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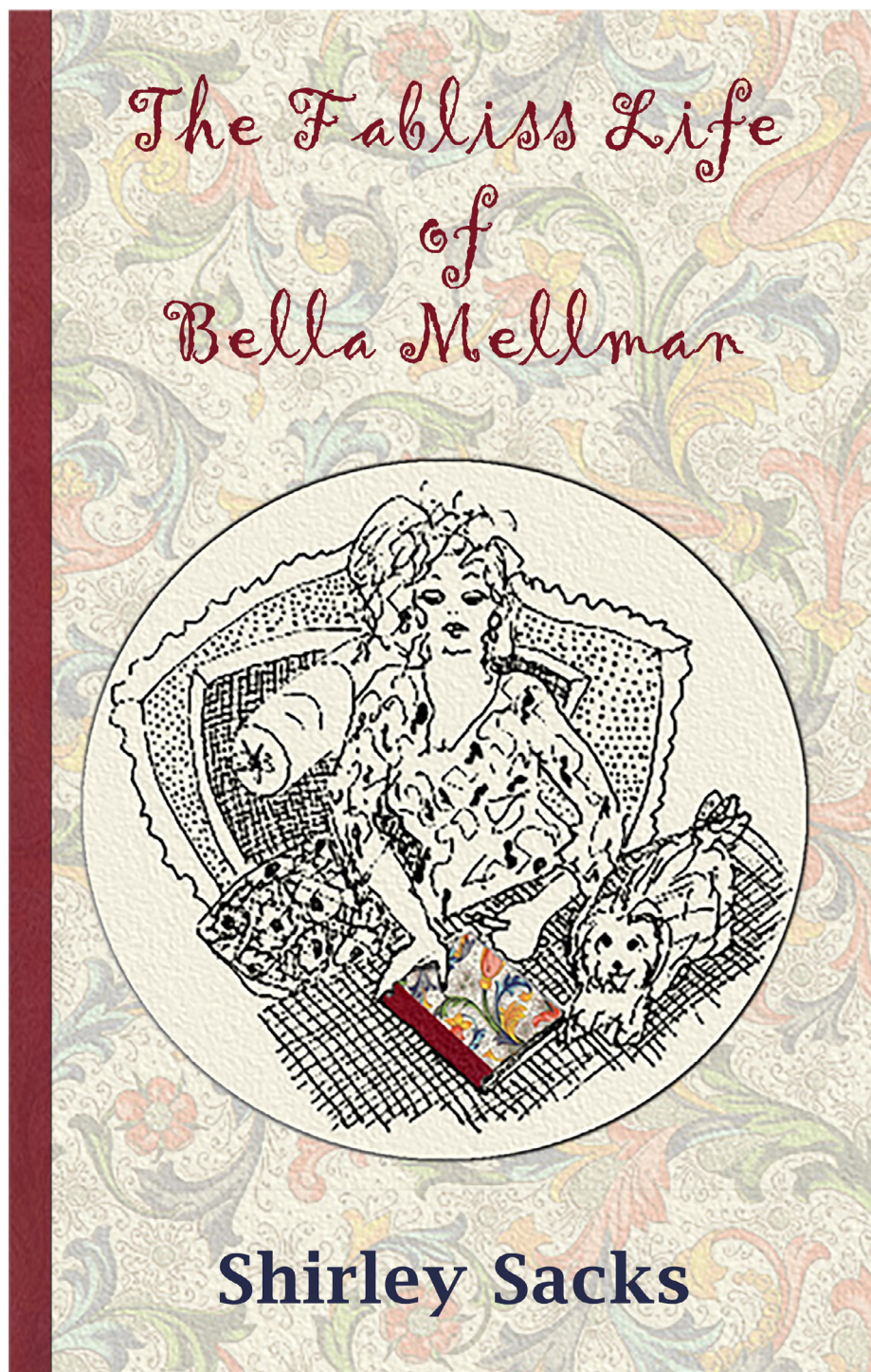
Press Kit

The Fabliss Life of Bella Mellman

"There's a little bit of Bella in everyone."

by

Shirley Sacks



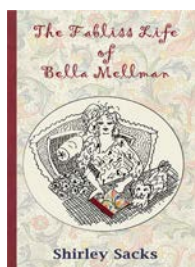


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For Immediate Release



"Shirley Sacks has created a fresh, wise and saucy voice you'll love -- Bella Mellman. You'll want Bella to live next door, to come for dinner, to meet everyone you love and to write about everyone you don't like."

Jill Schary Robinson, best-selling author of *Bed/Time/Story*, *Perdido*, and *With a Cast of Thousands*

LOS ANGELES, California (BELLCC) October 27, 2015 – BooksEndeependent, LLC is proud to announce the upcoming release of its latest title *The Fabliss Life of Bella Mellman* written by artist and first-time novelist, Shirley Sacks. The novel, to be released in print and e-book November 17, 2015, spins a bold tale of a savvy woman of the world who gives a rollicking social commentary on life in the flats of Beverly Hills, men, "mature" dating habits, and the odd complexities of love, sociopaths, marriage, divorce, and living a creative life.

