

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT LIONEL

How do you follow up a cult bestseller which charmed both critics and book clubs? LIONEL SHRIVER, the author of *We Need to Talk About Kevin* talks to ELLE about the hard years before success, being a woman writer (with a man's name) in a man's world, and her new book

By KAVITHA RAO

Like her sharp, stinging books, Lionel Shriver takes a while to get used to. She is one of those people who has no use for small talk, and can seem both frighteningly aloof and intimidatingly clever. She is small and fragile – looking at least a decade younger than her 54 years – but has a deep, foghorn-like voice which she uses to biting effect. The phrase “doesn’t suffer fools gladly” might have been made for her.

But when she does get warmed up, she is disarmingly self-deprecating, dryly funny and with a penchant for saying the unsayable, much like her characters. Shriver, of course, is most famous for her chilling exploration of the dark side of motherhood, *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, which describes a mother who hates her own son. The book became an unexpected bestseller, won the Orange Prize in 2005, and is also now an acclaimed film starring Tilda Swinton. It was so shocking that it was turned down by 30 publishers, and Shriver’s own agent. But then Shriver has never cared to be part of the mainstream. When she was young, she changed her name from Margaret Ann to Lionel, because she was a tomboy and grew up with brothers. Her latest novel, *The New Republic*, is just out to critical acclaim.



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as there are days in the year [smiles wryly]. It was about demography, an unpopular subject back then. Then I wrote a book about failure [*Double Fault*] and that was a failure too. My career was in the toilet before, after that it was in the sewer.

ELLE: Why do you think ...*Kevin* succeeded?

LS: I have no idea. I think, perhaps, it was a ‘zeitgeisty’ theme whose time had come. It broke the last taboo: Mothers are supposed to love their sons. I am often asked by journalists: “How did you suddenly learn to write?” And I say, “Have you read my books before ...*Kevin*? They are pretty damn good too!”

ELLE: You have this reputation for being frugal.

LS: Yes, I am constitutionally cheap. I still get my clothes in

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ELLE: Most people don’t know that you struggled for years.

Lionel Shriver: Yes, I wrote about seven books before *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, eight if you count one that was not published. Most of my books got good reviews, but didn’t sell. If ...*Kevin* hadn’t been published, I would probably have given up writing. One of my books, *Game Control*, only sold as many copies in hardback

charity shops, and I buy two for one shampoos. I cycle everywhere. I don’t need to live like this, but it’s a hard habit to break. I was the daughter of a minister. We would get 20 cents as pocket money, most of which had to go to the church. So when I did earn money, it was very precious to me.

ELLE: The most common criticism of your work is that the characters are ‘unlikable’. You also seem to like writing about taboo subjects: Increasing Third-World populations, resentments in marriage, psychopaths, terminal illness...

LS: I like characters who say what you are not supposed to, and I like writing about issues that make people uncomfortable. There’s really no point in going where other writers have gone before. I also resent the obligation to be nice about being a good loser. It’s bad enough you have to lose, then you are supposed to be gracious about it? I speak from experience, because at one point I was failing badly in my career. I think it’s interesting that the women characters are most criticised. Women are still expected to be sweet and cuddly and nice. Mine aren’t.

ELLE: Have you got flak from parents for writing ...*Kevin* when you are not a mother?

LS: Actually, I have heard from many parents that ...*Kevin* is very realistic. I am very suspicious of the huge pressure on women to feel a certain way about life events. Being a parent is hard work and very tedious. Many parents told me that while they loved their children as a whole, they hated parts of parenthood. When I wrote ...*Kevin*, I was in my early 40s and as close as I have ever been to having a baby. By the time I finished the book, I realised I didn’t want one!

ELLE: After winning the Orange Prize, you said that women writers were expected to be unambitious. Can you elaborate on that?

LS: I think women writers are less comfortable being ambitious. I also think that some of my novels would have been better accepted if I were male. Novels written by women are often pigeonholed as “domestic.” In the US, there is still a glass ceiling for women writers, except the very best. When people think of great writers, they always think of men, despite the fact that most readers are women. I don’t know why that is.

ELLE: You have also had girly covers forced on you, haven’t you?

LS: Yes, I hate, hate, hate the cover of my latest novel *So Much For That* [a delicate orchid on a white background]. They forced it on me. It’s a girly, sweet, wistful cover, and the book is a dark, biting book about terminal illness. I was told by my publisher that all my books have to have a



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woman on the cover. But my readers say they don’t want flowers, they don’t want lace, they don’t want pink girly covers, they want memorable characters. Readers are a good deal more sophisticated than publishers think.

ELLE: What do you do for fun? Does Lionel Shriver ever do anything frivolous?

LS: I watch an appalling amount of TV and I don’t sit around watching worthy documentaries either! I am heartbroken about *Desperate Housewives* ending this year. I love *Mad Men*, too.

ELLE: This may surprise some of your readers, given your books are very far from sentimental, but you have strong views on the value of marriage, don’t you? (Shriver is married to the American jazz drummer Jeff Williams)

LS: I have wanted some company for all of my adult life. When I wrote my book *The Post Birthday World*, the main character, Irina, confesses that all she has ever wanted was a healthy relationship. I got a lot of responses from women who were so grateful to be given permission, as it were, to want companionship. Everyone wants a hand to hold. It is not weakness to want this, and it doesn’t make you a lesser person. When men say this, it’s considered attractive, so why is it weak if women say this?

ELLE: What do you think about the ...*Kevin* movie?

LS: I think the movie is a great trailer for the book, and it has given the book a second life, without replacing it. I am a wordy mother*****, so I was nervous about how the film would keep the dialogue, of which there is a lot. In the film, the actor who plays Kevin hardly talks at all, but he is still so effective. It was a lesson to me in non-verbal communication.

ELLE: Tell us about your new book.

LS: My new book, *The New Republic*, is about terrorism. I wrote this book in 1998. I couldn’t find a publisher back then because in those days no one gave a sh** about terrorism. Then after 9/11, you couldn’t write a book about terrorism for several years. Especially because it’s funny and playful, and apparently we can’t be funny about terrorism. It’s also a very male book, with a male protagonist. In fact, I have just had a French translator decline it because it’s too ‘masculine’. Apparently, men can write about women, but women can’t write about men! ■