

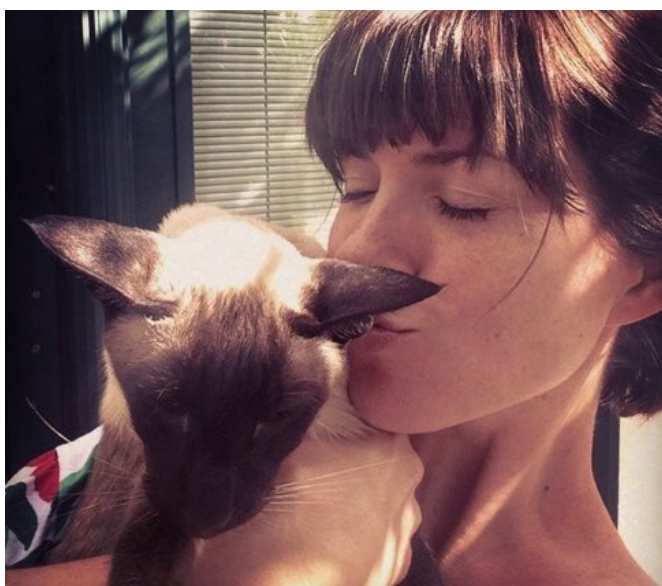
# MY INTERVIEW WITH LIONEL SHRIVER

By Dawn O'Porter



*We Need To Talk About Kevin* is one of my favourite books of all time. If you don't know it, it's a story about a young boy who gets trigger happy at his school and pops off a load of other kids. There is also a mother, Eva, who is cold, harsh, and impenetrable. But did she deserve a son like Kevin? Of course not, but the novel throws up the nature/nurture debate better than any other. I was gripped, and I still think about it a lot.

Then I discovered that Lionel Shriver had written a new novel, *Big Brother*. This one is about two siblings, one morbidly obese and the other trying to save his life. It's easier going than *Kevin*, this one won't keep you up at night for any other reason than you won't want to stop reading it. But the characterization is just as strong.



“ Then I discovered that Lionel lives on my street in London. Then she brought my missing cat home. ”

Then I discovered that Lionel lives on my street in London. Then she bought my missing cat home (OK, not quite, but you will read about that). So then I got cheeky and I asked her if I could interview her. And this is how that went...

*Note: the interview started a few months ago (it's been happening on email).*



## HI LIONEL, HOW ARE YOU AND WHERE ARE YOU?

I'm in my study in Brooklyn, in our ramshackle little dive in Windsor Terrace, a pleasant, still under-the-radar neighbourhood that hasn't been completely overrun with strollers the size of troop transporters. It's unseasonably cool, a breeze from the open window ruffling the paper melee on my desk from the compilation of my 2012 US taxes. Having dispatched that project this last weekend is such a relief that I could cry.

Instead I am more likely to weep that my regular tennis partner has deserted me for today, with the weather screaming for me to finally iron out the recurrent glitch in my forehand. Though I shouldn't be petulant, after three hours of rallying each afternoon for the last two days: my idea of a good time, my knees are swollen up, and I can hardly walk.

What does any of this have to do with literature, you ask? Gloriously, nothing.

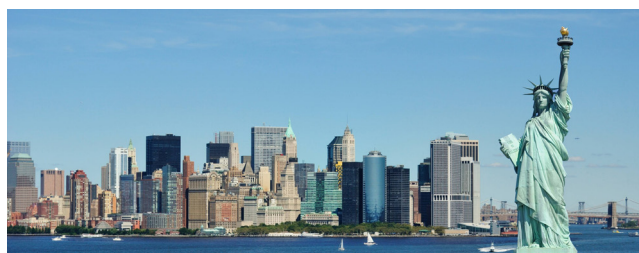
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**HOW FUNNY! I AM CURRENTLY SITTING IN A HOUSE ON WINDSOR TERRACE IN IRELAND. I ACTUALLY FEEL A BIT FUZZY ABOUT THAT, SEEING AS WE ALSO LIVE ON THE SAME STREET IN LONDON. INCIDENTALLY, THANKS FOR BRINGING MY CAT HOME WHEN SHE WENT MISSING LAST CHRISTMAS. WE WERE ON HONEYMOON AND I WAS DEVASTATED. I WROTE THE LAST LINE OF MY NOVEL THAT MORNING AND WHEN SHE TURNED UP AT YOUR HOUSE, I TOOK IT AS A SIGN. NOT ONLY THAT WRITING A BOOK WAS A GOOD IDEA, BUT ALSO THAT WE SHOULD PROBABLY BE BEST FRIENDS. ARE YOU SUPERSTITIOUS?**

I'm not superstitious, but I like weird connections--though I must clarify that Windsor Terrace is the neighbourhood, and not the street. (Exact name of my street in Brooklyn doubtless the same closely guarded state secret that my address in London has become--thanks to said weird connections with your cat.) Also, credit where due, we crossed paths because my husband caught your cat, not I, and if I didn't pay that tribute he'd be irate. See, he thinks he has a special connection to animals, and I am an animal-hater. It's a convenient thumbnail that isn't remotely true, but I humour him.

