



FLEISHMAN IS IN TROUBLE

'HONEST, POWERFUL, HUMAN' *GUARDIAN*

'SHARP AND WICKED' DAVID NICHOLLS

TAFFY BRODESSER-AKNER

Taffy Brodesser-Akner is a staff writer for the *New York Times Magazine*. She has also written for *GQ*, *ESPN The Magazine* and many other publications. *Fleishman Is in Trouble*, her first novel, was a *New York Times* and *Sunday Times* bestseller.

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Praise for *Fleishman Is in Trouble*

“*The* novel of the summer . . . It is incredibly wise. There is no one that this book isn’t for. I can’t believe it’s a first novel. Pure brilliance”
India Knight, *Sunday Times*

“Could be one of the books of my entire lifetime. I’ve never felt so seen . . . A coruscating, dizzying, razor-sharp attack on modern marriage, fatherhood, Tinder sex, social hierarchical woes and midlife unravelling” Grace Dent, *Guardian*

“The most astonishingly brilliant Trojan horse of a novel” Dolly Alderton, author of *Everything I Know About Love*

“Sharp and wicked, insightful and funny, and then suddenly so touching” David Nicholls, author of *Sweet Sorrow*

“Wonderful. Utterly blistering . . . A wildly entertaining, moving story” Marian Keyes, author of *The Break*

“A portrait of modern love and marriage that is blisteringly funny, wincingly painful, and—ultimately—both heartbreaking and humane . . . Taffy Brodesser-Akner can write the pants off any novelist out there. She’s a star, and this book is a work of utter perfection” Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*

“Witty and well observed . . . Brodesser-Akner has written a potent, upsetting and satisfying novel” Tom Rachman, *New York Times*

“Shrewdly observed, brimming with wisdom and utterly of this moment. Not until its explosive final pages are you fully aware of its cunning ferocity. Taffy Brodesser-Akner’s debut is that rare and delicious treat: a page turner with heft” Maria Semple, author of *Where’d You Go, Bernadette*

“Brodesser-Akner, in her debut novel, captures the essence of modern, middle-class New York mores brilliantly” Alan Johnson, *New Statesman*

“Believe the hype. *Fleishman Is in Trouble* is even better than we were promised . . . A book that makes you laugh so hard you don’t notice till later that your eyebrows have been singed off” Ron Charles, *Washington Post*

“An honest, powerful, human story with no apologies. And it will do the ‘American Novel’ a power of good” Katy Guest, *Guardian*

“A *Great Novel* . . . It has depth, wit, nuance and life. Heartbreaking and funny” Nigella Lawson

“I do think this book changed my life! . . . It’s hilarious, fascinating, painfully observant. I have recommended it to every single person I know” Scarlett Curtis, author of *Feminists Don’t Wear Pink*

“Read this book. All the emotions. Utterly brilliant and heartbreaking” Zoe Ball

“A marvel, full of shrewd observations, barbed wit, and deep insight. Taffy Brodesser-Akner reveals the twisted hearts of her characters—and the twisted soul of contemporary America—with an eye that is at once pitiless and full of compassion for our human foibles. This is a remarkable debut novel from one of the most distinctive writers around” Tom Perrotta, author of *Little Children*

“You’re going to want to read this one . . . A literary novel with a great plot” Laura Lippman, author of *Sunburn*

“A funny critique of the intoxicating life of the recently separated . . . Everyone is disastrous and everyone is human, and the writing is so sharp that one finishes the novel somehow feeling warm towards them all” Emma Brockes, *Guardian*

“A funny, dazzlingly written, delicious subversion of the marriage novel . . . It’s wry, deeply felt and moving—it’s definitely the book you should read this summer” Siobhan Murphy, *The Times*

“A shrewd meditation on marriage and middle age . . . A twisty, sophisticated narrative filled with humour and pathos” Olivia Petter, *Independent*

“[Brodesser-Akner] writes with the heft and masterful wordplay of a [Tom] Wolfe, but with empathy for and curiosity about all the players in the tale . . . *Fleishman Is in Trouble* will occasionally make you angry at the things the people in it do, but mostly it will make you hungry for whatever Brodesser-Akner is going to write next” Alan Sepinwall, *Rolling Stone*

