

The Course of Love Summary

By Alain de Botton

'Love is a skill, rather than an enthusiasm.'

The Course of Love is a fictional self-help book that looks at how we understand and sustain relationships. Through his fictional case study, De Botton instructs us how love grows and develops, changes course, and how our expectations need to shift alongside it.

Alain de Botton is a philosopher and author who merges experience with theories. He provides a lens through which to analyze contemporary topics, and shows how philosophy can add tremendous insight into the banalities of everyday life.

In *The Course of Love*, we're introduced to a fictional couple, Rabih and Kirsten, and the all-important narrator who adds wisdom and insight into the couple's relationship. Early on, we're told, 'He and Kirsten will marry. They will suffer. They will frequently worry about money. They will have a girl first, then a boy. One of them will have an affair. There will be passages of boredom. They'll sometimes want to murder one another, and on a few occasions to kill themselves. This will be the real love story.' This summary of the couple's love journey provides a scaffold early on, which allows the reader to remain distanced, while also critically examining their inner worlds.

This Briefer summary will guide us through relationship progression. We'll look at how our opinions and beliefs about love are often at odds with reality, and how expectations have been built around romanticism and marriage. However, because, according to de Botton, "love is a skill," we

can all learn to equip ourselves better, and to challenge our beliefs about how to sustain it. So often we're limited by our expectations of love, and we need to understand that the feelings we have when we begin a relationship, are not the feelings that will take us through the course of love. De Botton asserts, 'Love can endure, only when one is unfaithful to its beguiling opening ambitions.'

Romanticism

'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.'

If we want long-lasting relationships, we need to cast away any assumptions about the longevity of romance and infatuation. By taking us through the progression of Rabih Khan and Kirsten McClelland's love life, we're shown how infatuation and "happily ever after" are incompatible.

The trouble is that we've been set up to believe that our soulmate is just around the corner. Many of us dream of marriage or at least have a picture of what it looks like, and we imagine that it occurs because we've found the elusive "one," or our "soulmate." When we first become infatuated with someone, we're utterly bewitched. We fixate on this person, notice every detail, and pick up on mannerisms and qualities that we find attractive. Most often than not, we build an image of the person before we've even spoken to them, and the observations that we make help us to construct a fantasy. All of the first impressions we get are subjective, and any objectivity doesn't make an appearance until a lot further down the road. We act intuitively and without reason or rationality.

Infatuation is all about the small details from which we construct a grand narrative. We imagine a future; we might even hum the wedding march. And although our first infatuations seldom amount to anything, we remember them because they're significant to us. So it is that these small infatuations begin to form all of our understandings of love.

Our understanding of love is also based on those missed opportunities, and the missed encounters. For anyone with an inkling of a romantic sensibility, the search for a soulmate can form the principal purpose of life. For many of us, the quest for meaning is significant, and historically we've looked to deities to fulfill this. Nowadays, we're more inclined to look towards humans for building a meaningful life.

While romanticism is no doubt a wonderful state of being, we should approach it with caution. If we enter into marriage or a long-term relationship, with the idea that romance awaits us around every corner, then we're doomed to fail. By all accounts, de Botton is telling us that we shouldn't "fall" in love; love is something that we *agree* to. If we approach love pragmatically, we can also learn how to get better at it. Rather than expecting problems to be solved with a strong dose of love, we can learn how to work through them by communicating effectively.

How Did You Meet?

'What we call love, is typically only the start of love.'

Why do we set such store by meet-cutes? We know that they're a big deal in Hollywood films, and the basis for any wedding speech, but why are they so significant?

Perhaps the first meeting is significant because they form a precis or condensed form of the entire relationship. Maybe this first meeting comes to symbolize the unique nature of a relationship, and how with the "right meeting," they're less likely to fail? Meetings become metaphors for love. The beginning of a relationship gets a lot of attention, but are they valuable and full of wisdom? What can we learn from how people meet? Surely it's better to ask couples about how they came to a mutual decision about their bedroom color scheme, the design of the sofa, or the china pattern?

