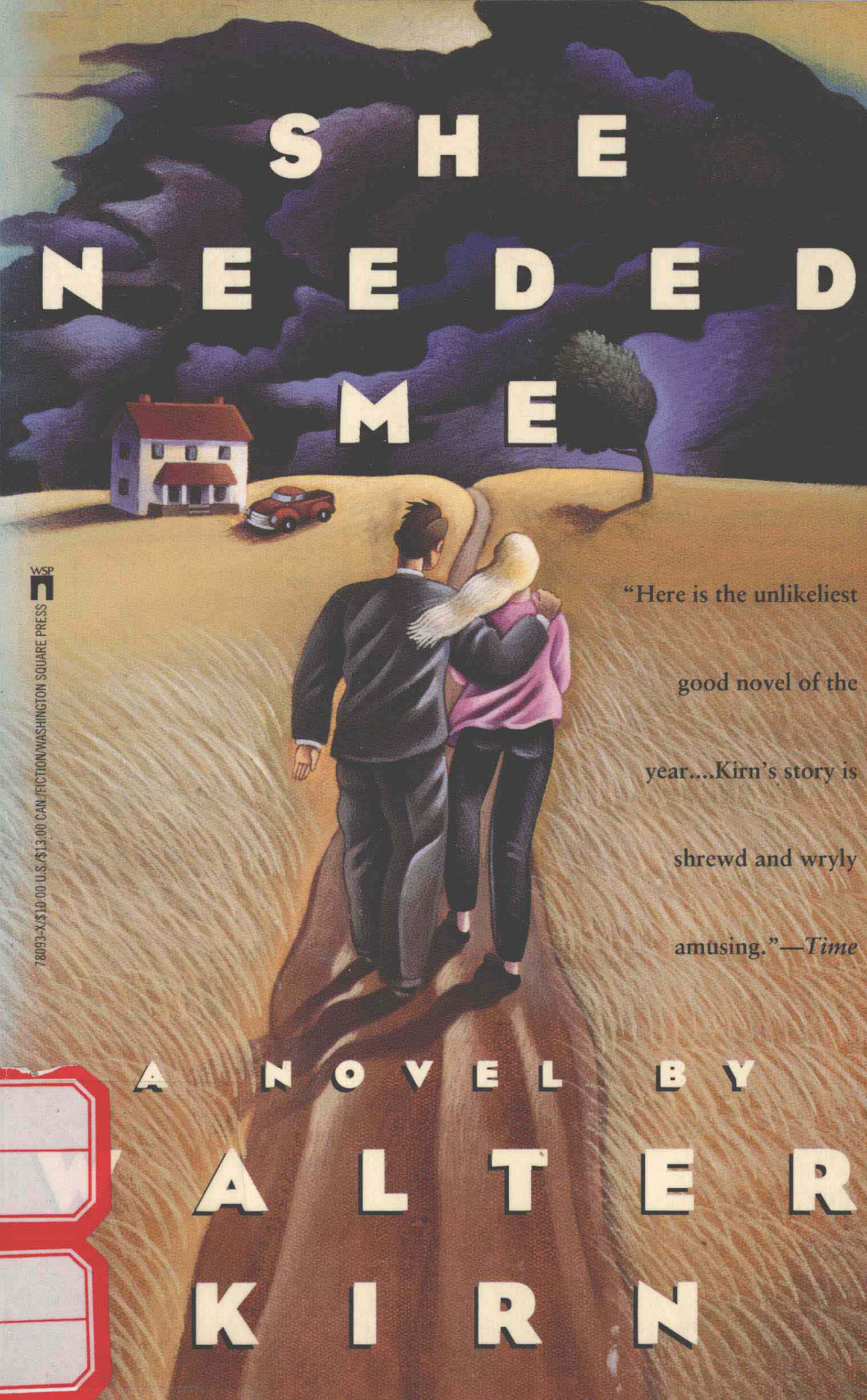


S H E N E E D E D M E

An illustration of a man and a woman walking away from the viewer down a dirt path that winds through a field of tall, golden grass. The man is wearing a dark suit, and the woman is wearing a pink sweater and dark pants, with her arm around his shoulder. In the distance, on the left, is a small white house with a red roof and a red car parked nearby. On the right, there is a single, dark, leafy tree. The sky is a deep, dark purple and blue, suggesting a storm or nightfall. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

