again. That she has no reason for sleeping with you except to revenge herself on Charles Felix who is insisting that she has an abortion. That it could have been you or it could have been anyone else. You are still too young and too much of a man to realise that there is nothing special about what you can do in bed. Like most men, you think that there is no one else like you. You still have romantic ideas about love and potency."

Ronan often sees men cynically and always sees Evelyn with feminist sympathy: "Her life was crowded out with the children, with Julius, lovers and a job. She got to the stage where it wasn't possible to go to the lavatory alone. . . . If she was at home, she

would have to take a small, whimpering child with her, out of guilt for the poor, half-motherless thing."

The book has its first-novelist flaws, chief among them the long disappearance of the narrator as an active character for much of the book's second half—perhaps because Hugh's presence mitigates against a second devoted lover center stage—but *The Men Who Loved Evelyn Cotton* rises high above those flaws to become both a delightful read and a happy promise of things to come from Frank Ronan.