

The International Bestseller

DAMAGE

A NOVEL BY

Josephine Hart

"Steamy."
The Washington Post



1000-X/\$5.99



To Maurice Saatchi



Sale of this book without a front cover may be unauthorized. If this book is coverless, it may have been reported to the publisher as "unsold or destroyed" and neither the author nor the publisher may have received payment for it.

Ivy Books

Published by Ballantine Books

Copyright © 1991 by Josephine Hart

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York. Originally published in Great Britain by Chatto & Windus Limited in 1991. First published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. in 1991.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 90-53393

ISBN 0-8041-1000-X

This edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First International Ballantine Books Edition: November 1991

“Had I died at fifty I would have been a doctor, and an established politician, though not a household name. One who had made a contribution, and was much loved by his sorrowing wife, Ingrid, and by his children, Martyn and Sally.

But I did not die in my fiftieth year. There are few who know me now, who do not regard that as a tragedy.”

**from DAMAGE
by Josephine Hart**

There is an internal landscape, a geography of the soul; we search for its outlines all our lives.

Those who are lucky enough to find it ease like water over a stone, onto its fluid contours, and are home.

Some find it in the place of their birth; others may leave a seaside town, parched, and find themselves refreshed in the desert. There are those born in rolling countryside who are really only at ease in the intense and busy loneliness of the city.

For some, the search is for the imprint of another; a child or a mother, a grandfather or a brother, a lover, a husband, a wife, or a foe.

We may go through our lives happy or unhappy, successful or unfulfilled, loved or unloved, without ever standing cold with the shock of recognition, without ever feeling the agony as the twisted iron in our soul unlocks itself and we slip at last into place.

I have been at the bedsides of the dying, who looked puzzled at their family's grief as they left a world in which they had never felt at home.

I have seen men weep more at the death of their brother, whose being had once locked into theirs, than at the death of their child. I have watched

Josephine Hart

brides become mothers, who only once, long ago, were radiant on their uncle's knee.

And in my own life, I have travelled far, acquiring loved and unfamiliar companions; a wife, a son, and a daughter. I have lived with them, a loving alien in surroundings of unsatisfying beauty. An efficient dissembler, I gently and silently smoothed the rough edges of my being. I hid the awkwardness and pain with which I inclined towards my chosen outline, and tried to be what those I loved expected me to be—a good husband, a good father, and a good son.

Had I died at fifty I would have been a doctor, and an established politician, though not a household name. One who had made a contribution, and was much loved by his sorrowing wife, Ingrid, and by his children, Martyn and Sally.

My funeral would have been well attended by those who had gone further in life than I, and who therefore honoured my memory by their presence. And by those who believed they had loved the private man, and by their tears gave testimony to his existence.

It would have been the funeral of an above-average man, more generously endowed with the world's blessings than most. A man who, at the comparatively early age of fifty, had ended his journey. A journey which would certainly have led to some greater honour and achievement, had it continued.

But I did not die in my fiftieth year. There are few who know me now, who do not regard that as a tragedy.

They say that childhood forms us, that those early influences are the key to everything. Is the peace of the soul so easily won? Simply the inevitable result of a happy childhood. What makes childhood happy? Parental harmony? Good health? Security? Might not a happy childhood be the worst possible preparation for life? Like leading a lamb to the slaughter.

My childhood, adolescence, and young manhood were dominated by my father.

Will, the total power of will, was his fundamental credo.

'Will. Man's greatest asset. Underused by the majority. The solution to all life's problems.' How often had I heard those words.

The combination of his unquestioning belief in his own power to dictate his life, and the tall, heavy body in which this will resided, made him a most formidable man.

His name was Tom. To this day, years after his death, I associate strength of character with every Tom I meet.

From the small grocery business his father left him, he built a chain of retail shops that made him a wealthy man. But he would have been successful

Josephine Hart

at whatever career he pursued. He would have applied his will to the pursuit of his goal, and inevitably have achieved it.

He applied his will to his business, to his wife, and to his son. His first goal with my mother had been to win her. Then, to ensure that any way of life she pursued did not interfere with the other goals of his life.

