

PENGUIN BOOKS

WHAT THE HELL IS HE THINKING?

Zoe Strimpel has been a journalist since graduating from Cambridge in 2004. She put her English degree to good use by writing features such as 'Can Men Fancy Talkative Women?', an experiment conducted while wearing short skirts and visiting Zoo Nightclub in Leicester Square. So conclusive were her tests – they can't – that Vanessa Feltz took her up on it on BBC Radio London. It was when she became *thelondonpaper's* Girl About Town dating columnist in October 2006 that she began thinking about the peculiar behaviour of men in earnest. Her weekly columns prompted heated responses from London's commuters: women related; men reacted. She has since written on the odd relations between men and women for *Cosmopolitan*, the *Sunday Times Style* magazine and *The Times*, and has appeared on BBC One's *Sunday Life* as a spokesperson for 'freemales', women who genuinely enjoy the single life. She is currently the lifestyle editor for *City A.M.*



What the Hell is He Thinking?

All the Questions You've Ever
Asked About Men Answered

Zoe Strimpel



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To my parents, Harriet and Oliver Strimpel, who want me to end up
happy more than anyone, be that married or single and loving it (well,
they'd prefer married, to be fair)



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Introduction

I was in the final throes of yet another quasi-dating thing, this time with a freelance website developer with all the time in the world for everything but me. Things had started off so promisingly. Our first date was the best I've ever had: a 48-hour cuddle-fest that had kicked off with a gorgeous meal and a romantic rickshaw drive through London to a fancy bar – all on him. But as time went on, and we kept seeing each other, things didn't develop as I'd hoped. When we were together (always having a great time) or, if I was lucky, in text messages, he would tell me that he missed me. But then days would pass without communication. There were so many mixed signals and contradictions, my head (and those of my friends who coached me through the whole thing) all but exploded.

In the end, things didn't work out. Why? I kind of got the sense he thought I wanted something too serious for him, but I couldn't be sure. As well as feeling sad it hadn't worked out, I was frustrated by the bizarre misunderstanding that seemed to have sprung up between us. What the hell had he been thinking this whole time?

Then a clever book called *He's Just Not That Into You* fell my way. For a moment, it seemed to make everything clear. All those intriguing contradictions and mixed signals? Those unsubstantiated moments of extreme affection? All signs that he was just not that into me. Great, case closed. And when a guy I had down for a rebound bailed on our first date because of 'a trip to Slovenia', I simply said to myself, OK, I get it. Not into me.

This new simple ethos was all very well until I realized it wasn't nearly enough of an explanation. I had a sudden vision of my friends and I sitting around with drinks, running out of boy-chat after six words, and promptly had a panic attack. No way would a six-word answer that entirely devalues and dismisses male thought or emotional subtlety be enough for me. I wanted to know what Rickshaw Boy (his name is Christian) – and all the other guys who say one thing and act out another – are thinking!

But why bother? Well, for a start, if someone I've spent some of my most intimate moments with suddenly appears to have jumped to another page, I'd quite like to know what page that is.

Then, I figure, once you know the page, you can get to know the book better.

Again, you ask, why bother? Isn't it enough to know that things aren't as they should or could be, and cease wasting time on them? Ideally, maybe yes. But life just ain't that simple. People – including men – ain't that simple. I mean, how often have we girls done one thing and, if pushed to think about it, meant another? Should we really just bin him because he doesn't ring when he says he will? Christ, it's going to be a long, lonely life if we're that black and white about everything. (Don't get me wrong, there's no excuse for shitty or, God forbid, nasty behaviour. Still, if you're reading this book, I'll wager you're smart enough not to get involved with anyone sinister.)

In the past, the rules may well have been clearer. There was a definite code of conduct. Neither men nor women were allowed to

get away with inhabiting the grey area of romantic intentions many of us do today. Judging from the way my grandmother talked on the Sunday afternoons I'd pay my weekly visit, there was a time when a girl was perfectly entitled to assume a guy had marriage on his mind from the moment he showed interest. Now, as she was bewildered to learn, that guy I've been seeing might not even be a boyfriend, and almost certainly won't become a husband. Plus, I had to explain, there are so many fancy ways to interpret his grey intentions. We've got Facebook antics, texts, email, MSN and jobs so cut-throat many of us like to think we don't have time for commitment. Our lifestyles are now so replete with choice and independence that our interactions with the opposite sex have simply become another form of both. Commitment flies in the face of the contemporary dream, I would explain. So if relationships are complex at the best of times, modernity has thrown an added veil over our dealings with one another. What the hell we are truly thinking and feeling can be anybody's guess. 'Good heavens,' Grandma would respond. 'I'm glad I'm not out there looking for a man now.'

But, modernity or not, we still want a good bit of loving. And I genuinely believe that men – hateful creatures as they may sometimes be – are worth trying to work out. Wouldn't we like to get a little closer to knowing what the hell he's thinking? I, for one, value the male presence in my life enough to want to know.