"Here is the unlikelyst

good novel of the

year....Kirn's story is

shrewd and wryly

amusing."—*Time*

A N O V E L B Y
A L T E R
K I R N

**S H E
N E E D E D
M E**

**A N O V E L B Y
W A L T E R K I R N**



WASHINGTON SQUARE PRESS
PUBLISHED BY POCKET BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore

The sale of this book without its cover is unauthorized. If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that it was reported to the publisher as "unsold and destroyed." Neither the author nor the publisher has received payment for the sale of this "stripped book."

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

WSP



A Washington Square Press Publication of
POCKET BOOKS, a division of Simon & Schuster Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

Copyright © 1992 by Walter Kirn

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce
this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.
For information address Pocket Books, 1230 Avenue
of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

Kirn, Walter, 1962—

She needed me : a novel / by Walter Kirn.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-671-78093-X

I. Title.

PS3561.K746S48 1992

813'.54—dc20

92-15909

CIP

First Washington Square Press trade paperback printing October 1993

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

WASHINGTON SQUARE PRESS and colophon are
registered trademarks of Simon & Schuster Inc.

Cover design by John Gall
Cover art by Terry Widener

Printed in the U.S.A.

CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR WALTER KIRN'S

SHE NEEDED ME

"*SHE NEEDED ME* is winningly unpredictable. . . . Kim and Weaver may be among life's losers, but they've been given some awfully good lines. . . ."

—*The Wall Street Journal*

"Kirn's followers will recognize . . . the same deadpan voice and dead-on vision that characterized Kirn's 1990 story collection, *My Hard Bargain*. But this time Kirn manages to skewer—or maybe barbecue—even larger chunks of the modern American dream. . . . Kirn and his sympathetic portrait of contemporary confusion deserve a warm welcome. We need them."

—*People*

"Kirn allows us our whole range of feelings, conflicted though they may be. . . . Kirn writes toward complication and truth, rather than away from it, and wins me over entirely. . . . I, as reader, wanted to give myself up to a novel that would leave me, finally, unmercifully wrenched or unsurpassingly joyful. That *SHE NEEDED ME* refuses to do either is, while frustrating, quite possibly a measure of the novel's own truthfulness, and therefore, of its ultimate artistic success."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"[An] entertaining comic novel. In Weaver's heady, heart-warming journey . . . Kirn captures both the comedy and the psychoses of the right wing."

—*Washington Post Book World*

A BOOK-OF-THE-MONTH CLUB SELECTION

“A novel of subtle redemption and open-ended searching. . . . Kirn is at his best, crafting a strong woman coming to realization. Indeed, it is in character depiction that Kirn’s talent breaks through. Drawn with devastatingly quick brushes, the characters’ lives are revealed in broken lines, allowing the reader to fill in, without realizing it, the broken lines of people we all know. . . . There are times when Kirn shatters with a sentence. In the end, *SHE NEEDED ME* is an honest and illuminating portrait of two people lost.”

—*Richmond Times Dispatch*

“*SHE NEEDED ME* oscillates artfully between religious satire and romantic sincerity. . . .”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“A gentle, bare-boned but clever ‘New American Regionalist’ Midwestern novel. . . . I’m a bit ashamed to like Kirn’s novel so much. I didn’t think I could possibly sympathize with his protagonist. . . . But Kirn, a savvy, skillful novelist, crafts him into a sympathetic, even likeable fellow. . . .”