“A clever novel that upends the sexist clichés of the Great American Novel as written by Philip Roth and John Updike” Richard Godwin, *The Times*

“[Brodesser-Akner’s] prose is seamless, her asides clever, her observations always on point . . . When she writes a book about modern heterosexual marriage, you don’t roll your eyes; you clear your schedule” Claire Fallon, *Huffington Post*

“Delving deep into the gender inequalities of sex, marriage, divorce and online dating in modern-day New York, it is a book teeming with insights and humour, a genuine tour de force” Sarah Gilmartin, *Irish Times*

“Stylish, smart, surprising. I loved it” Nina Stibbe, author of *Reasons to be Cheerful*

“Really funny and really right about the deepest human stuff. All hail Taffy Brodesser-Akner” David Baddiel

“Brodesser-Akner is a master of zeitgeisty pith” Hillary Kelly, *Vogue*

“Infusing candor, humor and social commentary, this book holds up a mirror to all of us, demanding that we take a hard look at how we live and how we love” *Mail Online*

“Debuts like this don’t come along very often” Phoebe Luckhurst, *Evening Standard*

“Brodesser-Akner writes a novel for our times: what makes a marriage? A parent? A man? And when does it all end?” Pandora Sykes, author of *How Do We Know We’re Doing It Right?*

“This dazzling switchblade of a first novel by Taffy Brodesser-Akner is smart and sexy and pitiless and humane. I think human beings must be cellophane to her” Rhik Samadder, author of *I Never Said I Loved You*

“Wonderfully, perceptively written . . . What I really loved was the savage social satire” Wendy Holden, *Daily Mail*

“Deftly done” Olivia Ovenden, *Esquire*

“Dazzlingly clever” Clara Strunck, *ES Magazine*

“[A] funny, searing debut . . . Shrewd and satirical, but balanced with sympathy, it’s an impressive first novel” Francesca Carington, *Tatler*

“Chock full with humour and originality . . . It’s a grown-up comedy that actually has far deeper things to say about love” Francesca Brown, *Stylist*

“Smart and sassy but also dark and scabrous, fans of Maria Semple will love *Fleishman Is in Trouble* too” Sarra Manning, *Red*

“Funny, acutely observed and certain to be on every sun lounger this summer” Sarah Hughes, *iNews*

“Taffy Brodesser-Akner dissects a marriage—and in doing so, interrogates the entire institution. She creates a page-turner as insightful as it is impossible to put down” Elena Nicolaou, *Refinery29*

“In her debut novel, Brodesser-Akner does the seemingly impossible, imbuing the classic tale of middle-aged male ennui with a sense of empathy for women” Keely Weiss, *Harpers Bazaar*

“Firing on all circuits, from psychological insight to cultural acuity to narrative strategy to very smart humor. Quite a debut!” *Kirkus* (Starred Review)

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IS IN
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TAFFY BRODESSER-AKNER



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Summon your witnesses.

—AESCHYLUS

An aerial, high-angle photograph of a city at night, showing a dense grid of buildings with many lit windows. The image is in black and white, with a slightly grainy texture. The text "PART ONE" is overlaid in the lower-left quadrant of the image.

PART ONE

FLEISHMAN IS IN TROUBLE

Toby Fleishman awoke one morning inside the city he'd lived in all his adult life and which was suddenly somehow now crawling with women who wanted him. Not just any women, but women who were self-actualized and independent and knew what they wanted. Women who weren't needy or insecure or self-doubting, like the long-ago prospects of his long-gone youth—meaning the women he had thought of as prospects but who had never given him even a first glance. No, these were women who were motivated and available and interesting and interested and exciting and excited. These were women who would not so much wait for you to call them one or two or three socially acceptable days after you met them as much as send you pictures of their genitals the day before. Women who were open-minded and up for anything and vocal about their desires and needs and who used phrases like “put my cards on the table” and “no strings attached” and “I need to be done in ten because I have to pick up Bella from ballet.” Women who would fuck you like they owed you money, was how our friend Seth put it.