He wooed her with total dedication, and married her within six months of meeting her. The nature of the attraction between them is still a mystery to me. My mother does not seem to me to have been a beauty. I heard her once described as having been a vivacious young woman. Perhaps that was what had attracted him. However, there is no trace of vivacity in my recollection of her gentle presence. She painted as a young girl. Some of her watercolours decorated the walls of my childhood home. But she stopped. Suddenly. I have never learned why. The nature of the bond between them, for it was undoubtedly there, still eludes me.

I was an only child. After my birth they slept in separate rooms. Perhaps my birth had caused trauma. Whatever the reason, there was my father's room, and my mother's room, and they were separate. How did that young man live his sexual life? I have heard no scandalous stories, overheard no innuendos. Perhaps the purpose of separate rooms was not to banish sexual activity, but to curtail it, for reasons of contraception.

My life as a child, and as a young boy, seems shrouded in a mist, permeated by the constant power of my father's presence. 'Make up your mind about it. Then do it,' my father would say—about

DAMAGE

exams, running (my only athletic prowess), even the piano lessons which I took, much to his embarrassment. 'Make up your mind. Then do it.'

But what of uncertainty, or pleasant failure? What of the will of others, subjected to his own? Perhaps it was something he never thought about. Not through callousness or cruelty, but because he truly believed he knew best. And that everyone's best interest would be served by following his.

"So you have made up your mind to be a doctor?" my father said, when at eighteen I decided to study medicine.

"Yes."

"Good! Stick with it. It's a tough course. Can you stick with it?"

"Yes."

"I never wanted you to come in with me. I have always said, 'Just make up your own mind what you want to do. Then do it.'"

"Yes."

Even as I went my own way, I felt I served some purpose of his. So it is with powerful personalities. As we swim and dive away from them, we still feel the water is theirs.

"Why that's wonderful," my mother said. "You're sure it's what you want?"

"Yes."

Neither of them asked me why. If they had, I could not have answered. It was a vague feeling that just grew. If it had been thwarted, perhaps I would have found clear-cut reasons, and been passionate in my commitment. Perhaps that sort of passion only comes when the will is thwarted.

At eighteen I went to Cambridge and started my

Josephine Hart

medical studies. Though I studied the myriad ills of the body and ways to soothe them, this brought me no closer to my fellow man. I seemed not to care about him or love him, any more than if I had studied economics. There was something missing in me, and in my commitment. Still, I qualified, and decided to become a GP.

"Why not specialise?" my father said. "Become a Consultant."

"No."

"Can't see you as a GP."

"Oh?"

"Ah, well! I see you have made up your mind."

I joined a practice in St. John's Wood. I bought a flat. My life began to take shape. Free will had brought me there, not parental pressure, not terrible academic struggle. I had made up my mind. I had done it.

The next step was obvious.

"Ingrid is a living beauty," my father said. "Strength of character, too! There is great will power in that girl," he continued approvingly. "Made up your mind to marry then?"

"Yes."

"Good. Good. Marriage is good . . ." He paused. ". . . for the soul."

All my ambitions were fulfilled. All had been my own choice. It was a blessed life. It was a good life. But whose life?

My wife is beautiful. For that, I have the evidence of my own eyes, and the reaction of those who meet her.

Hers is a beauty of pleasing proportions, a felicitous blending of eyes, skin, and hair. She is complete. She was complete before I met her. It was to her picture of life that I contributed my being. And I was happy to do so.

She was twenty when I met her, conventionally, correctly at a friend's house. There was nothing about her that jarred or caused me pain. She possessed in great measure that powerful seductiveness of serenity. Ingrid took my initial admiration, and later love, as a treasured gift, but a deserved one.

I, who had feared love, feared some wildness it might unleash in me, was soothed. I was allowed to love. I believed myself loved in return.

I unfolded no mysteries with her. She was in all ways as I had imagined she would be. Her body was warm, and beautiful. If she never approached me, neither did she ever turn me away.

