

MANKIND
&
OTHER STORIES
OF WOMEN



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Marianne Ackerman



GUERNICA
EDITIONS

TORONTO • BUFFALO • LANCASTER (U.K.)
2016

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Michael Mirolla, general editor

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Cover image: photo of sculpture by Evan Penny
Guernica Editions Inc.

1569 Heritage Way, Oakville, (ON), Canada L6M 2Z7
2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.
www.guernicaeditions.com

Distributors:

University of Toronto Press Distribution,
5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8
Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills, High Town,
Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

First edition.

Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit—Third Quarter

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2016938984

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Ackerman, Marianne

[Short stories. Selections]

Mankind & other stories of women / Marianne Ackerman.

—First edition.

(Essential prose series ; 139)

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-77183-072-0 (paperback).--ISBN 978-1-77183-073-7 (epub).

--ISBN 978-1-77183-074-4 (mobi)

I. Title. II. Title: Mankind and other stories of women. III. Title:
Short stories. Selections. IV. Series: Essential prose series ; 139.

PS8551.C33.A6 2016

C813'.54

C2016-902162-9

C2016-902163-7

*To Alice Munro
our mirror*

AE

Contents



MINA	1
SAGE	29



MARLENE	41
FLORENCE	59



AMANDA	87
LENA	111
KITTY	127
WANDA	141



MANKIND	159
---------------	-----



RASHMI	171
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Acknowledgements	181
About the Author	183

MINA



1

MINA, AN ASPIRING writer, asked Lenore to look at her work. An imposition, to be sure. Who has time to read novels these days, never mind a work-in-progress? Especially if the prospective reader is busy writing—or not writing—her own.

The request caught Lenore in a weak moment. She was out on the town with her book club, a speckled group of women her age (thirtyish) with careers in progress, including a couple of new mothers whose reading time was minimal. Their savage demolition of a hefty prizewinner cut right through the clouds of panic and jealousy that hang over the writing life. Seeing how other people treat literary success lifted her spirits, put her in a generous mood toward hopeful unknowns—like the waitress, Mina, who “couldn’t help but overhear ...” and had also read the blockbuster, without pleasure.

Moreover, Mina had read Lenore’s latest short story on a popular literary blog. The other women, who had not read it, were impressed, although not as impressed as Lenore. In the space of a few minutes, Mina uncorked their second bottle of Chardonnay, poured a round, extracted

a promise from Lenore to take a look at her work, and emailed the manuscript from her phone.

Weeks passed. After several updates and whimsical ☺ reminders dropped into her inbox, Lenore forced herself to open the most recent attachment (revised since their chance encounter), skimmed the first few pages and fired off a comment: the beginning began too late, unless the style was experimental, in which case it was outside her field of expertise.

Mina waited twenty-four hours before writing back. She began by apologizing for the bother and thanked Lenore for taking the time to offer incredibly helpful feedback, which would be put to good use immediately.

Lenore felt terrible. How selfish and arrogant to have brushed off an unpublished writer like that. She read the rest of the manuscript and invited Mina to lunch.

They met at café within walking distance of Lenore's Mile End apartment, which, though not rated for its menu, had a fireplace. While they waited for salads, Lenore made a few helpful comments about the manuscript, which Mina accepted gratefully, without encouraging discussion. After that, they talked about everything but writing. How Lenore had found her apartment, how Mina's parents had come to Montreal from India, music, movies, a forthcoming literary festival, the celebrated authors who'd been invited, the local names who had not. By the end of lunch, Lenore wondered if she should invite Mina to be part of the book club, but did not act on the idea immediately.

It was fall, the literary season, a busy round of book launches and readings. Lenore had a habit of arriving late

and leaving early. Mina spotted the pattern and took to waiting by the door. After several missed attempts, she finally made eye contact and they ended up going for drinks.

Lenore talked a lot about the film scene. At the time, she was friends with the legendary bad boy director, George, whose first feature had created a stir at the Sundance Festival. George had an eye for emerging talent. He invited potential stars to screen tests and had a stack of talent on file. He and Lenore had met at university, in a creative elective called Elements of Style. She'd worked on the script of his breakthrough film. It was clear she and George spent a lot of time together. Mina paid close attention, noticing how carefully Lenore skirted around the personal, as if she had something to hide.

