

KING PENGUIN

FAY WELDON

Author of *THE CLONING OF JOANNA MAY* and *THE LIFE AND LOVES OF A SHE-DEVIL*

PUFFBALL

"Fay Weldon is witty and stylish... a marvelously intelligent explorer of the country of women." —*The New York Times Book Review*



PUFFBALL

Born in England and raised in New Zealand, Fay Weldon received an M.A. in Economics and Psychology from St. Andrews University in Scotland, then turned to writing film scripts, plays, short stories, and novels. Her books include *The Cloning of Joanna May*, *The Hearts and Lives of Men*, *The Leader of the Band*, *The Shrapnel Academy*, *The Heart of the Country*, and *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (now the film *She-Devil*). She lives in London and in Somerset with her husband and two of her four sons.

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In the Beginning

Many people dream of country cottages. Liffey dreamed for many years, and saw the dream come true one hot Sunday afternoon, in Somerset, in September. Bees droned, sky glazed, flowers glowed, and the name carved above the lintel, half-hidden by rich red roses, was Honeycomb Cottage and Liffey knew that she must have it. A trap closed round her.

The getting of the country cottage, not the wanting – that was the trap. It was a snare baited by Liffey's submerged desires and unrealised passions, triggered by nostalgia for lost happiness, and set off by fear of a changing future. But how was Liffey, who believed that she was perfectly happy and perfectly ordinary, to know a thing like that? Liffey saw smooth green lawns where others saw long tangled grass, and was not looking out for snares.

Besides, as Liffey's mother Madge once observed, 'Liffey wants what she wants and gets cross with those who stand in her way.'

Richard stood in Liffey's way that hot September afternoon, and Liffey was cross with him. Richard had been married to Liffey for seven years, and responded, as spouses will, to the message behind the words, and not the words themselves. 'I want to live in the country,' said Liffey, remarkably enough, for she did not often put her wants and wishes so straightforwardly into words.

'We can't,' said Richard, 'because I have to earn a living,' and it was unlike him to disappoint her so directly, and so brutally.

Liffey and Richard seldom had rows, and were nearly always

polite to each other, which made them believe they were ideally suited and happily married. She was small and bright and pretty; and he was large, handsome and responsible. She was twenty-eight, and he thirty-two. Madge was relieved that Liffey was, so far, childless; but Richard's mother, although an Anglican, had already lit a candle to the Virgin Mary and prayed for the grandchild she could reasonably have expected five years ago. They had been married for seven years, after all.

'But we could be so happy here,' said Liffey. The cottage stood on rising ground, at a point where smooth fields met wooded hillside. It looked across the plains to Glastonbury Tor, that hummocky hill which rises out of the flat Somerset levels, and is a nexus of spiritual power, attracting UFOs, and tourists, and pop festivals, and hippies, and the drug squad. The cottage was empty. Spiderwebs clouded the latticed windows.

'We are happy where we are,' said Richard. Adding, 'Aren't we?' in a half threatening, half pleading tone of voice, so she was obliged to forget his crossness and kiss him, and say yes. And indeed, their city apartment was small, but convenient and comfortable, and Liffey had never before complained about it, nor had any real reason to. If she gave voice to worries they were not so much personal as ecological, and were about the way the earth's natural resources were being eaten up, and what was happening to the blue whale, and baby seals, and butterflies, and what deforestation did to the ozone layer above Brazil. Richard, who knew that new developments in nuclear, chemical and silicon chip technology would soon solve all such problems, laughed gently and comfortingly at her worries and loved her for worrying. He liked to look after her, or thought he did.

After they kissed, he took Liffey round to the back of the cottage, through hollyhocks and wallflowers, and there, in the long grasses down by the stream, made love to her. It was a decorous event, characteristic of their particular mating

behaviour. Liffey lay still and quiet, and Richard was quick and dutiful.

'Isn't she skinny,' said Mabs, watching through field glasses from the bedroom of Cadbury Farm. Her husband Tucker took the glasses.

'They grow them like that in the city,' he said.

