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# Reflections on Aggression and Love by Practicing Therapists

## Person on Love

**Vivian M. Rosenberg -** Drexel University

*Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters: The Power of Romantic Passion* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988) is a fascinating and complex study by Ethel S. Person, a practicing therapist and Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University. She writes articles and books for general as well as professional audiences. In her writings Person draws on insights gleaned from her own experiences as a practicing psychiatrist and on her impressive knowledge of a wide range of theories, research studies, biographies, autobiographies, and letters and comments—by both famous and ordinary people—about loves that flourished and loves that failed. Moreover, the author is familiar with an incredible number of novels and films illustrating different kinds of love relationships; she uses real life and fictional love stories as examples of the "Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters" mentioned in the title of her book.

The book is divided into five sections: "The Experience of Romantic Love," "The Aims of Love," "The Paradoxes and Struggles Inherent in Love," "The Gender Difference in Love," and "The Fate of Love." These complicated topics are further sub-divided and then explored and carefully analyzed in prose that is energized by her obvious enthusiasm for her project.

Sprinkled throughout the book are personal comments that

remind the reader that this study is of more than academic interest to the author. In the very first sentence of the "Acknowledgments" section, Ethel Person discloses her own passionate interest in her project. "This book," she writes, "is written for those who, like me, have struggled to understand the importance and power of romantic love." The "Introduction" that follows again reminds the reader that the book evolved from a personal need: "Love," Person confesses, "has been one of the most profound interests of my life since I was no more than twelve." Such personal asides help the reader identify with the writer and move through the complex material.

A mission at the core of this book also animates the text: explaining what motivated her to undertake this project, Person tells the reader that she felt compelled to correct what she sees as a tendency in the therapeutic community to disdain and denigrate romantic passion. It is interesting to note that a popular book by Irving Yalom, published in 1989 (New York: Basic Books), only a year after this one, offers evidence that Person's criticisms, at least when she wrote them, were on target. Yalom, writing about his own experiences as a psychiatrist, called his book *Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy*. "Love and psychotherapy," he asserted, "are fundamentally incompatible"; "the good therapist fights darkness and seeks illumination, while romantic love is sustained by mystery and crumbles upon inspection."

Ethel Person would disagree with Yalom's assessment of romantic love, and actually, in the title story of his book, Yalom wryly admitted that, in at least one case, he had been wrong when he tried to steer a patient away from what he thought was an inappropriate love. Long after her analysis ended, Yalom found out that this patient had continued the affair for years, apparently with no adverse consequences and with benefits to both participants. In her book, Person writes about many positive passionate romances, but she also insists that "even when the outcome of love is unhappy, the lover may nonetheless have experienced the liberating effects of love and be able to preserve the fruits of that liberation, whether in expanded creativity, enlarged insight, or a subtle internal reordering

of personality." Thus she insists that therapists, their patients, and the rest of us can and should celebrate romantic passion.

Of course Person doesn't deny the suffering that love affairs can cause to the lovers or the collateral damage that may be inflicted on their families, especially in adulterous relationships. Nevertheless, she contends that it is wrong to ignore the benefits of romantic love: such experiences can be life-affirming "change-agents," empowering the patient "to take more risks and build a stronger sense of self."

In her most recent book, *Feeling Strong: The Achievement of Authentic Power* (New York: William Morrow, 2002), Person reiterates the idea that love enables people to break out of stultifying and even destructive personality and behavior patterns. This book, published 14 years after *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters*, includes a chapter on "Power in Intimate Relationships." Here, drawing on her earlier work, Person once again observes that "falling in love is often accompanied by unusual spurts of energy, growth, and change, and by a sense of richness, abundance, and inner strength."

I suppose one might counter Person's optimistic conclusions by citing instances of passionate love that left one or both participants feeling weaker rather than stronger, and generally regretful about the experience. However, the type of love Person most admires (no matter whether or not it lasts) is "mutual passionate love," a love that is "reciprocal" and that includes these essential qualities: passion and tenderness, and "tender longing" when the lovers cannot be together; mutual caring; and empathy, which Person emphasizes, is "not complete identification." "One feels with one's beloved," she explains, "one does not become one's beloved." This is an important distinction. Although lovers crave merger, "this can only be realized for brief moments"; with mutual, caring love, "the essential autonomy and integrity" of each lover is maintained.