There was no question about it. Lenore stood out among the many attractive women in George's entourage. She was tall and slim with long blonde hair and unusually green eyes. In repose, her fragile features exuded a complicated beauty. Her smile was crisp. She self-identified as a writer, something Mina respected deeply. At one point, she was tempted to say the script was the best part of the film, but feared the judgement might reflect badly on George and jeopardise her budding friendship with Lenore, or at least require explanation. She did not want to divert conversation away from more interesting subjects, such as what it was like to be in a famous film director's orbit.

Mina had strong opinions on the subject of fame. She had come to believe it was the ultimate goal of creativity in the 21st century, an achievement you could grasp. Take

to the bank, so to speak. It was her reason for getting out of bed in the morning. In those days, Mina did not find it easy to get out of bed, which is why working at a bar suited her. She came home at 3 a.m., keyed up and ready to write. Her confidence was at its height, the self-censoring voice within, on mute. She wrote quickly, seldom reread and only rewrote based on concrete suggestions from experienced writers, such as Lenore. She was prepared for struggle and rejection, but deep down Mina believed great art was not a reward for hard work, although hard work was essential. It was a gift, something that jumped out at you or fell from the sky. Somehow, being with Lenore made the dream more real.

About George. He was unconventionally good-looking. He did not make a conscious decision to define himself through taste. He was dynamic. He got projects off the ground. These qualities naturally caused him to be invited to parties, where he met people. Especially women, which is how Mina got to know him, at a warehouse on Van Horne, the launch of a crowd-sourcing campaign for his new feature film project. She arrived late after her bar shift and dove into the crowd, assuming Lenore would already be there. She wasn't, but George recognised her and came right over. They'd met briefly at a literary reception. George couldn't remember the circumstances but he did remember Mina. He claimed he'd made a mental note to call her, but had lost her number.

She laughed. He asked why. She replied without

thinking: "Because mental notes aren't written down. They're thoughts."

He made his right hand into the shape of a gun, pointed two fingers at his temple and pretended to fire. Then he wrapped his arm around her slender shoulders and steered her toward the bar. In the long conversation that followed, he invited her to take a screen test for his upcoming movie, which had a role for an Indian beauty. He was developing a storyline around an immigrant triangle: a Hindu, a Muslim and an atheist.

Impulsively, Mina finished his sentence. "... walked into a bar ..."

He looked puzzled, continued talking about the project.

Mina felt terrible about sleeping with George, although not immediately. While she was making out with him that night, she thought of Lenore. There was a large black and white photo of them in the bathroom of his studio, arms wrapped around each other, a beach in the background. He didn't seem like Lenore's type. He was rough, quick. He laughed a lot, before and after. He unabashedly smoked cigarettes, a habit that in their circles was seen as a form of weakness, to be conducted shamefully, on balconies or in toilets.

It was not until the next day that anxiety set in. She was sure Lenore would find out about the skirmish and take revenge by re-reading and commenting negatively on every line of her work-in-progress. This would put her

off writing, forcing her to admit that waitressing was her true profession, thereby destroying her life. There was a second reason for feeling bad about sleeping with George right after the party. Now that they had crossed the line, she was pretty sure he would withdraw his offer of an audition on the basis of potential emotional complication. She would never hear from him again. Both her writing and acting careers had disappeared, in one careless swoon.

Nothing like that happened. The next day, his assistant called to set a date for the screen test. It went well. She was advised to get headshots and an agent. George took her out to dinner, drove her home, invited himself in. He fell asleep afterwards and stayed the night.

Weeks passed during which Mina avoided literary events. She scanned the blogs and googled Lenore's name regularly, hoping to find out that her former mentor had signed a big book deal or moved to Toronto, conditions under which she might avoid the embarrassment of being shunned. Eventually, spring came. Lenore's name appeared in the line-up of the literary festival held annually at a downtown hotel. She would take part in a panel discussion about the impact of e-books on literary style, beside an incredibly famous writer from New York. Under normal circumstances, an essential event. Mina resolved to confront her fears. She could not put ambition on hold forever.

