Sex and the Scribe

The Caroline Phillips

Interview

Women inspire him but he can't find love. He lives by spinning words yet hides behind them...can anyone understand J P Donleavy?

ALL women should become lesbians at a certain stage in their lives. Most women, including a number I've known, have had lesbian relationships," explains J P Donleavy the best-selling author of the scurrilous and brilliant comic classic, The Ginger Man.

"Women have much better relationships together. They offer sympathy, understanding and all kinds of things it's impossible to get from men. A woman should have children then find a female companion, even if she's married. It's good for the children because they get lots of attention." Does Donleavy inhabit a fantasy world?

We meet in Levington Park, his 25-room Georgian mansion set in 180 acres in Co Westmeath, Ireland, with flag-stone floors, tangerine walls and algae-filled swimming pool. It is beautiful but sad, lacking decent furniture and paintings, children or a feminine touch. 16 Christmas cards are still displayed in May.

It's here that James Patrick, known as Mike, writes — to date 11 novels, five plays, short stories, three non-fiction works and his entertaining latest book, The Lady Who Liked Clean Rest Rooms. He communicated with his secretary solely by intercom, until she walked out. "Everybody leaves," says a friend. "It's hard to put up with listening to a load of fantasy through a wall." Donleavy, 71, lithe, balding, with silver hair and a white beard, can't be more than 5 ft 8 in, although he claims another two inches. He's wearing a cavalry twill hacking jacket, cords, foppish red hanky and yellow cravat: the carefully cultivated image of a flamboyant country squire.

He doesn't look at me and appears shy, courteous and lugubrious. He answers questions with a self-protective wall of words, rambling often and talking very slowly. He offers me a cup of lukewarm tea and biscuit during a three-hour lunchtime interview and smiles once. It's so impossible to engage with him that I find myself wanting to shake him.

Donleavy is a recluse who sometimes doesn't speak for a week, and then only to converse with his farm help about his cows. "He doesn't get out in the world. He's paranoid and scared to leave that place," MW (Mighty Wonderful aka Mary Wilson; his second wife) explains later.

MW, who was married to him for 20 years, used to hold lavish Scott Fitzgerald-style parties, observed by Donleavy from a window. "I've never enjoyed parties," he says. "I'd attend a social engagement if there were an opportunity to walk in one door and out another." He has been known to arrive at gatherings, just to drive away.

"Is it true," I ask, "that you're paranoid and don't trust people?" "Oh God, heavens. I've sometimes thought I'm not paranoid enough." "Are you frightened of people or shy?" "I can talk to audiences."

But he sees enemies everywhere. He cannot forgive Edna O'Brien for once reviewing him badly counters. "You can't drink like that and produce all the word-perfect books I've written."

'I have sometimes thought I'm not paranoid enough'

His Howard Hughes-style behaviour doesn't help Donleavy people his books, and he hasn't had a lover for three years. He was married first, for 15 years, to Valerie and claims the relationship broke down because she moved to the Isle of Man and was so alluring to other men. Next, Donleavy lived with the late literary agent, Tessa Sayle. Then came MW. "He loves women," she explains. "But he's selfish and it's impossible to live with his ego. ." Donleavy says MW was so attractive that she was besieged by suitors, eventually marrying their near neighbour Finn Guinness.

"Your love life seems to have been a disappointment," I say. "Women are inspirations," replies Donleavy, who lives vicariously through his women. "I don't think writers can be writers without that sort of thing in their lives. I don't know why they're so tempted by other men. Perhaps because I spend so much time in isolation."

Donleavy has two children, Karen and Philip, now in their 30s, by Valerie; and Rebecca and Rory, now at boarding school, allegedly from his marriage to MW. "None of them ever comes here now, I suppose they have other things to do."

In 1993, Donleavy, Suzanne Fetherstone-Haugh, 32, and Rachel Murray, a 23-year-old radical and singer, were living with Donleavy, reportedly both having a relationship with him. Apocryphal, apparently. After their break-up, Rachel told The Express that she'd never been Donleavy's lover. "The media made out that I was a chauvinist," adds Donleavy, "treating women badly and living in some kind of circus."

Suddenly Rachel phones, allowing him to be achingly chivalrous. "Oh gosh, oh Lord, oh no, no, you poor, poor thing." It transpires she has a cold.

Donleavy appears lonely. "When I spend long periods on my own, I have to be careful about organising my life, otherwise I'd 'go Asiatic' — a naval expression for people who are away from shore for too long. This can happen in these big houses. You have to drill yourself and organise a routine for comfort."

He is self-confessedly driven, a perfectionist. He is a complex man and tricky to read. But he does seem to have 'gone Asiatic', rattling around alone in his huge house. "It is very rare that I enjoy myself," he admits.

Now he is obsessed with his mortality and planning a "dignified" departure. He wants to build a cemetery on his estate. "I haven't yet applied for permission. But I'm beginning to wonder, if I did get buried here, whether it might make it difficult to sell the place." I say it might make it easier and he radiates gloom.

Extraordinarily, he attributes a malevolent motivation even to Brendan Behan for recommending him to his French publisher, Maurice Girodias at Olympia Press.

Donleavy attributes his reclusive behaviour to the 23 years he waged a copyright war against Girodias who had relegated The Ginger Man to a pornographic series, albeit one including Nabokov's Lolita. On publication in 1955, The Ginger Man (with its "screwing") was widely banned, and remained so in Ireland for 20 years. Donleavy, a pugilistic one-time boxer, fought using 21 lawyers.

"My life had to be cut off from everyone. I lived those years from law case to case. Litigation took over my days and nights."

"What of the rumours," I ask, "that you deal with your self-imposed exile by drinking heavily?" "This business of my being an alcoholic has been exaggerated greatly," he

RECLUSE: J P Donleavy claims his 23-year copyright war drove him into exile