

Praise for Constance Debré

‘Constance Debré has the power to make you gasp like no other writer – it’s a thrill to be back with her taught-AF prose rendered brilliantly into English by Holly James’s translation. *Playboy* is a razor sharp exposition of desire and the rocky paths we follow as we try to sate ourselves. As ever, too, Debré dispenses swiftly with bourgeois heterosexual moral codes, exposing the hypocrisies at the heart of French society’ Rebecca May Johnson, author of *Small Fires*

Playboy is written in sharp, searing and tender vignettes, peppered with desire, banality and skewering takes on heteronormativity. Debré looks the reader right in the eye and doesn’t blink. It’s a book that makes other books possible’ Jenna Clarke, author of *Disturbance*

‘One of the most compulsive voices I’ve read in years . . . there’s undeniable pleasure to be had from the way in which she reacts, her powerful evacuation of feeling, her sense of taking an automatic rifle to her past . . . a vision of queer life that has nothing to do with identity or marriage or any of the new homonormative rites’ Olivia Laing, *Observer*

‘*Love Me Tender* is, without a trace of coyness, a love letter, both to a child and to a queer woman’s own becoming. As for Constance – both the author and her fictional counterpart – you root for her all the way’ *Guardian*

‘A story that’s quietly heartbreaking and fiercely defiant’
Spectator

‘Ferocious emotional honesty . . . A bracing read and a timely reminder that attitudes are often far slower to change than legislation’ *Irish Times*

‘Tight, present-tense prose (in a crisp translation by Holly James) . . . genuinely inspiring’ *Financial Times*

‘Debré’s writing aims to eradicate all origins and backstories, and with them the social roles they enforce, replacing them with an ethos of radical self-fashioning . . . Debré’s sprezzatura writing is the literary equivalent of a shrug: a swashbuckling “Et alors?”’ Alice Blackhurst, *New Left Review*

‘Constance’s voice is extremely strong – sharp, assertive, acerbic and wholly convincing’ *Buzz Magazine*

‘A compulsive read, this is for fans of Virginie Despentes, Hervé Guibert and Guillaume Dustan’ *AnOther Magazine*

‘[*Love Me Tender*] is exhilarating’ Eileen Myles, author of *The Chelsea Girls*

‘Committed to truth-telling, no matter how rough, but also intriguingly suspended in a cloud of unknowing and pain, *Love Me Tender* is a wry, original, agonizing book destined to become a classic of its kind’ Maggie Nelson, author of *The Argonauts*

‘In cruel, brilliant sentences that tighten around the truth like teeth, a fierce character emerges; a new kind of rebel in a queer masterpiece’ Holly Pester, author of *Comic Timing*

‘*Love Me Tender* will break your heart and repair it and break it again, but not because it’s trying to. Debré writes matter of factly, fluidly, scabrously, laying bare the hypocrisies of society, of institutions, of families. It is a brutal manifesto of how to live an honest life, direct the way a laser is direct’ Lauren Elkin, author of *Flâneuse*

‘*Love Me Tender* is a spitting, snarling tour de force of fuck-you feminist defiance. Pulling us straight from the tender moments of a mother meeting her estranged child, right into a whirlwind of lesbian pick-ups, Parisian apartment-hopping and chain smoking, Debré’s novel is a stark reminder of society’s suspicion towards women – particularly mothers – who resist easy definition. Wry, bold and confronting, *Love Me Tender* insists on a woman’s right to define herself, to choose her own life’ Imogen Crimp, author of *A Very Nice Girl*

‘*Love Me Tender* is written with edge and urgency in a voice that is both vulnerable and in full command. I read it in one sitting and was taken over by its narrative energy and shocked by the story it tells’ Colm Tóibín

‘Intense . . . a character striving mightily for authenticity and honesty, questioning and rending the veil of social norms, acknowledging the absurd, in hopes of finding some more solid, albeit subjective, truth’ Claire Messud, author of *The Burning Girl*

‘I am obsessed with Debré’s spare account of a, both chosen and necessarily, pared-down life, that smashes the conventions of style as it smashes the conventions of family, without ever losing its tender touch’ Joanna Walsh, author of *Break.up*

‘This book knocked my block off. One of a kind’ Ana Kinsella, author of *Look Here*

