

LOVE AND THE NOVEL

LOVE AND
THE NOVEL

LIFE AFTER READING

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGINALITY OF LOVE

In November 2018 I sat at the side of an indoor pool while my son Rohan took his swimming class. It was already dark, the way it gets on winter afternoons in Denmark. The sports centre was stoked with artificial warmth and light, and the sound of children's voices filled the glassy space. Rohan dived for weighted plastic in a squall of other eight-year-olds. A swimming teacher stood and cast rings for them, one by one, into the water – a green one to the right, a blue one to the left, the look on his face of someone feeding ducks in a pond. My coat and hat were spread beside me on the slatted bench and I'd taken a novel from my bag. I see myself now at a distance, as if looking back into that terrarium of human life: a woman watching her child plumb the depths of the pool. From the outside, she seems to have been many places and read many books. Less visible are the thoughts of the love affair, just started, trumpeting silently through her head and out into the chlorinated air.

It seems unlikely that falling in love could do much to a life as well populated and extended as mine was then. Hans and I had been together for decades. We lived in a nice part of Copenhagen, in a building by a canal lined with blue and

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pink houses and weekend sailing boats. Hans had renovated the flat, carved out a kitchen from an old beer cellar and decorated rooms for the kids. I had a job at a university in England and commuted most weeks of the term between our home and London, teaching literature classes prepped on the plane to well-read students. When I wasn't travelling, my days were filled with smaller routines. I biked around the city and met friends for coffee. I read bedtime stories, spent weekends at the summerhouse in Sweden, cooked meals, spoke at conferences, researched life in England in the eighteenth century. The book on my lap that day at the pool was *Pride and Prejudice*, carried in my bag because I'd agreed to produce by the end of the year an introduction for a new edition of the novel.

In taking on the project, I'd said I would describe the different kinds of love represented by Austen: between sisters, and between friends; love that is just lust; love that connects parents and children, even when they seem not to like each other much. More precisely, I wanted to explain the case Austen makes for reconciling romantic and heartfelt love with the kinds of socially productive marriage promoted in the early nineteenth century. At the time when Austen wrote there were plenty of reasons to get married, but little basis for believing in romantic and conjugal life as the same thing. It remained rare in her short lifetime to think that one had to fall in love with the person one married, or to assume that one could marry the person one loved. Children were cared for, obviously, but they were also routinely sent away to wet nurses or to school, or out early to work. The family at the centre of so many novels wasn't yet there as the

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emotional crux it seems now. As I watched Rohan swim, my finger marked the part of the story when Elizabeth wanders around Darcy's estate, believing that he's away from home. She's already refused his first proposal of marriage, but he's about to reappear in her life as someone she can't resist. It's a famous turning point in a book so familiar to me that I hardly needed to read the words again. Yet the connection between what Austen writes and what love really is, or was, seemed looser to me than it ever had.

In all these decades of teaching and writing about literature, one thing I've learned is that novels aren't blueprints for living; their stories do not bleed straight into our brains; they don't reveal truthfully what we think, or what we do with our bodies. The writer's job is not, as the poet Elizabeth Bishop once warned her friend Robert Lowell, to *tell what we're really like in 1972*. Jane Austen also wasn't writing to tell what love was like in 1810. If historians of the future dig up our libraries, the books we've written – those old ones we've kept reading and translating and turning into television shows – I hope they won't say, *Ah, that is how they were, that is how they loved back then*. I'm not sure we should read the fictions of any time that way, by joining too closely the dots between the novels we read and the things we do, the people we are. Knowing that I was born in the 1970s in a commune in London, or that I studied in the 1990s, working my way into a job as a literature professor during those years of queer and feminist debate, or that this story starts with me being unfaithful to a husband I loved, tells you a lot. But none of that puts me easily in the novels I have read or explains how reading them supported the new shape my life was taking.

