

FICTION

When Her Husband Is Guilty, What's a Wife to Do?

In "The Complicities," Stacey D'Erasmus introduces a woman who is rebuilding her life in the aftermath of her ex's financial wrongdoings.

By Lauren Fox

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THE COMPLICITIES, by Stacey D'Erasmus

Guilt by association is a thorny concept, especially now, in our ravaged world. How much are we to blame for the many misdeeds, intimate and global, that we may not perpetrate, but from which we benefit? And if we admit culpability, to what extent are we responsible for redress? Do we stop using plastic straws? Give up international travel? Live off the grid? I often think about that famous scene in "The Sopranos," in which Carmela's therapist tells her she's guilty of her husband's crimes by virtue of domestic proximity. "You'll never be able to quell the feelings of guilt and shame that you talked about," the therapist says, "as long as you're his accomplice."

Carmela, sniffing and crying, rejects this logic and clings to her innocence so that she can preserve the life she relishes: "All I do is make sure he has clean clothes in his closet and dinner on his table." But we know what that means. Even Carmela Soprano knows what it means.

Stacey D'Erasmus's novel "The Complicities" is a tricky and absorbing tale about crime, punishment and the lies we tell ourselves. At its heart is Suzanne Flaherty, a controlled and controlling narrator. On the surface, Suzanne is a woman trying to wrench her life back after her husband, Alan, is convicted of Bernie Madoff-esque financial wrongdoings, leaving shattered families — some of them friends and neighbors — in his wake. Claiming ignorance of his misconduct, Suzanne divorces Alan and moves to Chesham, Mass., a fictional, familiar town that, like Suzanne, is scrappy and down on its luck — "the kind of town you drove through on your way to somewhere better." Like Carmela Soprano, Suzanne is a too-fierce defender of her own honor. "You have to *know* to be truly complicit, and I didn't," she insists. "I was busy taking care of our family."

Into her new, lonely life a bomb is dropped, in the form of a beached whale. Seemingly out of nowhere it appears, immense and struggling to survive on the shore. In less capable hands, this beast might feel like a whale of a metaphor, but D'Erasmus commits to its extraordinariness and the specificity of its mammalian distress: "It sounded like the earth itself moaning, like an echo of a sound made thousands of years ago by a glacier scraping over a continent." Saving this "grand, suffering creature" becomes Suzanne's calling — her attempt to heal the world and clear her conscience of her own "misfortune."

The problem of the whale takes up a lot of real estate in "The Complicities." But the novel makes a different, rather remarkable turn in the second section, which homes in on a cast of supporting characters and gives them voice — sort of. Alan, who has been released early from jail, meets Lydia, a woman carrying physical and emotional scars who nevertheless decides to open herself up to Alan's love: "She understood so much more than she ever had before about life and death and teeth and blood and bone. She understood about coming from earth and returning to earth." And here, too, is Sylvia, Alan's mother, lugging her own burden of shame and confusion for having long ago run from Alan's abusive father, leaving Alan behind: "Her whole life she'd just been looking for peace and quiet and warmth, trying to keep two steps ahead of the darkness that lurked in so many places, in so many people."



Stacey D'Erasmus
Sarah Shatz

In these last two-thirds of the novel, Suzanne seems to loosen her storytelling grip, opening it up to Lydia's and Sylvia's perspectives, this wobbly orbit of women around Alan. Lydia is trying to build a life from the ashes of her past. Sylvia is trying to find and reconcile with her son. They're women gluing their lives back together after criminal acts and misdeeds. Their stories are small glimpses of hope.

But storytelling, of course, is an act of control. Suzanne may appear to be generously allowing some light into the cracks, but really what she's doing (what we understand her to be doing) is carefully arranging herself to show off her best angle. Glimpses of the woman behind the curtain pop up through the pages, reminders of who's in charge. "I'm making this all up," Suzanne admits, "— well a lot of it."

This sleight of hand calls the whole endeavor into question, but it also underscores the ways we subsume one another, overlap and twine together. The choices each character makes — whether to leave an abusive husband, to trust someone who is untrustworthy — spiral into other choices with consequences.

In spite of it all, we believe Suzanne when she grapples with the question of complicity. In an attempt to exonerate herself from her husband's malfeasance, she commits what may be either a whale-size act of generosity or an unforgivable one, or (probably) both. Afterward, she is drained of both obligation and ability to help Lydia, Sylvia or any of Alan's other victims, trapped in the muck between remorse and denial.

"What is real restitution?" Suzanne asks, early on in the novel. "I don't know. And, anyway, it wasn't my fault."

Lauren Fox's latest novel is "Send for Me."

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