The venue was packed. She found a seat at the back and prepared to take notes. When the Q & A was over, panellists and people who'd asked knowledgeable questions drifted downstairs to the bar. Mina went with the

flow, chatted with a poet she knew faintly and ended up standing just behind Lenore, who was in conversation with the big name writer. Eventually, the big name drifted away and Lenore continued talking to someone else. It would have been easy to sweep Mina into the conversation, which was about the famous writer's latest novel. In fact it was almost unavoidable. Instead, Mina was left on the periphery. Finally, she couldn't stay still. She smiled gaily at a distant waiter, and shot off to an imaginary conversation, out of sight of Lenore. A minute later she was standing on the street.

So, Lenore knew about her and George! What was there to know? She had gone for a screen test and slept with him a few times. Actually, quite a few. She was almost sorry it had gone that far, even sorrier she had accepted his Friend request, though she'd made him promise not to post pictures of her or mention her name, saying her family abided by traditional Hindu codes and did not approve of women exposing themselves on social media. George complied. But he kept posting crazy artful pictures of parts of her body and dropped so many hints that it would have been easy for someone like Lenore to figure out what was going on. She peeked a look at George's Facebook page. He and Lenore were not Friends. Had Lenore seen them together? How else could she have figured out what was going on? Unless George told her. And by the way, what was going on?

Mina herself did not have an answer to the question. She had gone from distant awe to up close and naked without the intervening step of dating. She was pretty sure there was no future in a bad boy legend, at least not

the personal kind. She said nothing about him to friends and relatives, fearing the former would spread information and the latter would nurse expectations. Without third-party input, she found it hard to take their relationship seriously.

As for George, he had never expressed the slightest hesitation regarding Mina. He said her screen test was amazing. Overnight, she became an integral part of his project. Probably, the star. He was extremely busy. He slept at her apartment whenever he was free. Desire and film chat filled the space where talking about the relationship might have taken place. There was simply no opportunity for the starts and stops, misunderstandings, tears and reconciliations by which a one-night stand evolves into courtship.

2

One day, after he had taken her to every hot, curry-scented dive on Jean-Talon Boulevard and insisted on watching Bollywood movies in bed until Mina couldn't stand it any more and spoke up for a wider menu, he asked to meet her family. He said it was difficult to get "under the skin" of the characters. He needed more.

What?

Context.

Mina was sure George already had a firm idea of what her parents would be like. Her mother would emerge from the kitchen in a waft of savoury smells, dressed in a beautiful sari. A kindly, gentle man, her father

air. Instead, she assured him they would speak more openly to a European, that a documentary was more serious than a movie. George protested. He said he'd spent no time in Athens, hadn't been to Greece since he was nine and had only sketchy memories, mainly of his grandmother who took him over, the airport and the ferry ride to the island on which she had grown up. The rest he knew from postcards and stories.

Mina remained firm. Details don't matter, she said. He would understand as soon as he met them.

In preparation for the filmmaker's visit, Gita Chaudhari took her best sari out of mothballs. She called on a bothersome cousin to help with the cooking, paid her train trip from Toronto and sent her packing the afternoon of the dinner.

Pungent aromas wafting from an expensive though little-used kitchen all day sent her husband into paroxysms of nostalgia for his Bombay childhood. Vikram had never regretted marrying a professionally-inclined woman. He appreciated his wife's many fine qualities, in addition to ambition. He knew he would probably live a decade longer than his brothers, who had married wonderful cooks and grown fat by forty. But he had a weakness for kitchen smells. When the buzzer rang, he was sleeping on a hard Italian sofa, dreaming of the monsoon season, a groaning table spread before him, lip-smacking samosas, hot bhajias, pakoras with green chutney, roasted bhutta rubbed with lemon ... Somewhere in the distance,

pretty obvious she was angling to be in the film, a turn of events she had not anticipated.

On the way down in the elevator, George said he had half a mind to do a documentary on the Indian diaspora in Montreal.

Mina laughed. "Don't be ridiculous. You'll forget all about it when you get back to Athens."

The door opened and they were thrust into a vast marble lobby, reminding George of an Etruscan frieze. His one true talent was to grasp situations as a single image. That night he saw Mina, arms outstretched, running toward some god-like beast slightly out of frame, him following, reaching out for her, licking her long black hair as it flew in the wind, their bodies frozen in eternal movement. He wondered why he had not seen this treasure before.

