Introduction

My sister describes the state of something being a psychological or personal “issue” for someone – a trauma, compulsion, phobia, or obsession, for example – as “having brain spaghetti”. For example, apparently she has spaghetti about me pinning her down as a child and tickling her until she screamed for mercy. She knows this because when her spouse tried to do the same, the experience she had as a child came flooding back as a complex tangle of fears, feelings and mental images. Notwithstanding the trauma inflicted on a sibling in my youth, the spaghetti metaphor is a simple but useful tool for explaining how complex our experiences are, and I bring it up here because I believe a lot of people have spaghetti about love.

In this chapter I explore the idea of love, particularly romantic love, and how people might come to have spaghetti about it. I also expand my earlier claim that love is a moral issue by examining the discourses surrounding it. In Western society, we grow up on a diet of popular discourses about relationships and what they mean. Many of these discourses are gendered – where intimate relationships are concerned, for men the discourse is predominantly about sex, for women it is romantic love, although of course the division is not so black and white. Discourses about love and sex also tend to be predominantly heteronormative, which is to say, focused on heterosexual monogamous relationships and traditional masculinity and femininity. Nevertheless, as we shall see, sex and love are two issues over which spaghetti abounds, and the relationship between the two
is probably one of the most complex with which people of all genders and sexualities in our society are faced. To that end, this chapter will examine some of the more enduring discourses characterizing romantic love and what they might mean for us.

**Discourses of romantic love**

**The discourse of enchantment**

In popular culture, romantic love is first and foremost a discourse of enchantment. Christina Perri, for example, sings about loving someone for a thousand years, and notions such as this abound in popular music, literature, film, and everyday parlance.

I have died everyday waiting for you
Darling don’t be afraid I have loved you
For a thousand years
I’ll love you for a thousand more

Simplistically, we might think of Perri’s words as a metaphor for the pain and yearning experienced while waiting for the “right person” to come along. When we meet “the one”, we feel as if we have known them forever, and that finally, fate has brought us together. When we meet our destined partner, our soul mate, we become enchanted with each other and with love itself. “A Thousand Years” was made popular as part of the soundtrack for the *Twilight* film series and echoes with excruciating precision the discourse played out between the two main characters, Bella and Edward. I will explore the *Twilight* series in more detail later in this chapter and in chapters 4 and 6. At this point, I want to focus on the song itself and how it beautifully depicts some of the most compelling contemporary discourses about romantic love. In doing so, I have no intention of demonizing love, or setting it up as a “straw man” responsible for all the ills in our society. Rather, I want to explore the richness of the concept and how deeply rooted it is within the psyche of many contemporary relationships.

Indeed, “A Thousand Years” resonates with me personally. Having been married and divorced, then through two unsuccessful relationships over the past 20-odd years, I was determined that I was better off without intimate relationships, happy to live peacefully with my
almost-grown up daughter and enjoying the solitary contentment of having (for the most part) only myself to worry about. In fact, as a philosopher, a researcher and a feminist, I had analysed love and relationships to death, and come to the conclusion that women have been duped by romance for far too long. Nevertheless, one summer a couple of years ago I met someone who managed to do what I considered the impossible. I met my partner in November but we really didn’t date until January. I didn’t want a relationship and said so several times. Jaded feminist that I am, I let it pass as the usual infatuation, figuring it would dissipate quickly and I would have my solitude back. She persisted, however, and at the airport one evening on her way to New Zealand, she texted me the name of a song and asked me to look for it online. I was lying in bed playing on my iPad when I watched the music video of Christina Perri singing “A Thousand Years”. Uncharacteristically, I burst into tears.

“Head over heels” might seem like a strange term, even if you are, liked most of us, used to hearing it in common parlance about love and romance. However, it describes perfectly the rush of feeling, the lightheaded, confused happiness and delight that come with realizing that someone you like and admire loves you that much. So much, in fact, that it trips you into the “fall” that becomes romantic love. Now, I have to admit the jaded feminist in me prevented me from crossing into the foolish infatuation, the “crushed” romantic so well depicted in literature and film. My research and philosophizing about love had taught me what a mature intimate relationship should look like. Thus I endured the puppy eyes and mushy endearments of my lover only up to a point. I still, however, willingly bought into the romance and at least some of its common accompaniments, including commitment and, in fact, have mellowed out considerably from jaded to hopeful, even contented. The question is, how does someone like myself, who has deconstructed all the discourses on romance, and understands in minute detail how distorted and harmful much of it is, come to be “in love”? Apparently, this is a question many feminists ask of themselves under similar circumstances.

In the introduction to her edited collection, *Jane Sexes it up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire* (Johnson 2002), Merri Lisa Johnson explores just that question. She bemoans the fact that, as a feminist, she knows that all the heteronormative hype of romance is problematic, but at the same time wants it anyway:
Growing up with feminism is like an eccentric aunt always reminding us how smart we are, how we can do anything, be anyone, the women of my generation hesitate to own up to the romantic binds we find ourselves in, the emotional entanglements that compromise our principles as we shuttle back and forth between \textit{feminist} and \textit{girlfriend, scholar} and \textit{sex partner}.

(Johnson 2002: 14. Emphasis in original)

Johnson (2002: 15) goes on to argue that, if feminism is right, these obstacles signal “personal failures, individual shortcomings in the face of unlimited feminist opportunity”. She then immediately confesses to trying to convince a man to marry her for four years! In a discussion of the film \textit{Jerry Maguire}, where Tom Cruise’s character, Jerry, begs his wife to come back with the famous line, “You complete me”, Johnson (2002: 16) responds “Ohgodjesus [sic] – I could live on that for the rest of my life.” Clearly we are talking about some very complex discourses here.