‘Written in clear and direct prose. Fearless and honest. Hard and soft. Resolute and tough and, yes, very tender’ Michael Imperioli

PLAYBOY

Constance Debré

Translated by Holly James



TUSKAR ROCK PRESS

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by
Tuskar Rock Press,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ

www.profilebooks.com

First published in the United States in 2024 by Semiotext(e)

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 80081 984 9
eISBN 978 1 80081 985 6



PLAYBOY

Part One

I didn't even dare use my tongue the first time I kissed a girl. That was after Laurent. I knew before but it was theoretical. I made an effort for the second one. I stuck my tongue right down her throat. She was a model, I felt flattered, like a guy. Things were going well. I was still scared, only less so. Except it never went any further than that. Or rather, they never went any further with me. Straight girls who were vaguely questioning their sexuality then giving up. Girls like me, only younger. With Agnès, it's different. She's fifty, she's married, she has children. She's a woman. I'm married and I have a son too but that's a different case entirely. Firstly, I was the one who left Laurent. And besides, it's just not the same. It's strange really, the fact I'm into her. I'm not even sure she's particularly attractive. I don't like her name. I never say it.

I show my card to security. I get a coffee from the machine. I smoke a cigarette. I put my lawyer's robe on. A friend tells me about the case he's working on. A court clerk says hi to me. Some tourists coming out of Sainte-Chapelle ask me Where are the toilets? I hope they enjoy the shit stains and the graffiti on the wall that says Arabs Suck Cock. I'm from the upper class, in case that much wasn't already clear. We even have a few duchesses on my mother's side of the family. That's why I speak like this. It's how aristocrats speak. They love it. I love it too. What you can't hear is the snobby accent. Which I also have, apparently. It might be because we're all bored shitless, the whole upper class, more bored than others that we speak like this. Just as bored as poor people. Really poor people. The ones from the projects and everywhere else. So we take it out on words. It lightens things up while we wait around for something to happen. I push open the padded door to the courtroom. The court usher's a good-looking guy. Not only

is he a fag, he's also an Arab. Makes a change from the usual token hires. He lets me go first. I defend my client. Hash dealer, drug trafficking. If you can call that a dealer. If you can call that trafficking. I take my time pleading the case. I go up to the witness stand. The judges listen to me. I get even closer. It's not pleading. It's telling them what they want to hear. Good guy. Good school. Good family. The prosecutor is only calling for a suspended sentence. Judges go out on a limb for the middle class. That's how I met Agnès. I was defending her son. Of course he got off. Middle-class people never do time.

People don't call me madame, they call me maître. I do a man's job where you wear a robe. It even comes with this phallic necktie called a band that you can fiddle with in court. The robe doesn't usually look good on women. They're too short. Not me. Plus, black is a good color. The white band makes me look like an old Spanish aristocrat. I even get a sash with ermine along the hem. Actually, it's rabbit. But it still makes you look rich. The job suits me fine. No one sees my dirty jeans under the robe, no one wonders where I am if I'm not in the office, no one answers back when I'm pleading a case, no one monitors what I do, what I think, what I say. I like the guilty parties, the pedophiles, thieves, rapists, armed robbers, murderers. It's innocent people and victims I don't know how to defend. It's not the fact that they're guilty that fascinates me, it's seeing how low a man can stoop. Without even saying a word. Without even flinching. It takes a special kind of courage to get that low. It's not enough to have had a

miserable childhood, alcoholic parents, or be poor with no prospects. Granted, it's a good start, but it's not enough. I like them, but I like them at arm's length. I'm not here to save them. If they get twenty years, that's not my problem. If they've had horrific childhoods and they end up dying in filthy prisons, that's not my problem. I'm just like everyone else, I'm here to get my pound of flesh. They have their lives, I have mine. I take a look and then I leave them in their squalor. I have my own. It's not as serious but it's no better. The important thing is to defend them well. And I do defend them well. It's not that hard. It's one of the few things I know how to do. That, and driving, I guess. There's nothing else, really. I don't think it's that big a deal. I don't think it's that important to know how to do things. Obviously it's not the best job. If anything it's mediocre. But at least I escaped office life, at least I don't have a boss, at least I earn decent money. I've always had a problem with money. Earning it stresses me out. It's only when I'm poor and the bailiffs are on my ass that I feel like I'm where I belong.