An interesting example of romantic love as an agent of

change appeared in the March 2006 issue of this publication. In a fascinating article entitled "Marriage at-a-Distance," psychoanalysts Jean Hantman and Donald Carveth described their nine-year courtship while she was living in Philadelphia and he was in Toronto. Awed by the depth of their love despite the fact that they "lived 502 miles away from each other in separate countries," both of these psychologically sophisticated and trained professionals contend that they changed far more as a result of their romance than they had through years of therapy.

The love relationships Person most admires, and the one Hantman and Carveth describe, are clearly different from the kind depicted in many films, including Woody Allen's most recent film, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona.* For Person, this film would fall under the category of "carnal (sexual) love"; I call this "tourist love" because, as Allen's title implies, the participants experience love as they experience Barcelona: they visit, and even savor it, until they decide to move on to another tourist attraction. Romance, for them, is exciting and absorbing for a while, but because it is driven primarily by sexual desire, it is shallow and short-lived. *Saturday,* Ian McEwan's 2006 novel, offers an excellent example of a long-married couple who share the reciprocal, caring love Person most admires.

The reader should be warned that this book is not an easy read. In 354 dense pages, the author discusses a great array of ideas about romantic love and offers multiple examples from life and fiction to illustrate these ideas. Her analysis also includes discussions of the impact of cultural and family contexts on desire and behavior. The many qualifying and nuanced remarks, as well as the frequent reminders of the multifaceted nature of romantic passion, make it difficult to draw clear conclusions. At the end of her book, Person herself notes that "it is not possible from what I have said to draw up any recipe for romance." She admits, too, as many have before her, that "love defies complete analysis." Luckily, the patient reader will discover stunning insights here, and many will find that their own experiences support the author's contention that love,

whether it lasts or not, "is one of life's pre-eminent crucibles for change."

The major problem I found with *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters* is that it is 20 years old; all the references are necessarily limited to what was available before 1988. It would be wonderful to have an update that would cite current research and theories as well as examples from more recent films and books. A particularly serious omission is any reference to John Bowlby's Attachment Theory. When Person was writing her book, Bowlby was known primarily for his work on mother-child relationships. Now, more therapists are building on Bowlby's work when counseling unhappy couples. (See Sue Johnson's 2008 self-help book, *Hold Me Tight*, a book based on Bowlby's work.)

By the time Person wrote *Feeling Strong*, she did include references to Attachment Theory. In the chapter, "Power in Intimate Relationships," Person refers to both Bowlby and Daniel Stern, another eminent name in the field. It seems to me that "attunement," a word often used in Attachment Theory, is in fact the quality of love relationships Person most values in both the 1988 work reviewed here and the 2002 book.

Because *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters* was written in 1988, also missing are discussions of events and problems affecting current romantic relationships: for instance, fears of sexually transmitted diseases or the impact of technology (for example, Internet affairs, virtual sex, pornography). Possibilities—and problems—related to Viagra-style drugs (greeted with such acclaim in 1998) could not be addressed here, either. These drugs have had unexpected, and not always positive, consequences. As early as 1978, the sociologist Philip Slater, in his book *Footholds*, was already criticizing Americans for turning lovemaking into a "task," a task that had to end with a "product" and had to be graded as "adequate" or "inadequate." More recent studies by sociologists and psychologists have described the effects of medical identifications of sexual "dysfunctions" and the aggressive marketing of pharmaceuticals to "cure" these "dysfunctions." Specifically, re-

searchers like Meika Loe and Lenore Tiefer maintain that drugs, and the ubiquitous advertisements for them, not only increase "performance anxiety" but also limit our notions of love and sex and decrease attention to creative pleasuring and relationship building.

Even though Person could not anticipate such recent developments in her 1988 book, I believe teachers and therapists will still find it of interest; so will ordinary readers, many of whom might better understand their own relationships after reading Person's thoughtful and informed analysis. Moreover, the lengthy index, the careful and copious footnotes, and the references that include lists of books and articles and films are wonderful teaching and research resources. What is most important, however, is that *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters* bubbles with rich and profound ideas about a topic that has universal appeal.

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## Why Should I Love Thee When I Have So Many Reasons to Hate Thee?

**Hanna Turken -** Private Practice

Martin Bergman's *The Anatomy of Loving* (1987), covers the significant developments and important contributions to the psychology of loving, and consequently the psychology of the opposite—hate, anger, hostility, and violence. From these contributions and my experience in the practice of psychoanalytic psycho-