

BOOK WARS

TWO COMIC NOVELS. LOTS OF LAUGHS. WHO WINS?

THE CONFUSION OF KAREN CARPENTER VS STRAIGHT WHITE MALE

Two contrasting styles of comic writing, one told from a female perspective and the other male, battle to be your commute entertainment

THE CONFUSION OF KAREN CARPENTER



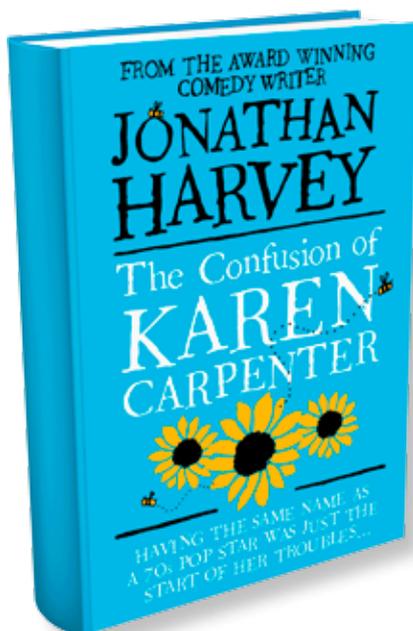
Stylist contributor Laura Price roots for *The Confusion Of Karen Carpenter* by Jonathan

Harvey (£7.99, Pan Macmillan) out 15 August

My first thought on picking up this book was, "Oh, right. As in Karen Carpenter, troubled Seventies icon, dab hand with the drums?" Well, no. Not exactly. But that's precisely the sort of question the book's Liverpudlian protagonist has had to endure throughout her 36 years of existence. Socially crippled with a sh*t name, as she puts it, she's spent a lifetime rolling her eyes and fielding funny looks whenever she introduces herself. But, as the well-worn rom-com rules go, her name is the least of her worries.

The Confusion Of Karen Carpenter is a choke-on-your-popcorn funny account of a special needs teacher who returns to work in the New Year, freshly single after her boyfriend left her over Christmas with only so much as a note attached to the kettle by way of explanation. Not one to wallow in self pity, she decides the only way to get over her ex is to pick herself up, wax her 'pegunda' (her words) and have sex. With someone. Anyone. And so she embarks on a cringe-inducing foray into the terrifying world of first dates and, ahem, anal bleaching.

Despite the regular sniggers, the novel also has a serious side, tackling complex themes such as depression. Women will immediately empathise with Karen as she struggles with

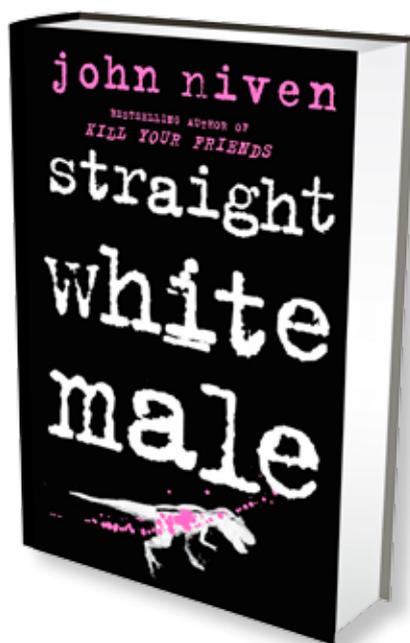


stone-cold rejection and faces the prospect of being left on the shelf.

Likeable from the start, self-deprecating Karen is in stark contrast to the protagonist of *Straight White Male*, the 44-year-old woman-hating, porn-watching Irish writer Kennedy Marr. It's a bit like *Bridget Jones Vs Don Draper*, only Kennedy lacks the charm of the latter. Whereas Jonathan Harvey (who writes regularly for *Coronation Street*) does a great job writing from a woman's point of view, *Straight White Male* – with lurid descriptions of four-way masturbation – could only have been written by a man.

Both novels are clever page-turners with side-splitting passages, but *The Confusion Of Karen Carpenter* gets my vote. Save *Straight White Male* for the man in your life.

★★★★☆



STRAIGHT WHITE MALE



Stylist's sub-editor Lucy Frith fights the corner of *Straight White Male* by John Niven (£12.99, William Heinemann) out 15 August

I like a laugh as much as the next person, so when I was tasked with reading new novels by notoriously sharp and witty writers, gratification was pretty much guaranteed.

Jonathan Harvey's history of comedy screenwriting is apparent in *The Confusion Of Karen Carpenter*, his second novel, even just the title prompted a small chuckle on my commute, but with *Straight White Male* John Niven takes humour to another level. Throwing in filth, sex, a myriad of colourful expletives (and the funniest passage you will ever

read – see chapter 16), he holds nothing back. And thanks to his central character – the sharp-tongued, narcissistic, sex-addicted, alcohol-loving writer Kennedy Marr – that titter turned into a guffaw and even an embarrassing snort as I stood reading on the 18:22 out of Waterloo.

Kennedy, unlike Harvey's Karen, is not immediately likeable; womanising, arrogant, unreasonable; living a privileged life as a screenwriter in LA. But in spite of it all, he's a lovable rogue and Niven his ingenious creator.

In over a million dollars of debt and under pressure to finish scripts, complete novels and visit his sick mother back in Ireland, Kennedy finds himself the unlikely recipient of a literary prize that sees him jetting back to the UK to spend a year teaching at the same university as his ex-wife. And while Kennedy starts to reconsider his precarious lifestyle in the sleepy surroundings of Warwickshire, we reconsider his alcohol-fuelled, misanthropic ways and see a conscience, a father and a teacher underneath his cynical, acerbic (yet hilarious) Irish drones.

Cleverly combining side-splitting humour and unexpected poignancy Niven's assessment of the excesses of the male psyche is one of the best things I have read in a long time – far from being a male-only read. And while Harvey captures the essence of the female psyche in *The Confusion Of Karen Carpenter*, *Straight White Male* had me laughing, crying, cringing and blushing all at once and you can't compete with that.

★★★★★

THE VERDICT: PICK STRAIGHT WHITE MALE FOR NO-HOLDS-BARRED HILARITY

They might both be comic novels, but like comparing Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* with Martin Amis' *Money*, the style of comedy – and central characters – couldn't be further apart. Karen and Kennedy definitely wouldn't hit it off. And while Jonathan Harvey's insight into the female psyche impressed, John Niven gets our final vote. Just as he did in *Kill Your Friends*, Niven creates a monster but still wins us over thanks to a fearless line in the darkest humour.

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