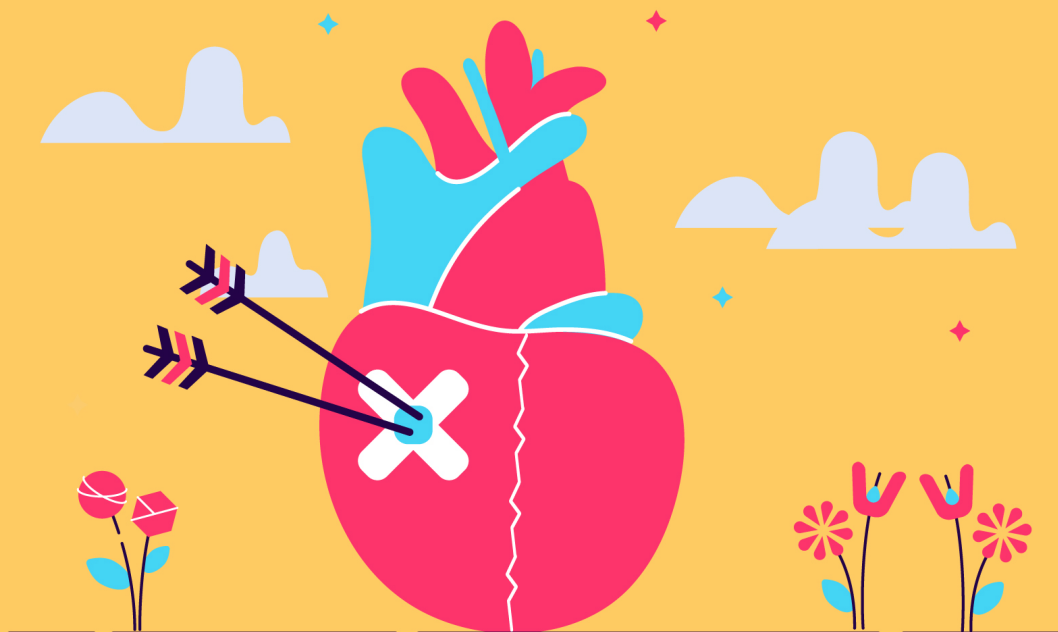


# SUMMARY

## UNREQUITED

LISA A. PHILLIPS



# **Summary of “Unrequited” by Lisa A. Phillips**

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Why we love people who will never love us back.

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# Introduction

Have you ever fallen in love with someone who didn't love you back? Maybe it's your sexy co-worker who doesn't realize you two are on the same planet. Maybe you've fallen for your best friend who's content to keep your relationship in the friendzone. No matter the circumstances, unrequited love hurts! And because it's so painful, we're often reluctant to admit that someone we love doesn't feel the same way. This can lead us to do crazy things as we go out of our way to get their attention or make them see what's so obvious to us. (Although thankfully, most of us don't take our unrequited passions in the same direction as stalker Joe Goldberg from the creepy hit TV series *You*).

But even if we don't become stalkers, many of us do waste our lives pining for someone in the hope that they'll one day wake up and realize that we were meant to be together. This book examines our complicated relationship with romantic obsession and documents the subtle differences that motivate some people to become stalkers, while providing actionable tips and socially acceptable methods to help the rest of us process our obsessions. The scariest part? The line between laughable Charlie Brown and Joe Goldberg is thinner than you think.

# Women Face Additional Stigma When Battling Unrequited Love

Have you ever been told, “he needs to feel like a man?” Many girls were told this as early as middle school when their strong personalities appeared to pose a threat to insecure boys who were put off by girls with a healthy sense of self-confidence. What this advice means, of course, is that men “need” to feel superior. That they “need” a sense of dominance in order to validate their masculinity. And although this topic may seem unrelated to the content of our text, the author observes that gender politics play a sizable role in our understanding of unrequited love. For example, if a man is rejected by a love interest who doesn’t share his feelings, it’s more socially acceptable for him to brood about it or engage in creepy, stalker-ish behavior. Why? Because our society still discusses male romantic pursuits with descriptive language like, “the hunt” or “the chase,” literally inviting men to pursue their love interests as prey.