Shortly afterwards, George came to Mina with a crisis. The guy who owned the studio loft he'd been staying in was tired of snorkelling in the Bahamas and had returned to Montreal. He wanted his property back. The apartment George had formerly shared with friends was no longer available. With the film heating up, he simply did not have time to scout around for a place. He wondered if he should bunk at her place, pay half the rent. With lower overhead, she could work fewer shifts at the bar and spend more time on her writing. He presented the arrangement as a mutual convenience.

How could she say no?

“She seemed basically aware of the potential. She said she’d sleep on it.”

“So she is interested?”

“I would say she is, yes.”

He followed her to the table, poured two glasses of wine. She sat down, waiting for the pizza to appear.

“What did you two girls talk about? I mean, three hours?”

An awkward moment. She wondered how Lenore would answer his question. If she would answer. Three hours? The time had flown by. It was the most creative time of her writing life, thus far. She was not ready to share it with George.

“Oh, you know, stuff,” she said, picking up the glass. “Ask me tomorrow. It’s been a long day.”

SAGE



THERE WAS A time when Sage saw her life stretching ahead just as it was meant to be. Things that had once made her afraid or annoyed or bored ceased to exist. Her best side turned to the future. Hope, expectation, confidence ruled. During this time, she was with George and all was well.

Then one day the tide turned. She missed her period. Ignored it for a while, then saw a doctor. The cause was perfectly normal. Nobody's fault, a technical failure.

George did not hesitate, not for a moment. He was young and broke; they both were. They couldn't consider tying themselves down to a family, not yet. Still, he went through a cartwheel of emotions and explained them all in detail. To himself, but out loud. What would it be like to be a father? Girl or boy? If one or the other, what difference? How do parents cope? Who are the good ones? Where did his go wrong? In the days they spent waiting for her appointment, they made love often. He held onto her as if she might get broken apart by the waves of manhood surging through him. He'll make a wonderful father, she thought. Someday.

into some elaborate fantasy and not come out for hours. If she knocked at their door with a tray of cookies and milk, they'd look up dreamily, say "thank you Mummy" in sing-song voices, and turn back to their games. Mostly she didn't mind. She was busy, needed, grateful for respite. She found a part-time job she could do from home.

When they started school, the rhythm changed. The old feeling came back, a sick sense that she was standing on the side looking in. She took a trip to New York City and made a terrifying discovery. She had lost the ability to be alone. The house felt empty, her job was numbing.

Patrick and the guy who tiled their bathroom had opened a business together, and were making scads of money renovating old apartments. He wanted to sell their floor and get a triplex. When Sage said she didn't think she could stand the noise and mess, Patrick assured her the new place would be ready before they put the old on the market, meaning he'd be working days, nights, weekends and holidays for months, maybe a year. He urged her to quit taking on work and open a business, do something, anything, what she'd always wanted. "As long as it makes you happy."

He meant well, she knew it, but underneath was judgement. He was telling her to get her act together. Be happy. He couldn't see the hole. He hadn't been around then. It wasn't Patrick's fault, she knew, and yet knowing meant nothing. Knowing was her problem, not theirs.

She started seeing a therapist. Three months into their weekly visits, she still hadn't mentioned the source of her problem. What was her problem? Anxiety, boredom, fear, a toxic combination? No. Those were symptoms, consequences. Not the problem.

A hazy midsummer day, she bumped into George on St. Catherine St. He was wearing a pale seersucker suit and had gained weight. He looked good, but slick for her taste. His mouth shot open, a celebrity grin. He flung his arms out and grabbed her up into a bear hug. He was a star. His first feature had won a prize at the Sundance Festival. She couldn't help it, she gushed right back.

When he was gone, she felt nothing. It started to rain. She stood on the corner of St. Catherine and Peel while her hair and clothes got drenched. She felt great. So, the problem wasn't George: something to tell the therapist.

Months passed. The girls started piano and violin lessons. No competition, they insisted on learning the same songs. Sage was amazed that time could pass so quietly while she felt so bad. She quit therapy and tried weight training, but dropped out after two weeks. It was too much effort. She was exhausted. She cut her work commitments down to part-time, telling Patrick she wanted to take a computer graphics course. But she couldn't find the energy to enrol. She slept a lot. She decided sleep was the solution.

A tiny voice from her religious upbringing said, it could be worse. This is a good life. Life is good.