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A friend came to Copenhagen once with a copy of Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights* for me in her bag. Like gifts she'd brought before, it was perfectly chosen. The intricate prose kept me awake at night, puzzling out the point of view and admiring the author. Hardwick wrote her novel late in the 1970s, just after her divorce from Lowell, that poet prone to telling it all. At the point Hardwick and Lowell divorced, they had a teenage daughter, an apartment in Manhattan and an impressive group of literary friends. Looking back at her life from that vantage point, Hardwick describes in *Sleepless Nights* some places she has been. At one point she offers a succinct account of it all:

Tickets, migration, worries, property, debts, changes of name and changes back once more: these came about from reading many books. So, from Kentucky to New York, to Boston, to Maine, to Europe, carried along on a river of paragraphs and chapters, or blank verse, of little books translated from the Polish, large books from the Russian – all consumed in a sedentary sleeplessness.

This, she says, is the true though insufficient explanation of her life. The books she's read are coordinates, but they are not a map. With reading as her mode of travel, she has been a passenger without destination, a woman finding her way, balancing her wishes against the grain of other narratives.

Hardwick's description of her life came back to me as I thought about *Pride and Prejudice*. In the essay I wrote on the novel during that long winter of 2018, I argued that Austen's emphasis on individual feelings is the key to the novel's

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innovative representation of love. If we want to understand why novels have mattered so much in the history of emotion, it's not enough to think of the marriages and trysts they describe. We must think of the whole experience of reading fiction as a lesson in having and discovering personal feelings, almost regardless of what one does with them, or how they relate to society's standards for living well. Before the middle of the 1700s, which is when people really began to buy novels for the first time, there were plenty of texts explaining what to feel: sermons, pornography, romance, travel narratives, satires, tragic plays. But none of them set as much store by individual response as the novel. Reading them didn't involve a journey of the kind Hardwick describes, *carried along on a river of paragraphs*, prone to divergence from any route mapped out in advance.

Individual romantic love and the novel emerged together in the eighteenth century, partook from the outset of each other's values, became testing grounds at the same time for the ideal of original selfhood. The lover who followed her heart would not be swayed in the end by what her parents or her religion told her. This individual celebrated and cultivated by the novel was able to feel for herself, to make rational choices, to defy rules, to read her own way through a story. It was for her sake – and not simply in the name of the partnerships and profits they represented – that novels helped drive arranged marriage and orthodox religion into decline. Unlike the sermons and conduct books that kept on circulating alongside them, novels weren't simple prescriptions for how to live. Even *Pride and Prejudice*, which ultimately reconciles that new level of feeling with a larger sense of social

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responsibility, was a primer in the logic of heartfelt choice.

This explains why novel-reading was also associated in those early decades of its existence with the incitement of rebellion and change. A daughter who read novels was more likely to insist on choosing for herself than one who didn't. Fiction built in this larger sense on all Enlightenment thinking. Don't trust your teachers, or your doctors, or your priests. The most radical questions that philosophers and politicians were asking in the late 1700s required members of the public to think, as well as feel, for themselves. Shouldn't all laws be put to the test of individual belief? Should one really obey a king? What disqualified enslaved people and women from having the rights of free men? Shouldn't I be allowed to change my mind? *To love at fifty someone different from the one I loved in my youth?*

For the famous radicals of Austen's time, novels helped show that feelings could be a force for good, a way of driving the machinery of change forward. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Thomas Paine, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft: all of them argued in various ways for a new world that would be built on true emotion. They claimed that children might be better brought up away from the corruption of polite society; that parents and rulers should earn and not simply claim these children's affection; that stereotypes of women as passive and vulnerable were wrong; that no man should command respect automatically. *I love my man as my fellow*, argues Wollstonecraft, *but his sceptre, real, or usurped, extends not to me, unless the reason of an individual demands my homage; and even then the submission is to reason, and not to man.*

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Those writers criticised the old romances and sentimental stereotypes, fantasies of women submissive to convention and seduction. They wrote novels encouraging personal relations needing renewal and reason, able at their best to cut through the hypocrisy of habit, of tradition, of patriarchy.