By 'working out', I don't mean we're going to find all the answers. The world of dating and relationships doesn't really lend itself to an exact science. Nor am I a guru. I am a normal, frazzled, fun-loving but responsible twenty-something trying to make sense of the romantic wilderness from whose branches I'm currently swinging.

But my girlfriends and I weren't getting any closer to the truth by talking among ourselves over still more cocktails. So one day, it occurred to me that I could just ask a bunch of guys why they do the things they do. After all, for the year and a half that I wrote my weekly

dating column for London morning newspaper *thelondonpaper*, the most impassioned, articulate and frequent respondents were men. Guys wanted to put their two cents in on the dating thing: they thought about it too, and obviously felt that their voices weren't being heard. So I figured there was a lot of manpower to harness out there. And, as predicted, they were more than happy to divulge.

This book isn't about streamlining the search for The One, nor is it a self-help book. It's a conversation with men, who, judging from the honesty and keenness with which most approached my questions, are as eager as we are to bridge the knowledge gap.

In the quest to find out what the hell he's thinking, I've talked to dozens, if not hundreds, of men. I asked them for their views in two formats, which I believe are the best ways of gleaning the information and insight most women are after. One is explanation: getting them to respond to accounts of flummoxing (but – to most women – recognizable) male behaviour, such as that of Christian above. Thanks to the candour of the guys I asked, I was able to see what was going on with Christian, with some clarity, and why. How could I have known he was a 'classic Casanova' – that is, addicted to making girls love him for the resulting feeling of validation – if it wasn't for Adam Lyons, a top pick-up artist and dating coach? Or that Christian, no matter how genteel, polite and charming he was when we met up, was not above the 'why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free' line of thinking? That is, while I was busy trying to impress him with my easy-going coolness, and wondering when the penny would drop about how great I am, he merely saw me as someone who didn't demand anything more challenging than a bottle of nice booze when we met, in exchange for sex, cuddles and all manner of ego flattery.

The other format is simple 'quick-fire questions' about all that stuff you've always wondered, from the lowliest physical question such as 'Do tampons make you queasy?' to 'How important is it to you that your friends think your girlfriend is attractive?' and 'Would you rather

date a stupid but beautiful woman than a humorous, intelligent but less gorgeous one?’

These questions and their answers come at the end of each part of the book, so they correspond in some way, sometimes loosely, with the preceding chapters. ‘Commitment Phobia’ for example, begs the bite-sized but still revealing question ‘What’s the biggest thing a girl does that scares you off?’ as well as ‘Do you wish you could have a polygamous relationship?’

Inevitably, there is some overlap – after all, we’re talking about love, lust and all the things in between, so nothing is too clear-cut. For example, although I decided to make ‘Sharing Space’ its own section, some of the questions following it relate to commitment phobia, such as: ‘What’s so scary about moving in with someone?’

Now, about the guys on the *What the Hell is He Thinking?* panel, the guys whose voices are our conduit into the male mind. They are all articulate, smart, thoughtful and basically good guys. I didn’t interview thuggish men or overt misogynists, because this book assumes that we’re talking about guys who deserve to be analysed, thought about and figured out, even if relationships with them don’t work out or they behave like arse-wipes. I am not interested in telling you something about all the men in society; just about the ones I reckon you’re likely to date, fall foul of, be mystified by and – one day – maybe stick with.

Particular stars on the panel are Tom L, recently out of a four-year relationship with an excellent woman he fell in love with on first sight; Anthony A, an adorable, woman-loving Lothario who I once snogged but am very glad did nothing more with; Victor L, my ex-flatmate’s boyfriend, who can talk for hours with scary brilliance about relationships and did so in our living room on many occasions; and last but not least, Adam Lyons, who, despite being a busy professional dating coach and pick-up advisor, managed to lend his eye to lots of the cases presented here and always cut through the complexities with

his scarily shrewd, and often cynical, insider's perspective on the male mind.

There are, of course, a variety of responses here; not every man said the same thing (that would just be weird). But the more I collated them, the more I got a flavour of the way men think. It's not something that can be explained in a sentence – though many people try to do that with such statements as 'men are cowards' or 'guys are straightforward; there's no point reading too much into their actions'. Although those opinions might contain some truth, there are so many exceptions that they aren't particularly helpful. Gaining a flavour of the way men think, on the other hand, *is* helpful, in the same way that learning a language takes more than a few short grammatical lessons. You have to pick a language up, gain a feel for it.

I hope that once you've read this book (and it is fine to cherry-pick the chapters; you don't have to read them in sequence), you'll have a feel for the rhythm of the male mind, and when inexplicable behaviour comes your way you'll be able to better understand what's going on. The name of the game is not to be thrown when a guy does something weird; rather, to recognize what it might mean, and where it's coming from. This should empower you to respond sensibly: to either persevere effectively or throw in the towel. Either way, knowledge is power. Here's to both. Oh, and having a whale of a time.