I liked her right away. I don't know why. Maybe it's the way she looks. The way she wears jeans. I just liked her. I didn't think too far into it. We were addressing each other formally. Then one day while she was on vacation, she started writing me, for no particular reason, with nothing particular to say. That's when I thought that she and I could have an actual love affair. Like with men. A real love affair with a beginning, middle, and end. And sex, obviously.

The essence of couple life is being bored shitless. Couple life and life in general. In that sense, we were compatible, Laurent and I. He smokes. That's his main occupation. The most essential relationship he has with the world. And why not? Before our son was born, the two of us were truly able to revel in our life of boredom together, wearing the same jeans, me taking his shirts. It was like that, that's the way it was with us. We were both the same height, we wore the same clothes, we were both as bored as each other. A solid foundation. Fifteen years of that. Neither here nor there. Calm. Like a bomb shelter. Fucking and love were additional extras. They were there, obviously, but they weren't the main attraction. There was a more fundamental understanding at the core of our relationship. Something that stopped us getting mad at times when we loved each other less. We didn't give a shit about that kind of thing. What we liked doing was waking up together every morning and saying How is it possible to be

this fucking bored? We thought it was funny. It worked pretty well. It was when we became a three that it stopped working. Because of the food, I think. Going to the store on Saturdays to fill the fridge up with all that crap. All that time wasted preparing something that would only end up as shit. It was the food and it was everything else. The vacations, the stuff, all of it. There was no more space for emptiness. Laurent was happy. Everyone else was happy. I noticed the way people started talking to me all of a sudden. Trying to get me involved in all their sentimental bullshit. That idiotic joy of theirs. Everyone was delighted for me. Especially the people who'd known me since childhood. They all breathed a sigh of relief. They told themselves my little tomboy phase was over. Those are the kinds of things that made me leave.

She's ten years older than me. She has a career, an apartment in the fourteenth arrondissement, and a house in the countryside. She owns her place. She buys things on eBay. She takes the bus. She goes to the movies on Saturdays, brunch on Sundays, she likes Emmanuel Carrère, she never wears sneakers. Except in the summer, canvas ones. She drinks wine in the evening, either a white or a light red, local wines. Her cousins from the countryside send her recipes. She reads *Elle* and *Le Monde*. If there's a big protest, she'll go along. She votes left. She's highly disillusioned with politics but she thinks it's important to vote. She's never lived abroad, she doesn't really speak English. She's always worked for the same company. She thinks she's underpaid but she doesn't want people to know. She only has a few friends, friends who are richer than her, people she finds a little intimidating. But they're not real friends. She never goes out. Occasionally she has a work dinner, she drinks a little too much, she always comes

home before midnight. Sometimes she feels a little sad and doesn't know what to do about it, so she waits it out. I decided that whatever happened between us would be the most important thing in my life. It didn't matter who she was.

I bought a second-hand scooter. I'm renting a one-bedroom apartment in the sixth. I've pretty much always lived in this area. In any case, I couldn't move too far from my son's school. Every other week, I pick him up on my scooter and drop him off at the gates. He hands me his helmet, bye sweetie bye Mom, I can't believe he's so tall, I can't believe he's him, I need to buy him new sneakers. Afterward I go to the café with some of the other parents. I listen to them all talking about the apartments they're buying. They don't seem happy. The guys are all bored and the women are worried about getting old. They all go to the same places on vacation. They end up in Megève, Biarritz, or Greece every summer. Maybe I'd be doing the same if I had money. Sometimes I feel like telling them they're all getting worked up over nothing. They'd be better off thinking about something else. They could easily survive without buying an apartment, without worrying about what tiles to put in their bathrooms, without leaving Paris for the

summer. Vacations are such a pain in the ass. When I moved, I threw pretty much everything out. I kept two pairs of jeans, my jacket, a bed for my son, a sofa for me, and that's it. I left the cutlery, the crockery, the washing machine, and the furniture in my old apartment, the rest of my clothes and all the other crap went in the dumpster. I felt better right away. I go and buy a sandwich when I'm hungry. I like the Oliva from Cosi. Or the meal deal from the Japanese place that includes four skewers, cabbage salad, and a drink. They usually deliver within fifteen minutes.