According to the author, *"The book looks at the role of the older woman, her place in the sexual panoply, which has been so horribly simplified."*

Bella Mellman, a transplanted South African artist and writer, lives a 'fabliss' life (as her 8-year-old grand-daughter tells it) in the flats of Beverly Hills. A long-time divorcee nearing the seventh decade of a very full life, Bella is constantly annoyed when friends, and even strangers, ask the impertinent question of "Why, don't you have a partner?" Followed by the hated phrase: "You look quite good for a woman your age." The only thing to do, Bella realizes, is to write a book that explains once and for all, her satisfaction with being older and single.



Shirley Sacks, born in Johannesburg, South Africa, has a degree in Fine Arts and has shown her work in galleries all over the world. She has also worked in advertising as a copywriter, and wrote a column for *The Sun*, a South African magazine. Ms. Sacks lived in London for many years before moving to Los Angeles in 1987. *The Fabliss Life of Bella Mellman*, which includes the author's original artwork, is Shirley's first published novel.

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Chapter 5 - The Romance Virus

"Romance is an appropriate name for a perfume."

Shortly after Bella got over the Envy's, she came down with a Romance Virus. This took the form of longing for what she knew did not exist: a loving, adoring, man of substance, who would be content sharing Bella with the life she'd made for herself, and who wouldn't intrude when not needed.

It wasn't that hard to fathom what caused the Inflammation: Guy, at the age of seventy-three, had fallen in love.

Since he and Wife Number Two divorced, Guy had dredged up old lovers, tried out a couple of gorgeous women who purported to be something other than what they were, and avoided most of the appropriate divorcées his friends pestered him to meet. Bella realized there'd be someone - sooner or later - and there were moments she wondered whether it could even be her; though their passion, such as it was, could never be rekindled. They might love each other, but theirs was a love best sustained by distance.



Irina was a genetic mix of Turkish, Danish, Irish, French, Swiss, and Portuguese, or so she said. Bella's daughter, Jessica, thought Irina sounded Latina. "She's a year younger than I am! Is that crazy or what? Dad's so dumb. He thinks we're going to become friends."

That this age difference was ludicrous made little difference to Guy, who was lit by that particular glow one gets - at any age - with a fresh romance.

Bella had been divorced from Guy for almost thirty-five years; and still, when he found his last love - for this was surely to be his last - she was pained so badly that huge splinters of ice shot up through her body, finally falling, falling, like a river of acid down her old cheeks.

Old cheeks. That's what she had. Damn him. Guy had a young cheek to caress, and she couldn't even blame him, seeing as old cheeks were not appealing to her, either.

Bella was stung by more than that. Not only was Irina young, but Guy had found love. And as Shelly so aptly remarked, "A woman is lucky to be a man's last love."

Jessica called to inform Bella that her father had introduced Irina to her. "Meet the love of my life," he said. For god's sake, she's my age!" Jess was horrified. "I'll come over and tell you all about her."

"No, I'm going out." Bella did not want Jessica to see her tears. She knew the minute she saw Jess, she wouldn't be able to control them.

Bella called Greta, "I have smoked salmon."

"I'll pick up some bagels."

There was a time - long ago - when Bella lost her appetite when she was upset.

"Get a grip now, girl," Greta hugged Bella. "He's a fool. You know there's no fool like an old fool. He's grasping at love with someone he can't possibly have anything in common with. I wish you'd see it as it is: pathetic. I wish you

didn't care."

"Perhaps it's a karmic thing that I do care?" Bella shrugged.

"There is no such thing."

"Maybe there is. It explains the inexplicable."

In Bella's late teens and early twenties, she dabbled amongst various esoteric ideas - Gnosticism, Theosophy, Zoroastrianism, Science of Mind - in order to find something that might comfort her from the unbearable realization that life ended. None were particularly comforting, including reincarnation, for what was the point in coming back over and over again if you didn't remember you were here in the first place?

"Why don't you try and seduce Guy?" Greta made a bold suggestion.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"It's not so ridiculous."

"It's not like that between us. Guy is like an old pair of slippers that are so worn out they no longer keep your feet warm," Bella reflected.

"Get rid of them!" Greta replied. "Let his young mongrel have him."

"Maybe I should never have gotten divorced? Dr. Feather told me that if Guy and I had been married today, a bit of therapy could have saved our marriage."

"That's because she's a therapist," Greta pointed out.

"When we got divorced, it was almost the thing to do. Nobody understood the consequences. I didn't. It was the early seventies, a time that was all about finding yourself, especially if you were a woman. If you were unhappy, you moved on, not for a moment thinking of the future or the children. They were expected to handle it."

Eventually, after endless examinations of Bella's feelings, Guy's state of mind, Irina's motivations, Wife Number Two, Bella's second marriage mistake, and a recounting of Bella's various failed romances, Greta said she had to leave.

"Glen is coming over."

"I thought this time you were really and truly never going to see him again?"

"He's going to help me with my taxes."

"That's a truly pathetic excuse."