—*Philadelphia City Paper*

“If you want to read a modern love story, with a great plot and simple language effectively dealing with abortion, religion, and self-discovery, you most certainly should read this book. Walter Kirn dives headfirst into the issues of the ’90s with *SHE NEEDED ME*. . . .”

—*The Muse*

“Walter Kirn is a cocky first-time novelist. . . . *SHE NEEDED ME* is like one of those artificial logs that burn with a sinister greenish flame: domesticated napalm. . . .”

—*Bookpage*

"I found one of the deep and lasting pleasures of *SHE NEEDED ME* to be a return to a writer whose voice taps into the sounds we all share, a lingua franca of our cultural life. It is a reliable, truthful, and direct way of speaking that Kirn manages to show us still exists; its meters are not without a hard, simple beauty. . . . Kirn also has an uncanny ear for the heartbreaking absurdities of his parents' generation, and his own. . . . And from this unclean pool of real moral life Walter Kirn enters again into the province that gives him his natural voice and power."

—*Newsday*

"Kirn's first novel is magnetically readable, told simply but not simplemindedly. . . . Chock-full of affecting and funny, affecting and creepy, and just plain affecting mundane incidents, and gingerly skirting sentimentality by means of strong characterization and an astringently ambiguous last page, this tale of two youngsters drifting in life and love might be the surprise hit first novel of the season."

—*Booklist*

"Intense. . . . Mr. Kirn is a writer in firm grasp of descriptive powers. . . . His sentences possess an unadorned clarity. . . . A dark and loopy journey."

—*Dallas Morning News*

"Kirn sensitively portrays his main characters' painful emotional waltz, perfectly capturing the hesitancy and mistrust that sabotages their yearning. . . . *SHE NEEDED ME* focuses more on the hearts of its protagonists, touching the reader's heart along the way. . . ."

—*Library Journal*

Also by Walter Kirn

My Hard Bargain

Most Washington Square Press Books are available at special quantity discounts for bulk purchases for sales promotions, premiums or fund raising. Special books or book excerpts can also be created to fit specific needs.

For details write the office of the Vice President of Special Markets, Pocket Books, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020.

*For Deborah Bull, without whom this book might
have been possible, but not probable.*

With special thanks to Steve and Jamie Potenberg,
Judith Regan, the people of the Owl,
Jim Harrison, and Thomas McGuane.

**S H E
N E E D E D
M E**

One

WE MET OUTSIDE AN ABORTION CLINIC.

The girl was standing up, about to walk inside.

I was in front of her, lying down.

I had gone there with some friends from church. The Conscience Squad, we called ourselves. Our leader was a man named Lucas Boone, a veteran of the Navy SEALs who had given his soul to the Lord of Hosts during an arctic training exercise. He said his conversion had something to do with the northern lights—their resemblance to the walls of a cathedral. That, and three weeks without sleep or hot food. What he learned up there, he told us, is that there are limits to self-reliance. Mastering hostile environments won't save you. Metabolic self-control is just another form of sinful pride. Kneeling before the au-

WALTER KIRN

rorra borealis, he laid down his pack on the ice and snow and was washed in the Blood of the Lamb.

Lucas's genius was planning and tactics. He picked the targets, the times. He drove the school bus. Surprise and nonviolence, those were the keys. The counterprotesters hated him because of his clever decoy actions. Lured by a phony memo or an anonymous tip, they would charge off to another city, sometimes a whole other state, while the Conscience Squad descended on a clinic just blocks away from their headquarters. A call from a pay phone along our route would alert the television stations, giving them just enough time to send cameras before the real action got under way. The press had a bias against us, Lucas knew, but it was outweighed by their need for quotes and pictures.

"Bloodsuckers," he said. "And I'm the blood."

Lucas understood the media.