Yes, who could have predicted that Toby Fleishman, at the age of forty-one, would find that his phone was aglow from sunup to sundown (in the night the glow was extra bright) with texts that contained G-string and ass cleavage and underboob and sideboob and just straight-up boob and all the parts of a woman he never dared dream he would encounter in a person who was three-dimensional—meaning literally three-dimensional, as in a person who wasn't on a page or a computer screen. All this, after a youth full of romantic rejection! All this, after putting a lifetime bet on

one woman! Who could have predicted this? Who could have predicted that there was such life in him yet?

Still, he told me, it was jarring. Rachel was gone now, and her gone-ness was so incongruous to what had been his plan. It wasn't that he still wanted her—he absolutely did *not* want her. He absolutely did *not* wish she were still with him. It was that he had spent so long waiting out the fumes of the marriage and busying himself with the paperwork necessary to extricate himself from it—telling the kids, moving out, telling his colleagues—that he had not considered what life might be like on the other side of it. He understood divorce in a macro way, of course. But he had not yet adjusted to it in a micro way, in the other-side-of-the-bed-being-empty way, in the nobody-to-tell-you-were-running-late way, in the you-belong-to-no-one way. How long was it before he could look at the pictures of women on his phone—pictures the women had sent him *eagerly* and *of their own volition*—straight on, instead of out of the corner of his eye? Okay, sooner than he thought but not immediately. Certainly not immediately.

He hadn't looked at another woman once during his marriage, so in love with Rachel was he—so in love was he with any kind of institution or system. He made solemn, dutiful work of trying to save the relationship even after it would have been clear to any reasonable person that their misery was not a phase. There was nobility in the work, he believed. There was nobility in the *suffering*. And even after he realized that it was over, he still had to spend years, plural, trying to convince her that this wasn't right, that they were too unhappy, that they were still young and could have good lives without each other—even then he didn't let one millimeter of his eye wander. Mostly, he said, because he was too busy being sad. Mostly because he felt like garbage all the time, and a person shouldn't feel like garbage all the time. More than that, a person shouldn't be made horny when he felt like garbage. The intersection of horniness and low self-esteem seemed reserved squarely for porn consumption.

But now there was no one to be faithful to. Rachel wasn't there.

She was not in his bed. She was not in the bathroom, applying liquid eyeliner to the area where her eyelid met her eyelashes with the precision of an arthroscopy robot. She was not at the gym, or coming back from the gym in a less black mood than usual, not by much but a little. She was not up in the middle of the night, complaining about the infinite abyss of her endless insomnia. She was not at Curriculum Night at the kids' extremely private and yet somehow progressive school on the West Side, sitting in a small chair and listening to the new and greater demands that were being placed on their poor children compared to the prior year. (Though, then again she rarely was. Those nights, like the other nights, she was at work, or at dinner with a client, what she called "pulling her weight" when she was being kind, and what she called "being your cash cow" when she wasn't.) So no, she was not there. She was in a completely other home, the one that used to be his, too. Every single morning this thought overwhelmed him momentarily; it panicked him, so that the first thing he thought when he awoke was this: *Something is wrong. There is trouble. I am in trouble.* It had been he who asked for the divorce, and still: *Something is wrong. There is trouble. I am in trouble.* Each morning, he shook this off. He reminded himself that this was what was *healthy* and *appropriate* and the *natural order*. She wasn't *supposed* to be next to him anymore. She was *supposed* to be in her separate, nicer home.

But she wasn't there, either, not on this particular morning. He learned this when he leaned over to his new IKEA nightstand and picked up his phone, whose beating presence he felt even in those few minutes before his eyes officially opened. He had maybe seven or eight texts there, most of them from women who had reached out during the night via his dating app, but his eyes went straight to Rachel's text, somewhere in the middle. It seemed to give off a different light than the ones that contained body parts and lacy bands of panty; it somehow drew his eyes in a way the others didn't. At five A.M. she'd written, *I'm headed to Kripalu for the weekend; the kids are at your place FYI.*

It took two readings to realize what that meant, and Toby, ignoring the erection he'd allowed to flourish knowing that his phone was rife with new masturbation material, jumped out of bed. He ran into the hallway, and he saw that their two children were in their bedrooms, asleep. *FYI* the kids were there? *FYI?* *FYI* was an afterthought; *FYI* was supplementary. It wasn't essential. This information, that his children had been deposited into his home under the cover of darkness during an unscheduled time with the use of a key that had been supplied to Rachel in case of a true and dire emergency, seemed essential.

