

SUMMARY

ALL ABOUT LOVE

BELL HOOKS



Summary of “All About Love” by bell hooks

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Learn about love from one of America’s greatest
Black feminists.

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Introduction

When did you first begin to base your identity around the concept of romantic love? You might not even realize you've done it, but for most of us, the indoctrination process starts early. In cartoons and Disney movies, the same old cycle is reiterated: girl meets boy, girl falls in love, girl's life is charmed and she lives happily ever after. Gone is displeasure, discomfort, or pain. Gone is the presence of conflict or strife. The magic of Disney promises that once you find that special someone, your perfect life will begin. And if we don't articulate it in precisely those words, many of us internalize this message at a young age and incorporate it into our worldview. We believe that we won't be complete until we find a partner. We commonly refer to our partners as our "other halves" or "better halves," intensifying the implication that we need someone else to be whole. And as you've probably seen firsthand, this generates a host of problems in our society.

In All About Love, we'll explore the flaws in this ideology and the negative impacts it generates. We'll learn how to restore our idea of love and examine healthy practices for dating and self-improvement. Put simply, over the course of this summary, we'll take a good, hard look at what love really is.

How do you Define Love?

Have you ever been asked this question before? Have you ever had to think about it? Many people are interested in knowing how others define love, so some researchers conducted a survey that involved asking elementary-school-aged children to explain what love meant to them. One little boy replied that, “When a person loves you, they say your name different. You just know your name is safe in their mouth.” A little girl stated that, “Love is when you tell a boy you like his shirt and then he wears it everyday.” Another little boy affirmed that, “Love is when daddy comes in all sweaty and smelly and mommy still tells him that he is handsomer than Robert Redford.” Now, all of these answers are pretty cute and, to tell the truth, they’re probably a lot more insightful than the answers we might come up with as adults!

Because when you really think about it, we often have deeply misguided ideas about love. For example, we often confuse lust with love, mistaking our physical attraction for a genuine desire to love and support someone for the rest of their lives. Similarly, our feelings can be manipulated and we can be blind to someone’s true intentions. For example, we might believe them when they say they love us, even if their actions tell a very different story. This often results in people being used and abused under the guise of love. Likewise, it’s possible that we can be blind to our own intentions; we might think we love someone, but really, we love what they do for us or how they make us feel. And in even more heartbreaking scenarios, people often stay in extremely abusive or toxic relationships because they want so desperately to believe that their partners love them.

With the prevalence of these misconceptions, it’s no surprise that people wind up using and abusing each other or breaking each other’s hearts. The world is full of so much pain and, sadly, a good deal of it occurs because we are so confused about love. So, what can we do? How can we clear up these misconceptions and find the true definition of love? How can we heal our pain? The author suggests that the answer is simple: we need to change our

perspective. Because we think of love as a feeling, we often make decisions-- and base our definition of love-- on the presence (or lack) of that feeling in our lives. But the author argues that we shouldn't think of love as a feeling at all. Instead, we should borrow from the classic old adage which posits, "Love is a verb," and think about love as a continuous action rather than a feeling that comes and goes. This, she posits, will help us to alter both our perspective and our definition of love. And as a result, we will both love people differently and change our definition of what it looks like when someone loves us.

What's Love Got to do With It?

Have you ever used a dating app like Tinder or Bumble? If you have, you probably exerted a very calculated effort in curating the persona you presented to the world. For example, you probably chose a sexy or appealing photo of yourself because you hoped it would make a prospective partner say, "Ooh, I want to go out with her!" Likewise, you might have listed some accomplishments, talents, or hobbies that would make you sound smart, funny, or interesting. But you probably didn't take an unflattering selfie first thing in the morning when you've just woken up and haven't brushed your teeth. Likewise, you probably didn't write a bio that said something like, "I have no hobbies or interests and I'm still on my parents' phone plan." Even if those things were true, you probably didn't say them!

So, does that mean you're lying? Well, yes and no. Are you trying to present yourself as the best and most interesting version of you? Of course. Is that a bad thing? Not necessarily. Everybody wants to put their best foot forward and everybody wants people to think well of them, even if they aren't necessarily on their best behavior at all times. And on the surface, that's not so bad. But it becomes a problem when you mislead somebody by presenting them with this awesome, flawless version of yourself and then, weeks later-- or perhaps even on the first date!-- they realize that your profile picture was actually just a photo of Margot Robbie and that you're nothing like what they thought.

The author aptly observes that this is extremely problematic, but that it happens all the time! In fact, it's so commonplace that it's actually been normalized. The normalization of lying is also a heavily gendered issue. If you're a woman, you've probably already noticed this a thousand times over the course of your life. For example, men use love to get sex, manipulating a woman's feelings and encouraging her to confuse his lust for love. Likewise, women often feel pressured to present themselves as ditzy, clumsy, or helpless in order to bolster a fragile male ego. And these gendered lies can

even impact a person's access to professional or educational advancement! Given the prevalence of dishonesty in our society and in our romantic relationships, it's no wonder that our search for love often leaves us feeling confused and manipulated.