They both spoke in the gentle, caressing drawl of the West Country, mocking the universe, defying its harshness.

'You don't know they're from the city,' Mabs objected.

'They're not from round here,' said Tucker. 'No one round here does it in public.'

Cadbury Farm was made of stone, and so long and low and old it all but vanished into the fold of the hill above the cottage. Liffey and Richard, certainly, had not noticed it was there. Tucker's family had lived at Cadbury Farm, or on its site, for a thousand years or so. When Tucker moved about his fields, he seemed so much part of them he could hardly be seen. Mabs was more noticeable. She was reckoned a foreigner: she came from Crossley, five miles away. She was a large, slow, powerful woman and Tucker was a small, lithe man. So had her Norman ancestors been, ousting the small dark Celts, from which Tucker took his colouring and nature.

'Richard,' said Liffey, 'you don't think we can be seen?'

'Of course not,' said Richard. 'Why are you always so guilty? There's nothing wrong with sex. Everyone does it.'

'My mother didn't,' said Liffey, contradicting because the feeling of crossness had returned. Sexual activity can sweep away many resentments and anxieties, but not those which are bred of obsession and compulsion. 'Or only when she had me,' she amended.

'More fool her,' said Richard, who didn't want to talk about Liffey's mother. Richard's parents had described Liffey's mother, after the wedding, as wonderfully clever and eccentric, and Richard had watched Liffey carefully since, in case she seemed to be going the same way.

'If we lived in the country,' persisted Liffey, 'and had a bit of peace and quiet, I could really get down to writing my novel.' Liffey had secretarial training and did temporary work in offices from time to time, when it didn't interfere with her looking after Richard, but felt that such work could hardly, as she put it, fulfil her. So she wrote, in her spare time, poems and paragraphs, and ideas, and even short stories. She showed what she wrote to nobody, not even to Richard, but felt a certain sense of progress and achievement for having done it.

'You'd be bored to death,' said Richard, meaning that he feared that he would.

'You have your career and your fulfilment,' persisted Liffey, 'and what do I have? Why should your wishes be more important than mine?'

Why indeed? Richard could not even cite his money earning capacity in his defence, since Liffey had a small fortune of her own, left to her by a grandfather. And he had of late become very conscious of the communal guilt which the male sex appears to bear in relation to women. All the same, Liffey's words rang fashionable and hollow in the silence he allowed to follow them.

He made love to her again. Moral confusion excited him sexually – or at any rate presented itself as a way out of difficulty, giving him time to think, and a generally agreeable time at that.

'She's just a farmyard animal like any other,' said Tucker handing over the glasses to Mabs.

'Women aren't animals,' said Mabs.

'Yes, they are,' said Tucker, 'tamed for the convenience of men.'

Mabs put down her glasses and looked malevolently at her husband, frightening him into silence. Then she turned back to Liffey and Richard and watched some more.

'They're very quick about it,' she complained to Tucker. 'I

thought city folks got up to all kinds of tricks. Do you fancy her?’

‘She’s too skinny for my taste,’ said Tucker.

‘And you can do a lot better than him,’ said Mabs, returning the compliment.

‘I should hope so,’ said Tucker, and did, pushing Mabs’ old grey skirt up and reaching the oyster-coloured silk underwear beneath. She was fussy about what she wore next to her skin. She had surprisingly long and slender legs. Her bulk was contained in her middle parts. Tucker loved the way her sharp brown eyes, in the act of love, turned soft and docile, large irised, like those of his cows. The image of Liffey stayed in his mind, as Mabs had intended it should, and helped. Mabs made good use of everything that came her way, and Tucker did, too.

‘If you would have a baby,’ said Richard to Liffey, as they lay in the long grass, the late sun striking low across the land, ‘there’d be some point in living in the country.’ Liffey did not want a baby, or at any rate not now. She might be chronologically twenty-eight, but felt eighteen, and eighteen was too young to have a baby.