Bella had little sympathy for Greta when it came to Glen Short. It was not that she didn't understand the passion of an illicit romance: what she couldn't fathom was how Greta believed Glen's promises. His words were archetypical of the straying married man: "I love my wife, but I am not in love with her; I need to wait for the right time to tell her; I don't want to hurt my wife; Give me time." And those seductive, honeyed words: "I love you."



Bella undressed. She gazed at her aging body, not in the antique mirror in her bedroom, but in the harsh light of the mirrors that lined her soon-to-be-renovated bathroom. She finally decided to take the plunge and organize a remodel. Like a falling face, the out-of-date decor needed some injectables. Bella had been researching tiles and fixtures.

Bella was certainly still attractive, if she didn't stare too close. Her breasts were not bad, her legs were smooth, and her skin was soft. She'd always had soft skin. Her pubic hair had thinned to almost nothing, but that was fashionable these days when women waxed themselves so that their private parts appeared more like those of prepubescent girls. Bella grimaced at the thought of sex. She couldn't imagine throwing her old body over another old body.

Elderly intercourse gave Bella a feeling of - she couldn't quite think of the right word, but it was close to distaste, or even revulsion. Bella did a little wiggle in front of the mirror. Someone once suggested that when she felt blue, she should do the twist naked, watching herself in a full-length mirror; she couldn't keep a straight face.

Maybe it was the fact that her long-married friends, Owen and Maggie Lowenthal, were leaving on yet another

extended trip to a faraway place - this time Russia - also caused the Romance Virus to flare. Bella could never quite fathom how Maggie managed to tolerate Owen all these years. He was insufferably bossy and his breath stank. He was rich though, or at least his late mother was. She had inherited the bulk of a South African mining fortune, which she passed on to Owen, her only son.

Bella was not a traveller. She would have liked to go to Russia, to India, or to China, but aside from not having the funds to travel first-class, which is how she wanted to travel, she did not like going away on her own. She wasn't the kind of person who could find someone to chat with, or enjoyed making instant best friends.



Bella hadn't noticed lovers for years, but that Saturday all she saw were people holding hands, kissing in the street, walking close together. Most were young, but there were a few oldies who obviously still cared by the way they leaned into each other for support.

She decided that a movie would surely take her mind off herself, so she drove towards the mall. She switched on the car radio. And as if the universe was mocking her, there was a talk on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the novel's publication. Bella listened to the accolades given to this all-time-great romantic novel, where the intelligent, spunky heroine gets the handsome, rich man.

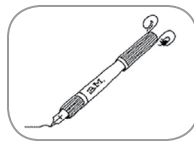
"I am intelligent," she thought. "And spunky. Why didn't I get a Darcy?" That was the trouble with romantic novels. "I got a womanizer. I got a gay man. I got a gangster and any number of -" Bella couldn't even think of a word to describe the litany of her mostly tawdry affairs. Why did the Romantic Virus remain in the body? There was no biological reason for a woman, long past childbearing age, to hanker after romance. Looking for love didn't make any sense from an evolutionary point of view. No sense at all. But then, she knew, life didn't make sense: the creation of the universe, evolution, extinction, love, hate, and death. She was forever thinking about those things. The great search hung about her neck like a string of heavy and unevenly shaped beads.

When she took Charlie out on her return, Nicole emerged to walk with them, and Bella asked her about the meaning of life.

"I think life is..."

At that exact moment, Charlie decided to do his business.

"That's what I think." Nicole laughed and so did Bella. It was the first time she laughed that whole envy-filled day, and she felt the better for it.



Greta glanced at the Florentine notebook she'd given Bella, which was sitting like an ornament beside her collection of antique Venetian paperweights. "How's the writing going?"

"It's not going," Bella sighed. "It's too hot to think," was her lame excuse. "It's supposed to be spring and it's ninety degrees today. And the rest of the week it's going to be the same."

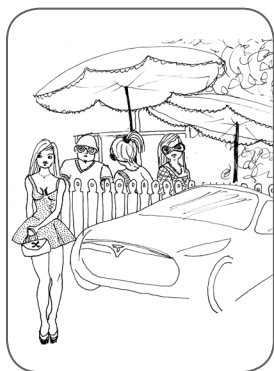
"Imagine if doctors decided not to treat patients when the weather was not to their liking," Greta quipped as she picked up the notebook.

"There's nothing to see. I'm not a writer. I'm fooling myself."

Greta ruffled through the mostly empty pages. On one, Bella had drawn a woman's face. She had slightly smiling lips, curly hair, and no eyes.

Greta said, "Why don't you go back to drawing?"





Chapter 6 - At the Ivy

*“Avoiding trends because they are trendy
is a form of snobbery.”*

Bella usually took out-of-town guests to The Ivy, on the border of West Hollywood and Beverly Hills. She thought it the prettiest and most charming restaurant in all of Los Angeles.

This wasn't such an accolade, as she considered LA almost devoid of charm.