In any event, I take meaning wherever I can find it, since it's a quantity that gets especially scarce in one's waning decrepitude. So let's choose to find the Windsor Terrace connection a sign, all spooky and ooh-ooh and very fun.



**YOU COULD HAVE REPLIED WITH AN EXCITABLE "HOW COOL, LET'S BE BFFS". BUT INSTEAD YOU TOLD ME YOU HATE ANIMALS, YOU MOCK YOUR HUSBAND, AND THEN YOU SHATTERED MY GIDDY EXCITEMENT ABOUT THE STREET NAMES. IT'S COOL, I'M TOUGH, I CAN TAKE IT. BUT I MUST ASK, ALTHOUGH HAVING READ YOUR BOOKS I THINK I KNOW THE ANSWER TO THIS, ARE YOU ROMANTIC?**

I don't hate animals! I actually had the thought: you know they're going to take that out of context and within minutes it will be all over the internet that Shriver has admitted she "hates animals". But what the hell--I already have a rep for "hating children", and children are animals, right?

Of course I'm a romantic. Covered by a thin layer of cynicism. I don't remember who observed that cynics are "failed romantics", but there's something to that. Disappointed romantics, perhaps. Yet since I'm not really disappointed, I'm probably more an

"embarrassed romantic". What I'm not is sentimental. Romance and sentimentality can get confused. And if we're going to be associative, the best definition of sentimentality I know is "unearned emotion". So I am into real emotion, hence real romance, but I detest the fake kind, and it's important to me to recognize the difference.

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**SHALL WE GET ON TO YOUR WORK? IT MAKES SENSE TO START WITH KEVIN. I HAVE NEVER BEEN SO AFFECTED BY A CHARACTER, SERIOUSLY. I LIVED AND BREATHED HIM FOR WEEKS UNTIL MY FRIENDS TOLD ME I HAD TO STOP TALKING ABOUT HIM. I WANT TO KNOW, DID YOU WANT TO WRITE A BOOK ABOUT A MOTHER LIKE EVA, OR A KID LIKE KEVIN?**

I wanted to write about a mother like Eva with a kid like Kevin. A reluctant mother who at least holds out hope that what they say is true, that children bring a new sense of vitality and meaning to your life--all that "making things new" stuff--and then she gets a kid who is bored with everything and limp and sceptical and nihilistic. In other words: not what is says on the tin.

**DO YOU THINK PEOPLE HAVE A PROBLEM WITH SEPARATING THE REAL YOU WITH THE CHARACTERS IN YOUR BOOKS? AND WITHIN THAT SAME QUESTION, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PRESS? I'VE READ SOME INTERVIEWS THAT YOU'VE DONE AND THE TONE FROM THE JOURNALIST IS OFTEN SO SNARKY.**

I know what you mean; the press coverage of me has got a great deal worse than merely snarky. Frankly, I avoid reading threads after my articles out of self-protection, and I don't generally self-Google much for the same reason. The best guarantee of not letting the catty stuff inside is not to read it.

There does seem to be a current of antagonism running through a proportion of the press about me that I find a bit mystifying. I'm a little eccentric, but not more so than a lot of people. Being American in Britain probably doesn't help. Being fairly assertive

**HOW DISCIPLINED ARE YOU? DO YOU ALWAYS MEET DEADLINES?**

With non-fiction, yes, always always. I appreciate these people have spaces to fill in publications on particular dates. With fiction, I'm a bit sloppier. Though if I miss a book deadline I will feel very very guilty--as if that helps.

**IS WRITING SOMETHING YOU LOVE DOING, OR A REALLY ANNOYING ITCH YOU HAVE TO KEEP SCRATCHING?**

I used to love it more, though writing is still compulsive. I don't like writing when I don't know what I'm doing. Once the project is defined and underway, I start to entertain myself.

and female in Britain probably doesn't help. Beyond that, I don't get it. Sometimes I trip across some venomous assault on the Net by accident, and I think: for pity's sake, what did I ever do to you?