By contrast, however, this “hunter instinct” is frowned upon in women and considered an example of unfeminine behavior. As a result, men are praised for “hunting down” their prospective partners, standing outside her window throwing pebbles, chasing her down at the airport to beg her to stay, or fighting to the death to prove themselves as her knight in shining armor. (For a more modern example, just think of The Police’s classic hit, “Every Move You Make”-- and the fact that most guys think it isn’t creepy!) But when women pursue the objects of their unrequited advances, it’s instantly classified as “Single White Female”-esque behavior. This contributes to the social perception of women as neurotic, psychotic, or attention-seeking, and traps women in an inexorable double bind that criminalizes them for pursuing their lovers even while society expects them to accept objectification. As you can see from these examples, unrequited love isn’t just painful-- it’s an unfair and unnecessarily gendered issue!

# Madly in Love

Have you ever noticed how love is often described in the same terminology as an illness? You are said to “fall in love” the same way you might say you “fell in a hole,” and the unexpected intensity of your drop is meant to characterize the depth of your passion. Similarly, you might say that you are “lovesick” or “madly in love” as though love is a mental illness with which you are afflicted. If these thoughts cross our minds, it might occur to us that this is funny wording and nothing more. But would it surprise you to know that “romantic obsession” is actually a real thing which has been diagnosed and treated by mental health professionals over the years?

Surprisingly, it doesn’t just occur in creepy cases involving stalkers, as you might expect. In fact, it’s most commonly treated as “lovesickness” in those cases when it manifests as depression or loss of appetite after a breakup. In many cases, a breakup might not even be involved; sometimes lovesickness simply occurs after you confess your feelings to someone and learn that they don’t feel the same way. This diagnosis has been in place since the thirteenth century, but psychologists and researchers began to flesh it out in the late 1970s and early ‘80s when mental health professionals noticed the gendered disparity at play in the history of the diagnosis.

For example, when lovesickness was diagnosed in men, it was historically well received and considered to be indicative of masculinity, in keeping with the gendered double standard we discussed in the previous chapter. By contrast, however, when women displayed the same symptoms, male mental health professionals usually accompanied this diagnosis with one of “hysteria” or “moral insanity,” designed to shame and silence women for experiencing the same romantic passions as men. Psychologist Dorothy Tennov attempted to dismantle this diagnosis in 1979 by renaming it “Limerence” and describing the diagnosis as a psychological state which produced complete emotional dependence on another person. Tennov argued that it is irrelevant whether those feelings are shared by the object of the sufferer’s affection. While in the grip of romantic obsessions, the love

interest is all that matters, even if their connection to the sufferer is distant and tenuous.

Helen Fisher, a biological anthropologist, expounded on this theory by asserting that love can literally act as a drug. In fact, her studies of people in love discovered that romantic feelings activate the same portion of the brain that responds to cocaine usage. This indicates that the feeling of being in love is extremely addictive like a drug; we pursue contact with the object of our affection or think about them constantly because it rewards our brains with a hit of happy chemicals like endorphins and dopamine. Her results prompted additional researchers to get in on the study of love. Internationally renowned scholars William Cupach and Brian Spitzberg conducted their own analysis and concurred with Tennov and Fisher's findings. However, they went on to elaborate and conclude that romantic obsession isn't always about your feelings for that person.

Rather, due to a process that Cupach and Spitzberg call "goal linking," it might be about something more. According to their research, goal linking occurs when we link a smaller, more easily achievable goal like finding love with something more complicated, like conquering our low self-esteem or finally practicing self acceptance. Our hope is that if we can achieve the smaller goal, we can also accomplish the bigger, overarching goal. However, these desires aren't always conscious in our minds, so we don't realize that's what we're doing. This also makes us extra reluctant to let go of our romantic obsessions because we fail to realize why they have such a strong hold in our lives.



# When Love Literally Makes You Crazy

But now that we've discussed the concept of lovesickness and the genuine science behind it, let's take a look at the darker side of romantic obsession--the side that really does result in people behaving like Hedra Carlson from *Single White Female*. This doesn't happen to everyone because it occurs when people take rejection especially badly. Perhaps these individuals had a fragile sense of self to begin with. Perhaps they were already very sensitive people or felt as though they didn't have a lot going for them in life. No matter what their extenuating circumstances were, romantic rejection often intensifies their personal struggles and causes them to become overwhelmingly self-absorbed.

