

Carey Baraka

### Reading Love: A List

Let me be honest: this panel is just an excuse for me to list my favorite romantic films and books. Once, when I was twenty (not too long ago, admittedly), I spent a whole year watching nothing but romantic movies. I had websites I consulted, websites that supplied listicles with such titles as “A Hundred Romcoms to watch before you die”, “Twenty most heart-breaking romantic movies ever”, and so on. Every night, before I went to bed, I would take out my laptop, open a suspicious website with ads that jumped out at my face, and play something from whatever list I was consulting that day. What joy, what pleasure.

So now, for your pleasure, let me present a quick list.

First, a quick word for Arnie Ernaux, who won The Nobel Prize in Literature for writing about desire. I read a tweet saying she is the perfect mixture of smut and highbrow literature. In a flurry of words, she darts between two worlds. For instance, this two-sentence entry from her diary from November 11th, 1988, published as *Getting Lost* in English earlier this month: “I realized that I’d lost a contact lens. I found it on his penis. (I thought of Zola, who lost his monocle between the breasts of women.)” What joy.

Ian McEwan wrote several dark, macabre novels, but from whose oeuvre the book least in style to the rest of his stories is also the best: *Atonement*. In the book, two characters find their loves shattered by what is either the ignorant carelessness of a thirteen-year-old child or the cruel machinations of a destructive teenager. The choice of language depends, of course, on how strongly you feel about the matter.

From the movies: Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling’s chemistry in successive films; Hugh Grant’s wavy hair and his wry smile; Jack dying in the freezing sea after the downing of the Titanic (although, perhaps the real reason he didn’t get into the wooden panel with Rose is that he suspected that she was secretly 25); Wes Anderson’s oddball characters; every single annoying pair of Nora Ephron characters.

(Somewhere along this list, you’ll wonder why I interpret love to mean romance. A fair question. In addition, you’ll question the obstinacy of not prodding further, of not asking whether, in the end, all stories are simply love stories – another fair question. Forget them. Move on.)

As a child, I read about Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn; their story bounced around my mind for years. I remember parsing through characters who have roamed my mind: Lila and Elena in Ferrante’s Neapolitan Series; Arundhati’s Roy’s twins, doomed to tragedy; Obinze and Ifemelu, unconnected and soon-to-be-reconnected lovers. Or Prince Charles and Camilla, whose story I puzzled over because what did that mean, that she was his mistress? I understood a mistress to be a sophisticated form of a babysitter, and I wondered why their love scandalized the British public. Even though I understand the word now, I still think of Charles as married to his babysitter.

Another confusing word; lover. Lover: *Noun*. A partner in a sexual or romantic relationship outside marriage.

This is a meaning I reject. To me, a lover is: *Noun*, a person who loves; a person who is loved.

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Let us speed up now. Who writes about love? A few nights ago, at a birthday dinner for one of the IWP writers, I played a love song from Kenya by a musician called Harry Ritchie. In the song, the character sings to his lover (i.e., person he loves):

'Vaida, tomato baby / Milky baby / Fine legs baby.

Let no one lie to you / Let no one hoodwink you / Let no one show you their nakedness.

If you miss me, call me on the phone / I'll come and give you things (*Translated from the original.*)

Who writes about love anymore? Well, Harry Ritchie does, and Nelly and Kelly Rowland and Boyz II Men and KC & Jojo do. The writers of Mexican telenovelas (that are extremely popular in Kenya) do.

Another list. (I like lists, can you tell?) A list of Mexican telenovelas that I've loved. La Revancha. Secreto de Amor. Tormenta en el Paraiso. El Cuerpo del Deseo. In all of these, men, women, and people of all genders, try to find their perfect lover. This lover is often challenging to find. Unless, of course, you are a recently deceased British royal for whom your array of cousins is your dating pool.

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