Liffey looked at Honeycomb Cottage. Generations of happy, healthy children, she thought, had skipped in and out of the door, along the path, under roses and between hollyhocks. There, loving couples had grown old in peace and tranquillity, at one with the rhythms of nature. Here she and Richard would be safe, out of the city which already had turned a few of his dark hairs grey, and was turning his interest away from her, and which threatened her daily with its pollutants and violence; the city: where there was a rapist round every corner, and rudeness at every turn, and an artificiality of life and manners which sickened her.

‘All right,’ said Liffey, ‘let’s have a baby.’

Panic rose in her throat, even as she spoke.

‘All right,’ said Richard, ‘let’s live in the country.’

He regretted it at once.

Mabs was in the yard of Cadbury Farm as Richard and Liffey drove back towards the main road along the bumpy track that passed both cottage and farm. Richard had to stop the car while Tucker drove his cows in. Mangy dogs strained and barked at the end of chains, and were yelled into silence by Mabs. She bent to give them bones and her rump was broad.

'So long as you don't ever let yourself go,' added Richard, and then Mabs stood straight and smiled full at Richard and Liffey. She was formless and shapeless in her old grey skirt and her husband's shirt. Her hair was ratty, she had unplucked whiskers on her double chin, and she weighed all of thirteen stone. But she was tall and strong and powerful, and her skin was creamy white.

'She looks like a horse,' said Liffey. 'Do you ever see me looking like a horse?'

'You'd better not,' said Richard, 'or we'll move straight back to town.'

Richard did not believe that Liffey, if offered the country, would actually want to live there. He believed he had called her bluff – which had begun to irritate him – and brought her a little nearer to having a baby, and that was all. He was realistic where Liffey was romantic, and trained, as business executives ought to be, in the arts of manipulation.

'Mind you,' said Liffey, 'horses are very friendly. There are worse things to be.'

Liffey, as horse, came from the Viennese stables. She tossed her head and neighed and pranced, precisely and correctly. She was trained in the arts of child-wifedom. Mabs, as horse, was a working dray – Tucker mounted her easily. She galloped and galloped and sweated and brayed, and what price breeding then? Who needed it? But how was Liffey to know a thing like that? Liffey never sweated, never brayed. Liffey made a sweet little mewling sound, as soon as she possibly could yet still carried conviction; a dear and familiar sound to Richard, for what their love-making might

lack in quality was certainly made up for in frequency. Liffey felt that the act of copulation was a strange way to demonstrate the act of love, but did her best with it.

Tucker's cows moved on. Richard and Liffey left.

'They'll be back,' said Mabs to Tucker. He believed her. She seemed to have a hot line to the future, and he wished she did not. She had a reputation of being a witch, and Tucker feared it might be justified.

'We don't want city folk down Honeycomb,' protested Tucker.

'They might be useful,' said Mabs, vaguely. Glastonbury Tor was dark and rose sharply out of a reddish, fading sky. She smiled at the hill as if it were a friend, and made Tucker still more uneasy.

Inside Liffey (1)

There was an outer Liffey, arrived at twenty-eight with boyish body and tiny breasts, with a love of bright, striped football sweaters and tight jeans, and a determination to be positive and happy. Outer Liffey, with her fluttery smiley eyes, sweet curvy face, dark curly hair, and white smooth skin. And there was inner Liffey, cosmic Liffey, hormones buzzing; heart beating, blood surging, pawn in nature's game.

She put on scent, thrust out her chest, silhouetted her buttocks and drew male eyes to her. That way satisfaction lay: the easing of a blind and restless procreative spirit. How could she help herself? Why should she? It was her rôle in the mating dance, and Liffey danced on, as others do, long after the music stopped.

Liffey had lately been cross with Richard. Bad-tempered, so

he'd ask if her period was due, thus making her more irritable still. Who wants to believe that their vision of the world is conditioned by their hormonal state: that no one else is truly at fault, except that believing it makes them so?

'I've just had my period,' she'd say, 'as you surely ought to know,' and make him feel the unfairness of it all, that he should be spared the pain and inconvenience of a monthly menstrual flow, and she should not.

'Perhaps it's the pill,' he'd say.

