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The Course of Love: A Novel

By Alain de Botton

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“*The Course of Love* is a return to the form that made Mr. de Botton’s name in the mid-1990s....love is the subject best suited to his obsessive aphorizing, and in this novel he again shows off his ability to pin our hopes, methods and insecurities to the page.” —*The New York Times*

The long-awaited and beguiling second novel from Alain de Botton that tracks the beautifully complicated arc of a romantic partnership, from the internationally bestselling author of *How Proust Can Change Your Life*. De Botton’s essay “Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person” (*The New York Times*, May 28, 2016), which draws from *The Course of Love*, was the #1 most emailed article for days.

We all know the headiness and excitement of the early days of love. But what comes after? In Edinburgh, a couple, Rabih and Kirsten, fall in love. They get married, they have children—but no long-term relationship is as simple as “happily ever after.” *The Course of Love* is a novel that explores what happens after the birth of love, what it takes to maintain love, and what happens to our original ideals under the pressures of an average existence. You experience, along with Rabih and Kirsten, the first flush of infatuation, the effortlessness of falling into romantic love, and the course of life thereafter. Interwoven with their story and its challenges is an overlay of philosophy—an annotation and a guide to what we are reading.

This is a Romantic novel in the true sense, one interested in exploring how love can survive and thrive in the long term. The result is a sensory experience—fictional, philosophical, psychological—that urges us to identify deeply with these characters and to reflect on his and her own experiences in love. Fresh, visceral, and utterly compelling, *The Course of Love* is a provocative and life-affirming novel for everyone who believes in love.

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Editorial Review

Review

PRAISE FOR *THE COURSE OF LOVE*:

“*The Course of Love* is a return to the form that made Mr. de Botton’s name in the mid-1990s.... love is the subject best suited to his obsessive aphorizing, and in this novel he again shows off his ability to pin our hopes, methods and insecurities to the page.”

—*The New York Times*

“There’s no writer alive like de Botton, and his latest ambitious undertaking is as enlightening and humanizing as his previous works.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“[De Botton] analyzes Rabih’s feelings, especially, with the finesse of a therapist—and in fact there is more than a whiff of the couch in this exemplary tale...Readers looking for insights and guidance will find plenty.”

—NPR

“An engrossing tale [that] provides plenty of food for thought.”

—*People* (Best New Books pick)

“The course of true love may not run smooth, but the storytelling certainly does in this wise, humane and irresistibly readable history of an appealingly nuanced relationship. De Botton deftly moves us through time, weaving in philosophical interludes that showcase his essayistic gifts, so that before we know it we have lived a whole life with these two, and they are just getting started. De Botton directs his ferocious intelligence at the most complex puzzle of all, and it seems that no intellectual or emotional problem surpasses his ability to solve it.”

—Matthew Thomas, *New York Times* bestselling author of *We Are Not Ourselves*

“*The Course of Love* is a complete delight. Not surprisingly, I feel that Alain de Botton not only wrote it for me, but also that we must have been conversing on these subjects happily and deeply, privately or in my dreams.”

—Amy Bloom, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Away* and *Lucky Us*

“The always-intriguing de Botton, who returns to fiction after 20 years and numerous nonfiction books, aims to answer the question, What is it like to be married for awhile? The answers are often funny but also quite moving, thought provoking, forgiving, and drenched in truth.”

—*Booklist*

“Well-observed and imbued with a tenderness that feels authentic and uncynical. It may even save some marriages. My bet is that if de Botton’s name were taken off this book it would be fêted by the sort of people who are in thrall to Milan Kundera and Adam Thirlwell. He wants us to feel less alone — and that’s not such a bad thing.”

—*Evening Standard* (UK)

Praise for *On Love*:

"The Romantic Movement sheds light on the nature of relationships...The method of telling much and showing little produces a good deal of wit, cogency, and humor."