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**I DON'T UNDERSTAND IT EITHER, BUT I DO THINK IF YOU WERE A MAN WHO HAD PRODUCED EXACTLY THE SAME WORK THE REACTION WOULD HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT. MALE GENIUS AND ECCENTRICITY IS CELEBRATED, BUT WHEN A WOMAN PULLS SOMETHING WEIRD OR CHALLENGING OUT OF HER HEAD PEOPLE THINK 'HMMM, WHAT HAPPENED TO HER THAT FUCKED HER HEAD UP?' WOULD YOU AGREE?**

I suppose, but on top of everything else people are sick of hearing women complain about being kicked around, which just makes us sound whingey and as if no progress is ever enough. For reasons that remain beyond me, literature is in the gender dark ages. But the thrust of my efforts will always be aimed at writing the best books and articles I can, and they will only rarely address directly how women in my occupation aren't treated with the respect of their male counterparts.

**I WANT TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER WOMEN. YOU CHANGED YOUR NAME FROM MARGARET TO LIONEL AS A TEENAGER BECAUSE YOU DIDN'T LIKE SOUNDING LIKE A GIRL, IS THAT RIGHT? DO YOU HAVE MORE OF AN AFFINITY TO MEN THAN TO WOMEN?**

I didn't feel like a Margaret Ann. I have long had close friendships with men and women both. When I was growing up, being female still involved a host of restrictions, so naturally I resisted (and resented) the gender into which I was arbitrarily born. My soul is androgynous.

**SO HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR STYLE? DO YOU CARE ABOUT FASHION?**

About the only distinctive style I adopt is in the evenings at home, when I'm partial to 1950s night shirts. Otherwise, I wear black jeans everywhere. The whole fashion thing doesn't interest me very much--though I admire other people who pull off their outfits with flair. I just don't have the energy for that stuff. To the extent that I'm invested in my appearance, I care mostly what I look like wearing absolutely nothing.

**AFTER THE SUCCESS OF KEVIN YOU BECAME QUITE FAMOUS, DO YOU ENJOY THE PUBLIC SIDE OF YOUR SUCCESS?**

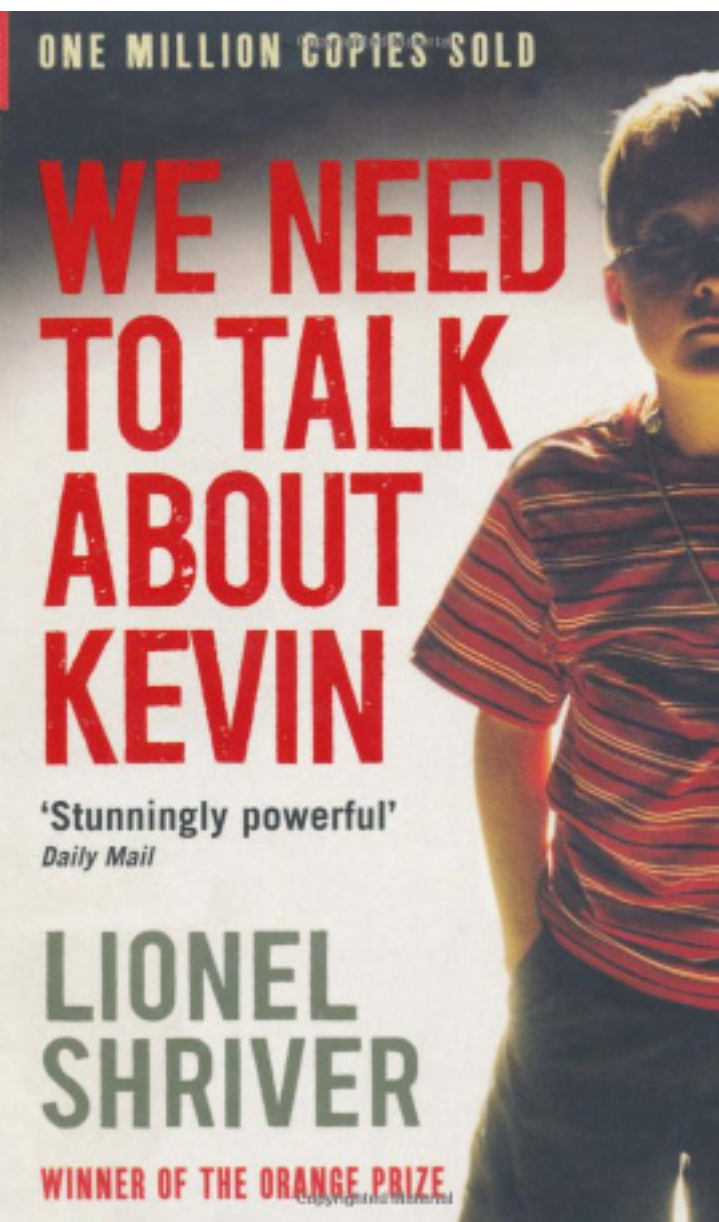
I do like it that all sorts of incredibly nice people will take the time to talk to me in signing queues. I like not having to introduce myself at parties (I suck at parties; I'm secretly very shy), or having to prove that I'm worth speaking to in 60 seconds or less (I get at least two minutes). I do not like that everything about me is apparently now everyone else's business. So it's a trade-off. Doubtless if I sank into total obscurity tomorrow I'd feel a little miffed ("why aren't all those people bothering me anymore?"), but I might be happier.