One night, Patrick called her into their bedroom and closed the door. He had something to tell her. He reached out, took her hand. She wondered why he'd shut the door. The girls were sleeping at his sister's. Her mouth went dry.

He took forever to speak. Then he circled around the subject, beginning with consequences, how she had every right to be furious. He wouldn't hold anything she said or did against her, because he'd been wrong from the start. Totally, he was at fault, every step of the way.

What are you saying? The words stuck in her mouth. She'd braced herself with one arm planted on the bed. The arm began to melt.

"I hope you can understand. It's not just something I kept from you, okay? I kept it *from myself*. You have to know that. I..." He stopped, as if he wanted to take the sentence back.

A cloud lifted, revealing what she'd long suspected: *This is the end of a good life, a life I was too weak to live. Now it will be gone and a much worse life will fill in the hole. I won't be dead any more. I'll be sorry. The next word is goodbye.*

She reached up with tingling fingers and touched his cheek. His chest caved, as if the air trapped in his lungs had been let out and he was finally able to speak. He said he had a son out west. From the time he worked on the rigs. He hadn't seen him in ages, though he'd sent money, a lot of it, which was why things were always tight.

"How old?"

"Thirteen," he said. "It wasn't my choice. Well, some of it, obviously. But I've never had anything to say about it. Until now. I mean ... I'm sorry, Sage."

She took his other hand. "Don't say you're sorry. That's a terrible thing to say."

put your feet up.” She laughed, tossed the fag into the wind and buckled up.

The rest of the ride was quiet. The boy drifted off to sleep. As Sage stroked his arm, he nestled his mop of black hair in her lap. Mouth open in a half grin, he drooled on her jeans.

She caught Patrick’s gaze in the rear-view mirror. He had a look in his eyes she’d never noticed before, although it had always been there. Heat from the boy’s riled body spread from her lap to the hole inside her. By the time they reached home, the hole was full. Gone.



MARLENE



THE BABY BORN to the Walmsley family during a late-January snowstorm was colicky. She couldn't keep her mother's milk down. When she wasn't sleeping, she cried. Her sisters Flo and Marlene, brothers Roger and Luke, took turns looking for the magic trick that would settle her down. A new sound or a bright object dangled in front of her face might provide momentary distraction, but as soon as the novelty wore off, she started up again, high-pitched screams that turned her face purple before settling into mournful wails. When she stopped, the sun came out from behind a cloud. She'd look up at them as if she'd been away or busy with some dogged mission. Whoever noticed first would summon the others. When Roger tried catching her wobbly smile with his Kodak Brownie, the flash sent her into hysterics. She was christened Patricia Kathleen but Luke called her Patty Kate, and the name stuck.

Helen Walmsley was thirty-nine by her fifth pregnancy, and slow to recover. Her mother stayed on through the summer to help. After months of sleepless nights, Gran started feeding the crier a teaspoon of pabulum mixed with

warm formula, followed by a lick of Gripe Water, and bundling—a flannel blanket wrapped tightly around the nervous infant until she couldn't move. Quiet reigned as long as Gran rocked the bundle and hummed Irish lullabies.

Years later, Marlene would wake out of a fever in some godforsaken place with a sensation of spiders crawling over her face, Gran's voice in her head. Driven into the deepest crater of memory, the songs broke her fall, provided the bounce she needed, just as that summer the mournful crying drove her out of the house, into a world of benign neglect where she found her taste for freedom and the beginning of everything else.

With Helen busy elsewhere, Florence took over the laundry and pretty much ran the kitchen. It was better than disgusting barn chores or weeding the garden under a hot sun. She tried out recipes from *Chatelaine Magazine* whenever she could get the ingredients: casseroles and summer salads involving macaroni, olives, tuna, melted cheese; Jell-O moulds, tapioca-based puddings and fancy baked desserts. Her specialty was Queen Elizabeth cake. The dark, chewy base was made from softened dates, smothered by a transparent mixture of melted butter, sugar and shredded coconut. Marlene and Roger fought for corner pieces, where the icing was thickest. In her spare time, Flo lay in the hammock reading Nancy Drew mysteries and old issues of *Time* magazine she'd picked up at the church bazaar. In July, she turned thirteen. Her thoughts were future-bound.