

# Love and the Designated Hitter Rule

---

by Nicholas Lemann

---

*Final Payments* by Mary Gordon (Random House), a first novel published last year to considerable acclaim, is an admirable book—admirable for its clean, careful, perceptive, and accurate writing, and for its main themes, extremely unusual for a novel about a young single person looking for love in New York in the seventies. *Final Payments* is about freedom and sex, as befits the times, but it's more importantly about love and morality, and caring for others.

Its heroine, Isabel Moore, is a young woman of 30 from a working-class neighborhood in Queens, who has spent eleven years caring for her invalid father and is suddenly released from that duty by his death. "He had a stroke when I was nineteen; I nursed him until he died eleven years later," Isabel says in the book's opening scene. "This strikes everyone in our decade as unusual, barbarous, cruel. To me, it was not only inevitable, but natural." It was also, as the book makes clear, more complicated than that; Isabel comes from a conservative Catholic background, and she is continually torn between the new world to which she is suddenly exposed—the world of divorced friends, love affairs with married men, working, living alone—and the world from which she has just emerged, one of total abnegation and self-sacrifice. Her great struggle is with

finding a middle course between the two.

The only major flaw in Gordon's depiction of life is that her men aren't nearly as good as her women—especially her most important man. All the female characters in *Final Payments* are drawn stubbornly imperfect, but Isabel's lover, alas, is the sort of dreamboat who descends on a cloud into the lives of the heroines of stories in *Cosmopolitan*—tall, handsome, "older," with one of those jobs (he's a veterinarian) where you get to be sensitive and compassionate but also make lots of money. He even has a dreamboat name: Hugh Slade. Isabel and Hugh fall in love and all looks rosy, until Hugh's wife confronts Isabel and asks her to back off. Suddenly Isabel is overcome with guilt, and grief for her father. She breaks off with Hugh, lets herself deteriorate physically, and goes off to spend her life ministering to a shrewish, hateful woman named Margaret, who used to be her father's housemaid.

But at the end of the book Isabel goes through an epiphany (conveniently taking place during Easter week), during which she realizes she is pursuing a destructive course. "We must not deprive ourselves, our loved ones, of the luxury of our extravagant affections," she tells herself. "We must not try to second-guess death by refusing to love the ones we loved in favor of the anonymous poor." So she

*Nicholas Lemann is an editor of Texas Monthly and a contributing editor of The Washington Monthly.*

leaves Margaret and prepares to go back to Hugh. Obviously this is the right course for Isabel; Gordon takes pains to make it obvious by creating a Margaret who is irredeemably horrible, and a Hugh who is wonderful, and by filling Isabel's period of total altruism with images of ugliness and physical decay.

Still, there remains that problem of how to find that middle course, how Isabel can leave her life of caring for someone she doesn't love, but still can bring some good to the world—as she says, “Perhaps I could give reasonably without giving my life.” She does not, after all, want to join wholeheartedly in the serried ranks of the Me Generation. In the final pages of the book, the solution comes to her in a flash: “I would work for a government, a dealer in charity without the weights of love. . . . Governments gave money and did not ask for love. Money was beautiful; if you could give money and not want love in return, you could change lives without giving up your own life.”

This is plainly the magic answer of somebody who has been cooped up in a row house in Queens for eleven years. Isabel Moore is probably the last person in America, real or imagined, who retains such total faith in the ability of the government to help those in need. The federal government now spends \$63.9 billion on caring for the dependent, and just about everybody else seems to think most of it is going to waste. On the right (old, new, and neo) the objection is that all those programs cost too much and are inefficiently and even fraudulently run. Liberals are uncomfortable with them because they degrade and oppress their beneficiaries. Radicals have always been hostile to welfare-state social programs on the grounds that they are mild palliatives designed to obscure deep structural problems.

These are valid objections, and they make it hard to accept Gordon's idea that working for the government is the way to do good. Indeed, even if the government suddenly were to over-

come all its flaws, the notion that money can solve people's problems better than love still wouldn't make sense. Of course, some money is absolutely necessary; nobody in this country should lack the funds to feed and house and take care of himself and his dependents. But over the course of history, love has done the better job. Humans are the only animals that go through lengthy periods of near-total dependency, just after birth and just before death, so the need for some caring mechanism has always been present. It has come, over time, from the family, with love the activating force. Many more dependent people have been well cared for by their families than by the government. Those most in need today are those without relatives who can do that job; many of their problems are financial, but others—chiefly loneliness, the sense of having no one who cares about you—would not be much alleviated by federal grants.

Curiously, this point comes through clearly in *Final Payments*. After her father's death, Isabel gets a job with a county government, visiting the homes of people who have taken in elderly non-relatives in exchange for a government stipend, to see how well the arrangement is working. On her first day on the job, she looks at the form she's supposed to fill out at every house she visits: “There were questions about square feet of space and medical equipment, about the patient's age, the state of his health, and frequency and kind of medication. Nothing was said about how people felt and what they wanted. It said nothing about being tired or lonely or in despair. But I would stick to the form.”