Yet there were writers on the other side of that political divide who tried to enlist love's conservative force as something oriented towards community and tradition. Edmund Burke wrote about the French Revolution, criticising the violence of the people against their monarch, showing what was lost when individuals began to question the authorities they were meant to look up to. Surely, he insists in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), the feelings of loyalty towards one's king and country should not be put to the test. He praises love of social hierarchy, admonishing the French for approaching this emotion as a matter for philosophy. Love belongs, he exhorts, to the youthful realm of *grace* and *manners*, not to the realm of philosophical reflection. Conservatism, just like radicalism, should be felt, not thought through. The kind of individual feelings rallied by fiction could also be directed towards monarchs, nations, conventions; the kinds of feelings that people should nurture are those supporting the family, the sovereign, the child. For Burke, it was inappropriate of the loyal subject or wife to think too hard about whom she loved.

Pride and Prejudice was written and rewritten at the fulcrum of those debates, which were sharp in my mind those last months of 2018, when my job was to write about novels, to teach them, and also to decide how to live the next part of my life. We were long past the age of Romantic revolt

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when lovers' feelings might help overturn a whole conservative regime. My own dilemmas had little in common with Elizabeth Bennet's. No one had expected me to marry. The cohesion of society did not depend upon my family unit. Yet my questions about what passionate love counts for, about what might make it original and true and when one could legitimately be guided by it, weren't so different from the ones Austen tried to answer. *Pride and Prejudice* makes the case for love being discovered and felt by an individual without being too scripted or coerced. Elizabeth cannot fall in love with Darcy as she does, in her own terms, without going through all the difficult stages of doubt and reasoning that result in her that hard-won, crystalline conviction that he is right for her. At the same time the partnership that Elizabeth chooses for herself is the one her small-minded mother would have chosen for her. Nothing about the relation between Elizabeth and Darcy upsets the conventions governing class and gender and heterosexuality. The lovers whose happiness is promoted make independent choices, based on their own feelings. But the choices they make are the ones conservative society inclines to. The fact that Austen's protagonists think and suffer and consider as they love is part of a more general compromise brokered in her fiction, between feeling as something true for the individual, and love as something that requires ethical deliberation and community sanction.

I went into my love affair with Austen in my pocket, thinking of her in these terms as the architect of the romance plot compatible both with original feeling *and* a larger social order. The happily-ever-after love that her characters are

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promised comes to those who wait and judge, not to those who desire too much or act too recklessly. Elizabeth makes it a point of pride that she has never gone as far as to fall in love with the rakish Wickham. Lydia, Elizabeth's younger sister, who does fall in love and elope with him, will never be happy. Real love is a reward for getting to the end of the story with one's individual feelings vindicated and one's moral integrity still intact. To love and to read radically *and* reasonably, Austen suggests, will yield new kinds of truth in reward. But to love too lustily or too sentimentally is to fall for convention, to abandon a reasonable course of action for something more ephemeral. As a reader of fiction, one prepares for love to count for everything, as well as to foresee and avoid the dangers of cliché, genre, sentiment. In twenty-first-century terms, falling as deeply as I had for another woman in the middle of my life might be radical or newly conventional; it might be just desire, or it might be truth.

Shortly before that day at the Danish pool I'd been at the British Library, studying letters from the 1790s and attending a conference at Birkbeck called 'New Worlds of the Novel'. Shannon, a fellow critic I knew by reputation but had never met, was there too. We spent consecutive evenings drinking at the bar of the hotel where the speakers were staying. Under dim lights we perched on stools between mirrored columns and tore at our beer mats in excitement over conversation that was unfathomably good. On the last day, once the organisers had summed things up by telling us that the novel was alive and well, Shannon and I broke away from the group and took a bus up to Hampstead Heath. In the open

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fields, breathing clouds of condensation, telling stories of our families, of being young in Kentucky and in Sussex, we took a path that led higher out of the city, leaving London looking grey and jagged in the distance and bringing us out in a far corner of Highgate.

From there we could go to the Freud Museum, I said. I liked the ordinariness of that place, it being both a museum and a house. It was something I could show an American in London, the city of my birth and a place where I had spent significant happy patches of my itinerant life. We went to the museum late and lingered as closing time approached in the rooms stacked with the tapestries and totems Freud had brought from Vienna, the famous couch behind tasselled ropes, the doors opening onto the garden. This was where Freud died and where his family went on living without him. Placards detailed their immigration to London, the epiphanies of Freud's career. The self is a honeycomb of secrets shaped by desires we may not even know we have. Shannon and I were both steeped in that argument. But it's hard, when thrilling to the nape of a neck, to fathom the idea that there could be anything deeper than what one most obviously feels. Waiting for a taxi to take us back to the hotel, leaning against Freud's garden wall in a state of ineffable happiness, I felt only desire. A psychoanalytic reading might reveal those rose bushes bedded down and barren of fruit as omens of a long winter to come, but I saw nothing but the beauty of their stubbly selves.