We can run into potential problems when we make snap decisions about love, and instead of methodically weighing up a person's inner and outer qualities, relying on our instincts. While this all seems perfectly innocent, the trouble is that when we first encounter people, we usually perform impression management. We edit ourselves, and we shield the aspects of our character that we might consider flaws. We don't prioritize showing our true self; we read into silences, we navigate anxieties. It's a performance. The real love story begins once we decide to commit to the person and continue from the first meeting.

The Things We Do For Love

'Love means admiration for qualities in a lover that promise to correct our weaknesses and imbalances. Love is a search for completion.'

We often fall in love with the qualities in another that we don't ourselves possess. We look for complementary strengths, and we seek out a host of aspirational attributes. Because humans are by our very nature incomplete, we have a desire to make ourselves whole, and we do this by making up for our deficiencies by seeking out qualities in others.

When we enter into love, we share stories, vulnerabilities, and we try to find balance. We take comfort in being comforted and providing comfort. We benefit from sharing our pain, frustrations, and anxieties, and this allows us to be more authentic. De Botton says that, 'Love reaches a pitch at those moments when our beloved turns out to understand, more clearly than others have ever been able to, and perhaps even better than we do ourselves, the chaotic, embarrassing, and shameful parts of us.'

Once impression management breaks down, and we can be ourselves around our partner, then we begin to experience deep gratitude. Through understanding our partners, we can predict how they will behave and react, and there's an enormous sense of relief when we can reveal secrets and hidden things about ourselves.

Sex and Intimacy

'The particulars of what arouses us may sound odd and illogical, but seen from close up they carry echoes of qualities we long for in other, purportedly saner areas of existence: understanding, sympathy, trust, unity, generosity, and kindness. Beneath many erotic triggers lie symbolic solutions to some of our greatest fears, and poignant allusions to our yearnings for friendship and understanding.'

Sex is risky and exciting. While we may think that it's something innately physical and physiological, it's so much more than that. De Botton explains that sex is 'Not so much about sensations as it is about ideas.'

Foremost among them, the idea of acceptance and the promise of an end to loneliness and shame.' When we embark on a sexual relationship, the first step is getting over any sense of shyness or shame, and once we've done this, it's immensely liberating.

Creating a mutual sexual bond with someone allows us to be more open and develop intimacy. Once we reach this point in a relationship, it's liberating, and we may find ourselves speaking freely about what it was about the person next to us that we first found attractive. We may go into detail about when we first started to think about them sexually. And then, we might naturally progress to discussing fantasies and learning surprising things about a partner.

Sex and sexuality are so often shrouded in guilt, so when we find a partner to share it with, it becomes easier. We've been led to believe that purity is a sign of "goodness," and that being sexual makes us bad. However, through sex, we can translate so many of our feelings, and turn appreciation and tenderness into a tangible physical act.

Then Comes Marriage

'Marriage: a hopeful, generous, infinitely kind gamble taken by two people who don't yet know who they are or who the other might be, binding themselves to a future they cannot conceive of and have carefully omitted to investigate.'

As with the "how did you two meet" question, questions around the nature of the proposal are infinitely fascinating. Why we accept, or make a proposal, becomes fodder for anyone with a vague interest in making conversation. Again, the proposal becomes the stepping stone for all the hopes and dreams of married life.

Most proposals take a lot of thought, effort, research, and planning. Comparatively, almost no thought goes into the actual marriage. None of us read books on it, study it extensively, interview other married couples, or do empirical research. When we scrutinize the failed relationships of others, we chalk them up to incompatibility, lack of imagination on the part of the participants, laziness, or general idiocy. We feel as if our own marriages will be exempt from marital issues because we have something "special" and "unique."

Historically, marriage was based on what was termed "logical reasons." Political, social, or economic benefits were at the heart of most marriages. Later, reasons became entwined with sex. When sex before marriage was taboo, a lot of couples jumped into marriage. Once the taboo was lifted, decisions around marriage were calmer and less impulse-driven. Nowadays, the need to rush into marriage seems to be the need for company and the fear of being single and alone.

