

The Course of Love

A. de Botton

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The bookstores of London display it prominently. Published in hardcover in 2016, it has just been issued in a Penguin paperback. Light reading.

It is not really a novel, more of a didactic piece, in which the author lays down his words of wisdom on the confrontation of Romantic Love with Real Life, making up a story to illustrate his points. Thus the narrative being predictably punctuated by shorter or longer pieces of commentary, inviting the reader to look upon the story of a marriage with the kind of amusement which comes with detachment. A little bit like watching the antics of rats in a see-through box.

The voice is what we expect from the author. Low key, soft, with gentle irony serving philosophical insights. To stay married may be a sign of timidity and lack of initiative, to propose marriage on the other hand shows initiative and boldness, he points out in an aside. Striking, until you realize that marriage plays no role in it, it is the change of status that is the key,

So we are introduced to Rabih, the fruit of a Middle-Eastern marriage, a father from Lebanon, the mother a German stewardess; and Karsten a Scottish woman, whose father once unexpectedly left her as a child, something she has never gotten over. Rabih also has experienced trauma, not so much living in Beirut during Civil War, but having his mother snatched from him by cancer. Such early traumas leave life-long scars in the form of destructively protective behavior we are being told. Remember this is not a novel, at least not of a classical kind, this is a didactic piece in which everything is laid bare and made explicit. This is the whole point, and also the comedy of the thing. The mock (one assumes) seriousness being the theme of the whole essay. But maybe not, one can never really tell, behind ironies there may be dead seriousness.

So boy meets girl, not exactly a boy nor a girl, at least not chronologically. There is the usual infatuation, the great drama of Romantic love, of finding your missing Platonic half (remember that Plato presented it as comic satire), who will always understand you silently and intuitively without you having to exchange any words. This is nonsense, we are told, which it is of course, on the other hand there is a lot of intuitive understanding between people, and especially between couples. One only needs to be reminded of peoples relations to dogs, which although involving a lot of beneficial understanding, still works because of shared instincts. Dogs differ from wolves by being particularly attuned to people. Now Romantic Love has to meet and come to terms with the prosaic brutalities of the so called Real World, where no one is perfect, where there really is nothing like compatibility. So we see our exhibition couple muddle through during their first years, getting a house and a concomitant mortgage, having children after a decent interval and conventionally spaced, and being immersed in a life trying to handle job obligations with family obligations. The fire may still burn, but it flickers and its light is rather inferred than experienced. There is a lack of excitement, an estrangement, a weariness and a

boredom. Sexual outlets more channeled through private phantasies (and play on-line at designated sites) than through actual intercourse. And then, the catastrophe, temptation turning out to be irresistible. Far away from home at a Berlin hotel. Young seductive woman from California. One thing leading to another and before they know they are in bed savoring the aftermath. The next morning going different ways, he returning to Edinburgh riddled with guilt and self-disgust. The single woman back in L.A. sends him erotic text messages, even photos of herself naked except for laced boots and knee-high socks. He is both appalled and strongly attracted and responds in timid kind. Then it comes to a head, they have a conversation on skype or some such channel, and he has it all out, realizing that continuing the tantalizing flirtation, spiced with the necessary secrecy, will be egotistical on his part, and apt to hurt the young woman as much as his wife. An act of honesty, yet brought about by compulsion. The sense of betrayal stays with him, and of course he cannot tell his wife, she would never understand and there would be an unbridgeable rift between them.

Is that necessary? The author dwells on the unreasonable demands of the idea of Romantic Love, of owning the sexual side of your partner, of not tolerating any momentary intertwinement with strangers, no matter how casual. Maybe reasonable, but is the author serious, what would happen if such things would be tolerated in ordinary marriages? What would happen to the necessary commitment if it could be relaxed whenever convenient?

Then there will be counseling, an old gray-haired lady, with a row of books behind her. Fifty minutes sessions at 75 £. The vocabulary changes. Now we are talking in terms of 'Avoidant Attachments' and 'Anxious Attachments' two of the most common dysfunctional attachments. Karsten is of the first kind, for ever retreating, seemingly cold and indifferent; Rahib of the second kind, forever anxious and controlling, craving affection but for ever dubious whether deserving of it, thus easily hurt, quick to take offense, and fundamentally very weak, although trying to compensate by appearing tough and brutal. During their weekly sessions they get the opportunity to quarrel with each other, but under the controlling influence of the therapist, who ensures that it does not get out of hand. What they are taught to appreciate is what the other person really means by their behavior, and also to be able to articulate their own, by recognizing it as it really is. Slowly they get back to each other, after some seventeen years of marriage, they finally reach the maturity required in order to really enter upon marriage. In short to no longer remain adolescents but to become responsible adults, to detach themselves from romantic ideas, to realize that people are fundamentally incompatible, and as far as there actually is compatibility it is the fruit of a long marriage obtained by toil, rather than a prerequisite for it, bestowed as divine undeserving gift.

Rahib starts to face himself and his own mediocrity (being as they say in good company) without self-pity. To shed his romantic dreams about what he would accomplish in life and to accept his own ordinariness.

So a didactic piece by necessity has a moral. The moral of contentment, of just muddling through life, of getting things to work somehow. But even such a middling accomplishment has something heroic when taken on its own terms. Marriages are not to be compared, there is no competition involved, it all boils down to the fact that a marriage is uniquely your own, and therein lies its value and justification.

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