He returned to his bedroom and called her. "What were you thinking?" he whisper-hissed into the phone. Whisper-hissing still did not come easily to him, but he was getting better at it every day. "What if I'd gone out and not realized they were there?"

"That's why I *texted* you," she said. Her response to whisper-hissing was eye-rolling glibness.

"Did you bring them here after midnight? Because I went to sleep at midnight."

"I dropped them off at four. I was trying to get in for the weekend. There was a cancellation. The program starts at nine. Give me a break here, Toby. I'm having a hard time. I really need some me-time." As if all her time weren't completely and totally her-time.

"You can't pull this kind of shit, Rachel." He only said her name at the end of sentences now, Rachel.

"Why? You had them this weekend anyway."

"But not till tomorrow morning!" Toby put his fingers to the bridge of his nose. "The weekends begin *Saturday*. This was your rule, not mine."

"Did you have plans?"

"What does that even mean? What if there had been a fire, Rachel? What if there had been an emergency with one of my patients, and I ran out without knowing they were here?"

"But you didn't. I'm sorry, I should have woken you up and told you they were there?" He thought of her waking him up, how it

could have been catastrophic to his progress in understanding that she was no longer part of his waking up.

"You shouldn't have done it at all," he said.

"Well, if what you were saying last night is true, then you could have predicted this would happen."

Toby searched his bleary brain for their last hateful interaction and remembered it with the force of a sudden, deep dread: Rachel had been sputtering some nonsense about opening up a West Coast office of her agency, because she was not busy enough and overwhelmed enough as it was. Honestly, it was a blur. She'd ended the conversation, he remembered now, by screaming at him through her sobbing so that he couldn't understand her until finally the line went dead and he knew she'd hung up on him. This was how conversations ended now, rather than with the inertia of marital apology. Toby had been told all his life that being in love means never having to say you're sorry. But no, it was actually being divorced that meant never having to say you're sorry.

"This hasn't been easy on me, Toby," she said now. "I get that I'm early. But all you have to do is drop them at camp. If you have plans, ask Mona to come. Why are we even still talking about this?"

How could she not see that this wasn't a small deal? He actually did have a date that night. He didn't want to leave the kids with Mona—that was Rachel's solution to everything, not his. He couldn't seem to convey to her that he was a real person, that he was not a blinking cursor awaiting her instructions, that he still existed when she wasn't in a room with him. He couldn't understand what the goal of having all these agreements in place was if she wasn't going to even pretend to adhere to them, or apologize when she didn't. He'd given her a key to his new apartment not to pull shit like this, but so they could have something that was amicable. Amicable amicable amicable. Did you ever notice that you only use the word amicable in relation to divorce? Was it because it was so often used for divorce that you didn't want to poison any-

thing else with it? The way you could say “malignant” for things other than cancer but you never did?

The kids were stirring and it was just as well because his boner was gone.

Solly, his nine-year-old, woke up, but Hannah, who was eleven, wanted to stay in bed. “Sorry, kid, no dice,” Toby told her. “We have to be out the door in twenty.” They stumbled into the kitchen with unfocused eyes, and Toby had to muck around in their bags to find the clothing they were supposed to wear for camp that day. Hannah snarled at him that he’d chosen the wrong outfit, that the leggings were for tomorrow, and so he held up her tiny red shorts and she swiped them out of his hands with the disgust of a person who was not committed to any consideration of scale when it came to emotional display. Then she flared her nostrils and stiffened her lips and told him somehow without opening her teeth that she had wanted him to buy Corn *Flakes*, not Corn *Chex*, the subtext being what kind of fucking idiot was she given for a father.

