

The Bonds of Love and Boundaries of the Self

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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Aims and General Description

Literature, London, husband and children. Coffee. How can the same four-letter word – love - describe my feelings towards all these subjects, as if they were of equal importance? Conceived from the premise that our affections form the building blocks of our identity and sense of self, this collection of short stories will explore the bonds of love and the boundaries of the self through a variety of types of love – romantic, parental, familial and platonic.

Just as love shapes our identity, so does our environment. Place influences our perspective and establishes its own bonds and boundaries. As the stories in this collection unfold, boundaries of the internal self and an external place will be explored, crossed or redefined.

Conceptual Background

Tracing love in the rich history of literature, from the bible to contemporary fiction, is like walking in the tracks of ever-evolving views on love and its place in society. This is true not only of romantic love, but also of friendships, love between siblings, and even maternal love. Indeed, for the last hundred years or so, ever since Freud, maternal love has been scrutinized for its effect on adult relationships. Psychologists such as Melanie Klein, who was among the developers of Object Relations Theory, tell us that the first bonds of love - those of mother and baby - shape our sense of self and the way we love as we mature. Jessica Benjamin writes that even as adults we still define our 'self' as relational. Just as the baby sees his or her self in the mother's eyes, we all still depend on being recognized by another, a loved one, for our sense of self. The stories in this collection will explore this self/other dichotomy.

Often in fiction, setting informs character, being a driving agent or point of conflict. In his article "The Importance of Place in Fiction" novelist Philip Hensher writes that "[f]or most of us, psychologies are rooted in setting, and revealed through place and physical setting." Each of the stories will be located in a different place, some in real cities, such as London, New York and Tel Aviv, and others in imaginary ones. In one story, "The Festival," a temporary city is constructed in a field. The cities form the physical boundary of the unfolding plot, allowing psychologies and space to intersect, their boundaries blurred and reshaped.

However, my main source of inspiration stems less from psychological theories than from the literature that I love - authors such as Grace Paley, David Shahr, Lydia Davis and Miranda July.

Grace Paley's stories often feature children, extended families and communities, all of which Paley navigates alongside her characters' romantic interests, never shying away from the real complications of life. In her story "Wants," there is a clear influence of the bonds of married love on the boundaries of the self, after the bond has been broken by divorce. The story "Friends" portrays long-time friends saying goodbye to one of them who is dying. During a long train ride the story explores time, memory and shared history through the lens of how love and loss define us.

In all of Paley's work I admire her wit and fast clipped dialogue, her startling imagery, and the humor that exists in the syntax itself, a kind of improvisational and understated humor that I associate with Jewishness and *Yiddishkeit*, and the act of 'translating as we go.'

Although very different in style, Lydia Davis's work is also infused with an undercurrent of humor often achieved at the sentence level. Davis inspires me in her attitude towards subject – anything can be interesting, if the writer's observations are exact and the sentences executed with precision. Because her writings are mostly very short, her choice of words and her syntax are themselves, in a way, as much the story as is the plot. As a non-native speaker and writer of English, I learn from her about precision and the rhythm of the English language.

In David Shahr's beautiful prose, I am inspired by his use of setting: his short stories and novels take place in Jerusalem, where characters tread

the same streets, which rise to a mythical status. One example is his story “Evil Eye,” in which the narrator remembers himself as a child in the Old City in Jerusalem. From his adult perspective he recounts how his Arab neighbor used to engage a British Mandate soldier with her old Ottoman tales. Shahar’s Jerusalem is a city connected to the world, yet simultaneously it *is* the world, with tales and interactions that are inconceivable elsewhere.

In Miranda July’s writing, sex and sexuality are part of normal, everyday vocabulary. Sex isn’t euphemized, tiptoed around or apologetic, but rather displayed in all its plainness *and* complexity. In some of my stories I approach this topic by trying to remove the taboos associated with it. I also find July’s first-person voice compelling, with characters who observe the world in an acutely personal and unconventional way, while communicating a relatable and deeply human angst.

Shape of the Project

This collection will consist of 7-8 short stories running 10-20 pages in length. The stories will be arranged according to the life stage of the characters – from the youngest protagonist, who is in her early twenties, to a grandmother in her seventies. This arrangement is meant to evoke a life span, and the different attitudes and challenges that love brings at different points in one's life. Narrated predominantly from a woman's point of view, the stories will vary in tone and tenor, alternating between humorous and dramatic, some sensual, others detached and ironic.

A few of the proposed story plots:

A young woman working in a school falls in love with a musician friend and colleague. She believes he is flirting with her, but when she makes a move she faces rejection, and finds that she has misread other aspects of her life. The school building and the New York City landscape form part of her internal journey in this coming-of-age story.

Israeli Maya and American-Israeli Benny try to "make it" in New York, but when Benny suffers an emotional breakdown, self-centered Maya has to step up and help. To do so requires her to travel through different states and changing landscapes.

A married woman and mother of three finds life in her Victorian London home overwhelming, and through the small mundane stresses and disappointments of family life, looks for a way to reconnect with her sexuality and husband.

A woman takes her father and teenage daughter to the airport, sending them on a Bat-Mitzvah trip to Rome. As things get complicated at the check-in counter, she recalls a trip with her parents when she was a teenager, and the ways in which the limits of their relationship were tested.

A middle-aged man who runs a festival stall in England is impressed with his newest crewmember – a precocious seventeen-year-old girl who stirs him out of his emotional slumber. He struggles to understand his strong feelings, and realises how he has isolated himself over the years. The festival-city serves as the background for alcohol and drug infused behaviour and unusual conversation.

A retired gynecologist tries to become more engaged with her family, only to realize they are more emotionally distant than she thought. She comes to terms with some regrets as she looks back at her life and assesses her possibilities for new love. This story will explore the concepts of privacy, secrets and dreams.

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