

## Essays in Love

*A. de Botton*

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This is a chronicle of a modern love-affair, starting by a chance meeting on board a plane from Paris to London and ending neatly one year after, also on a plane from Paris to London. It is an affair between two young professionals of unremarkable sexual allure, sophisticated if somewhat conventional tastes, and devoid of any real passion. In short normal. The charm of the novel is of course the amount of attention given to this rather marginal event, the ironic comments and touches of humor, often of the so called wry kind. The invocation of the great philosophers of the past gives the exercise a rather touching touch, so ridiculous in one sense, as to save the author from conceit.

Now is it autobiographical? Yes and no? It is a first novel and such novels are almost invariably autobiographical unless egregiously bad. After all a young author has very little to draw upon save that of his own life. No, equally obvious. How easy is it not to make superficial changes, renaming, rearranging of episodes, the inventions of some, making the ending tying up with the beginning. Maybe it was written as therapy. Or at least written in such a way to give the impression, the distinction is fine.

Why do we fall in love? Because we are expected to? We imitate the actions of our friends and we find inspiration in novels. Love is not real, it is a kind of mutually condoned make-believe. The idea of a romantic involvement is irresistible, and we very much labor to make it come about. Feedback is essential. Feedback stimulates the ability to give feedback in your turn and there arises some kind of exponential growth as to feelings, or perceived feelings. Of course no trees grow all the way to heaven above us, and after a while, the make-believe becomes too hard to maintain. Inspiration runs dry and of course the same mechanism that accelerated the illusion of love, works as well as decelerate it. Lack of expected positive feedback creates an reduced ability to provide it yourself, and pretty soon the whole thing winds down. If this happens simultaneously this is fine, but such perfect timing is a matter of chance, and more likely than not one partner tires before the other, who then feels abandoned and low, and contemplates suicide to get back. Of course such drastic measures are seldom taken, instead there is usually comfort around the corner. The same scenario to unfold itself again. Will it ever stop? For some people it never stops, for others romantic interest eventually wears thin and the desire for peace and quite, usually referred to as 'settling down' takes over. The suspicion that the final affair in no way differs from the previous, apart from timing, is difficult to suppress. In fact obvious as it is, and thus the object of denial, that the object of desire is to a large extent a matter of indifference, it is the desire itself that needs to be satisfied. There is no perfect partner, within bounds, anyone can do satisfying certain boundary conditions. But, as the author reports, this obvious insight is seen as demeaning, and all kinds of excuses for making the basically 'unspecial' special. Of course, this insight cannot be totally suppressed. Any fleeting glance of another attractive male or female brings up the case that although we have only one life, we have a myriad of potential ones. Living means choosing, and every

choice we make forecloses the possibility of endless others.

The most disturbing thing about the book is not only that recently purchased as it is, I find another copy of it in my book-case; but closer inspection of my list of past readings reveals that I have already read the book and written a short review of it, some six and a half years ago. How come I remember so little, if anything at all from that first reading. At first the book seemed a little bit familiar, but I easily put that down to my familiarity with the style of the author. Clearly given the huge amount of books deserving to be read, this is not one that really deserves to be read twice, especially since the first reading left so little of an impact. (But maybe the second did more?)

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