This she does, but it proves more difficult than she had expected. Everywhere she goes, the dependent person wants her to involve herself more deeply than her job requires. One woman reads her palm, another asks her what's black and white and red all over; an elderly roue persuades her to show him her breasts; and her final case begs for her help in carrying out a

suicide plot. All of them are desperate for more from life than just having their physical needs met; in every case, Isabel is strongly drawn toward that deeper involvement, and has to force herself back from it.

The reason is her conviction, drawn from the all-consuming experience of ministering to her father, that caring for someone else through personal involvement inevitably destroys the possibility of leading a normal life. "It always seemed that there was a great problem with sympathy," she says to herself during one of her visits to homes. "If you really cared for the person, or even for the extremities of their situation, you ought to do something, or you ought to give up the luxury of caring."

I don't think that's true, and the best way for me to explain why is to describe my own experience with this sort of thing. I'm a Big Brother, a weekend father figure for an eleven-year-old boy named James. I should say that I do this more because I like kids and thought it would be fun than as part of my campaign for canonization; certainly I am in no danger of falling prey to the extremes of altruistic behavior that bedeviled Isabel Moore. James' father ran away when he was an infant, and James lives in an apartment complex with his mother, who works on an assembly line in a big light-industrial plant. I should say also that in the opinion of James and his mother, Gordon's formulation is right: all of the deficiencies in their lives would be solved by money. But I don't think the government should be sending them cash instead of Big Brothers sending them me. All of their essential needs—food, rent, car, clothes, television—and not much more are covered by James' mother's paycheck. What they think they *really* need to be happy—mansions, Cadillacs, servants, vacation paradises, Betamaxes—I certainly don't want my tax dollars, or anyone else's, paying for.

What I provide for James is somebody to talk to and take him

places. The needs of an underindulged eleven-year-old are remarkably simple: what makes him most happy is to be taken to look at hot rods and customized vans. He and his mother are new in town, and so lack for family and friends and a deep prejudice both of them hold against Mexican-Americans makes James draw away from most of his neighbors and classmates. So to have someone other than his mother to talk to is a great pleasure for him, too. I worried at first that the whole arrangement would be too artificial; I had come to be his friend, after all, not because I loved or even liked him, or he me, but because an agency had paired us. But it has worked out. It's not love yet, but certainly we like each other. After a few weeks, he shyly asked me if we could get together twice a week instead of once, and I agreed. I think it would be better for him to have a father or a real big brother than me, but I know I'm better than nobody at all. Without either of us being consumed by it, both our lives are made a little better by the arrangement, in a way that money rather than personal contact could not have brought about.

So it seems to me that the proper reaction to the failures of the government to help people is not just to throw up our hands and revert to Social Darwinism, but to bring about an increase in voluntary altruistic activity. Altruism can fulfill more needs than government dollars; it costs less, and it need not be artificial or require on the part of the altruist a get-thee-to-a-nunnery devotion. Why, then, isn't it happening?

The main reason is not that we have become a nation of craven self-servers so much as that most of us, today, operate under what might be called the Designated-Hitter Principle. For those who don't follow baseball, this needs some explanation. A few years ago, the American League (and not the National, which has always had more class) decided to allow teams to place in the lineup a "designated hitter," whose responsibility was only to hit,

not to field. The rule was designed to liven up the game by relieving pitchers, always weak at the plate, of their batting duties, but it also reflected a longstanding trend in American life: increasing specialization and the concomitant dilution of individual responsibility. Most intelligent people today think that if they want to make a contribution to the life of the nation, they ought to acquire an area of expertise and apply it toward the public good, thus playing a small part in a sweeping effort to help people—become, for instance, a budget analyst at HEW; or help write nursing home legislation; or expose corruption in high places.

The problem is that because of the nature of large organizations, it's a 50-50 proposition at best whether those long days of budget analysis or bill-writing or corruption-exposing will actually make America a better place. Even if your nursing home bill passes and has the intended effect, the actual helping of old people will be done by someone whose *job* it is, and that raises problems of expense and of leaving unmet the needs that unpaid personal contact fills. On the other hand, working as a volunteer in a nursing home won't change the nationwide statistics much, but it will indisputably help a few people. We read every day about some high government official who goes off to work at seven and comes home at nine, but there's only one recent example of an official who was also engaged in labors whose tangible, immediate fruits he could see. That was the late Lawrence Woodworth, the tax-policy czar of the Senate Finance Committee, who spent his nights and weekends working on the civic affairs of his tiny hometown, Cheverly, Maryland. This was always reported as a charming eccentricity of Woodworth's.

What Woodworth saw was that doing good need not be subject to the designated-hitter principle—that it did not always have to be the job of some specialist who was paid to do it. But

usually designated-hitter thinking is so prevalent that it's built into policy.

