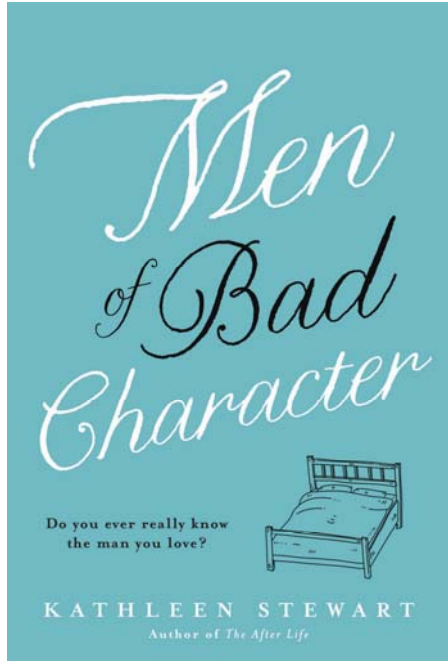


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BOOK CLUB NOTES
MEN OF BAD CHARACTER
KATHLEEN STEWART

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Rose has lived with David Flower for eighteen years when her vague premonitions of doom become manifest after he is found guilty of a terrible crime. After he is sent to prison, Rose is stricken with anxiety and dread, but then she meets Gary Gravelly and embarks on an unsettling affair. For although Gary is devastatingly handsome and sometimes charming, he clearly has problems, not the least of which are his secretive drinking and gambling. Rose's anxiety escalates as the months pass and Gary subtly pulls away, and as she begins to suspect that she has started another relationship founded on secrets and lies. She has the prickly intuition that things are 'wrong', but is unsure whether this anxiety is being driven by her past experiences or something genuinely sinister in her new lover. When she finally attempts to break free from Gary, she realises how manipulative he can be. Rose's first-person account is an unnerving patchwork of past and present as she struggles to untangle truth from fantasy. This haunting novel explores the emotional ties that can bind us to the past and threaten to derail the future.

1. The cover of the book asks: 'Do you ever really know the man you love?' This question might be asked of both men and women. Should we really expect to know everything about another person? Do we ever really know ourselves?

2. 'He was my child really, he'd been my child since I'd seen at the beginning how shut-down he was.' (p. 10); 'I was his teddy bear, his comforter, I see now.' (p. 45) Rose had always looked after David and then finds herself doing the same for Gary. Kurt tells Rose that David was looking for a mother, and Herman the intuitive hairdresser tells her that Gary wants a 'Mummy' (p. 223). Is Rose unconsciously seeking to compensate for the lack of love given to her by her own mother, Claire, in becoming a mother figure to her partners?

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3. In giving testimony, a rape victim is often treated like a pariah, and Rose also finds herself maligned when she refuses to lie to protect David: 'I was going against everyone's way, it seemed, and sometimes it felt to me as if that was the most shocking thing.' (p. 35) She feels abandoned by her friends and shunned by strangers: 'Then I was left there, part of the refuse David had left behind.' (p. 14) She actually begins at one point to blame herself for David's actions, worrying that her lack of interest in sex may have driven him to do it (pp 173–4). Guilt is something often shared by the victims and associates of the accused. Discuss.

4. Flowers are referred to metaphorically in both Rose's name and David's surname. Rose refers to David and his brothers Bernard, Gerald and Kevin as the 'Flower Boys' and her therapist is called Fleur. Rose thinks at one point, 'I would tell him that he's awakened in me a flower of fire' (p. 161), and describes herself wryly as 'a flower-hallucinating virgin saint' (p. 183). What is the thematic significance of flowers in this narrative?

5. Stockholm syndrome (p. 41) refers generally to the inability of a captive to break free from emotional attachment to the captor; Rose suffers something similar in her relationships with both David and Gary. She describes it as 'learned helplessness' (p. 41), and says she 'wanted emotional rescue ... sexual and sensual oblivion' (p. 65). Rose's emotional self-entrapment has led some reviewers to describe her as a 'frustrating' character. What makes her equally compelling?

7. 'I had to trust him, because if I was wrong again, if I'd picked another doubleman, I don't think I could ever trust myself or anyone else again.' (p. 142) She fears of Gary: 'But what if I see it in him, that smiling wolf, that gleam. What if all men are like that?' (p. 79). Why are relationships often plagued by unresolved issues from former affairs or other long-term involvements?

8. Rose has very poor self-esteem, describing herself at one point as 'a natural filer, if nothing else' (p. 107). She often laments her lack of appeal, and although Gary tells her she's beautiful she yearns for 'some far-off land' where she is 'a woman' (p. 43). She has no memories of her father, Ivan, and her mother was a 'serial lover'. Rose's sexual abuse by her mother's Polish boyfriend (pp 258–9) is revealed almost in passing towards the end of the novel. Is Rose's insecurity and twisted love life the result of her mother's neglect or the abuse? Is such a distinction knowable or even necessary?

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9. Ideals of romance and romantic heroes are referred to constantly in this book. 'You're a romantic, a classic ideal' Gary says to Rose at one point (p. 71). Rose says her favourite film is *Gone with the Wind*, and she describes Gary as a Mr Rochester figure, and herself as Miss Havesham (pp 20–1). Gary compares her to Cathy from *Wuthering Heights* (p. 41) and a later chapter is entitled 'Thrushcross Grange' (p. 24) after the house in *Wuthering Heights*. Old movies and movie stars are also alluded to throughout and in chapter titles. What part do these literary and popular culture references play in the novel?

10. Despite the book's serious themes, comedy and absurdity lighten many scenes. Is humour important in this novel? How does it shape Rose's character?

11. Rose confides in her friends, often in long phone conversations, and imagines herself as Carrie in *Sex and the City*, although the reality doesn't quite measure up to that ideal. What picture do you glean of Rose's friends in this novel? Are they supportive or manipulative?

12. Gary Gravelly is a sinister character, 'a hidden man' (p. 91) whose lack of personal fulfilment leads to his 'taking pleasure in withholding whatever [Rose] most wanted, in giving only to take away' (p. 171). Rose even suspects that he is a paid escort when they have sex, since he does it 'as if it were his actual profession' (p. 110), and she says that 'his unbearable beauty began to terrify' her (p. 133). Why does she become obsessed with him? What does he mean to her?

13. 'Wouldn't you rather be rejected for who you are than for pretending to be someone else?' Discuss.

14. 'I am done with my pointless attempts at saving others, I must save myself.' (p. 306) What must Rose save herself from?

Further Reading:

The After Life, Kathleen Stewart (Vintage, 2008)

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