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Affairs of the heart

Annie Proulx, Ludmilla Ulitskaya, Nicolas Fargues and Alissa York will meet at Lyon's International Forum on the Novel later this month to debate the power and purpose of love in fiction. We present exclusive extracts from their answers to the question 'why so much love?'

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Forbidden love ... Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger in the film adaptation of Annie Proulx's story *Brokeback Mountain*. Photograph: Rex Features

Annie Proulx

To me love is one of a thousand elements in fiction. Love in a novel is like salt, and I use it like salt to heighten plot and character in uncountable ways. In fiction, as in real life, love is tangled with anger, with compassion as in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (which obtuse critics mistook for pity), spirituality, adornment, fashion, parent-child relationships, shifting concepts of physical beauty, sacrifice, seduction, bodily sensation, fantasies, dreams and plottings, metaphor, lies and fumbling truths, poetry, virginity, possession, semen, philosophy, loss, fading color, tristesse, pregnancy, heredity, clan power. It runs the gamut of meanings from mad obsession to basic biological lust to a fondness for delicacies as Ignatius J Reilly's love for the soft drink Dr Nut in John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

And on the dark side sexual love has multitudinous negative facets that enrich many novels and stories: illness and disease; forbidden loves, including pedophilia, consanguineous unions (Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*), same-gender relationships as "*Brokeback Mountain*," and the whims of controlling parents or guardians, as *Romeo and Juliet*. It spawns jealousy (Robbe-Grillet's *Jalousie*), disappointment, infidelities (Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*), physical abuse and sometimes murder and suicide. Its commercial aspects—the lives of prostitutes as in Maria Flook's *My Sister Life*, the politics of madams and pimps—find their way into noir fiction. Thwarted love inspires ambition or vengeance. Strong stuff, this love.

Yet despite the ubiquity of love in literature I cannot see it as the contemporary novel's mainframe. The strength of the novel, until recent years, has been its flexibility of

form/shape and its structure as a malleable container for a multitude of ideas and themes, of which love is but one, and that usually dominated by heavier or more topical material. If we go beyond the realistic psychological novel of the 19th century, to experimental works of the early and mid-20th century as Robbe-Grillet and Irish-born Joyce, Beckett, Aidan Higgins, to the recent emergence of the ex-colonial novels of Panos Karnezis and Junot Diaz (to name only two of dozens), we see that these stories are telling us of other things than love. The woof and warp of societies and cultures and the characters' places within are the important elements.

The American narrative painter, John Hull, once remarked that when a painting wasn't working out well he would take crime writer Raymond Chandler's advice. "He said whenever you have a problem in a story with character or plot development have a man come in the room with a gun—and if it's a big problem make it a big gun."

For me, love, in most fiction, is a big gun.

Ludmilla Ulitskaya

The formulation of the commandment to love your neighbour is highly portentous: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself". The suggestion is, then, that a person should first learn to love himself, and then to love his neighbour no less.

In the years after the Second World War an immense change in attitudes came about, with people being taught to love themselves. This was done scientifically. Physics was brought to bear, and chemistry and biology, and medicine with all its remarkable achievements in stomatology, cosmetology, and surgery. Psychology raced ahead with persuasive arguments. A multitude of ways were found to assist in the expression of self-love. Factories began producing, representatives started selling. This was a gold mine! Biochemistry devises creams and lotions, designers create sketches of new, even more comfortable trainers, chemists make new anti-allergenic materials, couturiers produce their latest fashion collections. The whole enormous industry seductively whispers, gradually raising its voice to a bellow, "Love yourself! Indulge yourself! Give yourself pleasure! You are worth it!" And how else can anyone express love of themselves?

To go back to the beginning: has happened to the vertical? What has happened to the horizontal? Everything merges in a single focus, love of oneself. A whole civilisation has grown up which urges the individual on to a sterile, aimless love which leads nowhere. "Narcissism" is a term introduced by the world-famous doctor from Vienna, who was highly knowledgeable about the classical world, and here too we find the ancient Greeks were ahead of our own times.

The mythical youth Narcissus was in love with himself, and to this day such infatuation is known as Narcissism. The wise in all ages and all nations have known of this deadly disease of love.

Love is reduced to a solitary point, and all its variety and its nuances vanish: no verticals, no horizontals. There is no longer any creativity, or gratitude, or delight at the world. Even the instinct of love dissolves, the erotic love which urges people into embraces. Love of children, of parents, of friends is blunted. Dr Freud designated the early phase in a child's development "auto-eroticism", a primary emotional discovery of oneself and the surrounding world. As the child develops, this phase passes and the first promptings of the emotion of love directed beyond oneself appear. What happens to Narcissus can be seen as a pathological regression, not evolution but inversion. Are we here on the verge of a discovery? The optimistic notion of eternal progress, of movement in some generally forward direction, seems to have taken a knock. In these

deliberations, however, we are concentrating on just one aspect, difficult to define but definitive of the very characteristic of being human, and associated with the ability to "deliver" love. But where is it to be directed?

"Why, love yourself, my own dear reader!" Russia's great poet Alexander Pushkin exclaimed sarcastically. The sarcasm passed unnoticed, but the call was heard and understood only too literally. A new literary hero appeared. In the English-speaking world he was Byron's Childe Harold, in the Russian-speaking world Yevgeny Onegin. Both were among the cleverest people of their times, but unquestionably ideologists of egotism, and both had an unenviable fate. Alas, what a bunch of admirers they have spawned, who lack their undoubted merits. "You can be a thoroughly sensible person and think of beautiful fingernails," Pushkin claimed, but someone who thinks of nothing but beautiful fingernails cannot be a sensible human being.