As members of the Conscience Squad, we kept ourselves in a constant state of readiness, sleeping lightly, shoes beside our beds. We never knew when the call would come. A few of us, myself included, had lost good jobs because of this, not even having time to call in sick as we hustled into our clothes and out the door. On mornings when the school bus came, minutes mattered, excuses could wait. Lucas would honk the horn once, that's all; a second honk could rouse the neighbors, any of whom might warn the other side. If a person wanted breakfast, the school bus carried tea and doughnuts. Sometimes, on long trips, Lucas stopped at Burger King and ordered us malts and Whoppers. Myself, I was usually too wound up to eat.

My job was distributing the literature—snipping the twine on the heavy bales of pamphlets and passing them

around to members before we reached the target clinic. The slicker handouts, the ones with color photos showing the disturbing, bloody truth of what our opponents called “the procedure,” were obtained from a national clearinghouse in Georgia. The tracts that were made up of Bible verses and quotes from remorseful abortionists we produced ourselves.

For its boldness and disciplined organization, the Conscience Squad had received citations from public figures too numerous to name, including a Catholic archbishop and a U.S. senator. It was the first group I had been a part of that actually stood for something, some idea. There were rumors that even the governor supported us, although his advisers would not let him say so, for fear of offending liberal special interests.

I was very proud to be a member.

Things were running smoothly the day I met the girl. The clinic had only two entrances—in front for the patients, in back for the staff—the sort of simple layout Lucas dreamed of. I was stationed in back, between the Dumpsters and the parking lot. At Lucas’s request, I had worn a suit and tie to contrast with some of the other members’ clothes. A mixture of formal and casual outfits got the point across on TV that our membership had a range of backgrounds. A few of us dressed like 1960s hippies, and once were. Some of us were leading businessmen. We had women, far more than our critics acknowledged, and half a dozen blacks and Hispanics, all of whom were glad to stand out front and prove to the public our group was not racist. Most of us, however, were like me: ordinary caring Americans willing to do whatever it might take to put an end to child-slaughter.

By the time the clinic opened at nine, there had been scuffles, but nothing unexpected. As usual, the nurses were the worst. They loitered in the parking lot until their whole shift had arrived, then marched as a group toward the door. We didn't try to block their way, just stood in two parallel rows of nine or ten, praying out loud in unison and holding up our signs: UNBORN BUT NOT FORGOTTEN; EVERYONE DESERVES A BIRTHDAY; BE A HERO, SAVE A WHALE—SAVE A BABY, GO TO JAIL. The nurses reached our human corridor and started to spit and curse, the old routine. We smiled and did not react, our own routine. The nurses had almost reached the building when one of them, tall and broad-shouldered, older than the rest, suddenly stopped short and rushed my row, head down, claws out, wailing like a beast. We opened ranks and she shot right through, then recovered her balance and climbed on one man's back. Lucas's rule was clear: Fight if attacked, but defensively, never to do harm. The man whom the nurse was on top of—a lawyer friend named Derek Griff who did a lot of pro bono for the cause—ducked and backed up and let her tumble over him, and then, when she got up again, full-nelsoned her and walked her to the door. Fortunately for the nurse, the police had not yet arrived on the scene, or Lucas would have insisted she be held.

The patients—we didn't call them that; they were being maimed, not healed; we called them the mothers, the lost—began showing up about ten minutes later. By this time there were dozens of policemen and a K-9 unit, the usual government overkill, and all three news vans were parked and ready, antennas and satellite dishes raised to capture every nuance of the conflict. A ragtag group of counterprotesters, most of them students from local St.

Paul colleges, was milling around the edge of the parking lot, offering to escort the mothers in or if they preferred, to drive them to another clinic. When I noticed a group of them pushing my way, I took it as a signal to lie down.

Here is how Lucas had trained me to do it: First, I took a series of deep breaths and cleared my mind of fear. Then I pictured my body as a rug, a mat. I knew that some of the people would walk right over me. They might even kick me, driving their heels in, aiming for my genitals. What I was meant to do then was—nothing. Nothing but pray for them, calmly but audibly, letting them hear my concern and my resolve. Depending on the municipality, the police might drag me away at this point, or they might stand aside, uninvolved, scratching the ears of their panting German shepherds. Bruises were part of it, breathing was part of it. Mostly, though, it was Love.