As a result, they struggle to see the other person's side of the story or accept that, as tragic as it is, it's possible that they just might not be what that person needs or wants right now. Instead, they can only see the tragedy that is happening to them and they become obsessed with the cycle of rejection and pain that characterizes their experience. This usually results in one of two types of responses: masochism or narcissism. In the case of the former, the jilted lover will become depressed and despondent. They may be obsessed with stalking the object of their affection on social media, asking mutual friends for updates, or any other small way of "staying in touch" that allows them to continue believing they have a connection with this person. Even though they know this "connection" isn't real or even the same thing as being in a relationship with that person, they may be unable to stop as a result of issues like goal-linking or limerence, as we discussed in the previous chapter. They may feel unlovable or spiral into depression, but these feelings often don't motivate the person to let go of their obsession or pursue an attainable partner.

Narcissism, by contrast, is where we start to see the really creepy stuff that becomes the stuff of thrillers. People who experience narcissism as a result of romantic rejection generally don't start out with clinically diagnosed narcissism. They might be otherwise rational people who succumb to

narcissistic thinking and behavior as a result of being rejected. But because unrequited love can severely distort your perspective if you let it, people who fall on the narcissistic end of the romantic rejection spectrum may be angry and want to make their love interest suffer for rejecting them. Alternatively, they may truly believe that their behavior is appropriate because it mimics examples of socially acceptable romantic gestures.

For example, sending your partner flowers at work is romantic. But it's a bit creepy if that person isn't expecting them, doesn't know who you are, and doesn't know how you found out where they work. It's even worse if they've explicitly told you to leave them alone! Someone who's thinking clearly would recognize this and acknowledge that someone else might find this would be disturbing or scary. But if you're blinded by narcissism or romantic obsession, you might not notice when you descend into truly scary, Joe Goldberg-level territory! That's exactly why it's important to maintain a healthy relationship with friends, family, or even a therapist who can lovingly provide you with an honest assessment of your behavior and enable you to get help if you need it.

# Find Your Adele Moment

We all know Adele, right? Who doesn't love Adele?! We love her for her talented singing voice and her authenticity. But we also love her for her heartfelt and sad songs, which were inspired by her catastrophic breakup in her early twenties. Adele herself has frequently said that she might never have found such perfect material for her songs nor risen to fame as quickly as she did if she had not experienced the pain of unrequited love. So, while that's not to say that suffering is a prerequisite for art, Adele's story serves as an example of the amazing things that can happen when you find a creative outlet for your pain.

As you can see through Adele's success story, she didn't allow unrequited love to make her a narcissist or a masochist. She didn't go off the deep end or start stalking her ex (even though she may have wanted to!) And even though she was sad, she didn't allow her pain to consume her. But the fact that she channeled her pain into a creative task is even more remarkable because it demonstrates an important psychological principle. Researchers have found that, believe it or not, the creative process is shockingly similar to the process of falling in love! That's because love and creativity activate the same regions of the brain. Similarly, pursuing someone you love and pursuing a creative project are both actions which release a flood of happy hormones in your brain.

Because your brain is happily drowning in dopamine and endorphins, this triggers the same addictive responses in your brain as we've seen through the examples of being in love or snorting cocaine. However, the best aspect of these similarities is that creative projects result in an outcome that is both positive and constructive. Being addicted to pursuing your love interest might drive you to pursue some questionable decisions, but pursuing your creative projects will just make you happy and put something new and beautiful into the world! That's why the author argues that creativity is the best form of therapy for someone suffering from unrequited love. Sure, you can't take your art on a date or snuggle up with it at night,

and of course it can't replace that special person you were hoping for. But it can fill you with a renewed sense of purpose and passion and help you get your life back.

## Final Summary

At one point or another, pretty much everyone has experienced the unpleasant sensation of loving someone who doesn't love you back. This is a uniquely sad experience and it frequently results in a downward spiral towards depression or obsession as people get lost in feelings of worthlessness or futile attempts to make their love interest reciprocate their feelings. As a result, many people develop toxic attitudes or thought patterns that contribute to the deterioration of their lives and emotional states. Some can even spiral into narcissistic stalker territory!

That's why the author argues that it's important to dissect and understand the science behind unrequited love. If we understand how it operates in our brains, we can learn the right strategies for combating it. To that end, the author recommends finding your "Adele moment" by channeling your passion into a creative project as famous singer Adele did after her breakup.



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