—**John Updike**, *The New Yorker*

"A reader gets whiffs of Donald Barthelme, Julian Barnes, Woody Allen...De Botton borrows exuberantly, and well, from forebears [and] therein lies the buoyant charm of this approach."

—**Lisa Zeidner**, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Smart and ironic...The success of *On Love* has much to do with its beautifully modeled sentences, its wry humor, and its unwavering deadpan respect for the reader's intelligence."

—**Francine Prose**, *The New Yorker*

Praise for *The Architecture of Happiness*:

"De Botton has a marvelous knack for coming at weighty subjects from entertainingly eccentric angles."

—*The Seattle Times*

"An elegant book. . . . Unusual . . . full of big ideas. . . . Seldom has there been a more sensitive marriage of words and images."

—*The New York Sun*

"With originality, verve, and wit, de Botton explains how we find reflections of our own values in the edifices we make. . . . Altogether satisfying."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"De Botton is high falutin' but user friendly. . . . He keeps architecture on a human level."

—*Los Angeles Times*

Praise for *How Proust Can Change Your Life*:

"Delightfully original.... As well as being criticism, biography, literary history, and a reader's guide to Proust's masterpiece, this is a self-help book in the deepest sense of the term."

—*The New York Times*

"One of my favorite books of the year.... Seriously cheeky, cheekily serious."

—**Julian Barnes**

"Curious, humorous, didactic, and dazzling.... It contains more human interest and play of fancy than most fiction."

—**John Updike**, *The New Yorker*

"A witty, elegant book that helps us learn what reading is for."

—**Doris Lessing**

"A wonderful meditation on aspects of Proust in the form of a self-help book. Very enjoyable."

—**Sebastian Faulks**

"Funny and very refreshing."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

Praise for *The Consolations of Philosophy*:

“Wonderfully original, quirky.... De Botton finds inspiration where others might fail to look.”
—*Newsday*

"An enjoyable read... In clear, witty prose, de Botton...sets some of [the philosophers'] ideas to the mundane task of helping readers with their personal problems.... The quietly ironic style and eclectic approach will gratify many postmodern readers."
—*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

Alain de Botton is the author of numerous works of fiction and nonfiction, including *On Love*, *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, *The Art of Travel*, and *The Course of Love*. He lives in London where he founded The School of Life, an organization devoted to fostering emotional health and intelligence. More can be found at AlainDeBotton.com.

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The Course of Love

Infatuations

The hotel is on a rocky outcrop, half an hour east of Málaga. It has been designed for families and inadvertently reveals, especially at mealtimes, the challenges of being part of one. Rabih Khan is fifteen and on holiday with his father and stepmother. The atmosphere among them is somber and the conversation halting. It has been three years since Rabih's mother died. A buffet is laid out every day on a terrace overlooking the pool. Occasionally his stepmother remarks on the paella or the wind, which has been blowing intensely from the south. She is originally from Gloucestershire and likes to garden.

A marriage doesn't begin with a proposal, or even an initial meeting. It begins far earlier, when the idea of love is born, and more specifically the dream of a soul mate.

Rabih first sees the girl by the water slide. She is about a year younger than him, with chestnut hair cut short like a boy's, olive skin, and slender limbs. She is wearing a striped sailor top, blue shorts, and a pair of lemon-yellow flip-flops. There's a thin leather band around her right wrist. She glances over at him, pulls what may be a halfhearted smile, and rearranges herself on her deck chair. For the next few hours she looks pensively out to sea, listening to her Walkman and, at intervals, biting her nails. Her parents are on either side of her, her mother paging through a copy of *Elle* and her father reading a Len Deighton novel in French. As Rabih will later find out from the guest book, she is from Clermont-Ferrand and is called Alice Saure.

