

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Opposed Positions

Gwendoline Riley

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About the Book

At thirty, Aislinn Kelly is an occasional novelist with a near-morbid attunement to the motives of those around her. Isolated, restless and stuck, she decamps to America – a default recourse – this time to an attic room in Indianapolis, to attempt once again the definitive act of self-salvage.

There are sharp memories to contend with as the summer heats up, and not least regarding her family history, now revealed as so botched and pitiful it seems it might yet cancel her out. She's spent years evading the attentions of her unstable, bullying father, only to find her mother now cowering in a second rancid marriage. There are also friendships lost or ailing: with bibulous playwright Karl, sly poet Erwin, depressed bookshop-wallah Bronagh, and Aislinn's best friend Cathy, who has recently found God . . . Finally her thoughts turn to her last encounter with Jim Schmidt, a man she's loved for ten years, hasn't seen for five, yet still has to consider her opposite number in life.

Opposed Positions is a startlingly frank novel about the human predicament, about love and its substitutes, disgraceful or otherwise. Some of these people want to be free – of themselves, of each other – and some have darker imperatives. Wry, shocking, perfectly observed and utterly heart-breaking, the novel moves towards its troubling conclusion: a painful appreciation of what it is we've come from, and what we might be heading for.

About the Author

Gwendoline Riley was born in 1979 and has published three previous novels: *Cold Water*, which won a Betty Trask Award; *Sick Notes*; and *Joshua Spassky*, which was shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and won the Somerset Maugham Award.

ALSO BY GWENDOLINE RILEY

Cold Water
Sick Notes
Joshua Spassky

Opposed Positions

Gwendoline Riley



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

Did fiction do this to me?

Philip Roth

I

1

I THINK THIS happened on their first date: when she came back from the Ladies' to find him talking about her. He was boasting to his two brothers, telling now how he'd had to use his pull to get her her job.

'Yes, I might well live to regret it!' he was saying.

And: 'No, it wasn't an easy sell, that!'

And it would have been – quite a feat, he was right. Him having worked in their office for what, six weeks? While she'd been there for two years, since she'd graduated. But no matter, passing her over her drink, he went on, to say that she was pretty hopeless all round, really. With the practical side of things, did they see? The way a business *works* . . .

His brothers were visiting for the weekend. Their first time down in London, from Sheffield, they would have been – still quite shy, I imagine, and quiet until they were drunk. Not up to much eye contact with her, anyway, I wouldn't have thought, as with his arm around her again now, he jiggled her, saying, 'This one couldn't wire a *plug* before she met me!'

She married him because: 'Well, it was just what you did.'

'He had all those brothers. It seemed like a ready-made, nice, big family. My childhood was *so lonely* with just me.'

'Oh, I don't know. Women got married and had babies. It wasn't like today, so – aren't you lucky, hey?'

She called my questions funny. They were funny. She would keep answering them, though, so I learned all about

it. How he 'banned' her from wearing trousers, for instance. She said that very matter-of-factly, too.

'Hold on,' I said. '*Banned?*'

'Oh, yes.' She nodded.

It went further than that, though. The weekend after their honeymoon, while she was out at the supermarket, he took it upon himself to gather her trousers up. Again, I picture him: standing there with his arms full. I think he must have got anxious, mustn't he? Left alone in that new flat, going from room to room. (I even think I can hear his breathing as he did that.) I imagine him thinking something like, having this – wife now, what else could he have? When she got back he showed her what he'd done before she'd even put the shopping down. That's almost touching, isn't it? Wanting her to see, her clothes there in a bin bag – and covered in paint, too: he'd poured a good long goop of white paint in there with them; the last of what they'd used in the hall.

He liked to take photographs, too. I know that was a craze for a while. Whenever she was harried or un-made-up would do: when she was cooking, or when she was ill. When she was on the toilet was a favourite. (He unscrewed the lock from the bathroom door the day they moved in.)

When the films came back he'd sit at the dining table and go through each set, passing her the ones he thought were funniest. (The ones where she looked the worst.)

'Oof!' he'd say.

And when she didn't laugh: 'Sulking!'

And all night long: 'Oh! She's still sulking!'

So she was in those photographs, and she was sitting at the table with him, and then – she was somewhere else entirely, too, I had to assume. That would be the way to deal with a situation like that, wouldn't it? I mean, I've been prone to that myself, I know: drifting off.

'Well, I was still heartbroken over Anthony, I think, looking back,' she said, 'wasn't I? When he left I wanted to die. I barely knew what I was doing.'

And: 'Well, he didn't hit me until after we were married, did he? And then I had no job any more, and then I had you two kiddies. He controlled everything, all the money. He used to say I was welcome to go but, oh, I could never take you. He'd *kill* us all first.'

'Right,' I said. 'Okay.'

I remember the day we left: that surprise reprieve from school when I'd already put on my uniform: a grey shirt tucked into grey wool tights, and then that bottle-green tunic. I was tugged out of them, and then tugged into my weekend clothes, my coat and my wellingtons, and told to sit still in the living room. From the window in there I watched Mum struggle out with bag after bag, down the path, back and forth between our building and an estate car that I didn't recognise. That done, she strapped my brother Liam into his buggy.