The decor of The Ivy was a mix of Mexican, French, and English country. The food was excellent and the portions large. There was always an array of beautiful people dining both on the terrace and inside. A meal at The Ivy didn't come cheap, and she was amazed that so many people were rich enough to keep the restaurant full for lunch and dinner every day, all year round. But then any trip to Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, Barneys, or Madeo - Bella's favorite expensive Italian restaurant - made her realize how many wealthy people lived in Los Angeles. Digby Bootch, Farrel's father, was always there when Bella occasionally went to Madeo. "They keep his table, in case he comes in," Ivan told her. "If he isn't there by six-thirty - he won't eat later than that - they give it up."

Seeing as her son worked for Digby's son, Bella once introduced herself to Digby when she went to The Ivy with her rich friends, the Blausses. He was polite, but distant. Ivan said, "It's because people are always trying to get money out of him."

Bella replied, "They certainly aren't getting a smile."

The Ivy was an experience which commenced when valets - as handsome as models or movie stars, wearing pink shirts and khaki chinos - parked customer's cars: Teslas, Mercedeses, BMWs, Porsches, and Bentleys, with the odd Audi throw in. Bella's new Subaru didn't make the cut, but the cute four-wheel drive had a certain élan, which she liked, even though Greta told her - after the salesman at the dealership informed her how Subaru served a niche market - "Lesbians drive Subarus."

"Maybe I'll attract a woman? God knows, I haven't attracted a man in years."

"That's a lie," Greta replied. Greta was irritated when Bella said men didn't like her. They did, but she was too fussy. Who did she think she was that she could so disdainfully discard every man - some really nice ones in Greta's opinion - who showed any interest?

Hoping to snap a shot of anyone vaguely well-known dining at The Ivy, paparazzi waited in front of the white picket fence that shielded the flower-bedecked patio dining area from the street. On the patio, where those who wanted to see and be seen preferred to dine, fashionably dressed women picked at salad. Men - whom Bella imagined were Hollywood producers but were more likely in property - dined with starlets or, on occasion, wives.

Bella usually chose to sit inside, away from the trendy bustle. But for lunch with Becky Blumenthal, her old friend from high school who was visiting from Florida with her husband, Brian, Bella booked a patio table. Becky, who loved all things she believed were exclusive - from handbags and face creams to restaurants and holiday spots - would enjoy the scene.

Bella persuaded Greta to join them. "I need support. I've known Becky forever, but she insists on feeling sorry for

me so she can feel that life with her philandering husband has some meaning. You can back me up. Not that I can't defend myself, but I want to bash her head in sometimes. Having you there will prevent me from spending the rest of my life in jail."

True to annoying form, Becky ordered Cobb Salad. "No bacon. No tomato. No onion. Dressing on the side, please."

Greta ordered Cobb Salad, too, trying hard not to sound mocking when she said, "With everything."

Bella ordered Fish-and-Chips.

Becky refused a piece of the steaming, diminutive loaf of bread served on a cute, matching-size wooden board. "I'm gluten intolerant."

"Everyone is now gluten intolerant, it's the fashion," Bella said as she broke off a piece of bread.

Becky then launched into an energetic description of the exclusive, luxury cruise she and Brian took during the summer.

"Our cruise was nothing like those cruise packages advertised in the Sunday papers. We met quality people. Very high-end. The women dressed up, and when I say 'up,' I mean jewels, long gowns, and men in black tie. Very exclusive."

Greta said, "I love travelling, but I've never been on a cruise. I'm waiting to get older."

Bella added, "Neither have I. I don't like boats."

"Ships," Becky corrected. "There was a fabulous woman we met from LA., Margo Rogers, divorced from Rudy Rogers. You've heard of him of course. She's very involved with the Museum, or maybe it's with the Philharmonic. I can't remember exactly... but she's very well-known. In fact, I want you to meet her. I know you'd get along. But she's in New York at the moment. She has a place there, too."

Bella was utterly annoyed when women told her how she would get along with other women they knew, as if she was short of women friends. She didn't add that she'd never heard of either Margo Rogers or her rich ex, but then she didn't move in those circles.

"I think she's also a bit lonely since her divorce," Becky added.

"Also?"

Becky didn't pick up on the irritated tone in Bella's voice and, as if she wasn't present, addressed Greta. "I think Bella is incredibly brave. She's faced so much alone."

"Brave? What have I done that's brave?" Bella scooped a huge blob of mayonnaise on a french fry and almost waved the fat-inducing morsel under Becky's nose.

"Difficult then..." Becky shrugged.

Bella refused to let that pass. "Not difficult, interesting."

Greta almost bashed Becky's head in herself, but Bella motioned - in that imperceptible way good friends communicate - to let her comment go.

Bella tried to explain, "I am not lonely Becky, I am alone. There is a difference."

Bella found that couples could not comprehend how single people managed to actually survive.

"I like living on my own," she continued. "Once you get used to it, it's almost impossible to make the compromises necessary to live with another human being."

Becky stared longingly at the small, homemade loaf of bread on the cutting board.

"I admire you, Bella. You've made the best of a hard life. I respect you for that." Becky gave in, cut a slice, and layered it with the slimmest sliver of butter.