Long before Freud discovered the unconscious, novelists invented characters who had difficulty recognising their own

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feelings. In some sense, fictional selves became realistic at the point where they wanted things they could not name. This is the gist of one of the earliest modern love stories, Madame de Lafayette's *The Princesse de Clèves*, the first text on the 'Love and the Novel' course I sometimes taught. More fairy tale than fully-fledged novel, the late seventeenth-century story reckons differently from *Pride and Prejudice* with the new psychology of love. The princess is very young and beautiful, and marries as she should – a man she respects and of whom her mother approves. Her husband loves her excessively, more like a mistress than a wife. But the love he wants from her exceeds by far what wives at the time are encouraged to feel. The demure princess does not understand what she is being accused of withholding. What can be missing from this marriage in which she happily complies? Then a young duke arrives in the French court and the princess dances with him. The electric current flowing between them makes the whole court murmur.

The married princess is the last in this scenario to realise what is happening. It is only when she hears a rumour that the duke has taken a lover that she discovers feelings for him that she hasn't dared confess to herself. Love dawns on her as a sudden and unwelcome truth. At the point where she sees she is capable of the love that her husband wants from her, her feelings are directed firmly towards another. Overcome with shame at not being able to control her own heart, the princess is distraught. The breaching of the wall between her conscious and unconscious mind is painful. She wants to tell her husband everything, but she feels betrayed by a desire that cannot possibly be reconciled with the world. For the

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rest of the novel she tries desperately to regain control over a story too easily legible to those around her as sex and scandal.

There's no doubt that Lafayette recognises the radical power of desire to upend other kinds of convention. Yet she, like Austen, does not see it offering women a simple form of liberation. The princess's escape from one story – of court etiquette and arranged marriage – writes her into another one just as scripted, of her own lust. She feels as fully deprived of her volition as a lover as she did as a wife. While she is tempted to reject the constraints of marriage, the princess would not be freer if she did. She and the duke have already become characters in a romance that people are reading. Society tells them what they want, as well as what they are not allowed. Socially defined answers to the question of the princess's desire anticipate Freud's claims for the power of the subconscious. The only way out of the impasse, the princess decides, is to avoid love all together. When her husband dies, she goes to a monastery rather than into the arms of the Duke of Nemours.

Today's students tend to resent the idea of a self not in charge of its feelings. The emphasis on the princess being the last to know what she really wants reads strangely in this climate of consent. The next novel on that 'Love and the Novel' syllabus, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, has also become harder to read with students than it used to be. Written almost a century after *The Princesse de Clèves*, this English novel of letters describes the romance between a young aristocrat and his mother's servant. On the face of things, it's a happier story for its lovers: despite the scandal of their alliance, Pamela and Mr B end up married. But Pamela's

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equivocations of agency make it hard for twenty-first-century students to see her story as radical. Richardson was a middle-class and middle-aged publisher when he invented his famous character. Ostensibly he started ventriloquising his girl heroine while he was meant to be writing a book of letter templates for novice writers to imitate. His blow-by-blow account of Pamela's attempts to avoid the sexual advances of Mr B is steamy and full of near-misses. The novel was a media sensation, well read and debated, a scandal in its own time. Pamela's innocence seems implausible, the scenes of almost-rape that she describes more obviously titillating than the framing of it all as morality tale admits, and the idea of love as an avenue of upward mobility for beautiful young women mildly offensive.

Like the princess, Pamela is also less known to herself than to a wider community of onlookers. She has several chances to escape Mr B's hold on her. But she stays in his house to finish a waistcoat she is embroidering for him, then because she misconstrues the cows in the field outside the house as bulls. The longer this goes on, the more likely it begins to seem that she wants him more than she admits in her letters. Readers can feel forced to countenance what seem today like scenes of harassment, to see Pamela inviting the attention – perhaps even the sex – on offer. The realist script, given to us as the letters she writes to her parents, asks to be read between the lines. Despite what she says, it becomes clear how much she desires Mr B. It also becomes difficult for a good twenty-first-century feminist to know how to interpret this.