'Well, come on then,' she said.

Our progress was slow. The roads were icy, and then the motorway jammed. I remember Mum peering into the rear-view, her chin up, her teeth bared. At lunchtime we stopped at a Little Chef. Not that I wanted to eat, particularly, and Mum's attempt at her beans on toast amounted to only a couple of over-chewed mouthfuls before she put her cutlery down and wiped her mouth.

'Now don't complain if you get hungry later,' she said.

It got dark quickly after that, and I got tired, and soon I was being woken up again, this time outside Grandma and Grandpa's house, which was in Tyldesley, near Wigan. I'd been there twice before. Getting out of the car, I saw decorations already up in some of the other houses on their street: fairy lights in bay windows blurred by frost and net curtains.

Grandma held the door open and ushered us into the hall, and then into the warm back parlour; Mum carrying Liam and dragging his buggy up the step, and then she went

back, and there was that spotty procession of suitcases and bin bags that she left in the hallway and then Grandpa carried upstairs.

Another memory – this must have been a few weeks later, it was a Saturday night, and – Grandma spotted this first: Dad had parked up outside the house.

‘Oh, *good God*,’ she said.

And then, having gone back to look again through the curtains in the dark front room, ‘Still there!’ she called out. ‘Still there! Oh, that bugger. What’s he playing at?’

She kept going to look and then reporting back like that.

Grandpa even decided he was going to go and have a word; he put his coat on, but then he couldn’t find his gloves.

‘Help me out, Peggy,’ he said.

They both fussed furiously, under siege, while Mum sat with us in the back, her feet (in her new Christmas slipper-socks) up on the sofa, watching the TV. There was a three-bar electric fire in there (giving out a fearsome, dry, headachey heat), and a stack of *Reader’s Digests*, and a huge beanbag I considered my own, and a rough tartan blanket that I liked to pull right up over myself, over my head.

‘Oh *don’t*,’ Mum called out eventually. ‘Don’t give him the satisfaction. Why are you all so excited?’

STRAPPED IN, IN the back of that car, every Saturday we were taken on the rounds, to various relatives' houses and flats, around Sheffield and Chesterfield. Dad would draw up at nine o'clock, having travelled up the night before and stayed with one of his brothers. He was always on time, and if we were late coming out he'd start sounding his horn: short blasts at first, then longer ones.

'Oh, *Christ*,' Grandma would say. 'Christ *almighty*.'

I remember walking down the path with Liam and seeing him sitting there. He was always only staring straight ahead.

A favourite topic of conversation during that first year, while sitting in one or other of his brothers' front rooms, were the plans he'd had to snatch us. One had been to drive up the motorway in the Routemaster bus his brother Joe worked on, and then wait outside our school in it.

'Imagine that,' he said. 'All your mates seeing you leave in a big red bus! We were going to take you abroad, where your mother couldn't find you!'

He watched for our reaction then; there wasn't much of one, though, and so he shook his head disgustedly, and harrumphed.

'You know,' he said, 'Joe said you were stuck up.'

And: 'You're a prig,' he said, nodding over at me. And then, 'Isn't she?' he said, his attention on Liam now. 'Miss Prig!'

It went on like that. Every Friday night dread infected me. He always looked so starving, and so greedy. That was difficult to bear, I found. And in general his behaving as if

certain things were the case with me which were not the case.

Mum said, 'Oh well, you know he's mad; ignore him.'

'Saturday's my day,' she said. 'It's my *one day* to get anything done around here.'

He liked to talk about her, though, often as soon as we got into the car, and then he would lean back between the seats when we were stopped at the traffic lights, making sure we got his point, or if not that we knew he was watching us in the rear-view mirror, we saw his eyes letter-boxed there.

'So, er, my spies have seen your mother out and about with my look-alike!' he said one morning.

His 'spies' were the two of his brothers who lived and worked in Liverpool, where Mum now had a job, and where we were hoping to move to soon. Round at his brother Gerry's house later, he told the story again.

'Yes, Calum keeps seeing her out and about with my look-alike, apparently. Hear me, Ged? Calum, yes; he said it was extraordinary. He looks just like me this latest one!'

I think I was ten years old then, sitting there at another kitchen table, drinking another glass of Coke. Dad was sitting opposite me, Liam to his left. They both had pint glasses of Coke, too.

'Of course, your mother's very messed up, you know, in that department,' Dad said. 'I *think* she's probably quite masochistic . . . She had a strange relationship with your grandfather. It had these *undertones*. That's why she likes Clark Gable so much. There's a definite resemblance there. Clark Gable and, er, what's the other one? *Vincent Price*.'

For clarity's sake – honestly, Grandpa looked nothing like Clark Gable. Short, and short-sighted, too, and always so nervous and friendly, I'd liken him to Kenneth Connor, at best.

But then: 'He killed thousands of innocent people, you know, during the war. Children. *Dehousing*. Heh! Yes, you