

Making Love: A Romance

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“True love, by definition, is unrequited,” claims the narrator of this polished debut novel, recounting her love affair with the troubled Louis. The first-person protagonist goes unnamed, but that seems inconsequential-what matters is the men in her life and her doomed pursuit of love.

Like Emma Bovary, this novel’s heroine is “in love with being in love.” Love is not so much a state of being as it is a fashion accessory. She sleeps with men because it’s the polite thing to do and she does not know how to say no. Louis loses his virginity to her during their teen years, and decades later, when they are in their forties, calls her up claiming to have been in love with her all this time. In a state of grief from the recent loss of her father, the narrator falls again into a relationship with Louis, which she describes as “intense.” The intensity is less felt than told at first, but as the narrator reveals more about Louis’s dark secrets-his alcoholism, his manic-depression, his philandering-the reader is drawn in to her tale.

The book flashes back to the narrator’s swinging sex life in 1970s England. Louis pretty much disappears in this section, and it is Damon, the first love of her life-a man who prefers being stoned to anything else-who dominates the pages. Her relationship with Damon reveals how the narrator can only relate to men in a sexual and submissive way. At the same time, she is attracted to needy men, men who desire caring, coddling women. The phrase “matches made in hell” comes to mind, as this woman desperately falls in love-or so she calls it-with deeply flawed men again and again and again.

The author, who lives in London, has written two travel books, Tiger Balm: Travels in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia and The Weather Prophet: A Caribbean Journey. She has been the editor of Granta magazine, and also edited Erogenous Zones: An Anthology of Sex Abroad. While sex takes up a lot of this novel’s action, it is not bawdy or crude. Sex becomes a conceit for the narrator’s fundamental problems-her need to please, her damaged relationship with her parents, her ruefully acknowledged belief that love and pain are one and the same. After closing the covers of this book, the reader must ask the question: How can this woman expect to find love if she doesn’t even know what love really is?

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