

## It's not me, it's you: These books are about romantic commitments and why they're a pain. Valentine's Day is over.

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Laura Kipnis likes to be a cage rattler, a fly in the ointment, a crap stirrer, a poker of hornet's nests. She zigs whereas others merely zag. She's no sheeple. She also really likes metaphors, and so one of the primary enjoyments of her provocative books is sorta thrilling: No matter how sensitive the scenario, no matter how prone to tiptoeing around dynamite you may be, her words cut to the quick. She can be amazingly reductive, and I mean that in the most intoxicating sense. Hers are the driest eyes in the house. She is, I guess, Evanston's Larry David of academia, and at times, she can be just as startling.

Here is someone who once attended a sexual harassment workshop at Northwestern University, and when the workshop instructor explained that "do not make unwanted sexual advances" was the guiding principle, Kipnis spoke up from the back of the room:

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"But how do you know they're unwanted until you try?"

Take love, romance, relationships, the very heart of Valentine's Day.

Kipnis' 2003 book was "Against Love: A Polemic"; but there was also, among others, "How to Become a Scandal" (2010) and "Men: An Ongoing Investigation" (2014). I'm sure she has written somewhere that she also supports love and romance and puppies and marshmallows, but I wouldn't believe it; her tone is too indifferent and delightfully skeptical to be trusted. Which is expected, even welcome. Still, I just finished three books on long-term commitment. Heather Havrilesky's "Foreverland: On the Divine Tedium of Marriage." Shelia Heti's beautiful novel "Pure Colour." And "Love in the Time of Contagion: A Diagnosis," a new social study by Kipnis, longtime professor and bomb thrower (metaphorically) at Northwestern, which was the most hopeful — or maybe least bleak.

A therapist friend tells her that, among her clients, everyone has "a fantasy that other people were doing better." Kipnis seeks out portraits of couples navigating "uncertain times" and comes to the truism, "we yearn for one another in sickness and in health."

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Which is about as *Awww* as she gets.

Havrilesky, the Polly of the [Ask Polly column](#) in Substack, takes us into courtship, marriage, babies, suburbs, the threat of infidelity, the inevitability of disease and middle age, the promised tedium, and

though there's plenty to recognize, "Foreverland" is like one of those films that concludes with a tight smile, the loose ends never mended. Which is wise, of course. Sometimes we never know the unnerving laughter from the plain laughter. As the title suggests: Maybe we should aspire to feeling both ordinary and unsettled. Maybe that is plenty. She decides she cannot "listen to a mother telling her kindergartner with the pink mohawk and the "London Calling" T-shirt, 'Check your body.'" She decides: "Our kids deserved the comfort of mediocrity." When she worries her husband is responding too well to therapy, she fears: "A tiny part of me wanted him to remain out of touch with himself. I wasn't sure that our marriage had room for two vulnerable, emotional beings." Yup, get in line, Molly. (And that's after she compares her husband to laundry: "Smelly inert, useless, almost sentient but not quite.")



"Foreverland" by Heather Havrilesky, "Love in the Time of Contagion" by Laura Kipnis and "Pure Colour" by Sheila Heti. (Christopher Borrelli / Chicago Tribune)

If "Foreverland" is, at times, riveting, boots-on-the-ground reportage from the most common front line in humanity, Heti's "Pure Colour" is a wistful stroll through its forever.

It's not really about romance, but love and attachment, art and loss, in the grandest sense. Like many of her novels, it's philosophical, restless, more parable than narrative. It begins with an explanation of how the world works. As Heti writes, the world is heating up "in advance of its destruction by God, who has decided that the first draft of existence contained too many flaws." There was a disconnect in humanity. Some people were born from bird eggs; some were born from bear eggs; and some from fish eggs. Each of these different types of humans "will never completely understand each other." Which is basically when Mira met Annie, one a bird and one a bear. Though when Mira's father dies, his next state of existence is ... a leaf. Her father turns into a leaf on a tree, though before I lose you on this, this is Heti's way into the trouble with moving on, and memory.

It's smooth, lovely stuff, aching for whole chapters, then bracingly mystical, and finally earthy and real. "Mira had spent so much of the second half of her life thinking about people from the first half ... who she felt she never should have abandoned." There's metaphor there, of course. She writes that the next draft of existence will find mature

love. Though it won't be like first love, "short-lived, painful, directionless and all wrong."

If only we appreciated both.

Good news.

With "Love in the Time of Contagion," Kipnis offers a cloistered world in which, at least, we recognize both, the painful and the enlightened. It's called 21st century quarantine, and you can't help noticing. The sheer *nearness* of everyday life in a pandemic, she offers, offers ample room for an ugly alchemy of immaturity, judgment and release. (She can't help but root around her boyfriend's personal papers.) The hook here is love during wartime — "No doubt living through an extended planetary contagion will be infecting our relation to other people's bodies and droplets for years or decades to come" — though Kipnis' perceptiveness, less irreverent here, stays incisive enough to transcend COVID. The setup is all irony — the author of "Against Love" forced into domesticity by a pandemic, but the follow-through is necessarily a walkabout through so much more. In 2015, after Kipnis wrote about the sexual misconduct case of a Northwestern professor, several students protested, then even filed a Title IX complaint against her, charging she violated a policy against retaliation and created, in her writing, "a hostile environment."

They'll have plenty to hate here.

Provocateurs will provoke. She also writes about innuendo, Reddit, codependency, Jeffrey Toobin. She notes how much her boyfriend hated being patted on the head like a dog, then proceeds to do exactly that. Metaphorically, she writes, "We secretly know every marriage is a little murder." Less metaphorically, she wonders if the one thing binding couples is misery. In an essay on the #MeToo movement, she writes: "The fact is that women finding men disgusting is a modern achievement," then follows with a compelling pocket history/argument of female disgust — how women have historically viewed men. Kipnis is easy to hate, and hollow for stretches; often so categorical, she's easier to dismiss. Except there's an ocean of middle ground where she luxuriates. She writes: "I've sometimes thought ambivalence is for me what psoriasis was for John Updike, unlovely but the key to everything."

Naturally, she's not alone.

Shortly after the pandemic started, she posted an online survey asking couples how they were doing during quarantine, what they were learning about each other. The responses, which occupy the end of "Love in the Time of Contagion," *veer*, as you'd expect. But the true common denominator is not misery. It's ourselves, our quirks, the lies we tell ourselves — not so much the things we do for love but the things we do that drive the people we love insane. One person complains: "He counts how many berries he eats for breakfast. And before you ask, twelve blackberries, or eighteen blueberries."

Another says: "We're each perfectly fine people. We just don't have a lot in common."

Try fitting that on a Sweetheart.

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