

# Love in the Time of Contagion' Observes Mutations in Domestic Life

Laura Kipnis's new book is about how relationships, including her own, have changed during the pandemic.

By Molly Young

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## LOVE IN THE TIME OF CONTAGION

A Diagnosis

By Laura Kipnis

210 pages. Pantheon Books. \$26.

Dance like nobody's watching. Love like there's no tomorrow. Write like nobody's going to cancel you. This is the way of Laura Kipnis, a critic, author, polemicist and professor whose latest book, "Love in the Time of Contagion," calls itself "a diagnosis." What a trip it would be if a medical doctor issued conclusions with the juice and style that Kipnis brings to her essays about intimacy, disgust and contamination (which might be three synonyms). People would probably go in for checkups more often.

The early days of Covid, as Kipnis recounts from the apartment she shares with her boyfriend in Harlem, were a time of obsessive domestic speculation. Did other couples experience the fury that explodes from a thousand cumulative irritations? Were all of us more annoying than we'd previously assumed, or had circumstances forced us into new realms of annoyingness? Also, why were we focusing on dumb grievances (the dishwasher, the scummy ring in the bathtub) when people were dying?

But there we were (and still are, in some cases), stuck inside. "At best a couple is a workable neurotic pact," Kipnis writes. Embedded in "workable" is the concept of romance, which requires an element of mystery — mystery that vanished under Covidian conditions of nonstop access. For some couples, all of life became the equivalent of going to the bathroom with the door open while your partner leaned against a wall asking if you had anything to add to the grocery list.

Which brings us to the related concept of keeping secrets. Secrets, Kipnis observes, are harder to maintain (on both sides) if you're trapped in a stuffy enclosure. She describes the creepy allure of snooping among your partner's things, seeking out the "hidden caches" of surprising porn, unpaid bills, emails to exes — stashes that might have gone undiscovered if it weren't for a sudden excess of proximity. She writes about the gleeful "Eureka!" of finding evidence of a partner's hidden life, the shame of looking for it in the first place and the inevitable synthesis of the two feelings: acknowledgment of mutual depravity.

Laura Kipnis, whose new book is  
“Love in the Time of Contagion.”  
Nina Subin

The book is also a relationship postmortem. At some point during the pandemic, Kipnis confronts her partner about his drinking: “For him alcohol was a magical elixir that elicits, enhances and erases emotions all at once.” He presents the defense that everyone has a life-avoidance mechanism of choice, and his just happens to be alcohol. Kipnis accepts this reasoning in an abstract way, but finds it lame in practice — when, for instance, her partner gets a ticket for drinking in public because he neglects to hide his can in a bag, as every prudent open-air drinker knows to do.

She becomes aware of “previously untapped reservoirs of sadism” bubbling up inside. Her boyfriend hates having the top of his head patted because it makes him feel like a dog; Kipnis diabolically starts doing exactly this whenever they watch TV. The head-patting is her equivalent of violently scratching a mosquito bite: Nothing good will come of it, yet she claws away, which leads to further discomfort and the cycle continuing. During one fight she hurls a can of Diet Coke at the boyfriend, “winding up like Roger Clemens,” only to find sticky liquid streaming down her own back because the can was open.

“I’m a critic: I want to see the world clearly,” Kipnis writes, adding: “Maybe that overstates it — I just want to have interesting things to say about the world.” And she does! For three of the book’s four essays, scooting around Kipnis’s mind feels like eating the world’s finest trail mix: no dud raisins to shift aside, only M&Ms and the fancier nuts.

All the missing raisins can, it turns out, be found in the fourth essay, which is a tour through the social-mediated romantic life of one of Kipnis’s former students, Zelda. The essay is tedious, or maybe Zelda is tedious. Or perhaps reading about *anyone’s* social-mediated romantic life is tedious. It’s all commotion and no action. Instead of sex, there is Instagram, Twitter, FaceTime, screenshots, DMs. Apparently if you text someone and your text is normally blue, but now it’s green, it means you may have been blocked. If it turns blue again, you may have been unblocked. This brought to mind a line from Goethe’s “Elective Affinities,” which I will lightly paraphrase here: “Even in momentous times, when everything is at stake, people who spend way too much time online do go on with their daily life as if nothing is happening.”

How is it possible that the same Kipnis who pitched a Diet Coke across the room at her boyfriend would find anything compelling about the minutiae of her former student’s digital life? “Zelda was happy to share her intel with me and I liked hearing it, though she did occasionally describe herself as an ‘oversharer,’ something she said she had to ‘work on,’” Kipnis writes. Those scare quotes indicate a whiff of skepticism that the author, if she were being less loyally polite toward her former student, might have expanded on. Oversharing is a problem of form, not content. You’d never fault a great storyteller for divulging too much; it’s only “oversharing” when the sharer is boring.

But, small complaint. Otherwise the book is perfectly equidistant between riff and investigation. It’s hard to think of anyone else who would cover, in such a short span, the #MeToo movement, H.I.V. crisis pamphlets, Rodney Dangerfield, Jung, Eugene Ionesco, Reddit, Kafka and a 2010 supernatural horror movie about a guy haunted by his astral-projecting son. (“Insidious,” starring Patrick Wilson and Rose Byrne. Two and a half stars.)

Kipnis launches provocations with the frequency of a tennis ball machine. In reference to the Jeffrey Toobin incident, she wonders whether the resulting moral indignation wasn’t itself a public display of “self-stroking.” She is amused by the colloquial use of “narcissism” as a shorthand for “everything we want from other people, don’t get and never will.” She wonders whether the misery of couplehood is “the one thing that truly unites us as a species.”

Do all of Kipnis's points land? No, not with me, but that's fine. I'd rather swallow a cyanide capsule than subsist on books that are 100 percent congruent with my convictions and experiences. Absorbing high-quality arguments by people with whom you disagree is one of the best ways I can think of to develop any kind of intelligence. Or to have fun.