In the middle of the eighteenth century satires recast Pamela as a knowing pretender, more designing of marriage

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than Richardson allows. Today, the emphasis falls on her right to say no. The age of Byronic heroes who intuit what women really want, or of women who can't help but fall for them, is over. The Freudian idea of unconscious desire is still with us, but it is harder now to reconcile with a robust idea of women's choice. Elizabeth wins fans for refusing Darcy the first time he proposes to her, even if we suspect that she likes him more than she knows. When she ends up wandering around his estate as a tourist, Austen's godlike hand, not Elizabeth's sublimated desire, seems to be directing things. Yet it's clear that the process of Elizabeth falling in love with Darcy involves – just as clearly as that of Pamela coming to love Mr B – a slow growth in her own awareness of what a community of readers already know she wants. Darcy and Elizabeth are revealed to us as a perfect match for each other long before they discover this themselves. Their love may be radical, but we have given them permission to feel it.

I met Shannon when I had already been talking for decades with students about sex and marriage, the agency of lovers who defy convention; teaching classes circling this problem of where real originality lies, of whether the union of man and wife can ever be anything but a violent norm, of whether love is a story worth telling at all. In the luxurious classrooms of Williams College; at the University of Michigan, where my students padded across the quadrangles in their puffy coats and fur boots; back in England, teaching the British novels I'd grown up reading in Australia – in every one of these settings I had led groups undecided on whether love sits deep within the individual or whether it's merely a script inserting us into a world already decided. To

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me, the princess's dilemma still seemed unsolved: that puzzle of whether it's worse to submit to desires you cannot fathom or to follow the rules imposed from the outside. Freudian logic doesn't deliver you from social coercion. If I write about travelling back with Shannon through London from the Freud Museum, the winter sunset streaking the chemically tinted sky, our gloved hands touching on the back seat of the taxi, do you already know what should happen? When we come to the hotel and stand in the mirrored lobby the last night before I am due to fly back to my family, you may know better than I did at the time which way to turn.

After that night in London, everything changed. But on the surface of things, my life stayed the same. Shannon flew home to the US and I went back to marking student papers and living in my home by the canal with Hans and Rohan and Marie. I told Hans that I'd fallen in love with someone else, but that seemed to overstate the reality. For the rest of the winter it was my reading and my letter-writing that swivelled towards Shannon. Postponing my work on Austen each morning when everyone left the house, I called up the things she had written online. There's a special kind of pleasure that comes from listening, across the distance of print, to a voice that has just breathed endearments into your ear. After reading proofs of William Godwin's essays at the time they were living down the road from each other, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote of *sensations, that have been clustering round my heart, as I read this morning – reminding myself, every now and then, that the writer loved me*. Shannon's fine lines of argument filled me with the same kind of admiration

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two centuries later, had me wondering what it would be like to hear them from her naked beside me.

When I finished reading her writing, I began reading the novels she wrote about in her work. I went back to the early twentieth-century fictions by American authors I'd studied in graduate school in the US: descriptions of muddy banks, Native burial mounds, sparsely populated piny coastlines. In those novels, nature is a force unsettling the way people live in towns, in couples, in houses. The more authentic characters are the lonely ones, people on horseback or in little boats between islands, the queer ones whose community seems to lie in the future or the past. Spinsters and misfits meet up on occasion, their desires pent up so far below the surface that whole lives are locked for ever in impossible lust. Herbs and fir, and no one watching. *Do you really like these novels?* I asked Shannon in one of the long emails I wrote every day, doubting that she was in fact akin to their characters. When I first read Willa Cather and Sarah Orne Jewett in my twenties, I'd been impatient with all that loneliness and pushed back against their stories, identifying myself as the child of European collectives, impervious to such New World statelessness and individualism.

