



Checker and the Derailleurs

Lionel Shriver

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Beautiful and charismatic, nineteen-year-old Checker Secretti is the most gifted and original drummer that the club-goers of Astoria, Queens, have ever heard. When he plays, conundrums seem to solve themselves, brilliant thoughts spring to mind, and couples fall in love. The members of his band, The Derailleurs, are passionately devoted to their guiding spirit, as are all who fall under Checker's spell. But when another drummer, Eaton Striker, hears the prodigy play, he is pulled inexorably into Checker's orbit by a powerful combination of envy and admiration. Soon The Derailleurs, too, are torn apart by latent jealousies that Eaton does his utmost to bring alive.

Checker and the Derailleurs Details

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Vonia says

Checker & The Deraillleurs. Where to begin on this magnificent hidden gem from Lionel Shriver? To begin with, this coming-of-age story is about so much more than that; far more than any brief synopsis I have read posits. Then again, I would have a difficult time writing a synopsis that is up to par, with the themes, ideas, philosophies, + general insights into the various characters' emotions being difficult to put into words. Even more difficult is to express how this bands' story - the story of each member's life, plus that of Eaton Striker, an envious admirer with a penchant for evil, and Syria Pyramus, a glass blower ("The Fire Queen") whom forms a love triangle with Checker + Rahim - has such an illuminating relevance to my life, your life, growing up, parenting, friendship, marriage, love, personality differences, negativity, peer pressure, loneliness, ambition, fear, pleasures, music, careers, outlooks on daily life, life decisions, sociology, psychology.... Shriver has long been one of the most psychologically astute authors around, and Checker & The Deraillleurs is among her best in eloquently revealing the wonders of our psyches, next to Big, Double Fault, and We Need To Talk About Kevin.

This has been referred to as a retelling of the story of Christ. This is less obvious than one might imagine. Even Shriver herself mentioned in an interview not realizing she was doing that until after the fact (but was not surprised since she was raised quite religiously; although not religious herself anymore it seems). Although I was made aware of the comparison before reading, it was not until a few days later, innocently re-examining different aspects of the novel (as I do, quite unconsciously, after every good read), that it all seemed so obvious and the parallels so bold, that I was puzzled how I had not seen them sooner. Checker has his disciples ("followers" as they are called in the text) whom respect him, idolizing him with a varying range in logic. The great Checker Secretti is an icon, a symbol of optimism, rightness, even all that is good. Hardly anyone knows his roots as Irving Secretti. In their devotion to him, many of his disciples has given up much, some without even realizing this. Like the original disciples, some inevitably discover themselves strayed from good on the path of evil. Here, the fallen angel is Eaton Striker, whom loves, respects, envies, desires this man, this apparition that is Checker, that the only thing he feels he can do is bring him down. And eventually, it works. The other band members are lured by him into animosity. They begin to see everything they once loved in Checker through a negative filter. Rachel, having always been in love with the drummer, is pushed into facing the fact that it is unrequited. Quiet Carl, having a special place in his heart for Rachel and seeing how Checker has hurt her, also reevaluates his affinity. Howard, his best friend and the band manager, begins to see him as overly maudlin, his niceness excessive. Checker has arranged a marriage between Syria & Rahim in order to save the latter from deportation. At first hating the arrangement (Syria agreed to the marriage only with the understanding that he would serve as a live-in housewife), Rahim eventually falls in love with his new wife. Unfortunately, so does Checker.

Under Eaton Striker's ever so persistent guidance, the entire band witnesses Checker & Syria making love. What then follows is the complete fall of the band, including their love for Checker. Again under the guidance of Striker, they ruin his favorite red bicycle, his drum set, and, almost literally, his soul, as he exposes to Checker all of his weaknesses and every negative though any of his disciples, his friends, have had in the recent months. Although they may not have felt strongly enough to voice their concerns to Checker himself, when Eaton Striker, the voice of evil, does, they cannot, will not, say anything in Checker's defense. He flees the scene, attempting suicide shortly thereafter. It is soon revealed that although possibly the most warranted (logically) occurrence, this is not the first time. Checker is a bipolar manic-depressive.

