

## 10/27/2023: WRITING LOVE IN THE AGE OF IRONY

*Love, arguably the most powerful human emotion, is a perennial challenge to the rational grip of narrative. Add to it the extra tripwire of irony, as seen in the ubiquity of rom-coms on everyone's screens. Is it possible to give true love (rather than "true love") its due in words? In every literary culture? What literary work has succeeded in making you truly feel that emotion?*

### 1. WONG YI Eva (Hong Kong)

There is a great tradition of love stories in Hong Kong literature. You may have heard of Eileen Chang (張愛玲)'s *Love in a Fallen City* (傾城之戀), a story about how it took the fall of Hong Kong after the Japanese invasion in order for the lovers to become aware of their true feelings for each other. Another famous example is the short story *A Girl Like Me* (像我這樣的一個女子) by Xi Xi (西西) in which a mortician is afraid of telling her boyfriend the truth about what she does for a living, because she's afraid that his love for her will die immediately if he knows that the faces she puts makeup on are no longer alive. In the heyday of the newspaper column, many talented Hong Kong writers such as Yi Shu (亦舒) filled the pages every day with fictional romance narratives to entertain the readers of the pre-internet era. My latest short stories collection, entitled *Ways to Love in a Crowded City* (擠迫之城的戀愛方法) also ran as a magazine column for two years. Although the title of the book may sound like I'm trying to teach readers every single way to win over a lover's heart, I am in no way interested in writing a self-help book. Instead, I wanted to use my short stories to demonstrate the various possible emotions and behaviors related to romantic love (including those of people feeling indifferent to or even repulsed by romantic love), and the ways in which romantic love is expressed by those living within the unique constraints of a crowded and busy city like Hong Kong.

I get it. Portrayals of love can feel so shallow and cheap sometimes, especially when used in advertisements as a shortcut to suggest if you use this product you'll live happily ever after; in cookie-cutter rom-coms; or in popular fiction often considered low-brow. I began publishing short stories as a newspaper columnist 15 years ago, and *Ways to Love in a Crowded City* was the first time I placed romantic love at the forefront of my work. As a columnist, I'm used to producing one short story every week, and doing that for months and years at a time requires the consistent generation of new and functional ideas for writing, which would be a huge challenge for anyone. Over the years, I have noticed that love is a marvelous tool for the fiction writer in a hurry: it can instantly bring conflict and motivation to any story, explain away all ridiculous behaviors and choices on the part of the characters, and add momentum to a story that doesn't seem to want to go anywhere, but needs to get out to your editor in only a few hours. Sprinkling romance into your half-baked story to make it interesting is so easy, like adding chicken bouillon to a pot of soup to save yourself hours of brewing your own stock on the scorching hot stove.

And it is precisely this dangerous convenience that motivated me to work as hard as I can, and to go as deeply as I can into certain issues that can only be revealed through stories about love, such as the Hong Kong culture of long working hours and working overtime at the office leading to insecurity in the heart of a lover; couples making out in IKEA instead of at home because their rent is too high;

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lesbian couples contemplating emigration to Taiwan because in Hong Kong gay marriage remains illegal. Albert Camus wrote in *The Plague*, “Perhaps the easiest way of making a town's acquaintance is to ascertain how the people in it work, how they love, and how they die.” My stories use love as a way to play with techniques in fiction writing, and as a way to unravel the unique conditions of life in the city I call home. Love is a very powerful, basic human need, containing great power to help humans survive through impossibly painful times. Case in point: three months into the initial pandemic lockdown, all of my close friends told me that their exes were coming out of the woodwork and asking to reunite. I spent so many hours telling them not to do anything stupid out of loneliness. But I get it. Love offers comfort and distraction, especially in times of chaos and great distress. It’s a safe haven. Love stories do exactly the same thing.

The pandemic hit during the run of my column *Ways to Love in a Crowded City*. So I wrote about lovers arguing over whether the boyfriend should or should not go see his passionate ex-girlfriend who had promised to give him surgical masks – these were in city-wide shortage at the time. I wrote about another boyfriend being adorably jealous because his girlfriend’s entire office got to see inside her bedroom when she was forced to make Zoom calls while working from home, her typical tiny Hong Kong apartment without a separate room to be used as an office, for that matter not even a wall that looked remotely professional. I wrote about a girl in a fourteen-day self-quarantine finding peace in her suffering, knowing that her self-imprisonment protected her lover living in the same city from the risk of being infected if she turned out to be patient zero in the community after all:

妳喜歡她，很喜歡很喜歡她，喜歡得願意忍耐著不去見她，只要她安好。那麼，就繼續忍耐下去吧。等隔離期結束，等疫情過去，等她回覆。妳從她送來的物資裡取出兩片紫菜，把它黏在上唇內側扮成兩隻長牙，然後裝鬼臉自拍給她看：我是一隻海象，剛從澳洲游水回港，請多多指教，嘿嘿，妳說。然後妳獨自躺在酒店空虛的 king size 床裡，等她在自己家的單人床上醒來，笑著回應。

[You like her, you really, really like her, you like her so much that you’re willing to be patient and not see her, as long as she’s safe and sound. And so, just keep on being patient. Wait for the quarantine period to pass by, wait for the outbreak to subside, wait for her to reply. You pluck two pieces of seaweed from the goodies she sent, stick them inside your upper lip to form two tusks, then make a funny face and send her a selfie. I’m a walrus who just swam back to Hong Kong from Australia—it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, heehee, you say. Then you lie alone in the hotel’s empty king-size bed, waiting for her to wake up in her own single bed at home, chuckling in response.] *Excerpt from “Patient,” translated by Jennifer Feeley.*

Through these pandemic love stories, I tried to speak to the readers of the magazine in real time, and let them know that they are not alone, that I am also there, with a story that brings gentleness and comfort. Love stories are one of the best forms of entertainment in times of peace, and a form of temporary escape and emotional outlet in times of turmoil. Love stories are also my way of

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demonstrating what living in Hong Kong was like during an exceptionally trying time. I guess, in a way, there's nothing that love and its stories cannot do.

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