

5 Great Reads for Hopeless Romantics

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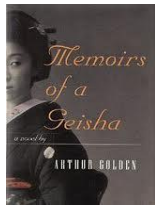


UNH lecturer and author Stephanie Harzewski

As an instructor of such undergraduate standards as “The Rise of the Novel” and “British Literature, 1800-Present,” you might expect I’d take a traditional route when

offering up a list of good Valentine's Day reads. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), say, with its humble and plain governess who becomes a heroine through courage, self-possession, and a generous heart, or Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, whose Elizabeth Bennett is regularly singled out for her independent mind, quick wit, and resistance to marriage offers of convenience.

But when *UNH Today* asked me for some selections for its first-ever Valentine's themed issue, I couldn't help but think of love in its many guises – romantic, filial, forsworn, taboo. Here, then, is a quintet of narratives that are a mix of traditional man-woman love plots and stories that brought me to the profession of teaching English with their artistry and haunting quality.



Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997) tells the fictional story of a geisha working in Kyoto, Japan, before and after World War II. The novel has a nearly epic scope, and over a span of decades and locations its exquisite narrative voice considers the role of destiny, fate, and the concept of the soul mate. I think the novel offers one of the most rapturous endings of romantic love in contemporary literature – though Golden and his literary muse and information source, retired geisha Mineko Iwasaki, experienced a less happy ending. After publication Iwasaki sued Golden for breach of contract and defamation of character, and his publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, settled out of court for an undisclosed sum.

The Lover is an autobiographical coming-of-age novella by Marguerite Duras, set in 1929 French Indochina. The story narrates a clandestine romance between a pubescent girl from a financially strapped French family and an elegant, wealthy Chinese man some twenty years her senior. The telling of the story as a flashback, with majestic opening and closing paragraphs, offsets what technically is a tale of pedophilia and economic disparity.



The recipient of the 1984 Prix Goncourt, *The Lover* has been published in over forty languages.



"The Red Convertible" (1984), a short story by Louise Erdrich, is about two brothers and their titular Olds convertible. Set in 1974 on a North Dakota Chippewa reservation, this dark spin on the coming-of-age story is a masterpiece of compression. A young Vietnam veteran's struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder and his sibling's efforts to bring his 'old' brother back through the deliberate damaging and restoration of a classic car comprise a moving account of familial love and loyalty in challenging circumstances.

Annie Proulx's 1997 short story "Brokeback Mountain" pushes the theme of love between two men into forbidden territory as it follows two Wyoming ranch hands over the course of 20 years. A landmark text of the LGBT movement, this story of tragic love represents for me an exemplary piece of nature writing in its parallels between the weather and the ranch hands' relationship. I found Proulx's original to be, if possible, sadder than its well-known Academy Award-winning movie adaptation, its closing a brutal, psychologically realistic portrait of lost love and the high price of homophobia.





The children's book *Grandfather's Journey* is based on author Allen Say's grandfather's crossing of the Pacific Ocean from Japan to the United States and back. The 1991 recipient of the Caldecott Medal for illustration, this short tale meets the obvious criteria for romance as its protagonist returns to his homeland to marry his childhood sweetheart, but also examines a different kind of love – the love of place.

I first encountered *Grandfather's Journey* as a twenty-something on a voyage of my own from Philadelphia to New Hampshire to teach at UNH. While grateful for the natural beauty of my surroundings and the charm of the historic architecture, I missed the tastes and sounds of West Philadelphia; missed, too, my hometown of Staten Island, where my parents have lived since the 1960s. A world away from my personal touchstones, *Grandfather's Journey* had for me the remarkably ability to conjure nostalgia, and the feeling for two places called “home” offers appeal for all ages.

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