
Martin Winckler

The Women's Chorus

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BIOGRAPHY Marc Zaffran was born in Algiers in 1955 and has lived in France since 1963. A graduate of the medical school of the University of Tours, he began publishing fiction in 1984 under the pseudonym Martin Winckler, a name he chose as a tribute to Georges Perec. His first novel, *La Vacation* [The Vacation], introduced the character Dr Bruno Sachs, who later became famous in *La Maladie de Sachs* [The Case of Doctor Sachs], which was made into a film of the same name by Michel Deville, with Albert Dupontel in the title role. Winckler gave up his country medical practice in 1993 in order to concentrate on translating and writing full-time, while continuing to work part-time in a provincial hospital. In 2009 he received an invitation from the Centre de Recherches en Éthique (Center of Ethical Research) of the University of Montreal, to work on a research project on medical training.

PUBLICATIONS Recent novels published by P.O.L: *Histoires en l'air*, 2008; *Les Trois Médecins*, 2004 (reissued by Gallimard, collection "Folio", 2006); *Légendes*, 2002 (reissued by Gallimard, collection "Folio", 2003); *La Maladie de Sachs*, 1998 (Prix du Livre Inter 1998, reissued by Gallimard, collection "Folio", 2005). And from Calmann-Lévy (coll. "Interstices", 2008-2009) came the three-volume *La Trilogie Twain*.



Jean Atwood, a hospital intern, top of his class for four years running, has his sights set on becoming a chief ob-gyn surgery resident. Instead he is to spend his last semester interning in a women's health clinic. Atwood wants to perform surgeries, not waste his time listening to women talking about themselves all day long. Nor does he relish taking orders from Franz Karma, a department head with a rather controversial reputation. But reality never lives up to expectation, and the relationship between the two doctors winds up being very different from what Atwood has imagined.

A *bildungsroman*, *The Women's Chorus* is also a choral novel, its structure inspired by musical theater: over the course of his sojourn in the microcosm that is Unit 77, Dr Atwood has to deal with women who tell him about their lives, their loves and their deaths, both as "soloists" and as members of a deafening chorus. It is also a story of enigmas: just like the patients in their care, both Atwood and Karma harbor a secret: one that drives them, that divides them and that ultimately unites them—the essential secret that defines who they are, as physicians and as human beings.

Overture

What was it they had told me again?

I'm having trouble remembering, because it seemed so unbelievable back then, and still seems ludicrous to this day ...

Ah, yes.

That I was going to suffer. Because he always had to have the last word. That if I stood up to him, he'd crush me. That if on the other hand I pretended to be interested in what he was saying, he would bore me to death, so dearly did he love to hear himself talk. That he'd had plenty of women—nurses, medical students, interns—rotating through his bed at some time or other. That he'd lured many of his patients—the foxiest ones, naturally!—there as well ... and that he had no objection to boys either! That with—or perhaps thanks to—my good looks, he would surely try to get me into bed. And if by some lucky chance I did not interest him that way, he would make my life miserable. In short: he was insufferable.

And also:

That he was always lecturing people. That he badmouthed his colleagues. That he spouted crazy ideas. That he performed dangerous and totally ill-considered procedures. That he took risks, with his patients as well. That he was very tight with Sachs, another nutcase of an internist who used to annoy the hell out of the ob-gyns at the teaching hospital, and who worked side by side with him in Unit 77 for many years before taking off to go freeze his balls in Quebec (good riddance!). That they had written a book together on the doctor-patient

relationship, and that he had later done another tome on contraception, which had caused a bit of a stir in the women's magazines—of course, journalists, if you know how to butter them up ... In short: he thought he was a big shot, but he pissed everyone off.

And finally: that he was secretive and a blabbermouth, straightforward and devious, aggressive and a toady. In a word: unpredictable. And temperamental as well. In the halls of University Hospital he was nicknamed *Barbe-Bleue*, Bluebeard. Because along with still playing the seducer at the age of fifty-plus, he sported a not always well-trimmed beard and was always ready to bark at his interlocutors.

