

## Slummy mummy Lucy Sweeney

**Alpha Mum asks me to join her book club.  
'What a lovely idea,' I say. Sexy Domesticated  
Dad makes throat-slitting gestures**

In an unexpected turn of events, Alpha Mum accosts me outside school one day to ask if I want to join her book club.

"We meet on the first Monday of every month," she says breezily. "It starts at 8pm and we try to wrap things up by 10.30."

I run through the principal reasons why this would be an appalling idea: 1) it will inevitably involve Stendhal rather than Steele; 2) there will be competitive cooking; 3) she won't let anyone go off-message to talk about the plot of *Spiral* or the perfect contours of Smouldering Teacher's biceps.

"Yes," I hear myself say, feeling flattered. "What a lovely idea. I need some intellectual stimulation. What do I need to read so that I can join in the next session?"

Behind her, I see Sexy Domesticated Dad make throat-slitting gestures.

"Slow down, Lucy," says Alpha Mum. "There's a process we need to follow."

She explains that the reason her book club is looking for reinforcements is because it was forced to expel one of its founding members.

"So we need to make sure that we do our due diligence," she explains.

"Gosh, that sounds dramatic," I say. "What did she do wrong? Overdo the pinot grigio?"

"She was pretending to read the books and then looking at Amazon reviews to form her opinions," says Alpha Mum. "As you know, I am not a great supporter of short cuts. And she wasn't reading around the author."

"Well, I'll make sure I choose something I really want to read," I say enthusiastically.

"We don't let new members select books for the first year," says Alpha Mum with a fixed smile. "We find their tastes too obvious. They tend to want to read things by populist American philosophers like Michael Sandel."

"But he teaches at Harvard," I splutter. "He's hardly populist."

"He writes bestsellers. We are very discerning," she says.

"Well, I'll choose the wine instead," I say.

"We are a non-alcohol book club," says Alpha Mum. "Low carb, too. And vegetarian."

"Oh," I say. "It's good to have a dry night every couple of weeks. Very liver-cleansing."

She tells me she is pleased with my answers and is willing to sponsor my membership.

"I'll help you prepare," she says.

"Prepare for what?" I ask. "I can read the book on my own."

"There are four PhDs and a smattering of first-class degrees among us," she says imperiously. "We need to make sure that you have the right chemistry to blend in with the group."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"They need to vet you,"

she says. "Come for your audition next week. Make sure you read Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* first." ■



## Things you only know if you're single

Hannah  
Betts



...that decorum is all.

As this column has established, one of the pluses of the single existence is laying claim to a sex life, unlike the conjoined for whom sex is something that happens to other people. One of the difficulties of said existence is that no area of human interaction is more beset by issues of decorum; issues in which individuals are likely to adopt a zealously absolutist stance on matters that can only ever be subjective.

TYOKIYS is not referring to the niceties of, say, oral hygiene here. (Albeit, flossing really needs to become more of a British phenomenon.) Instead, it alludes to crucial topics such as whether it is more winning to text or telephone; degrees of postcoital discretion; when, if ever, one might consider that one has "gone exclusive".

One of the most contentious subjects is how open one should be about the presence of others in what may or may not be the opening stages of a relationship. Those of a tree-hugging persuasion will feel that honesty is all in such situations. Still others will argue that it is not duplicitous, but merely polite, to draw a veil over such shenanigans. Both are likely to view the opposite assumption with no small degree of horror.

In such circumstances, it pays to make no assumptions whatsoever. Someone behaving singly must never be taken as an indication that they are, in fact, single. Doing it once is not a sign that either of you will necessarily desire to do it again. Loose talk costs lives, or, at least, repeat performances. ■

## I don't give a monkey's...

Carol  
Midgley



...for weather denial.

The average woman own 19 pairs of shoes, but only wears seven. She possesses 100 items of clothing, but fewer than a third are ever seen on her back. Some say this proves how fickle females are, grabbing at shiny new items like a tongue-lolling baby grabs at bubbles. I say rubbish. What it proves is that we're cold.

Have you seen how utterly unsuited to the

British weather most vaguely fashionable women's clothing is? Tinkerbell's thong is more substantial than some current "in season" stock. It's OK for men striding out for all occasions in socks, sturdy shoes and, for all we know, thermal long johns. When the weather's colder than a penguin's bottom, women face pulling on condom-thin tights and strappy high heels, then sitting all night wondering when their toes will blacken unstylishly from frostbite.

We're all in denial about the weather here: women, shops, fashion designers. We see lovely clothes, hope springs eternal that it'll soon be "hot" and we buy them. But come April there are still icicles on the guttering, so we slouch around in the same boots, woolly cardies and jeans we've worn since October.

I'm often found swearing at the telly in midwinter because, when I'm clinging to the radiators, I see women in soap operas making the kids' tea in sleeveless shift dresses and bare legs. This does not happen. And yet we all collude in the pretence that it does and we're living balmily in Miami. At a Liverpool restaurant recently they actually had air conditioning on, as though it were Delhi. Outside, it was -1C. Customers were wearing coats and had dewdrops hanging from their noses, but the management were undeterred.

Face it, there's a 36-hour window in the year when we can wear our nice clothes. If we're lucky. That we choose to forget this and buy anyway shows not fickleness, but the stubborn optimism of the human spirit. ■