Yet even if we got past that mentality, what would compel us to volunteer? The answer, as strange as the notion may seem these days, is that the volunteer spirit is not contrary to fundamental human nature. Yes, we are at base selfish creatures, but selfish in complicated ways. A parent will usually, if given the choice, sacrifice himself to save his child. When America has been genuinely threatened, people have signed up to defend it at great personal peril. The most narcissistic social climber will put in long hours on charity work if it will mean a better class of invitations. In other words, there are selfish motives—prestige, recognition, the preservation of a valued social unit—that make people behave in other than the most obviously selfish ways. In my own case, my stock with people usually goes up when I tell them I'm a Big Brother, and that's certainly part of why I do it.

So the way to encourage altruism, besides convincing people that it actually does some good, is to pluck the strings that make the music play. This is not a newly discovered secret—it's the way churches and junior leagues and Rotary Clubs and political parties have enticed people into service for years. With these institutions in relative disrepute, the government might take up the slack by glorifying altruism itself. This it could do by convincing people that they have a personal stake in the well-being of the society at large. Every laid-off New York sanitation worker must wish that ten years ago he had thought a little less about getting those extra sick days and a little more about the welfare of the city. Ten years from now, in a country where people just don't seem much to like or care about each other, it will seem pretty silly that we each went about our responsible, important jobs, did our public good, and never took the trouble to enter the life of someone who needed a more basic, personal, and compassionate form of help. ■



# Tidbits and Outrages

## Gays and Dolls

For those who missed it, here's the latest letter to Ann Landers about Gay Bob:

Dear Ann Landers:

Recently a reader from Alabama wrote about a new doll for children—"Gay Bob." She was appalled at the degree to which homosexuality had been accepted. The writer fumed, "The manufacturer is a New York executive who must have lost his marbles the last time he went through the Bermuda Triangle."

Your response was one of total cynicism. "Gay Bob?" you quipped. "I'll believe it when I see it." Well, you'd better believe it because Gay Bob is now available in some fairly respectable retail stores.

I just read a newspaper story on Gay Bob and saw a picture of him, coming out of the closet and caressing another male. It seems the dolls (complete with wardrobe) were first offered through mail-order ads, but now they are appearing everywhere.

—Bryan  
College Station, Tex.

## Grantsmanship

You may have read about how hard it is to get a job in the civil service these days—but there's another way to get at the taxpayers' wallets, as this recent ad in *The Washington Post* points out:

### SEMINAR:

HOW TO BECOME A SUCCESSFUL

## FREE-LANCE CONSULTANT

You too can earn up to \$500 a day as a part-time or full-time consultant to business and government. This exciting seminar will teach you how to turn evenings, weekends and other free time into more income with no capital investment. The seminar is conducted by Frank Tennant, successful executive consultant, speaker, editor, writer and former West Point professor.

**Who should attend?** Anyone with a marketable skill gained through education or experience—accountants, administrators, authors, businessmen and women, college professors, counselors, designers, editors, executives, graduate students, investors, managers, manufacturers representatives, military officers, photographers, psychologists, public relations practitioners, realtors, salesmen, scientists, sociologists, teachers, and others.

**You will learn:** consulting requirements; structuring your business; finding consulting opportunities; selling your services; the consulting job interview; overcoming client resistance; keeping clients happy; grantsmanship; determining overhead; setting your prices; collecting fees; getting repeat business; becoming well known; avoiding bad business; avoiding giving away your services; working with other consultants; use of contracts; and a lot more.

**This is the consulting seminar to attend.** It has been presented to enthusiastic groups in major cities throughout the country. As the *Washington Post* said in a feature article, "Consultants need advice and encouragement, and that is where Frank Tennant, consultant to consultants, comes in." Clip and save this ad to yourself not to miss an exciting seminar.

Circle 1

## Washington Already Feeling Effects of Shah's Fall

Betty Beale of *The Washington Star* has this advice for new congressmen about their social life in Washington:

"The main impetus to social activity comes from the foreign ambassadors who have been sent here, among other reasons, to wine, dine, woo and win you to their point of view. And like the maiden fair who is being courted with flowers, fun and fancy words—you may as well relax and enjoy it.

"Unfortunately, the biggest hunk of the glamor, excitement and brilliance of Washington entertaining disappeared with the absence of Iranian Ambassador Ardeshir Zahedi.

"There has not been in this city in perhaps a half century another host who entertained so frequently so many important people with such elegance and such concern for the comfort of his guests. His detractors are only those who have not witnessed firsthand his brand of diplomacy, are unacquainted with the good he has done in the community and with the respect he has earned from American officials and diplomatic colleagues.

"As the closest man to the Shah, it seems unlikely he will continue as envoy here if the Shah is no longer in power. So unless he settles in Washington, you newcomers to town will not experience those caviar and champagne parties with imported celebrities, Capital VIPs, music to dance by, and age-old Persian serenades to soothe the bitter bureaucrat."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG