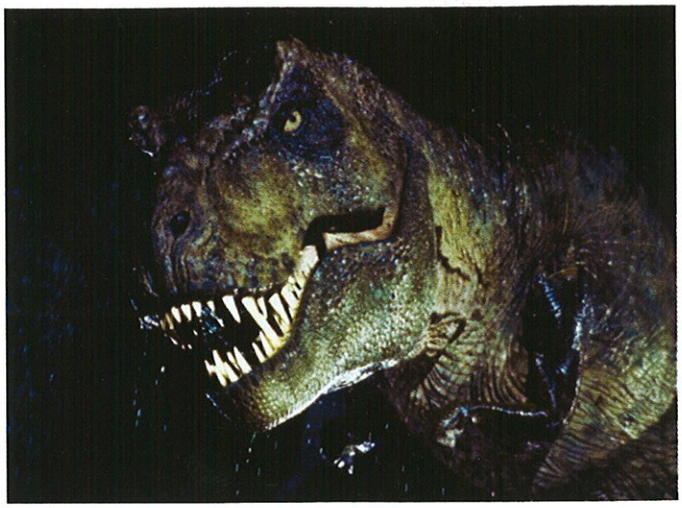

direction" for policy. Lincoln is not devoid of sentiment; early on there is a conversation between the president and two soldiers (one of them black) that threatens to be the cinema equivalent of a moralising tableau. But the detailed business of politics soon intervenes. In an age of soundbites and presidential tweets, Spielberg wants us to focus on the otherwise invisible "works."

And that is his achievement: to use his Hollywood skills to get some bizarrely un-Hollywood material past us. When I spoke to him recently, he cheerfully spoke of the "popcorn movie" that would be his next project after *Lincoln*. Then again, his idea of "popcorn movie" might surprise one. The Universal Studio tour also contains another "attraction" from the Spielberg archive. It is the plane crash site from *War of the Worlds* (2005), HG Wells updated after 9/11. A smoking fuselage sits on a hillside, surrounded by suitcases burst open, life jackets, the odd shoe and toy from its missing passengers—more ordinary detail rendered surreal. Tourists pass close by in little carts, many of them contemplating their own imminent flight home. It's a strange way to have fun, with this vast *momento mori*, but Steven Spielberg has never really been in the business of comfort.

Francine Stock is a broadcaster and author of "In Glorious Technicolor" (Chatto & Windus)

Not like a novelist

Sheila Heti has struck hard against the male literary scene, as all the fuss shows, says *Richard Beck*

How Should A Person Be?
by Sheila Heti (Harvill Secker, £15)

How Should A Person Be? is Sheila Heti's second novel. Its narrator is a 36-year-old woman named Sheila Heti, who, like the author, lives in Toronto and spends her days in conversation with friends about how best to live and make art. Much of this extraordinary book's dialogue is taken from recordings of conversations that actually occurred.

"As people feel life," Henry James wrote, "so they will feel the art that is most closely related to it." This is terrific advice, yet many novelists ignore it, holding instead to what James called "an eternal repetition of a few familiar clichés." The recorded conversations that make up about half of Heti's book are her way of holding life close, without which the book's animating question would remain unanswerable and unreal.

The novelty of Heti's approach is eye-catching, but it is her seeming indifference to many of contemporary fiction's most cherished ideas that made *How Should A Person Be?* last year's most polarising and widely discussed novel in the US. In a literary landscape dominated by realists like Jonathan Franzen and Jeffrey Eugenides, Heti's impatience with the fiction/non-fiction divide struck reviewers as either inspired or tedious, bold or self-indulgent. When asked by interviewers to spell out the rationale behind her approach, Heti's answer was direct and refreshing: "I wrote this book to answer the question posed by its title," she said. "I wanted to use everything at my disposal."

So how should a person be? "Not like a novelist," seems to be part of Heti's answer. In the book, Sheila spends time with painters, poets, hairdressers and Jungian analysts—but not with novelists. Heti has acknowledged as influences self-help books, *Fortune* magazine, reality TV, films by Werner Herzog, and the Bible—but not novels. Her wariness about the form may have less to do with novels as such (she did, in the end, choose to write one) than with the current culture of novels. This is primarily one of insecurity and fear, in which worries about the novel's future and the declining attention span of its audience serve as rallying cries for the demoralised. What Heti notices in the book's prologue, however, is that these anxieties belong almost entirely to men, and this makes it easy for her to skip right past them. "One good thing about being a woman," she writes, "is we haven't too many examples yet of what a genius looks like. It could be me." She jokes that the current age cries out for a new kind of genius, one by definition unavailable to heterosexual men. "We live in the age of some really great blow-job artists," she writes. "Every era has its art form. The 19th century, I know, was tops for the novel."

The prologue is an exciting piece of feminist provocation, denigrating literary culture's obsession with canonisation and the heroic inner life. In their place, Heti lionises celebrity and friendship, admiring "all the great personalities down through time, like Andy Warhol and Oscar Wilde. They seemed to be so perfectly themselves in every way." Sheila's friends admire her for who she is, but she wants to be someone better fitted to the times: "I would rather be liked for who I appear to be, and for who I appear to be, to be who I am."

Although reality TV does not appear in Heti's novel, its atmosphere and logic, which combine a nearly sublime form of leisure with the terror of always being watched, pervade and shape Sheila's thoughts and choices. Other novelists have critiqued reality television, but Heti may be the first to ▶

simply describe it, which is much harder. Sheila and a friend take a trip to Miami for an art fair, where, like the characters on any reality TV show, they find themselves simultaneously enchanted and bored by the vulgar, shimmering manifestations of wealth that surround them. Drinking in a hotel bar, the pair take off their clothes and swim around in a pool as patrons look on. "I'm so happy," Sheila later says, "with how we were making everyone jealous with how happy we were in the pool!" Then they watch the infamous Paris Hilton sex tape on a laptop.

Heti's quest for a way of being that suits both herself and her age unfolds in the form of a picaresque, moving quickly from incident to incident. The novel begins with a marriage that ends. Divorced and embarking on a period of self-imposed celibacy, Sheila seeks to understand why she has always been drawn to spending time with men but not women. "What was a woman for? Two women was an alchemy I did not understand." Since *How Should A Person Be?* is not only a picaresque but a self-help book and bildungsroman as well, Sheila will have to learn what a woman is for. That's when she meets a painter named Margaux.

One literary commonplace is that the novel needs solitude like an orchid needs its greenhouse, and that the internet, by interrupting this solitude, threatens writing and reading alike. But the friendship that emerges between Sheila and Margaux advances the opposite possibility: the mutual dependence of art-making and social life. In Heti's book, an endless series of drinks, discussions, brunches and fights nourishes art making, and if art will sometimes throw friendship into crisis, or vice versa, that isn't a problem but rather the foundation of the whole project's appeal.

Sex, eventually, rears its menacing head. Out drinking at a bar one night, Sheila strikes up a conversation with a man named Israel, who she has long thought of as "the sexiest guy in the city." What follows, in a chapter titled "Interlude for Fucking," is an explicit, extravagant account of their time together. Israel is a pervert, but fortunately (or unfortunately) for Sheila, he is amazing at it.

Reviewing the book for the *New Yorker*, James Wood wrote that Heti's prose "is what one might charitably call basic: simple, direct, sometimes ungainly." The best of Heti's writing on sex—ambitious, assured and ruthlessly controlled—shows just how wrong this judgement is. It is one thing to say that sexual degradation is degrading, but Heti is able to show what makes it sexy, too.

The problem with sex, or at least the problem with sex with Israel, is that it distracts Sheila from her friends, her work, and herself. Although Sheila eventually stops seeing him, the larger questions surrounding sex go unanswered, and in fact *How Should A Person Be?* has been criticised for a certain evasiveness. Many of the book's grandiose expressions of artistic ambition wind up with a self-deprecating joke, as when Sheila writes that if her play only maintains our global standard of living at "its current level," she will "weep" into her oatmeal. These supposedly wild swings between sincerity and irony, between confidence and hesitation, it has been suggested, demonstrate some flaw in Heti's thinking that runs so deep as to border on the pathological. Maybe she is a lazy writer. Maybe her need for adulation and fame blunts her capacity for self-criticism. Or maybe, like so many of her peers, she is simply a narcissist, another hapless "millennial."

But what if Sheila Heti is simply Jewish? *How Should A Person Be?* is filled with searching references to the wandering tribes, Moses, and the modern state of Israel. Halfway through the book, Sheila thinks to herself, "I will give up pot because it makes me paranoid. But I will stay close to God because he makes me paranoid." This isn't just a joke—it's a Woody Allen joke. ("I was captain of the latent paranoid softball team," Allen once said. "I used to steal second base, and feel guilty and go back.") Here we have a technically experimental, autobiographical novel, narrated by an authorial alter ego who is obsessed with fame, sex, her Jewish heritage, and egotism. Does that description remind you of any particular American novelist? If one detects a bit of sexism in the idea that Heti's project is hopelessly self-involved, one reason may be that when Philip Roth pursued exactly the same project, he ended up being celebrated as America's Greatest Living Writer.

One passage, late in the book, makes this Jewish literary ancestry obvious. Sheila is soliloquising, again, on the topic of her world historical destiny:

> "Yet there is one character in history who is reassuring me these days: Moses. I hadn't realised until last week that in his youth he killed a man, an Egyptian, and buried him under some sand. The next day he saw two men fighting. When he tried to stop them, they said to Moses, "What? And if we don't—are you going to kill us too?" He became afraid. He thought, Everyone knows what I have done.
>
> Then he fled town.
>
> And he is the king of the Jews—my king. If that is what my king is like, what can I expect for myself?... I used to worry that I wasn't enough like Jesus, but yesterday I remembered who was my king: a man who, when God told him to lead the people out of Egypt, said, "But I'm not a good talker! Couldn't you ask my brother instead?" So it should not be hard to come at this life with a little bit of honesty. I don't need to be great like the leader of the Christian people. I can be a bumbling murderous coward like the king of the Jews."

This passage is rich with humour, terror, self-delusion, and all the energy and confusion of youthful ambition. "I will stay close to God because he makes me paranoid"—it is precisely Heti's closeness to life, or to God (or at least to Moses) that lends her book its seriousness. "The characters in my book are wandering," Heti told an interviewer. "I saw a correspondence between our generation's doomed worship of the self and that generation's damned worship of the Golden Calf."

Heti also pointed out to the interviewer that it isn't the Jews who leave Egypt who reach the Promised Land, but the generation that comes after. But ▶

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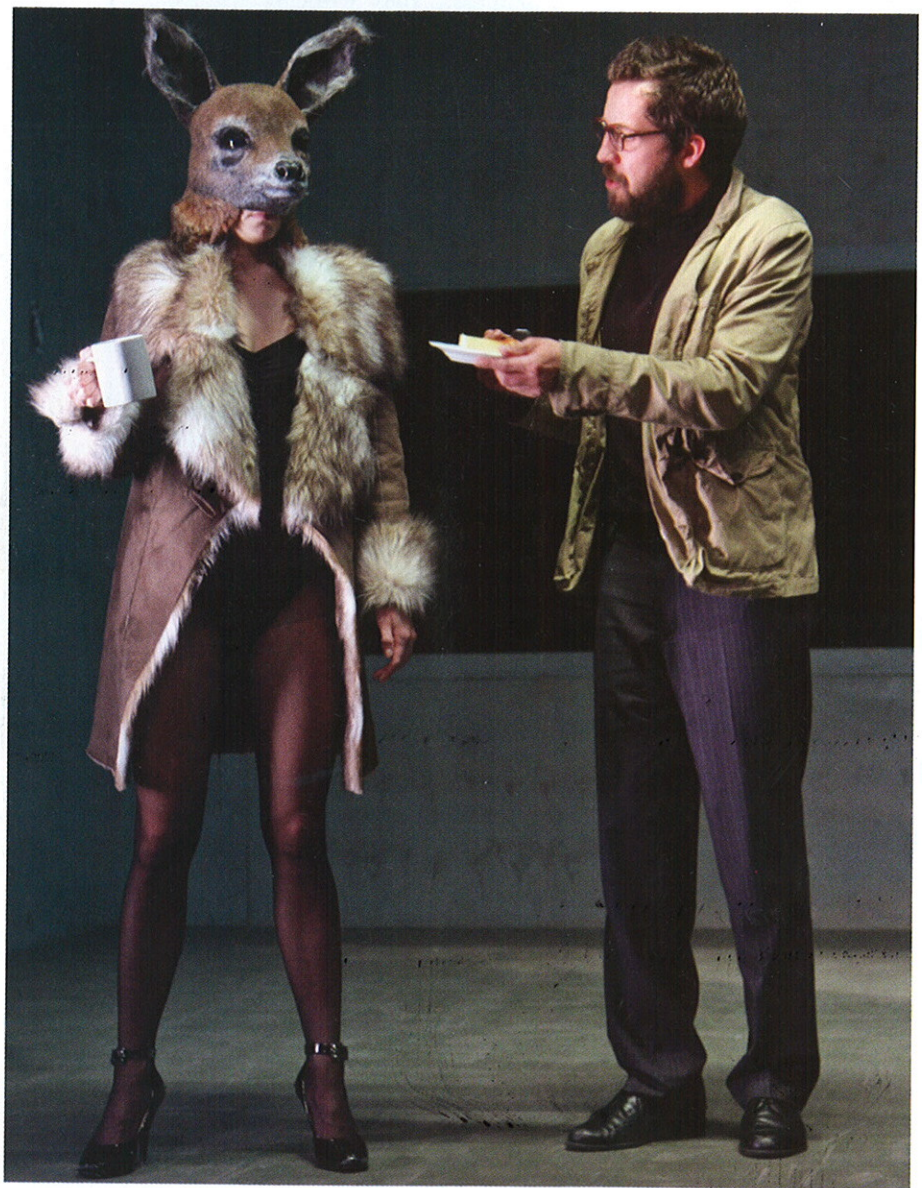
Sheila Heti: the new Philip Roth?

if Heti sees her peers as doomed to wander in the desert, doomed to leave many of their most pressing questions unanswered, why should it be a flaw in the novel to say so? Reaching the promised land isn't what novels are for, and novelists can't describe deserts unless they're willing to fully inhabit them. The best novels are not only statements about the world but products of the world as well. It's not hard to see why *How Should A Person Be?* should be so confused by sex, so desperate for friendship, so enthralled by reality TV, and so bored by novels. Just look at the rest of us! "May the Lord have mercy on me," Heti writes, "for I am a fucking idiot. But I live in a culture of fucking idiots." The line, asking not for forgiveness or pardon but for mercy, is wise advice. It's exhilarating to see Heti embrace her contemporaries, fucking idiots though they may be, with such anger, affection, and intelligence.

Richard Beck is an assistant editor at n+1, a New York-based literary magazine

Punk at the theatre

The playwright Simon Stephens is a rebel at the heart of British theatre, argues *Michael Coveney*



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Women are shown as deer in Stephens's *Three Kingdoms* (2011), a play about sex trafficking

The most prolific playwright of our new century, 41-year-old Simon Stephens, sits at the very centre of new British theatre, a ubiquitous activist who believes in "making" theatre, not writing it, relishing what he calls "the gang mentality" involved.

Port, which opens at the end of January at the National Theatre, defines Stephens's talent and areas of interest almost perfectly. A story of growing up and escape in his native Stockport, *Port* charts the odyssey of a young girl over 12 years as she strikes out on her own, with a much younger brother. Pushed to the margins in the shadow of a big city, she embodies the spirit of melancholy and alienation Stephens admires in the music of Morrissey and the Smiths.

Last year alone, Stephens had six titles performed in Britain, including the controversial *Three Kingdoms* at the Lyric, Hammersmith (only someone "debauched beyond redemption" could enjoy the dildo-and-bondage scenes, I wrote, somewhat primly). The play, which begins with the discovery of a headless female corpse in Hammersmith, followed two British detectives through the lower depths of the European vice-trade and sex-trafficking business.

Stephens also served up two acclaimed, award-winning adaptations, both re-surfacing this year: brilliant versions of Mark Haddon's hit novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, transferring to the West End from the National Theatre in March, and of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, returning to the Young Vic in April.

There is a time-honoured division in British theatre: on one side stand the Roundheads of the Royal Court "new writing" school and the politicised fringe; on the other, the Cavaliers of the Trevor Nunn-style Royal Shakespeare Company, with the National Theatre straddling both camps.

When it comes to the playwrights themselves, the distinction is even clearer. Stephens, as a former inner city teacher, odd job man, shop worker, musician (he played in a Scottish punk band called the Country Teasers) and provocateur turned playwright, is the leading Roundhead in a profession more easily identified by the general public in its Cavaliers: Tom Stoppard, Alan Bennett, David Hare and Alan Ayckbourn.

Unlike those plumed playwrights, Stephens has never had a West End hit (well, not until the arrival of *The Curious Incident* next month, perhaps), nor does his work court, or indeed attract, top box office names. But it lies at the heart of our theatre, partly because Stephens himself gets so involved—he used to teach on the Royal Court's brilliant Young Writers Programme, was resident dramatist at the National and is now a busy associate at the Lyric, Hammersmith—and partly because he is so effusive and skilful.