He has never felt anything remotely like this before. The sensation overwhelms him from the first. It isn't dependent on words, which they will never exchange. It is as if he has in some way always known her, as if she holds out an answer to his very existence and, especially, to a zone of confused pain inside him. Over the coming days, he observes her from a distance around the hotel: at breakfast in a white dress with a floral hem, fetching a yogurt and a peach from the buffet; at the tennis court, apologizing to the coach for her backhand with touching politeness in heavily accented English; and on an (apparently) solitary walk around the perimeter of the golf course, stopping to look at cacti and hibiscus.

It may come very fast, this certainty that another human being is a soul mate. We needn't have spoken with

them; we may not even know their name. Objective knowledge doesn't come into it. What matters instead is intuition, a spontaneous feeling that seems all the more accurate and worthy of respect because it bypasses the normal processes of reason.

The infatuation crystallizes around a range of elements: a flip-flop hanging nonchalantly off a foot; a paperback of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* lying on a towel next to the sun cream; well-defined eyebrows; a distracted manner when answering her parents and a way of resting her cheek in her palm while taking small mouthfuls of chocolate mousse at the evening buffet.

Instinctively he teases out an entire personality from the details. Looking up at the revolving wooden blades of the ceiling fan in his room, in his mind Rabiح writes the story of his life with her. She will be melancholy and street-smart. She will confide in him and laugh at the hypocrisy of others. She will sometimes be anxious about parties and around other girls at school, symptoms of a sensitive and profound personality. She'll have been lonely and will never until now have taken anyone else into her full confidence. They'll sit on her bed playfully enlacing their fingers. She, too, won't ever have imagined that such a bond could be possible between two people.

Then one morning, without warning, she is gone and a Dutch couple with two small boys are sitting at her table. She and her parents left the hotel at dawn to catch the Air France flight home, the manager explains.

The whole incident is negligible. They are never to meet again. He tells no one. She is wholly untouched by his ruminations. Yet, if the story begins here, it is because—although so much about Rabiح will alter and mature over the years—his understanding of love will for decades retain precisely the structure it first assumed at the Hotel Casa Al Sur in the summer of his sixteenth year. He will continue to trust in the possibility of rapid, wholehearted understanding and empathy between two human beings and in the chance of a definitive end to loneliness.

He will experience similarly bittersweet longings for other lost soul mates spotted on buses, in the aisles of grocery stores, and in the reading rooms of libraries. He will have precisely the same feeling at the age of twenty, during a semester of study in Manhattan, about a woman seated to his left on the northbound C train; and at twenty-five in the architectural office in Berlin where he is doing work experience; and at twenty-nine on a flight between Paris and London after a brief conversation over the English Channel with a woman named Chloe: the feeling of having happened upon a long-lost missing part of his own self.

For the Romantic, it is only the briefest of steps from a glimpse of a stranger to the formulation of a majestic and substantial conclusion: that he or she may constitute a comprehensive answer to the unspoken questions of existence.

The intensity may seem trivial—humorous, even—yet this reverence for instinct is not a minor planet within the cosmology of relationships. It is the underlying central sun around which contemporary ideals of love revolve.

The Romantic faith must always have existed, but only in the past few centuries has it been judged anything more than an illness; only recently has the search for a soul mate been allowed to take on the status of something close to the purpose of life. An idealism previously directed at gods and spirits has been rerouted towards human subjects—an ostensibly generous gesture nevertheless freighted with forbidding and brittle consequences, for it is no simple thing for any human being to honor over a lifetime the perfections he or she might have hinted at to an imaginative observer in the street, the office, or the adjoining airplane seat.

It will take Rabihi many years and frequent essays in love to reach a few different conclusions, to recognize that the very things he once considered romantic—wordless intuitions, instantaneous longings, a trust in soul mates—are what stand in the way of learning how to be with someone. He will surmise that love can endure only when one is unfaithful to its beguiling opening ambitions, and that, for his relationships to work, he will need to give up on the feelings that got him into them in the first place. He will need to learn that love is a skill rather than an enthusiasm.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Thomas Murray:

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