The whole thing just made me laugh, for to tell the truth, I couldn't have cared less. It wasn't my problem. My problem was that the Dean was making me spend the last six months of my fifth-year internship—my “swan song,” he had added with a big smile meant to console me—in this guy's department, working under him, and that wasn't fair. I didn't give a flying fig, frankly, about Dr Franz Karma, his gal pals or his moods. Not a bit. But I'd already worked two six-month stints in the delivery room, which had been a real drag because Collineau, the chief of obstetrics, preferred delivery using touchy-feely *haptotony* instead of Caesarean section, and would go all teary-eyed whenever he had to perform an episiotomy, apologizing to some woman who wouldn't feel a thing anyway when he snipped her, who'd be quite happy to have the whole thing over and done with, for her kid to have nice pink cheeks instead of coming out blue with the cord around its neck because it had had to wait for Mr Head Obstetrician to search his heart and soul in order to decide if the kicks he felt when he laid his hands on the mother's abdomen really meant, “I'm not in any hurry to get out of Mommy's tummy, it's *cold* out there,” instead of, “Get me out of here for crissakes, I'm either going to croak or go gaga if I have to rot in this hole a minute longer!” So I'd had it with the New Age doctors and their whiny patients. I was tired of having to apologize when I was getting them to spread their legs in order to retrieve oh so delicately their gooey howling brats while getting a faceful of placenta. I longed to do something different with my hands.

In leaving the delivery room behind me, I had just one fervent wish: to get back to the OR. At least in there, the women don't scream, they don't ask questions, they just want the problem taken care of, they want to get rid of the tumor devouring their breast, or the fucked-up uterus with the bleeding fibroids—and that's just the plain vanilla stuff, the most compelling is the icing on the cake: making the woman who's flat as a pancake into a 36 C without leaving a scar, removing six eggs from a decrepit ovary incapable of popping them out by itself, fertilizing them in vitro, then incubating them in utero to make sure that they hatch. Or the *ne plus ultra*: I'd dreamt of nothing else, ever since the first time I saw Girard, the chief of plastic surgery, reconstruct a hymen, in that particular case, that of a penniless girl who'd been sleeping around since she

Martin Winckler

The Women's Chorus

was fourteen, and at the age of twenty-three wished to reinvent herself in order to marry a wealthy sucker, to make him think that it was a first for both on their wedding night—her first man, and his first virgin. Girard knew how to fix them just right. I still get shivers down my back when I think of his smile, his self-satisfied monologue as he tied the last knot: “There! Now she’ll be just tight enough so that he’ll flop on the first try; just sensitive enough that she’ll scream on penetration when he tries it again, as if it were really her very first time, the little slut; and just flimsy enough for it to tear and bleed at the first thrust—not too much, but just enough to leave a stain on the bridal sheet. And then, when the stain is discovered, the mother-in-law will want to hang it from the balcony ... In other words, just enough to make sure that the guy’s wedding night isn’t ruined. A work of art.”

I could think of nothing else for two whole weeks.

So this Dr Franz Karma, the doctor in charge of Unit 77, “Women’s Health”, was really no skin off my nose. The fellow and his clinic held no interest for me. Only, I couldn’t get out of it: every intern planning to go into surgical gynecology had to spend at least twelve months on the obstetrics floor (where, I had to admit, I did learn to perform a pretty decent caesarian, as well as on three occasions—I really lucked out, since you don’t see those very often—having to perform an emergency hysterectomy on women hemorrhaging blood after popping their papooses) as well as—this was a lot less fun—six more months on a strictly medical ward. The official reason was that you had to “learn to establish relationships with the patients and become familiar with standard primary-care procedures.”

Even though I tried to explain to Collineau that I wasn’t interested in establishing any relationships, hand holding really wasn’t my style, and that primary care wasn’t at all my cup of tea—I felt in my element only with a set of retractors in my hands, a scalpel or an electric lancet, scissors, a needle and thread; in other words, something solid to hold—he had replied that those were the rules and—with a haughty look—that if I did not want to go there, I might want to consider changing my specialty. So I was pretty steamed about having to waste my time with Karma. But what was being said about him didn’t bother me, and I promised myself in any case to take extra shifts and to sneak over to the OR as often as possible. It was important not to lose my touch.

There was one thing, however, that did concern me. An intern I met in the hospital had told me that Bluebeard—he was also known as “the guru of Women’s Lib Health,” having been the one, apparently, who had decided on the name of the clinic—had fired him without any explanation the day after his arrival, after having heard him make some lame crack in front of a patient. “It’s crazy!” he told me, “I just made a silly comment, nothing bad, and the patient—what a bitch—took offense, I really have no idea why, she started bawling and before I knew it Karma appeared like Zorro on his big horse and

kicked me out.” Since then the poor guy had been trying to find another post, but things being what they were, even back then, he was having a very hard time finding another department that would take him. And that, I must admit, did worry me quite a bit. I had come to realize that department heads are often little tyrants; aggressive, mean and vindictive to boot. Those who didn’t get to run a department would get frustrated and take it out on the interns. And to be fired by some little tyrant, even a very minor one, as Karma surely was (because his was the smallest department at University Hospital North), that’s equivalent to kissing your career at that hospital goodbye, or if not, having to go work for his worst enemy—hell, in other words, since his nemesis would be happy to declare that his colleague “made a mistake in letting such an excellent doctor go,” but would never miss a chance to tell anyone who would listen that your work stinks—to be expected, of course, considering the department you came from—and if even “over there” you weren’t able to do the work correctly, there really isn’t much hope ...