Here is another aspect of the novel I really appreciated. The foreshadowing for Checker's bipolar was there. In hindsight, in fact, it seems obvious. But it was melded in so artfully through the storytelling, with almost an aura of mystery, that readers could have missed it altogether. This is more difficult than it seems; far more

frequently, an author's foreshadowing is blatantly obvious and/or not telling of anything at all.

And so, there we have the most iconic of Christ's story, the resurrection (Checker survives his suicide attempt; one can imagine him rising from the depths of the ocean). Likewise, his band members, his friends, his disciples, come to love him again. Checker had long sacrificed much of himself in pleasing his adoring followers, and continues now, although at a more realistic level. Looking out for himself as well, he marries Syria (thankfully with Rahim's blessing), and accepts an offer from CBS for his musical talent. Under his new personal manager, Howard, record deals are in order.

All of this takes place in Astoria, Queens. Although I have never been there myself, the magnificent portrait Shriver paints of it is loving and vivid. So much that Astoria becomes a character.

Of course, this novel is also about music. How music can alleviate sorrows, better the lives of all whom will accept its magic. It delves into band life, the personality clashes, what goes into maintaining one under all the pressure, the rejection from the ambivalent, arbitrary music companies (Checker even has a philosophy that a true music lover whom plays for the love of it should never send samples out, as, either way, the result screws you over; if rejected, you are forever second guessing yourself and your talent; if accepted, the

praise you receive becomes all you care about; "It is dangerous, this tape business... You make it their business. It is not yours anymore. You let them say what you are and you are lost. You have sold your soul." Oh, how true this is. How many of my favorite artists were only so on their EPs? A few years later, they have sold out, their music having changed to cater to the masses.)

Shriver also wrote the lyrics to the songs included in the text, with the index of song titles included at the end. The illustrations at the header of each chapter title were also her doing. Not a first class artist, but she has the form and can sketch far better than most.

Clearly, Shriver had a lot of fun with the novel, which is fitting. This is a coming of age tale; despite its exploration of a few very adult themes, it is still fun-loving, whimsical, and has the overarching feel good tone from beginning to end. If I had to give it one arching message (very difficult to choose only one), it would be to treasure the little things in life; make the best in life with the hand you have been dealt.

Jody says

3.5 rounded to 4 because it's Shriver. Probably not for first time Shriver readers. Took a long time to build momentum, but as usual, has a great deal of depth. I always feel Shriver finds a nugget of truth about life, and weaves an entire story around it. She illustrates this in a unique way. This had a slight feel of Tartt's "The Secret History", and I can see why this would give it a cult following.

B says

Late to the Party

Catching up on favorite author's novels came across this gem. Shriver captures the past and future lives of young, hopeful, ambitious or not musicians with much clarity. Witnessing firsthand the past lives lived over

in story and disillusionment, I can attest to so many of her written words. I can also assert to the truth related here as relates to those people who will continuously prop up the unambitious and allow them to feel special even as their lives dissolve about them. Shriver captures the energy that props up the young, and the foolishness which betrays itself.

I've often wondered what so attracts me to her writing. Reading her self described penchant for proper wording, I know it is she writes with the same correctness of verbiage which led to my own obsession, from a very young age, with William F. Buckley, Jr.

Katie says

An excessive amount of set-up to deliver a story that I didn't find very original, although it was written in the mid-80s so maybe it would've seemed more original back then. Anyway, there are much better Shriver novels out there, so I wouldn't bother reading this one.

Leo Robertson says

As Shriver herself exclaims: a Shriver with a happy ending!!

It had its great moments but I skimmed the ramble and could only recommend to diehard Shriver's like myself :D

Nancy says

This book was sitting on my bookshelf for the longest time. I finally picked it up as a campaign to rid myself of unread books. Most of these I usually end up giving away, if I haven't cared enough to read it right away. But this one is an all time keeper. I loved the first part of the story when everyone was getting along. When the misunderstandings started, I still enjoyed the book. Can't have story without conflict, I know. But the betrayals perpetrated by one of the characters hit me hard. I wanted to cry several times when I read this book. I also wanted to have a friend like Checker in my life. I may have fallen love with his sense of wonder, with his character period. Haha. I liked it better than the Post Birthday World, I liked it better than We need to talk about Kevin. It's my favorite of hers so far and I can understand why this book attained a cult status. Grateful that it was reissued as I was too young in 1988 to appreciate it.