**AFTER A HIT LIKE KEVIN, IS THE PRESSURE ON TO HAVE ANOTHER HIT OF THAT MAGNITUDE?**

"The Post - Birthday World" was also a best seller in the US. So I have spared myself the one hit wonder label - just.

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## **DO YOU FEEL MORE SECURE, OR LIKE YOU HAVE MORE TO PROVE AS A WRITER NOW?**

I feel chronically insecure because in this biz you're only as good as your last book and I find novels harder to write than ever.

## **WHEN ARE YOU AT YOUR HAPPIEST?**

On the tennis court.

## **WHAT KIND OF BRIDE WERE YOU?**

Miserable. Our wedding was ... I'm not even going to get into it.

## **WHAT KIND OF WIFE ARE YOU?**

Top-drawer. I cook dinner every night. I'm affectionate. I keep up my end of things financially. I make jokes! What more would a man want?

## **GO ON THEN, GIZZ A GAG?**

I'm not one of those performing bears who crack jokes on command. I tend to be funny by accident. But I have a feeling saying you're funny is like calling yourself smart or beautiful: humorousness is a quality that other people are supposed to impute to you. Perhaps I should have said that I have been told I am funny.

## **WHAT EMBARRASSES YOU?**

Forgetting people's names. Which I do all the time. Wherever you store these things in your brain in my head looks like a smoking incinerator.

## **WHAT MAKES YOU SO ANGRY YOU CURL YOUR LIP?**

Waste. The British habit of putting leftovers in the fridge without covering them with cling-film, in the obvious hopes that the food will get crusty and disgusting so you have an excuse to throw it out. (I think the British revile leftovers.) Hypocrisy, irrationality, and bureaucracy (the latter being more waste). Religion and gratuitous cruelty--those two belonging in the same "life is hard enough" boat.

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## ARE YOU QUITE CHILLED OUT?

I am funny, which is not the same thing as chilled out. In fact, I grow readily enraged, and I enjoy being enraged. Gets the blood running. But to full-circle: what makes all this ranting about of mine marginally palatable is that I am funny when I rant. I have a powerful sense of the absurd, and the rest of the world continually obliges with new material.

## I READ YOU DON'T LIKE CENTRAL HEATING, WHERE DO YOU STAND ON AIR CON?

You can't fault my consistency: we don't have AC in Brooklyn either, not even the odd window unit. Some like it hot.

## YOU MUST HAVE TALKED ABOUT KEVIN A MILLION TIMES AND ANSWERED EVERY QUESTION UNDER THE SUN. DOES IT EVER GET TIRESOME?

Of course it does. But I always have to remember that I'm very lucky that so many readers feel the need to talk about Kevin. Having to remember to feel fortunate also gets tiresome.

## WILL YOU REALLY NOT TELL ME ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR WEDDING DAY?

No.

## BLIMEY, OK. WHAT KIND OF THINGS DO YOU COOK?

My own equivalent of fast food. I try not to make anything that takes much more than half an hour. I throw fresh chopped chilies on pretty much everything but ice cream. Here's one of my quick inventions that's not too spicy: sauté one large, chopped onion. Thinly slice a couple of chicken breasts. Lightly stir fry the chicken in butter or olive oil with the onions on rather low heat until just barely cooked through. Add a couple of tablespoons of porcini mushroom powder (that's the only hard part: you have to source it), and drizzle it with double cream. Season with salt and tons of freshly ground pepper. Serve with brown rice. You can do that dish in fifteen minutes.

## ARE YOU CURRENTLY WRITING ANYTHING ELSE?

I haven't started a new novel; I'm still doing background reading. I'm interested in economic collapse (on a scale we did not see in 2008) and the post empire United States.

**Good luck with the research. In the meantime, congrats on Big Brother. Another cracker, no matter what the press says about you, you sure can throw a story together. Get back to Windsor Terrace and thank your husband for bringing my cat home. I really had been terribly worried.**