The Danger of “Falling” in Love

Who hasn't heard the expression “we fell in love?” It seems like this phrase-- or some version of it-- is present in every song, movie, book, and TV show we encounter! In fact, we are constantly bombarded by the idea that two characters met and “fell in love.” Or your friend tells you that meeting her new partner “was just fate” or “meant to be.” A new romance might be “written in the stars,” while two new lovers might be “starstruck.” Likewise, you might have heard it said that “love is blind” or that you “just can't help falling in love.” And because these phrases-- like lying!-- have been so normalized, you might not see anything wrong with them. But have you noticed the one thing they all have in common? Although these phrases can apply to a variety of different people and scenarios, the one thing they have in common is the implication that love is helpless. That it's a mystical thing beyond your control.

Have you ever stopped to question whether that's accurate? Is it true that you simply “fall in love” the same way you fall in a hole? And if you can fall in love, is it equally true that you can fall out of it? The author observes that this perception is one of the primary flaws in our societal view of love. Because if we envision love as being a mystical force that leaves us helpless, we are absolved of all responsibility. In fact, we're even absolved of any need for commitment. After all, if you couldn't help falling in love with a person, you can't really help falling out of love either, can you? So, when things don't work out, it can't be because you failed to love and appreciate another person or because you neglected to put in the time and effort. No, it must simply be because you just fell out of love!

As you've probably already figured out, the author believes that this is both profoundly untrue and extremely problematic. That's because it prevents us from viewing love as something that requires work and commitment. It's also in complete opposition to the ideology we considered in chapter one: the belief that love is a verb, not a feeling. Because if love is an action that we must intentionally take, then it can't be something that just overwhelms

us. So, if we want to learn to love our partners properly, then we have to accept that love is more than just a hazy feeling that envelops us and then spits us out. We must take a good, hard look at ourselves and identify who we are as people, what we want in a relationship, and what we can give to a partner.

The author believes that this last step is especially important because, all too often, when we consider a relationship, we think about what we want out of somebody else. And to an extent, that's not a bad thing. It's okay to want to surround yourself with people who are loving and kind, who will support, encourage, and strengthen you. It's okay to know what you're looking for and what qualities make a good partner. But it's also important to consider what you have to give. For example, are you prepared to be supportive, encouraging, and strong in return? Are you a good listener? Are you willing to be honest with your partner, even when that means telling them something they don't want to hear? Are you willing to love them in good times and bad? Will you love them when you're tired, angry, or depressed?

It's important to take these questions into consideration before beginning a new relationship. That's because these questions can help you to identify your potential compatibility-- or lack thereof. And if you test your knowledge of your prospective partner against what you know about yourself and what you're willing to give, you can get an idea of the relationship's future and whether or not it will be successful. This will also save you the trouble of deciding that you've helplessly "fallen in love" with the wrong person and realizing it too late!

And last but not least, being intentional in love can help you in another area. Because the approach described above is based in realism, it can also help you to avoid a common mistake: falling for the fairytale fantasy. Whether you've thought about it in precisely those terms or not, we've all been there. We've all gotten swept up in the picture perfect images portrayed by romance movies or the blissful lyrics of love songs. Because the media only represents a very one-sided image of romance, we often

succumb to the mistaken idea that it's supposed to look like that all the time. Even if we know real life isn't always perfect, sometimes we still find ourselves being unreasonably disappointed when our picture perfect romances are revealed to be less than perfect.

Maybe your knight in shining armor snores. Maybe, when you get to know each other better, you realize your significant other has some nagging insecurities or unattractive traits. Your moments together stop feeling like a scene from a romance movie. And at this point, many people grow disillusioned and decide to jump ship. Because it's not perfect, we assume that it must be fated to self-destruct. But that's not always true at all! While it's certainly true that some people are just incompatible or that some partners are toxic to each other, that's not always the case. Sometimes relationships are abandoned because people have the wrong ideas or assume that the relationship is doomed just because the honeymoon period has ended.

But the author knows that real love only flourishes with time, trust, commitment, and mutual communication. In fact, she believes that mutual growth is the most important ingredient for a successful relationship. That's because mutual growth involves honesty and realism. You accept that you're attracted to each other, but that neither of you are perfect. You accept that you're going to have bad days, stressful days, or days where you get on each other's nerves. You accept that you both have room to grow and improve. And rather than giving up on each other, you're committed to growing together and encouraging each other to become better.

And in doing so, it's also important to remember that traditional gender roles are impediments to growth. When we assume that men and women inhabit separate spheres, with separate responsibilities, and separate emotional landscapes, we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to grow together. So, as you seek to build a healthy and loving relationship, try to let go of toxic, preconceived notions about male and female roles. Instead, work on replacing those ideas with a free and open-minded commitment to

growing with your partner and embracing the people you are. Because that's what real love is all about.

Final Summary

Our society is fraught with a host of toxic misperceptions about love. Often, we misunderstand what love is, what it means, and what it looks like, and this can result in a variety of unhealthy attitudes and relationships. But the author believes that love, at its core, is a verb. Love is an action, not a feeling that simply comes and goes, and this means that we must be committed, intentional, and generous in our attitudes toward love. And when we reconstruct our idea of love, we can build healthy and committed relationships that are grounded in mutual growth, respect, and trust.



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