Above me, as the group came nearer, I could see outstretched arms, a forest of them, holding out paperback Bibles and leaflets, waving them, showing the photos. The arms drew back as the group pushed on: Never touch the mother. I saw two boom mikes the size of baseball bats swing across the sky and hover there. I could hear Lucas preaching on a bullhorn. Sirens. The opposition, chanting. You could go off at such times, you could lose yourself. Better to stay focused, though. Alert. As the first of the line-crossers tried to step over me, corduroy trousers and bulky hiking boots, I called down a blessing on all of us: “Let live!”

The mother—a girl in her early twenties who had on a pair of tight black jeans and tennis shoes bursting out at the sides, the sort of girl you see in a store aisle and can’t help suspecting of shoplifting cigarettes—stopped a foot away from me, stopped cold. There were men on either

side of her, pro-abortion people, trying to move her along. She didn't budge. Such moments of dawning awareness and remorse were what we hoped and prayed for, the reason we rose before dawn, gave money, and worked whole nights in the chapel basement mimeographing letters to congressmen. But you had to be quick or they'd lose that glimmer, whatever it was in them waking up to save them.

"I'll help you," I said. "There are counselors here. They'll let you know your options."

The girl looked right and left, at the men, then down at me, arms crossed. Her brownish blond hair fell into her face. She tossed it back. "Stand up," she said. "I want you to stand up."

One of the men said, "He's crazy. Ignore him," and gripped the girl's wrist. She shook him off. A boom mike swung down and clipped the man's head. He slapped it away in a red-faced rage. Someone screamed—a cameraman, I think—and there was a sound of crashing glass and metal. Expensive, high-tech breakage. Everyone but the mother turned to look. Her eyes were fixed on mine. "You said you'd help me."

"Our counselors—" I raised my hand, a shield. It was a fight now, people were running. I thought I had glass in my eye.

"You," the girl said. "You said you would."

She crouched and held out her hand. I took it, panicking. A TV sound man staggered sideways into us, bleeding from his headset. The girl, falling backward, grabbed hold of my tie; I hooked her armpit, lifted. I glimpsed a clear path through the crowd and went for it, dragging the girl along by the elbow, amazed at how slim and light her body felt. People were screaming: "Fascists! Nazis!" Peo-

ple were screaming: "Baby killers!" A woman whom I did not recognize as belonging to either side was stooped in the parking lot in front of us, brushing the dirt off a trampled Bible.

Out of harm's way, behind some parked cars, I asked the girl if she was okay.

She touched her left earlobe, which was bleeding slightly. "I think I maybe lost an earring."

A police car nosed past: revolving blue lights. Derek the lawyer loped along beside it, shouting at the driver. A woman squad member sat in the back, singing a hymn of faith and defiance through the open window. Her voice sailed out over the crowd noise like a sacred offering, so beautiful.

"Oh, and my purse," said the girl. "I had a little purse."

I shook my head and said, "I'm sorry. We didn't mean this to happen. It's their fault."

"I probably won't get it back, do you think? Probably not," she said. "Shit."

I said, "It's not important. What's important—"

A blast from Lucas's bullhorn cut me off. "Everyone please return to the school bus. Assemble at the school bus." I turned in the direction of his voice. I saw a young man with a hand-held newscam walking slowly backward a couple of feet in front of him, shadowed by someone holding a spotlight with a wide silver reflective rim. The three of them matched their steps, a moving unit.

Lucas looks good, I thought. He's in control here. Everyone will see we're in control here.

The girl was not there when I turned back. The crowd had begun to break up by then and was streaming away between the parked cars, making it hard to see for any distance. I touched my left lower eyelash. Grit, not glass.