All this to explain how uncomfortable I felt that day—the first day, a drab, gray day in February—when, after having taken all the vacation days I had coming to me in order to postpone the start date as much as possible, and having tried every possible way to switch my assignment (to a rotation in women’s geriatrics, for example, where you would not have to waste your time asking your patients questions, since they aren’t capable of answering you anyway; or even, in a pinch, to rehab, where the gimps are so busy with their physical therapy there’s no need to spend more than five minutes holding their crutches), I finally screwed up my courage to present myself at ... Women’s Health (what a joke!) telling myself that in the end, it was just like the first years of college, you just had to grin and bear it for a while, and if there was a way to jump ship at some point (I had enough points to be in the running for the first chief residency that became available when the incumbent, male or female, had had enough of working for peanuts and decided to go into private practice, which even in those days was happening more and more frequently), I would leap at the opportunity. For, if not, spending six months in the company of all those bimbos without being able to pick up a scalpel ... No, that wasn’t for me.

And so I found myself that day standing at the entrance to the Maternal division of “I’Hospice”, Tourmens University Hospital North, a dump built in the seventies and never renovated—there was even talk of tearing it down. I had already paid a visit to the maternity wing a few days earlier, to drop off my file, hoping to pump the secretary for some dirt, but nothing doing! She didn’t give me anything to go on, nothing, she simply brushed me off with, “Ah, you are going to work with Dr Karma! How lucky you are, he’s so nice, you’ll see, you’re going to learn so much with him,” in such a drippy way that I felt like smacking her.

Martin Winckler

The Women’s Chorus

Feeling extremely grumpy, I stepped into the revoltingly smelly locker room (everyone got dressed and undressed in there together, nurses, orderlies and interns, as if in a cattle pen) thinking that I'd stow my belongings, but on catching sight of a pair of bright red pumps on top of a metal locker, I realized that it was even worse than I had imagined. Seeing her in her smock and plastic clogs, you'd never guess that in civvies, when she goes home, a nurse or orderly is only a poor vulgar slut. White is a great camouflage.

The lockers did not have locks so I couldn't leave my laptop case or my raincoat. I just grabbed a white coat in my size, pinned on a badge that said, "Dr Jean Atwood, Intern" and slipped a brand new little notebook into the pocket: I had been told that Karma liked it if you took notes during his tirades, that it pumped up his ego; since I write very fast and can read my own handwriting, why not, if it might help ...

*

So I took a deep breath and pushed my way through the double doors into the long corridor that divides the maternity wing from the gynecology floor of Unit 77, Women's Health—and Purgatory.

Standing in the deserted corridor, my head bursting with all these thoughts, my case over my shoulder, the coat over my arm, I shake my head and sigh deeply in anger and frustration. What they do in this department is as far as you can get from my real interests and from what I have done up to now. And it wasn't my choice to come here. Circumstances forced my hand ...

I dither. I glance at my watch. If I'm late, this isn't the OR, no one will die. I could go and have a coffee with my mates, upstairs ... But in the end I take a deep breath and I tell myself I've got to do this. I turn up my collar so that there will be no mistake about it, I am an intern, not some pimply medical student. I hold my head as high as I can and I start walking down the corridor, trying, in the forty-five seconds it takes me to reach the door, to remember all that I know about the physiology of the menstrual cycle, about ovulation, about periods, about all that foul female business I don't give a flying fuck about but which I'm probably going to be hearing about until it's coming out of my ears. Damn!

At the far end of the corridor, the glass double doors don't quite meet in the middle. A triangle of light dances across the vinyl floor covering. Through one of the translucent windows I see a shadowy silhouette, and I stop.

For suddenly I'm afraid.

Afraid of not knowing and not knowing how. Afraid of not knowing how to go about it. The way it should be done.

Afraid of not being able to cope.

Afraid of not being up to snuff.

I've crammed in so much stuff over the past few years, and all of a sudden, I'm not sure what I've retained. Will I remember any of it? Is it going to be of any use to me?

I stand there staring at the door, and when the shadowy silhouette starts to move, suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, it all comes back to me.

I watch myself pushing open the door and going inside.

Martin Winckler

The Women's Chorus