But as the Christmas of 2018 loomed, I felt more alone than I'd been for a long time. I had to finish my essay on *Pride and Prejudice*. I had to find out, as I explained to Hans, *what this feeling was, if it was anything at all*. I couldn't do that while going to gatherings in Copenhagen, where people snipped away happily at intricate paper Christmas decorations and made delicate cardamom cookies. I seemed always to be walking down along the icy cobbled street for a stolen

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minute on the phone with Shannon, or fighting with Rohan about too many hours of *Minecraft*. I couldn't do it all under the teenage eyes of Marie, asking me what was wrong; or in the office of the therapist whom Hans had enlisted to help us talk things through. In an effort to give me space, Hans drove me out to a small cabin in the south of Sweden that his parents had helped him buy. We slipped across the bridges, supplies of firewood and canned food in the car and Leonard Cohen songs playing to hide the silence, and Hans drove off again before dark, back home to the kids.

The lake beside the cabin was frozen just enough to walk on, and I crossed it between sessions of reading and writing and dreaming of limbs and tongues. The lines of my footprints intersected with the tracks of birds, whimsical in their circles and figures of eight on the ice. I thought the firm surface might break and swallow me up, or that I might simply keep walking into the darkness of the forest. But that would have meant missing the emails I downloaded slowly each day onto my offline computer, toggled to Shannon's through a phone signal too weak to carry sound. I walked to places where huge mushrooms ballooned to life in autumn and small flowers pricked the moss in spring; to places I had been with Hans and the kids and friends, and in which I had imagined our future. I sat so long hoping to see deer that my hands numbed and the fire had burned out when I got back to the cabin. The next morning I had a fever and brought my books and notepads into bed.

In the days of my sickness, Shannon and I read Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* in tandem. She'd taken her copy of the novel on holiday with her to a hotel in the Caribbean

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while I'd taken mine to Sweden. The only love story in *The Magic Mountain*, which is set almost entirely in a Swiss sanatorium, is obsessive and risible. Castorp waits in a state of luxurious incarceration for Clawdia, who comes and goes annually as a way to manage her own marriage. At the high point of his obsession, Castorp praises a portrait the doctor has made of her, commenting on every pore of her painted skin. Oh, the joy when he procures an X-ray taken of her heart, using a new technology that enters the human body with magic fingers. The single night the two spend together is carefully concealed in Mann's narrative, almost skipped over. But whole pages are dedicated to Castorp rising from the dining table to rearrange a curtain so that the sun doesn't shine on Clawdia's face. The prose itself gets slowed down by his drippy state of devotion. His deep attention to Clawdia justifies and colours Mann's description of everything else.

Shannon wrote in her letters to me of reading *The Magic Mountain* by a hotel pool. Stoned and sunburnt, she retold Castorp's fantasies of the female form back to me – Clawdia beamed at galaxy-size across the sky, the inner flesh of her arms exposed as she leans down to embrace Castorp from the sky. I stoked the fire and ate chickpeas and chocolate and worked on the footnotes for *Pride and Prejudice*, trying to focus on the details of shoes and sandwiches in the 1810s. The introductory essay was done. Writing it had allowed me to articulate something I really believed about novel-reading, which is that it can be a model for love that is grounded in intellection and open to reconsideration. Loving as Elizabeth does need not involve finding one's own Darcy: it may simply be a matter of falling for a novel as good as *Pride and*

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Prejudice, a narrator as good as Austen's. Working this argument out, though, had not helped me decide what to do about my own affair, or what exactly to say to Hans back in Copenhagen.

Instead of reaching any conclusions, I read the chapters of *The Magic Mountain* that Shannon invoked, with my own body in play. I was still coughing like the patients at the sanatorium as I lay propped beside the fire. At night, my fever rose and the sounds of animals boomed in my brain. The barking of deer and the sounds of ice shifting felt like sighs coming from my lungs. I missed Hans and the kids, wondered what they were all doing on those long winter nights. On the first day of 2019 a letter from Shannon arrived. She described reading *The Magic Mountain* on a bus crossing the island to the airport, looking up to see the parties of the people who lived there still going in the tropical dawn. Our settings were so far apart but I felt her next to me, the pages of the novel like a filament of joy between us. It was hopeless to say I wouldn't see her.

