

I realised during a night out last summer that none of the three women I was chatting with shared the same idea of what constituted cheating. All of us were in monogamous relationships, two with men and two with women, but each had a different impression of what counted as infidelity. The one who had been married for 10 years said she didn't care or want to know unless penetration was involved. One said she considered watching porn cheating, a position so at odds with her trendy self-presentation that the rest of us glanced at her askew, trying to figure out if being prudish was a new kind of kink. Another said her line was simple: any physical touch beyond a friendly hug. She didn't mind close or regular communication with others, because she considered such things impossible and unattractive to police.

I said that anything I felt the need to hide would strike me as a problem. The hidden thing could be sex, or it could be a dinner plan I might conveniently omit when relaying my plans for the week. This seems the only reasonable barometer to me, given how individual and varied boundaries are among different couples. But is it a good enough litmus test, I wondered later, when there are things I don't want my partner to know that have nothing to do with infidelity? Impulses and thoughts that reveal my laziness and inadequacy and selfishness, for instance, but don't reveal any attraction to another person. How to decide what is reasonable to subsume into the ultimate unknowability of another, and what needs to be in the open? What is cheating, anyway?

The past 12 months have been a banner year for infidelity. Cast your mind back to last summer when the unfortunate tech CEO Andy Byrson was snared in an intimate embrace at a Coldplay concert with a woman who was not his wife, but was, in fact, his co-worker. Then there was Olivia Nuzzi, whose bizarre decision to begin a romance with Robert F Kennedy Jr after profiling him for *New York Magazine* is relayed in *American Canto*, her memoir. This, in turn, has been extrapolated upon at tawdry length by her spurned ex-fiance Ryan Lizza. (His Substack details the chillingly bad erotic poetry allegedly sent by RFK.)

In October came Lily Allen's album *West End Girl*, a whole timeline of infidelity laid out as overtly as was legally sound. Part of the album's pull was that it granted us insight into not only a wrecked marriage, but an open one. This was a modern woman who was scorned: one who had reluctantly accepted non-monogamy and yet had, even so, been betrayed. If there was any fear that the normalisation of alternative relationship structures would dilute the drama of good old-fashioned betrayal, this was the counterpoint.

Relationships may be evolving, but they're still hard to navigate. Two recent novels, Erin Somers's *The Ten Year Affair* and Emily Adrian's *Seduction Theory*, wrestle with the question of what infidelity offers today. In both, the affairs have to do with the need to reclaim one's identity beyond the confines of marriage. In Somers's book, middle-class millennials Cora and Sam, both raising young children in the Hudson Valley, project their marital dissatisfactions, sexual and otherwise, upon the distracting prospect of an affair. In Adrian's delicious campus novel, Simone and Ethan are married creative-writing professors at the same college but with vastly differing reputations: she, the sleek star, and he, the tag-along spousal hire. Ethan finds himself inexplicably drawn to his unremarkable secretary, and Simone is far more accommodating to a student than she should be. For them, the old tropes about infidelity should be rendered obsolete by economic parity and the dismantling of the mandatory nuclear family, but are found to be as pertinent as ever.

Miranda July's 2024 novel *All Fours*, meanwhile, spoke to women in long-term relationships, and especially those who are perimenopausal. July's narrator exemplified a

STATE OF AFFAIRS

In the age of poly, a more, why do people still cheat?

By Megan Nolan



Young Judas Tree, 2023, by Eve Ackroyd

certain privileged despair at marital stagnation, and a retaliatory conviction that the best sex may still be ahead of them (and outside of monogamy).

Why, in an age of open relationships and polyamory, do people who feel trapped by monogamy not seek alternatives, rather than cheat? "I didn't want them to be that cool," says Somers of her characters. "They are so uptight, and ultimately so deeply conventional. Beyond the style and bluster, these middle-class people are still yoked to tradition." Although we may understand, in the abstract, that we are free to be liberal with our affections, the reality and emotional task of maintaining an open relationship is often not so appealing. Not, either, is being alone.

Somers's plot cleverly explores how even the fantasy of an affair can function as a valve for the desire for autonomy and escape. Cora proposes an affair to Sam, but when it doesn't proceed, the narrative divides into reality and a parallel world in which the affair takes place.

In Adrian's novel, there is a clear-cut, physical infidelity, but there is also a more nebulous one between Simone and her student. "The core betrayal of the book, I think, is not the husband's sexual affair, but the wife's manipulation of her students to get what she wants emotionally," says the author from her New Haven home. "Simone wants to be admired and validated and almost worshipped by people who are not her husband, even if she is drawing a line at actually consummating those pursuits physically." Part of her need for validation may be to do with the dwindling of her husband's once-untold potential; he has not lived up to his promise as she has. And there is a sense of Simone's ambition. There are new, more alluring frontiers to cross.

Duplicity is still duplicity. "It's about deception and betrayal and a secrecy that is damaging to the relationship, and that can happen no matter the structure - gay, straight, bi, open, poly," says Lauren Larusso, a psychotherapist and the author of *Beyond Infidelity*, a guide for those dealing with a partner's betrayal. "It's about transgressing a mutual understanding that you have with your partner, about the safety or the rules or the promise or the commitment, and taking that elsewhere. People who have more permissive attitudes are going to maybe face better, but it's more about the betrayal than it is the context that it's happening in."

These modern novels pose a stark contrast to the purient pleasures described by those great chroniclers and practitioners of infidelity: John Cheever, Philip Roth and the cheater's laureate, John Updike. Updike became famous and wealthy after he wrote *Couples*, a novel that follows the lives of 10 romantic duos in Massachusetts in 1968. He shows the wayward spouses as seeking necessary release, having married too young to have accrued enough sexual adventure or experience.

The free-wheeling ease with which Updike's characters step out - evading the social bonds that were more or less mandated previously - is absent in these contemporary novels. Today, the reckoning is not about eschewing convention but questioning the choices we make of our own volition. We are told that everything is now possible: being a husband or wife doesn't imply the obligatory trappings of submission and provision. Instead we have romance, free will and choice. It's a sobering realisation to find that life cannot accommodate endless possibility and not only are our options limited, our time on earth is too.

Sure, sometimes infidelity is merely an expression of impulsive lust. What compels many of us, though, to stray, physically or otherwise, is something else. It is the compulsion to flee our circumstances, our choices - and finally, who we are. You can't have everything; you can't have a flexible open marriage and the familiarity and consistency of a traditional family unit. To think otherwise is a refusal to recognise consequence. ■ HHS

Megan Nolan's most recent novel is *Ordinary Human Relations*, published by Vintage at £9.99



Beyond Infidelity by Lauren Larusso (Bloomsbury, £14.99)



All Fours by Miranda July (Canongate Books, £16.99)



Seduction Theory by Emily Adrian (Orion, £18.99)



The Ten Year Affair by Erin Somers (Simon & Schuster, £14.85)