



## Rowan Pelling: Seduction? Any woman with her own hair and a bottle of vodka can do it

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A lunch at London's Groucho Club last week commemorated the fact that it is 10 sad years since the ebullient, skirt-chasing *GQ* editor, Michael Vermeulen, died. In his last interview he said that men had only one choice nowadays - "to become playboys or drones". Had Vermeulen lived, there is little doubt that he would have used the ascent of career women to plough his furrow down the playboy route. And his new hero would have been the Rolling Stone writer, Neil Strauss, who would undoubtedly have received his highest accolade - "a big swinging dick around town."

Strauss is a PUA, or pick-up artist, a tag accorded to a man who can seduce any HB (hot babe) within minutes of meeting her, using a sequence of proven manoeuvres. Most of these are gleaned from gurus of the all-male "seduction community", who have honed their mantras from study of evolution theory, psychology, social dynamics and neuro-linguistic programming (a form of hypnosis which uses verbal cues and physical gestures as triggers to the subconscious mind). Techniques include "peacocking" (engaging women's interest with outrageously dandyish costumes) and "negging" (delivering a subtle put-down to a gorgeous female who expects a string of compliments).

Strauss has written a book, *The Game*, about his time among America's pick-up gurus, and how he rose from a nerdy, bearded no-hoper to dark prince of the serial seducers armed only with platform heels and the PUA name of Style - a moniker that has all the panache of a Vauxhall Vectra special series. The author's publicity blurb for *The Game* anticipates our sneering incredulity: "The following is a true story. It actually happened. Men will deny it, women will doubt it." An enthralling if sobering hour on Google produced plenty of corroboration. A bewildering number of websites offer seduction seminars and tips for men, and many of the PUAs cite Strauss: "This guy is totally awesome." Yeah, awesome if you are a drooling male who is a would-be pick-up hotshot, and totally freak-you-out catastrophic if you're an attractive female "target", who suddenly realises that the charismatic, oh-so-intuitive guy who swept you off your feet the other night was actually a robotic Strauss/Style clone.

So how can women fight back? The maddening thing about *The Game* is that it truly is an all-male sport. Where is the skill, value or novelty in seducing lots of men? Any woman in possession of her own hair and a bottle of vodka can pull off that stunt. And will a secret society of women praise her? Ask the *Daily Mail*.

But lo! On the horizon I spot a vivacious heroine in an empire-line frock. It's Lauren Henderson, author of *Jane Austen's Guide to Dating*. Henderson believes that everything you need to know about courtship is in Austen's novels. She places particular emphasis on identifying and avoiding "players" in the mode of Henry Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, and Mr Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*. She cautions that no matter how much they flatter and charm you, "they are like that to everyone... You are just another target." It seems the PUA's tricks are not new at all. When Strauss describes a "two steps forward, three steps back" method of accelerating attraction, it's precisely the blowing hot and cold technique used by Crawford to toy with the Bertram sisters. Henderson also identifies the tactic of undermining a beautiful woman's self-confidence, writing of a friend whose "latest guy, Philip, picked her up in a bar by telling her that her hairstyle didn't suit her".

So, there we are: in the blue corner, cads and serial shaggers; in the red corner, Lizzie Bennet and the romantics. Let the animosities begin! Except, when you look closely, it seems neither Strauss nor Henderson is entirely candid. If serial seduction is so darn cool, why has Strauss abandoned harems for his girlfriend Lisa? And if "players" are to be avoided, why does Mr Darcy first pique Lizzie Bennet's interest with a classic "neg": "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*."

I strongly advise singletons of whatever gender to read both books. Forewarned is forearmed.

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