Marriage is not the gamble we sometimes say it is. Over its course we have some control. Our choice of spouse is mostly intelligent, as well as romantic. For who is foolhardy in an endeavour

Josephine Hart

whose reputation is so fearful? My marriage to Ingrid pursued a course which surprised neither of us. As loving as we could have expected, as careful as our natures seemed to demand.

No. Children are the great gamble. From the moment they are born, our helplessness increases. Instead of being ours to mould and shape after our best knowledge and endeavour, they are themselves. From their birth they are the centre of our lives, and the dangerous edge of existence.

Their health, a random good fortune at best, is often regarded by us as the result of breeding and care. Their illnesses, when serious, destroy happiness. When they recover, we live for years with knowledge of what their death could mean to us. The arbitrary nature of our passion for children, who reveal so little of themselves during their short stay with us, is, for many, life's great romance. But, unlike the object of our romantic love, we do not choose the child who will be our son or daughter.

No earthshaking revelations on the nature of life seemed to attend Martyn's entry into the world. He was there, almost as though we had always expected him, a loved and perfect son. Sally was born two years later. My family was complete.

In my thirties I looked at my small children gratefully, lovingly, and lost. Surely here was the centre of life, its core? A woman, two children, a home. I was on high ground. I was safe.

We had the serenity and happiness of those who have never known unhappiness or terrible anxiety. The much admired peace of our home was a good fortune for which we secretly congratulated ourselves, as though some high moral purpose of ours

DAMAGE

had been served. Perhaps we had learned that life was open to organisation to one's own advantage; that it simply required intelligence and determination; a system, a formula, a trick.

Perhaps there are benign and malevolent rhythms in life. We had tuned ours to the sound of beauty. My life then was like a pleasant landscape. The trees were green, the lawns rich, the lake calm.

Sometimes, I gazed at my wife asleep, and knew that if I wakened her I would have nothing to say. What could they be, the questions I wanted her to answer? My answers were all there, down the hallway, in Martyn's room or Sally's. How could I have questions still? What right had I to questions?

Time rode through my life—a victor. I barely even clung to the reins.

When we mourn those who die young—those who have been robbed of time—we weep for lost joys. We weep for opportunities and pleasures we ourselves have never known. We feel sure that somehow that young body would have known the yearning delight for which we searched in vain all our lives. We believe that the untried soul, trapped inside its young prison, might have flown free and known the joy that we still seek.

We say that life is sweet, its satisfactions deep. All this we say, as we sleepwalk our time through years of days and nights. We let time cascade over us like a waterfall, believing it to be never ending. Yet each day that touches us, and every man in the world, is unique; irredeemable; over. And just another Monday.

Ah, but those lost Mondays of our young dead friend! How much better they would have been!

Josephine Hart

Years pass. Decades pass. And living has not been done.

But what of the births I had attended? Could anything mark a man's time more usefully? What of the deaths I had witnessed? A competent easer of pain, I was often the last person the dying saw. Were my eyes kind? Did I show fear? I believe I was useful, here. What of all the minor dramas? The fears and anguish I dealt with? Here, surely, was time well spent.

Yet to what end did time cascade then, only to be lost in the flood? Why was I a doctor? Why did I minister? To what good purpose did I minister, carefully but without love?

Those who are lucky should hide. They should be grateful. They should hope the days of wrath will not visit their home. They should run to protect all that is theirs, and pity their neighbour when the horror strikes. But quietly, and from a distance.

Ingrid's father was a Conservative MP. He had been born into a well-off middle-class family and was now, through wise investment, a wealthy man. Though my father had more money than most people would have believed, Edward Thompson was the wealthier man.

He believed that the basic instinct of mankind is greed. That the party which won an election was the one which promised the most advantageous economic package to the majority, not to the country.

"That's where Labour makes its big mistake, old boy. They know it's all about economics really. They confuse that with a better economic deal for everyone. No one wants it. It's too expensive, and anyway they just don't care. The majority, keep them better off, and they will vote for you. It's as simple as that."

Ingrid smiled, or argued gently, humorously. But the reality was, he could be right. He was returned each election, his safe majority still intact.

I found it harder to be gentle with him, but all my questions went unasked for many years. As time went on, I became less patient. I began to