'I expect it's just me,' she'd say, bitterly.

But how was one to be distinguished from the other? For Liffey's body was not functioning, as her doctor remarked, as nature intended. Not that 'nature' can reasonably be personified in this way – for what is nature, after all, for living creatures, but the sum of the chance genetic events which have led us down one evolutionary path or another. And although what seem to be its intentions may, in a bungled and muddled way, work well enough to keep this species or that propagating, they cannot be said always to be desirable for the individual.

But for good or bad – i.e. convenient for her, inconvenient for the race – Liffey had interfered with her genetic destiny and was on the pill. She took one tablet a day, of factory-made oestrogen and progesterone powders mixed. As a result, Liffey's ovarian follicles failed to ripen and develop their egg. She could not, for this reason, become pregnant. But her baffled body responded by retaining fluid in its cells, and this made her from time to time more lethargic, irritable and depressed than otherwise would have been the case. Her toes and fingers were puffy. Her wedding ring would not come off, and her shoes hurt. And although the extra secretions from her cervix, responding to the oestrogen, helped preserve her uterus and cervix from cancer, they also predisposed her to thrush infections and inconveniently damped her pants. Her liver functioned differently to cope with the extraneous hormones, but not inefficiently. Her

carbohydrate metabolism was altered and her heart was slightly affected, but was strong and young enough to beat steadily and sturdily on.

The veins in her white, smooth legs swelled slightly, but they too were young and strong and did not become varicose. The clotting mechanism of her blood altered, predisposing her to thrombo-embolic disease. But Liffey, which was the main thing, would not become pregnant. Liffey valued her freedom and her figure, and when older friends warned her that marriage must grow out of its early love affair and into bricks and mortar and children, she dismissed their vision of the world as gloomy.

Was Liffey's resentment of Richard a matter of pressure in her brain caused by undue retention of fluid, or in fact the result of his behaviour? Liffey naturally assumed it was the latter. It is not pleasant for a young woman to believe that her behaviour is dictated by her chemistry, and that her wrongs lie in herself, and not in others' bad behaviour.

Holding Back

The next weekend Liffey and Richard took their friends Bella and Ray down to visit Honeycomb Cottage.

The trap closed tighter.

'When I say country,' said Richard, to everyone, 'I mean twenty miles outside London at the most. Somerset is impossible. But as a country cottage, it's a humdinger.' He had a slightly old-fashioned vocabulary.

Richard was, Bella always felt, a slightly old-fashioned young man. She wanted to loosen him up. She felt there was a wickedness beneath the veneer of well-bred niceness and

that it was Liffey's fault it remained so firmly battened down.

'When I say have a baby,' said Liffey, 'I mean soon, very soon. Not quite now.'

Ray had a theory that wives always made themselves a degree less interesting than their husbands, and that Liffey, if married to, say, himself, would improve remarkably.

Bella and Ray were in their early forties and their friendship with Richard and Liffey was a matter of some speculation to Bella and Ray's other friends. Perhaps Bella was after Richard, or Ray after Liffey? Perhaps they aimed for foursomes? Or perhaps, the most common consensus, Bella and Ray were just so dreadful they had to find their friends where best they could, and choice did not enter into it.

Bella and Ray – who wrote cookery columns and cookery books – were a couple other couples loved to hate. Liffey and Richard, however, such was their youth and simplicity, accepted Ray and Bella as they were: liked, admired and trusted them, and were flattered by their attention.

Ray and Bella had two children. Bella had waited until her mid-thirties to have them, by which time her fame and fortune were secure.

When Bella and Ray saw the cottage they knew at once it was not for them to admire or linger by. Its sweetness embarrassed them. Their taste ran to starker places: they would feel ridiculous under a thatch, with roses round their door. They rather unceremoniously left Richard and Liffey at the gate and borrowed the car and went off to the ruins of Glastonbury to inspect the monks' kitchen with a view to a Special on medieval cookery.

'Richard,' said Liffey. 'The main-line station's only ten minutes by car, and there's a fast early train at seven in the morning which gets you in to London by half-past eight and