Every Sunday we meet in the Jardin des Plantes. We walk a bit, we get coffee. That's how it started. Looking at the ostriches and the yaks, between her trip to the market and brunch.

The first sign of affection came from her. Without saying a word, she smiled and pulled me into a tight hug. A greeting, in silence, she held me in her arms for a long while. Her soft, matte, leather jacket. Her body, small against mine. That bistery brown smell of leather, musky, sweet, salty, earthy. Her perfume, and beneath the perfume, her smell, easily identifiable, detectable, distinct.

We'd have a coffee, then a second. A third even, later, when the weather started getting cold. We were stretching out time. I walked her part of the way home.

She put her hands in her pockets. As we walked, I took her by the arm, just above the elbow. That feeling again, her slender frame beneath the coat. A woman's bones feel so delicate when you're used to men.

The moment comes when it's time to say goodbye to her, when I hold her, when I breathe in her scent. I don't know if it's desire. I don't know what it would be like to kiss her.

At some point she suggests addressing each other informally. I'm the one who finally dares to do it, months later.

She says she'll go for dinner with me. She asks me if I'm in love. She tells me she's met someone. I don't know if she's talking about me. When she talks about love, it's always about men. She tells me she took a shower before coming.

Sometimes I get annoyed at myself for not being brave enough to do anything. Once or twice I let on that I'm angry or frustrated. She doesn't say anything, she doesn't seem to take offense.

She comes to my place for the first time. She smiles, she barely speaks, she looks at me. She says I'm beautiful, she asks where my bed is, I don't move. She gets up, she puts her coat back on, I get up too, she slowly fastens the belt, she doesn't leave, she looks at me, she seems to be waiting

for me to do something, I'm too scared. That's exactly what I tell her, I'm too scared.

Beneath my thumb, when I go to say goodbye to her, the curve of her breast under the felt of her coat. So light and fast that I'm not even sure. I close my eyes, yes, it was her breast.

I never really understood why people think having junkie parents is such a bad thing. My sister and I still managed to have a blast. Especially after my mother died. We had some great times with our dad, the shrinks, the fire brigade, and all the rest of it. Like the time we forgot which day we were supposed to be handing the apartment back, and we turned up in the street with the trash bags, the vacuum cleaner, and the Mr. Muscle Fresh Pine in the back of the car, and the English owners were already standing at the window, they took up smoking again there and then when they saw the state of the studio apartment, and Dad just sat there on the couch, not saying anything, drunk. My mother was a different story. My mother was spectacular. Everyone would stop and look at her. Young people, old people, dogs, children, rich or poor, ugly or beautiful. She could ask for anything. She always got it. If ever the police stopped us in the car, she just had to say one word and they would let us go, their cheeks turning

red. It was crazy. My childhood memories are of me looking at her. Me and my father looking at her. It's different for my sister. She doesn't really remember. She was too young when my mother died. And those were the dark years when they didn't have enough money for heroin. They started drinking. That, my sister remembers. Heroin wasn't as nasty. All it did was send them to sleep, cigarette in hand, and occasionally the bedsheets would end up in flames. The meds came after that. My father's true specialty. But the best was the opium. The pipes, the lamp, the smell. That was when I was really young. It was like Saigon. My sister and I were talking about it the other day. She thinks they were completely insane. I think it's normal lives that don't make sense.

When school's out for winter break, she invites me to the countryside for the first week of vacation. It's her grandfather's farm, she bought it from her sisters. She tells me he used to wash himself once a week with a washcloth in the kitchen. She shows me a photo of him. A farmer with very dark skin and a very wrinkly face. It looks like a postcard. She's the successful one in the family. Her parents were teachers. It was a big thing for them, Mitterrand getting elected, his march to the Pantheon and all that. She's converted the old stable into a living room and decorated it in light colors. There are paperbacks of Flaubert, Balzac, and Dostoevsky in one corner of the room.

Her husband isn't here. She never talks about him. In the beginning I thought they'd split up. But maybe that's not the case. Because they definitely still live together. The first time she mentions him, it's to tell me he refers to me as She Who Must Not Be Named. Like Voldemort in *Harry Potter*.