

# THE DEAD MAN

a novel by **Nora Gold**

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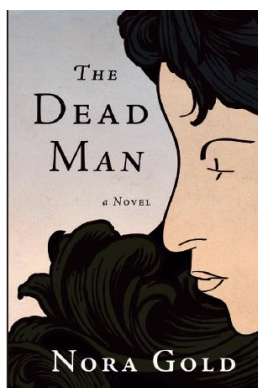
Nora Gold's *The Dead Man* is as impressive, as was her first novel, *Fields of Exile*, in its thought-provoking subject matter. In *Fields*, Gold focused on antisemitism in the academy. In *The Dead Man*, she ventures into the literary terrain of women and madness.

Gold exploits the tropes of that most gendered genre, romance (in which the emotional angst of a female protagonist is given primacy, the socio-political world figures largely as the backdrop to an intense and ever-anxious love affair, and a seemingly troubled but fascinating man—somewhat above her in station—is ultimately understood), to write a “horror” story of an inability—or refusal—to overcome an obsession.

Widowed, fittyish Eve, a music therapist and composer, is the fraught protagonist, who, five years after being unceremoniously dumped by email, perpetually fluctuates between recognizing the gross flaws of her former lover, Jake, and denying their depth and magnitude, as she parses every moment of their past relationship in order to determine if he ever really loved her. The tale presents a litany of her emotional excesses. In the first paragraph she's contemplating whether to subject Jake to her fortieth or so act of phone harassment. She subsequently recalls her distress, during the relationship, when his attention was temporarily focused on driving or chopping vegetables, rather than on her. She wanted “to lose herself in him, like an infant with a parent” (219). He

remains the constant subject of her major musical compositions.

Women's “madness” in the history of literary texts, be it a real psychic state or a label imposed on them, takes on a host of forms, but is frequently and robustly interpreted by feminist critics to be a *consequence* of their desire for—or acts of—transgression against the dominant socio-sexual order. Simplistically stated, their circumstances have rendered them the victims of patriarchy or masculocentrism.



But Gold demonstrates that Eve is largely a victim of her efforts to positively *buttress* traditional social norms about masculinity, despite their detrimental effects, and even as she espouses a counter discourse.

Specifically, at one point, Eve provides for Jake a definition of the recognizably liberal feminism to which she ascribes: “...we believe that women deserve full equality—economically, legally, in every way.” She notes the ways in which the dominant structure of the family benefit men, the need for its reorganization, and concludes, “it’s a matter of women having self-respect, and not undervaluing themselves. And employers treating women and men as equals.” And Jake, hearing (for the first time?) that feminism isn’t “anti-men,” says he could live with that. And Eve is momentarily happy with that because it might indicate “not just that he could live with feminism, but whether he could live with her” (79).

As if it's easy to change one's most ingrained desires and behaviours. As if it's easy to find a partner interested in “reorganizing” relationships. In reality, even when experiencing how awful Jake was, Eve repeatedly engages in major work to prop him up. When he mentions pushing his wife into a wall once when he was frustrated, “She nodded. Not saying it was ok he'd hit her, just that she understood his frustration” (216). And she insists on constructing him as a paragon of masculinity. Initially repulsed by Jake's hairless body, “as the mind flips around when you're in love, it went from seeming to her like a defect, to being something desirable, even a sign of his innate superiority... More spiritual and sensitive. A higher kind of Man” (207).

Gold bleakly articulates what it means to be the fragmented subject of conflicting ideologies: feminism and masculocentrism. Eve more or less uses feminism as a “pull down” menu: I want this and I want that ... but not that.” Consequently, her desire for parity and self-respect is continually undermined by her desire for Jake. Through her portrayal of Eve, Gold effectively highlights the psychic consequences when the historically entrenched, culturally tenacious construction of desire is such that straight women, particularly when they possess the social and economic capital to do otherwise, continue to be attracted to the romantic lead of yore: a man with greater such capital, even if the latter, as represented by Jake, demonstrates the personality traits of a psychopath.

At the novel's resolution, Eve declares Jake “dead” to her, but is he? Or will she just keep trying (not) to get over him?