"There is nothing hard about my life. I am not working in a factory sticking labels on ketchup bottles. I'm not hauling rocks from a mine. I've been married and divorced. I've loved and lost and lived to love again, and again, and again. I've resided on three different continents. I have a capable and attentive daughter, and a decent son. I have my divine granddaughter, Chloe, whom I adore and who adores me. I have a more-than-pleasant roof over my head. I have all my senses."

Greta nodded. "And then some."

Becky scraped some butter off her bread.

Bella wished she could tell Becky how Brian had privately shared - soon after he and Becky married - that he always had a crush on Bella and how once, when he'd come to Los Angeles on a business trip, he'd called and invited her to join him at a conference in Boston. Brian was just one of many married men who had propositioned her, and she learned over the years to deflect their attention with a gentleness they did not deserve. Husbands seemed to think all single women were fair game.

"You could find a man; you're still very attractive," Becky proposed. "I'm sure there are men who would want a woman like you."

Greta added, "There are! Quite a few."

"Not ones I want." Bella glared at both Greta and Becky. "I'm fussy, it's true, but I'm not interested in having sex just to make myself feel wanted. I'm fine without that supposedly indispensable activity. Men want sex, and they want to screw till the day they die. And in case you haven't noticed from the TV ads, they're prepared to ingest great quantities of medications to keep their unresponsive members erect, despite the side effects. Imagine risking your eyesight for a fuck!"

Bella grew up at a time when cursing was not ladylike, and she rarely did, but the word was so perfect. "I don't need sex in the same way as a man - to prove myself - and when I have the desire, there are battery-powered devices that do a better job than any man, aided by Viagra or not."

The horrified expression on Becky's face was so blatant that Bella made a mental note to send her a vibrator for her next birthday.

"Secondly," Bella was on a roll, "most women know how to make a home. Most men don't. We're able to make ourselves comfortable. We know which cleaning products to buy and how to use them. We know the difference between single- and double-sheet toilet paper, and boil and broil. Most men haven't got a clue. Your Brian would be lost without you."

Becky pushed her bread off to the side. "You are so right."

Becky's cell phone buzzed. Apologetically she whispered, "I have to answer, it's Brian."

When she'd finished the brief call, Becky announced, "Brian is back at the hotel."

"Congratulations, he managed to find his way back without you."

"He wants me to come back after lunch." Browsing the boutiques down the street, which Becky was eagerly anticipating, was now no longer possible.

"You know what Brian is like," Becky said as Bella and Greta drove her to The Beverly Hilton. "I don't want him to get in a bad mood."

"You have to compromise if you want to live with another person," Greta pointed out after they dropped off Becky. "You have to pretend you love someone, when half the time you want to kill him. That's one of the reasons I never got married. I'd never be able to hide my feelings."

Bella laughed. "When I first dated Guy, I told him I liked watching rugby because he was a fan. I think the sport is much too violent. But when you are first in love, you lie. You lie to yourself, too." Bella was making a subtle reference to Greta's affair with Glen Short.

From what Greta told Bella about Glen, she couldn't have found anyone less suitable. "He makes me feel adored, cherished. He's very sensual."

"Well of course, that's all you do - make love." Bella wanted to say, "All you do is fuck," but she tried not to use that word again. When Greta showed Bella a photograph of Glen and his wife on a website called Switcheroo, Bella could barely believe the depths to which Greta had fallen. There was Glen - tall, dark, and, according to Greta, very handsome - wearing his wife's pastel-pink shift dress and T-strap heels, and holding her gold clutch handbag. His wife posed beside him, wearing Glen's much-too-large suit.

"He's certainly chirped you up." Bella smiled fondly at Greta, whom she had to admit was glowing with a slight tan, more highlights, high heels, and a low-cut, black chiffon blouse that showed her breasts - naturally pert - to advantage.

Bella was practical. "You'll end up with a broken heart. But so what? You'll have lived, and loved, and lost."

"Why do you say I'll lose?"

"Experience."

"I told you I don't want him to leave her. Maybe when the children are grown up?"

Bella guffawed. "That's at least seven more years. Do you honestly think this hot-and-heavy affair will continue so fervently for years to come?"

Much as she hated it, Greta knew this was the truth.

Bella was not a romantic. Romantic novels and movies didn't appeal to her. She didn't like romantic music. She was cynical about love, not because she hadn't loved, but because she had.

Her cynicism began early. She was six years old when she worked out that her father and her friend Della's mother were up to something. And whilst she didn't know exactly what that something was, she knew their deception had to do with romance, and that their duplicity was illicit. Della's mother would call. She'd allow the phone to ring three times and then hang up. If Speedy was home, he'd call back, and vice versa. Della and Bella - the girls loved their similar names - would laugh at their respective parents. "They're stupid; they think we don't know."



Bella got into her bed that night, luxuriating in the cool softness of the freshly laundered, favorite red-checked Ralph Lauren sheets. She arranged her pillows, propped her head against the monogrammed neck roll for support, and began reading. The book was a doorstopper, a dense biography of Catherine the Great whose moniker, Bella was learning, was well deserved.

An oft-repeated refrain started up in Bella's mind: "My life is unimportant. What have I done that is in any way special? Am I really happy living alone, or am I lying to myself?" Then her thoughts, as they so often did, turned to Guy.

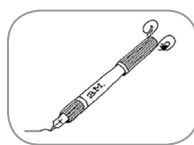
Guy was dirt poor when they married, but he was rich enough now - and guilty enough about his many indiscretions - to help her purchase her condo, a car, and a decent way of life. Between what Guy gave her and her own income, Bella could afford weekly manicures, an occasional visit to Peter for her hair, and training with Sven.

Sven was her one consistent luxury, but seeing as she hated working out, he didn't seem an extravagance like massages, facials, Botox, or a drastic face-lift. She was certain Becky had a lift - damn her, she did look good.

Bella imagined Becky and Brian in their hotel, bickering away, in the manner couples did.

Then, with a wave of affection for Becky, for the past they shared so long ago in South Africa, Bella did what she knew would make her feel better. She prayed to the Good in the Universe: "May Brian and Becky have a happy marriage."

Bella read a few more pages about Catherine the Great before her eyes began to close. She switched off the bedside lamp - a mid-century Chinese figurine topped by a pale, melon-coloured silk shade that gave the whole room a comforting glow - turned on her side, and pushed the monogrammed neck roll so that she wouldn't squash her face and cause wrinkles. She listened to the tinkle coming from a fountain that the new neighbors had installed on their patio - which she was sure someone would complain about - and soon fell asleep.



Bella had doubts about whether *The Lions of A'marula* was the best story for her to tell now. There was one other of the seven she'd written that might work: *Kietekie*.

She planned to run the idea past Shelly over their next dinner at Il Figo. They both liked the food and ambience there and, best of all, the neighborhood restaurant was near enough for them to walk there. This lightened their guilt about dessert, which they always shared.

“So what’s the story about?”

“It’s about a six-year-old white girl who was allegedly raped by a black man - a horrible story really - and the worst thing is that most of what happened is true. His name was Phineas Mawela, and he was the grown-up son of my maid, Anna.”

“I might need more than iced tea for this.” Shelly rarely drank. She had no problem with alcohol; she simply didn’t like the taste.

She took off her leather bomber jacket. “I can’t stand the heat!” They were sitting on the patio, which was pleasantly warmed by ceiling heaters. She asked the waiter to turn the heater down, which he did.

“They can’t control the heaters.” Shelly adamantly refused to admit she was menopausal, and fanning herself with the wine menu, asked Bella to tell her more.

“Phineas lived with his girlfriend, Mary, who worked for the Van der Merwe family, which included little Kietekie, her parents, and Kietekie’s three older brothers. If they lived here, they’d be labeled Trailer-Park Trash. In South Africa, we call them Poor Whites. Phineas was allowed to sleep with Mary in her little room in the servant quarters in the backyard, because he was a mechanic and helped Mr. Van der Merwe with his old car. On the day of the rape, Phineas had to be at work at four in the afternoon. He walked to the garage, where he had an evening shift. This happened during the school holiday. Kietekie’s older brothers and some of their friends were in and out of the house, as was her father, who was out of work.”

“I don’t believe the heaters were turned down!”

“Are you listening?”

“Of course I am!”

“Kietekie’s Aunt came by during the day to see if her sister was back from work. Phineas greeted her as he walked down the driveway to go to work.”

“Where did he work?”

“You’re not listening. I told you, he worked at a nearby garage. Anyway, the aunt said at the trial that she noticed Kietekie walking strangely, but she didn’t tell anyone at the time, nor did she ask Kietekie if anything was wrong. When Mrs. Van der Merwe came home from work, Kietekie said nothing. Odd no?”

Bella didn’t wait for Shelly to agree and continued, “Kietekie’s parents went out for the evening. Mary was left in charge of the kids, who fell asleep on the living-room floor. When the parents came home after midnight, Mary went off to her room and left the mother to put the children to bed. It was then that Kietekie complained she was sore down there. Mrs. Van der Merwe took her to the hospital, where a female doctor found Kietekie had abrasions, although her hymen was intact.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Then she wasn’t raped?”

Bella laughed. “The judge didn’t know what a hymen was. The doctor who gave evidence had to explain!”

“You can’t be serious. Maybe he was gay?”

“No, he wasn’t. Just ignorant. The court proceedings were so confusing: conducted in three different languages! The Van der Merwes spoke Afrikaans. Phineas, though fairly fluent in English, was Xhosa and was questioned in his native tongue. The Advocate spoke English. All this had to be translated back and forth. I didn’t understand much Afrikaans, and no Xhosa. I sat there for three days.”

“What about your maid, Anna?”

“She didn’t want to come. She said that being present would upset her too much. But she wanted me at the trial. I had to get permission to be in the gallery because no spectators were allowed during the trial due to the age of the child. Kietekie gave evidence. You should have seen her. She wore a pink frilly dress, like she was going to a party. Her

hair was in ringlets, tied with pink ribbons. Her white socks had lace frills. The Van der Merwes and the mother's sister glared at me as if I was the rapist. I ignored them, but the sight of them made me sick."

"The child said that Phineas put a pillow over her face so she couldn't see him, but she still knew it was him."

"And you thought Phineas could be someone else?"

"I thought the father, or perhaps the brothers or their friends, had been sexual with Kietekie. It sounded, to me as if the child was clearly coached to blame Phineas. The black Clerk of the Court told me, after Phineas was found guilty and sentenced to eight years in jail, that the verdict was a miscarriage of justice."

"And so?"

Bella wondered whether the horrible story - or Shelly's hot flushes - were affecting her lack of attention.

"The sentence indicated that even the Judge found something amiss: a black man raping a six-year-old white girl in apartheid South Africa. He could have got the death penalty. The case went to appeal in Pretoria's Supreme Court. Three Judges heard the evidence presented by a state-appointed Advocate, who was not the same as the one in the original case. He was a charming young lawyer, and I filled him in on what I suspected."

Shelly called the waiter and asked that the heater be totally switched off, but other guests complained of the cold. The heater was thus reignited. Bella bit her tongue.

"So tell me, what happened in the end?" Shelly took a piece of paper from her purse, folded it, and made a fan.

"The judgment was upheld. Phineas wasn't present, but I was permitted to speak in his favor. I felt important facing those three High-Court Judges, and for a moment I considered becoming a lawyer. I was in my forties. People went back to school and began different careers. Then I discovered I'd have to be able to speak Afrikaans if I wanted to obtain a law degree. I hated the language and the apartheid it stood for."

"But I've heard you speaking to another South African."

"I can make myself understood - Afrikaans was compulsory at school - but I'm no way near fluent. I never got more than a C."

"What happened to Anna?"

"She retired as our maid, but before that I took her to visit Phineas at the jail near Pretoria on Sundays. We waited outside and I watched the sad trail of visitors coming and going. Phineas sent me a letter with a drawing of hands in prayer, thanking me for my efforts on his behalf. I felt so sad when I read his words. As if I'd failed him."

Later, Bella rummaged for the letter in her antique Chinese, papier-mâché letter box, and showed it to Shelly.

"What do you think?"

Shelly read the letter. The lined paper was fragile and the writing was childish, but the sentiment was touching.

"Oh, it's so sad!"

"So you think the saga of Phineas and Kietekie would make a good movie?"

Shelly folded the letter and gave it back to her friend.

"Don't get me wrong, the story is dramatic. But the black-white false accusation thing...we've seen it too many times already. Not exactly, but similar. Remember, we've had fights for racial equality, too."

Bella knew Shelly was right.

The next day, Shelly called. "I've been thinking, you could make *Kietekie* work. Don't give up because of anything I said. I'm not giving up, either. I'm going on another blind date tonight."







Author Interview



BooksEndependent: When did you know you wanted to become a writer?

Shirley Sacks: My initial desire, seeing I was born with some artistic talent, was to become an artist, which I did. I went to art school and obtained a degree in Fine Arts. I exhibited my work. I wrote the odd thing, which I think most young people do, but I had no idea that I wanted to write anything like a book.

When I got divorced and went to live in London with my two small children I began to write about my life in rhyming couplets. It started when I wasn't invited to a big event that everyone else was going to. The words came easily. And then I began to chronicle my life in that way. I didn't care to be good.

After 4 years in London I returned to South Africa. I got a job as a receptionist in a small ad agency. One day a handsome young man came in and I asked my boss what he was doing there. He said he was being interviewed for the job of assistant copywriter. I said, "Can't I be that?" I barely knew what a copywriter was. In fact, I would correct the boss's copy for his ads, as they weren't good English. With that, I became a copywriter and learned the value of words. I think being an advertising copywriter is a great way to learn to write.

At one point I was invited to write a social column for Sun Magazine. I would go to events, take photographs, and write about it all with a barbed tongue. It was fun for a while. I also helped Linda Stafford, one of South Africa's best-known journalists, write a food column for a while. When I began a love affair with a mad man, I was inspired to write a novel with madness as its subject.

I came to live in America and for a nanosecond had someone interested in the book.

I edited some of my rhyming couplets and sent those off. One agent thought they were too scatological.

I decided to write short stories. I sent those off to various agents, but the general response was that nobody was interested in South Africa, and if they were, there was Nadine Gordimer. I had a dab at screen writing. After all I was living in LA and everyone does that. I didn't like that medium at all.

Then I found Jill Robinson's writing workshop – The Wimpole Street Writers. I can't begin to state how important that was for me. I began a memoir, just for my family. It was more short stories, than a memoir, and inspired by the thought that I would have loved to know more about my grandmother's life, my great grandmother's life and those that came before her. It was a memoir for my descendants.

I more or less finished it when I got an inspiration to write about the character called Bella Mellman. No more memoir. It was to be a novel and I fell into writing it as if it was waiting for me.

BE: In a nutshell, what is your novel about?

Shirley: The book looks at the role of the older woman, her place in the sexual panoply, which has been so horribly simplified, amongst other things that I have been interested in.