Lauren Albert says

I love this book. The characters are complex, compelling and multifaceted; Shriver's portrayal of their relationships are so vivid and true that you feel like you are standing in their midst; and she manages all this while still finding room for humor. It's about ambition and happiness and friendship and jealousy and so much more. I find myself dumbfounded that I have never heard of it though I've heard of all of her other books.

Rick says

Although I didn't like this as well as her WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN, this book was a worthwhile read. It explores issues like coming of age, art vs. commercialism, what defines success, and how human connection shapes and forms our lives. It's also a wonderful portrait of Astoria, Queens, which is almost another character in the book. Some might say it's also a re imagining of the Christ story and they would have plenty of evidence to back up that claim (it's all here--disciples, sacrifice, resurrection).

In the end, though, this is a touching story about growing up, seen through the lives of some very complex and fascinating characters. The only reason I deduced a star for this effort is that sometimes Shriver was a little too keen on shouting "look at how brilliantly I can write; look at how elegantly I can turn a phrase". She hadn't yet learned the virtue and value of simplicity when she wrote this one. If she had, this would be a five-star book. Still, highly recommended.

tim says

I was got this book from a friend who found it at a library sale while we were staying in San Miguel Allende, Mexico. It was a nice choice as I am a drummer and movie critic (I did like the film version of Shriver's Something About Kevin) I read Checker and the Derailleurs on the return flight.

I did appreciate some of the passion and insight. I like the biographical comments made by the author in the back of the reissued paperback. The little chapter sketches are darling as well.

This is a cult book?

By comparison, JT Leroy's (AKA Laura Albert) 'Sarah', with its made-up world, felt authentic and immersive. "Checkers" never drew me in. It uses the music world as a device, a contraption. The names of the characters, the conversations, the plot are stilted. The dialogue is out of an afterschool special. Even the names (Checkers "Check", Syria Pyramus, Striker) are annoying and overly contrived. The 'old testament' plot is a nice idea but detailed with dreadful cliches and laughable turns of phrase.

I made it through the book (I was on an airplane) but never warmed to it.

Jgknobler says

The story of a teenage drummer from Astoria, his bandmates, including a jealous rival, and a strong-willed woman glassblower who becomes his lover. There is not enough tension or narrative drive to make this truly compelling, but Shriver's humor and insights are always a pleasure.

Lizp says

Checker Secretti, a young, black, talented drummer, is a wonderfully drawn character. This is a very well written story of youth, talent, envy, hero worship, love, and ambition. Lionel Shriver is an outstanding writer.

Sharon says

I first read this book 16 years ago and it blew my mind. I still read it every year or so because it's still as good every time. The descriptions are lush without being mawkish and the characters are very well drawn. And if you want some subtle 80s culture and music references, you'll love it.

Adam says

As much as I loved Checker's curious mystique and unyielding fascination for the world in which he lives, I had a hard time caring about his story!

The quippy dialogue was definitely cute as each character was defined primarily through their interactions with others. However, so many main characters made it feel like each was fighting for his or her place in the book's limelight. Perhaps this is just might take on it, or, then again, perhaps Ms. Shriver did and excellent job of portraying 'band life' in text!

A saddening little story where good fights evil and I'm not quite sure who wins but at least evil doesn't get it outright!

Seth Golbey says

For a long time, *Checker and the Derailleurs* had mostly a cult following. Published in 1989, it went out of print until reissued in 2009. Now that Lionel Shriver's books are going to gain new audiences due to the buzz around the film version of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, someone will probably try to make a movie of *Checker* as well.

I hope not. While it seems eminently filmable and the richly colored and textured images Shriver paints could be magic in the hands of a visual director like Terrence Malick or Tom Ford, it would be a shame to ruin a character like Checker Secretti.

Checker, who reminded me of a latter-day Phineas (from John Knowles's 1953 *A Separate Peace*), is like a personal gift from the author because we need so much to bring him to life inside our own heads. I very much want to hang with Checker, but the Checker of my imagination, not of some casting agent's.

Some folks read this book over and over, and I can see why. It's the only way we can keep knowing Checker and his friends over a lifetime.

Kathy Doll says

Didn't like the writing style which kind of made me sad because usually I just love any of Lionel Shriver's work. Oh well I guess they all can't be winners.