In February I flew to New York. There was a long-planned conference in my calendar, but Hans and I now viewed the trip as a dangerous point of reckoning. In our therapy sessions we kept talking about our relationship, but to me, that felt like looking backwards. Does there have to be something wrong with one life for another to become more desirable? I could only think in very specific terms about the trip to come. The plane landed in an unseasonal snowstorm and sat banked in a long queue on the runway for hours. I could feel Shannon in the terminal, her car out there somewhere in the

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carpet of Newark's car parks, but my phone wasn't working. Instead of calling, I finished Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*, which I had begun back in Copenhagen. The novel is about a love affair between women, but I was not reading to find out about that. I was so invested in the singularity of my love that I couldn't imagine researching it. What I liked was the way the affair on the page felt like a thing one could get hold of and slow down. In the case of *The Price of Salt*, everything except the ending had already been revealed to me. The friend who'd told me the plot had not given that away. The romance starts in the toy section of a department store, where Therese is working as a sales assistant. Carol, older and beautiful, comes in to buy a Christmas present for her daughter and, when Therese sees her, everything else stops. It takes for ever for Carol to reach the counter.

In 1952, when the novel was published, many things stood in the way of that relationship, which is slow to start and seems unlikely to flourish. Carol, just separated from her husband and fresh from a love affair with her friend Abby, is legally vulnerable to her husband's claims to custody of their daughter. Yet in the second part of the novel, Carol gets Therese recklessly into her car and they drive, almost in a dream, out across America. They become lovers on their journey, plotting their route, whirling from motel to motel, washing up in small towns each afternoon. The excessive movement gives the story traction, and it speeds up when the couple find themselves followed by a detective that Carol's husband has hired to expose them. But desire intercepts their progress, slowing down the road trip dramatically when the women end up looking at each other across a table or lying

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beside each other, eating an orange or drinking milk. Even when the chase is at its height, Carol and Therese's nights are unhurried. Highsmith registers the small details of Carol's hairbrush, a hotel fixture; sex is the element into which they retreat at night.

Reading this novel on that landlocked plane, its different currents of movement and stillness ran through me. I remembered the hyperbolic energies of the journeys taken with Hans over the years, the moves between London and New York and Copenhagen, along the roads through Sweden and Germany. There on the runway that movement that had kept me criss-crossing the Atlantic for so long felt halted in some dramatic way. Tired and fallen out of time, my body became one of those in *The Magic Mountain* cuddled in blankets, ruffled by the winds of death and joy. One ten-minute snowstorm might last a lifetime. Perhaps desire was a form of energy more sustainable than jet fuel, but it no longer seemed like one that would get me somewhere. Instead, it seemed to bypass all the novel's native forms of progress, the whole world of narrative. If only Therese and Carol could lie still long enough that the movement driving their century of expansion, disaster, disillusion and reproduction would wind down and leave them to occupy the world in their own terms. Falling in love seemed like an eddy in time, an opportunity to opt out of the imperative to be always doing and moving and making. How ironic that novelists – some of the greatest poets of love – should have been obliged formally to keep characters on the move, shackled to plot.

Those months in Copenhagen I had resisted the feeling of being in a story of the kind that could ever be told in a

Love and the Novel

novel. It didn't have to be going anywhere; didn't have to be a tragic affair or a romance. Yet, strapped to my plane seat, I was also glued to that novel. In the last pages of *The Price of Salt*, Carol leaves Therese and goes back to New York to fight for custody of her daughter. She loses, but the two meet again and, on an evening full of possibility, Carol invites Therese to come and live with her. Therese says yes. The mother and child getting parted is hard to fathom, but the lovers being together trumps the loss. When I reached the final page, gratitude towards Highsmith for that ending overcame me. She had published the novel pseudonymously and never really found its happiness herself. To read *The Price of Salt* seventy years later as a benediction of my own prospects was surely to read it badly. And yet the book made me feel that a happy ending was already at hand, unfolded and there waiting for me to walk into it.

On the runway little vehicles were blinking, reversing, charging forward again, in small efforts to get things moving. The guy next to me was playing *Angry Birds* on his phone. *Could I use it to make a call?* Shannon sounded far away, for someone standing right there in a building visible in the distance. I told her we were still stuck on the runway. She had thought so, said it didn't matter, said she would wait.