BE: How long did it take you to write your book from start to finish?

Shirley: 2 years.

BE: What is your editing process like?

Shirley: I write without thought of how it reads, just get the words down. I type fast and make huge mistakes, but who cares with the computer. I have always written on the computer. When I got a job as copywriter, our client was Commodore Computers. This was the first personal computer. The accountant asked me if I wanted her to show me what it did. That was that. I was hooked. Eventually she got so mad I used her computer so often, they gave me a computer without a screen, if you can believe that. And it was not simple like today's computers. I had a page filled with



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instructions: command click, etc. etc. Seeing as my handwriting is so bad, that I can barely read it myself, a computer is essential. I think fast, and write fast and then correct and correct and change and correct and change. It's endless.

BE: How many hours per week do you spend writing?

Shirley: Probably about 3-4 hours, but that's with some days more and some less. Sometimes all day and into the night. Then a day or so, with nothing. I am quite disciplined in my own way.

BE: What was the most challenging part about writing your book?

Shirley: Once I began, the writing came so easily I said it was a gift from God. When my publisher asked for a major change, I just about sank. But what do you know, the gift just continued. Know that I am not religious, just a seeker of a Higher Power. I think if you have something you want to say, the words come.

BE: Can you tell us more about what you're working on right now?

Shirley: I am already on *The Fabliss Life of Bella Mellman, Book Two*. There is so much happening in the world. It's daily inspiration. I hope that Bella finds her life, with all its paths, still fabliss.

BE: If you could meet three authors, which authors would you choose?

Shirley: I would rather meet scientists.

I love reading about science, biology and cosmology, even though I barely understand a lot of it. In my next life I want to be a scientist of sorts, but in this life I've been given that kind of brain that doesn't get numbers.

I would like to meet Eugene Marais who was a South African. He wrote *The Soul of The White Ant*, whose premise was plagiarized by Nobel laureate Maurice Maeterlinck as *The Life of The White Ant*. He (Marais) is acknowledged as the father of the scientific study of animals known as Ethology. He was a morphine addict and committed suicide. He also wrote excellent poetry in his native tongue, Afrikaans, and managed to make that rather unattractive language sound beautiful. He was apparently very attractive to women, too.

And then, South Africans J.M.Coetzee whose book *Disgrace* is so memorably dark and *My Traitor's Heart* by Rian Malan. I love books about Africa, North, Middle and South and am always on the lookout for books that might help me understand more.

American novelists: I would like to meet Tom Wolfe. He writes important books and I admire the affectation of his style. Looks and books. I also think Jonathan Franzen is marvelous. I'd also love to meet Erica Jong and Germaine Greer. I love that women writers have paved the way for writers like me.

I adore Bill Bryson. If I could write like him I'd be in heaven. I like John Reader who writes about the big picture. His book *The Biology of a Continent*, which is about Africa, is a must for anyone interested in that huge continent. I think the book by Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, is one of the saddest books ever. It made a huge impression on me when I read it, as did every book I have mentioned.

BE: How has writing changed your life?

Shirley: Being creative is a gift. It makes life so much more interesting to be able to notice things and from those observations always thinking how to use them as part of a creation. As far as writing goes, I am always wondering ... is that something for my book? I love it. It turns every day into creative possibility. I become so much more observant and aware, and also thoughtful.

Even though I am not doing much art at the moment, I see things and think ... aha, those colors, or that pattern. I



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adore Pinterest. It's a treasure trove of inspiration and fascinating to see what people find interesting, what they do and share. I absolutely love the Internet. On it, I learn, discover and also share things I am passionate about, like animal rights.

There are many kinds of creativity -- music, math, cooking and so on. I have been blessed by art and writing. This present writing period has really changed that way I see everything, as everything is now a possible writing opportunity. I can do more than just think something or observe. I can write it down and turn it into something else. That's creativity. Turning something into something else.



Author Bio



Shirley Sacks was born in South Africa in 1943. She left South Africa in 1976 and lived in London for several years. She has lived in Los Angeles since 1987. She has a degree in Fine Arts and has shown her work in galleries all over the world. She has also worked in advertising as a copywriter, and wrote a column for *The Sun*, a South African magazine. This is her first published novel.



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Summary:

The *Fabliss Life Of Bella Mellman* spins a bold tale of a savvy woman of the world who gives a rollicking social commentary on life in the flats of Beverly Hills, men, “mature” dating habits, and the odd complexities of love, socio-paths, marriage, divorce, and living a creative life. The book also looks at the role of the older woman, her place in the sexual panoply, which has been so horribly simplified.

The narrator of the book is Bella Mellman, a transplanted South African artist and writer who lives a ‘fabliss’ life (as her 8-year-old grand-daughter tells it) in the flats of Beverly Hills. A long-time divorcee nearing the seventh decade of a very full life, Bella is constantly annoyed when friends, and even strangers, ask the impertinent question of “Why, don’t you have a partner?” Followed by the hated phrase: “You look quite good for a woman your age.” The only thing to do, Bella realizes, is to write a book that explains once and for all, her satisfaction with being older and single.