Marriage is based on feelings and instinct, and there's an element of danger. Marriage can result in destruction. So why is it that we're so ill-prepared for such a huge decision? If we look at the traditional Western marriage vows, we're given a list of promises, but with no sense of how to adhere to them. Religious and government institutions don't exactly provide us with an exhaustive list on how to stay married. Once we say "I do," we're on our own.

The Rhythms Of Married Life

'It is precisely when we hear little from our partner which frightens, shocks, or sickens us that we should begin to be concerned, for this may be the surest sign that we are being gently lied to or shielded from the other's imagination, whether out of kindness or from a touching fear of losing our love. It may mean that we have, despite ourselves, shut our ears to information that fails to conform to our hopes.'

Once committed to marriage, the routine starts to set in. Marriage is in many ways about the banalities of everyday life, so couples settle into a repetitive rhythm. Years melt into each other, and are punctuated by small decisions like what glassware to buy, and more significant decisions like where to live and whether to have children. Creating and making a home becomes the focus for many couples, while also being a source of many disagreements. The decision to have children adds a whole new dynamic to the routine of marriage. Parenthood is simultaneously tedious and exciting, and it also gives us a new perspective on hope and the future.

Agreements occur when both partners see the world in the same way, and disagreements happen when they don't. Small things like how to pack a dishwasher, and when to put things back into the fridge after use, become catalysts for bigger arguments. Compromise becomes the end game. And, marital struggles, like extended periods of silence, slammed doors, and immaturity, are things couples keep to themselves.

Struggles are normal, and form part of the fabric of marriage. Most couples experience financial woes, troubles at work, career crises, unexpected curveballs, and things not turning out as we hoped. More often than not, our expectations aren't met, and there's lingering disappointment and resentment.

The success of marriage also comes down to learning how we, and our

partner, deal with conflict and anxiety. Typical areas of disagreement include domestic responsibilities, the division of labor, and feeling valued. More serious issues such as coping with infidelity, jealousy, and betrayal, can also be part of the journey. The key is to be aware of how we rationalize our mistakes, what attachment style we have, and getting to know these things in our partner.

Perhaps one of the most profound insights is that 'We don't need to be constantly reasonable in order to have good relationships. All we need to have mastered is the occasional capacity to acknowledge, with good grace, that we may, in one or two areas, be somewhat insane.'

In Conclusion

'Ideally, art would give us the answers that other people don't. This might even be one of the main points of literature: to tell us what society at large is too prudish to explore. The important books should be those that leave us wondering, with relief and gratitude, how the author could possibly have known so much about our lives.'

The Course of Love is a didactic novel that gives us a crash course in relationships. And, by juxtaposing two different characters, it shines a very empathetic light on faults, flaws, and foibles. However, it's not just instructive; it's a humorous and witty take on a familiar story.

Mark Twain famously said that 'There is no such thing as a new idea. It is impossible. We simply take a lot of old ideas and put them into a sort of mental kaleidoscope. We give them a turn and they make new and curious combinations. We keep on turning and making new combinations indefinitely; but they are the same old pieces of colored glass that have been in use through all the ages.' So, although de Botton tells a relatively generic story that goes through the patterns of a long-term relationship,

the narrator's insights add theoretical grounding. All of us experience relationships, but often we don't have the theories to explain why they thrive or fail. Understanding "romantic pessimism" is profoundly enlightening.

De Botton teaches us about how past experiences lead us to behave and how powerful transference is. How often do we repatriate emotions and respond with irritation and anger over empathy? We're also given a fascinating case study on attachment theory that builds from theories that Amir Levine discusses in *Attached*.

Love is a skill, and emotional intelligence is a skill. However, as we've learned from marriage vows, so often we're told the basics, with no details on how to approach them. Relationships are about teaching and learning; they're also about intuiting our partner's needs. Once we approach relationships and love as imperfect, we're more likely to manage our expectations and realize that enthusiasm is an unsustainable dream.