There is now a whole army of people of very varied nationalities, educational levels, professions, and ages. The assistant in the food shop and a great actress, the sportsman, the businessman and the plumber, the schoolboy and the old age pensioner each to the best of their ability and financial means tries to respond to the siren call: "Love thyself! You deserve the best! You're worth it!"

Alissa York

Much has been made of boundaries in recent years. To be clear, I'm speaking now not of borders and checkpoints, but of personal boundaries. Current thinking holds that it's unwise-even unhealthy-to lose track of the line where your own psyche leaves off and your lover's (or mother's, or employer's) begins. As is often the case, folk wisdom got there first: good fences make good neighbours. Would that it were quite so simple. If the long, looping tale of human history has taught us anything, it's that those fences-the ones that keep neighbours sweet-also serve to keep them, well, separate.

The walled city divides the world: those inside the gates are friends (though some of them may be monsters); those outside are foes (though some of them may be saints). While it's true that this model of urban development is no longer in vogue, it's equally true that humanity keeps the psychological blueprints close at hand. My family is not your family, highlanders are not lowlanders, French is not English, black is not white. We separate self from other, self from environs, self from God. Ultimately, lumbered as we are with the gift of reflexive thought, we separate self from self. That done, we're free to wreak havoc on all of the above.

It's tempting to blame the reptilian brain, locus of our oldest and narrowest understanding. Crouched muscle-bound and twitching at the base of the human skull, this inner throwback regards everyone and everything with suspicion. Fight or flight? it mutters, Fight or flight? It's not that the instinctual brain is without value-we could neither balance nor breathe without it. It's just that we're so much more than our ancient, fearful selves. Elsewhere beneath that dome of bone, the brain has flowered. Language is one bright bloom; love is another.

What's more, we human beings hold no monopoly on such developments. Elephants adjust their frequencies to speak to one another through the earth, just as whales do through the sea. Raccoons have been known to adopt stray kittens. Horses will bond for life with dogs, and even chickens, that share their stalls. And speaking of our animal brethren, it's worth noting that we tend to fall back on the model of the walled city where they're concerned, too. Why take home that starving mutt when we could breed a cuter one that can't support its own spine? Why not force-feed a goose until it chokes, or pen a calf so it hasn't the space to turn around? What can it possibly matter if the polar bear or the Andean condor is no more? Sadly, this isn't the old, scaly brain

talking. This is the mighty neocortex, the rational-one might say rationalizing-brain, of which we're all so proud.

The point is this: somehow, despite these capacious organs of thought-or perhaps, at least in part, because of them-there remains a basic truth humanity can't quite seem to grasp. Novels have been trying to tell us for ages. Monks and mystics, too. More recently, physicists have taken up the cause. It turns out particles are waves. There are no boundaries. We really are all one.

Which brings me back to love-beautiful, stupefying, romantic love. It's a dizzying state. We fall into it. In English we sometimes even fall head over heels. This is important: the sensation is one of tumbling, of losing one's bearings in relation to the horizon. There exists no division between terra firma and the heavens. More to the point, there exists no division between lover and beloved, between you and I. Falling in love-truly, deeply in love-is about oneness. Love explodes the wall between self and other, even as it dissolves the countless barriers within. For a time-for a moment, at least-the walled city is no more. We throw wide the gates and walk naked into the radiant world.

No wonder we seek it. No wonder we tell one another stories about it, and those of us so inclined set the stories down-sometimes in the form of a novel. We're trying to get at something important when we tell love stories, something urgent, in fact. We're trying to lay bare a fundamental truth. The one humanity is forever learning and forgetting and, hopefully, learning again.

Nicolas Fargues

In 2004, after ten years in a relationship that both of us believed to be eternal, I separated from my wife in circumstances whose violence reflected the exceptional degree of interdependence that we had achieved, a violence increased, moreover, by the fact that we were then living 10,000 kilometers from our respective families in a small town cut off from the rest of the world, without support of any kind, with no escape, and with no witnesses to our crisis other than ourselves.

This experience, this painful separation, which ended in a new encounter, in the birth of a new love, proved decisive for me in more than one respect. Personally to be sure, but also literarily. For the first time in my adult life, my emotions turned out to be more powerful than my capacity to express them, to hold them at a safe distance. For the first time, literature took second place to life.

Yet it was of course to literature that I turned to attempt to get beyond these profound upheavals in my life. For the first time, I thought of describing them without shame in a book that would be 100 percent autobiographical and to which I never even imagined that anyone would one day attach the term "novel." It was the first time that I sat down to write without searching for my words, the first time that I sat down to write with my gut rather than my brain, without asking myself any questions ...

The success that my book achieved led me to ask basic question and to understand some very simple things. First, there is no secret: you will touch more people with your heart than with your mind. I also understood that the way to achieve universality was to be yourself authentically and unsparingly. Try to become yourself, try to find the words that will bring you closer to yourself and therefore to others, to the readers to whom you give your words as a gift and thus reveal the universality and humanity we all share. Therein lies the essence of literature, it seemed to me, as well as its major challenge.

Above all, I felt deeply uneasy when I asked myself if I would be capable of writing

another such book. In fact, in the next novel I published as well as in the one I am writing now, I could not refrain from writing again about love, because it is the only thing that really interests me. I went back to searching for words, which this time were dictated not only by malice but also by calm, reason, and experience. Try as these words will, however, try as I might to put all my sincerity and all my sensibility into my work, it remains mere blather. Because in literature more than in life, perhaps, love cannot be ordered up at will.

•The 2nd International Forum on the Novel, organised by the Villa Gillet and Le Monde, will take place from May 26 to June 1 2008 in Lyon, France, bringing together 90 writers and critics from around the world for a week of debates and roundtables around the theme The Novel, What an Invention!. Texts written for the Forum and read during the discussions will be published by Christian Bourgois in autumn 2008