Solly, on the other hand, ate his Corn Chex cheerfully. He closed his eyes and shook his head with pleasure. “Hannah,” he said. “You *have* to try these.”

Toby was not above being grateful for Solly’s sad show of solidarity. Solly understood. Solly knew. Solly was his in a way that made him never wonder if all of this had been worth it. He had Toby’s same internal need for things to be okay. Solly wanted peace, just like his father. They even looked alike. They had the same black hair, the same brown eyes (though Solly’s were slightly larger than Toby’s and so gave the appearance of always being a little scared), the same comma-shaped nose, the same miniatureness—meaning not just that they were short, but they were short and regular-sized. They weren’t slight or diminutive, so that if you were to see them without a height benchmark, you wouldn’t understand just how short they were. This was good because it was hard enough

to just be short. This was bad because it meant disappointing people who had seen you in just such a benchmark-deprived way and had expected you to be bigger.

Hannah was his, too, yes, except that she had Rachel's straight blond hair and narrow blue eyes and sharp nose—her whole face an accusation, just like her mother's. But she had a specific kind of sarcasm that was a characteristic of the Fleishman side. At least she once did. Her parents' separation seemed to ignite in her a humorlessness and a fury that had already been coming either because her parents fought too often and too viciously, or because she was becoming a teenager and her hormones created a rage in her. Or because she didn't have a phone and Lexi Leffer had a phone. Or because she had a Facebook account she was only allowed to use on the computer in the living room and she didn't even want that Facebook account because Facebook was for old people. Or because Toby suggested that the sneakers that looked just like Keds but were \$12 less were preferable to the Keds since again they were exactly the same just without the blue tag on the back and what about being too-overt victims of consumerism? Or because there was a sad popular song on the radio about a long-gone romance that meant a lot to her and he had asked her to turn down her speakers while he was on the phone with the hospital. Or because later when she explained why that sad popular song was so meaningful by making him listen to it she seethed at him because he didn't appear to magically understand how a song could ignite in her a nostalgia that she couldn't possibly have had, never having had a boyfriend. Or because he wondered if her skirt was too short to sit down in. Or because he wondered if her shorts were too short if they showed the crease between her buttocks and thighs and were even so short that their full pocket linings couldn't be contained by them and so extended beyond the shorts' hem. Or because he asked where her hairbrush was, which clearly implied, to her, that he thought her hair looked terrible. Or because she. did. not. want. to. see. *The Princess Bride* or any of his old-man movies. Or because

he ran his hand across her head one day in a display of tenderness, ruining her very perfect middle part that had taken ten minutes to get right. Or because no. she. did. not. want. to. read *The Princess Bride* either, or any of his old-man books. Yes, her contempt for her parents, which seemed manageable when it was aimed at both Rachel and Toby, was absolutely devastating in its current concentration when it was directed only at him. He had no idea if she saved any of it for Rachel. All Toby knew was that Hannah could barely look at him without her lake-water eyes narrowing even further into lasers and her nose becoming somehow pointier than it was and her lips turning white with purse.

They inched toward camp, irate and unfocused, because they were tired (See, Rachel? See?).

"I *hate* camp," Hannah said. "Can't I just stay *home*?" She'd wanted to go to sleepaway camp for the whole summer, but her bat mitzvah was in early October, and she had still needed June and July to learn her haftorah.

"You're leaving in like a week. One more lesson left."

"I want to leave *now*."

"Should I maybe rent you an apartment in the interim?" Toby asked. Solly laughed at least.

They arrived at the 92nd Street Y, along with all the mothers in their brightly patterned leggings and their exercise shirts that said YOGA AND VODKA OR EAT SLEEP SPIN REPEAT. This place cost about as much as sleepaway camp, and Hannah kept asking if she could skip being a camper and instead become some kind of counselor assistant, which you weren't allowed to do until tenth grade anyway.

"Even then, it still costs money to go," Toby said when he looked at the Y's website. "Why do I have to pay for you to learn how to be a counselor while they use you as an actual counselor?" he'd asked her in the spring.

"Why did you have to pay to learn how to be a doctor while they used you as an actual doctor?" she'd answered. It was a good point.