Johnson claims that “Gen X” is confused by these conflicting messages, but I believe that this is understated – baby boomers like myself and some of my colleagues and friends are also feeling it, as are Gen Y’s. Indeed, Stevi Jackson was writing about this phenomenon as early as 1993 in her now famous paper “Even Sociologists Fall in Love” and it seems that since then little has changed for our generation. Indeed, it seems spaghetti abounds no matter which generation you belong to. To illustrate this point, I now turn back to the \textit{Twilight} saga film series, which provides a wealth of examples.

Interestingly, as I noted above, the female lead in the series is named Bella. One can’t help but make the automatic association between her character and that of Belle in Disney’s \textit{Beauty and the Beast}. Both characters are troublesome. Belle, the “Beauty” in the Disney film, is captured by a cranky beast who lives in a huge castle. Belle is the quintessential beautiful young ingénue who wins the beast over with her kind words and sweet manner. The facts that she has traded herself for the safety of her father and that the beast is abusive are downplayed, overtaken by the romantic storyline, where Belle eventually, through her sweetness and love, turns the beast into the perfect prince and they get married and live happily ever after.

The Bella of \textit{Twilight}, on the other hand, willingly falls under the spell of a century old vampire, Edward Cullen, who still looks 17.
Theirs is a very traditional and chaste relationship, though there is much sexual tension arising from the traditional values underlying Edward’s gentlemanly refusal to give into Bella’s lust for him (Kokkola 2011). The first time they meet, he yearns to suck her blood, but forces himself to contain his desire because he and his “family” (a group of vampires the creation of which stems back to the “father”, Carlisle Cullen) are “good” vampires who don’t kill people, preferring to dine only on animal blood. His desire for her blood is mingled with passionate romantic desire and a sense of the destiny of their meeting, both of which he feels he must suppress because he is too powerful and too ethical. She falls for him anyway, and the first two films are spent arguing the “fors” and “againsts” of them having sex and a relationship. Apparently he is so strong that he fears crushing her in his embrace, but also fears for her getting involved with him, as the only result can be her eventual death and transformation into a vampire like himself. In spite of Bella begging Edward to kill and transform her, he remains resolute, at least until the third film, where they marry and he whisks her off to Brazil for a honeymoon from which she returns covered in bruises. Eventually, he is forced to kill her and make her a vampire in order to save her from some Italian vampire Nazis.

If you have not had the dubious luck to have seen these films, my short summary might cause you to wonder how on earth an otherwise sane 17-year-old girl could be so masochistic. And there lies the main similarity between the Bella and Belle. Where Disney’s Belle transforms her beast through suffering and love, Twilight’s Bella is herself transformed by her suffering and love. Historically, this transformative notion of love is deeply embedded in Western culture. Burns argues that “the notion of romantic love in its idealistic, redemptive and sensual version” has been around since the twelfth century, when French poets such as Chrétian de Troyes wrote about romantic love as a “transformation of desire” (Besley 1994: 97; cited in Burns 2000)

Historically, passionate romantic love has been imbued with the ability to challenge traditional structures and taboos, to survive obstacles (even death) and to be a symbol of freedom and redemption to the extent that obstacles become an integral part of the love trajectory.

(Burns 2000: 482)
Bauman (2004), however, contends that the challenges of love inevitably lead to its demise; indeed, that love is always fatally transformed by its own achievement. Individuals who fall in love seek to fuse their duality into the “couple”. Love seeks to care for, to protect and therefore to possess, but the possessed will always seek freedom, and this tension is what ultimately forms love’s death wish. As Bauman (2004: Loc250) states, “Eros prompts a hand to be stretched toward the other – but hands that may caress may also clutch and squeeze,” and goes on to name “possession, power, fusion, and disenchantment” as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse for love.

The key to its destruction, he claims, is love’s desire for the other: “The protective net which love weaves caringly around its object enslaves its object. Love takes captive and puts the apprehended in custody; it makes an arrest, for the prisoner’s protection” (Bauman 2004: Loc 281). Nevertheless, people continue willingly to believe that love’s transformation is more like a “beautiful nightmare” – the sacrifice of the self, well worth the price. If sacrifice can transform the damaged and broken into something glorious and enduring, then sacrifice is a virtue, something to aspire to.

This is nowhere clearer than in Beauty and the Beast. Disney’s Beast is ugly and mean, but Belle’s willingness to sacrifice herself together with her ability to understand her Beast’s true inner (kind and courageous) self, transforms him into a kind and handsome prince, the ultimate prize. Twilight’s Edward, on the other hand, while potentially dangerous, is devastatingly handsome, which accords much more favourably to a Gen Y audience brought up in a society where appearances mean everything (Kokkola 2011). He is still a monster, but a good-looking one, and he also proves his worthiness by trying to protect Bella from her fate. How can she not fall for him and eventually convince him to proceed with the transformation that means they will be together forever?

One has to ruefully concede that Twilight’s Bella will love her Edward for a thousand years (and more)! The eternity of vampirehood is a rather crude metaphor for the eternity of romantic love, which is meant to endure until death and even after. The message is clear – “true” romantic love is enduring and worth suffering for. Taylor (2012: 31) argues that this combination of “masochistic” relationship and Bella’s “yearning for an undead subjectivity” is perceived as a “utopic site of possibility” for teens. This is bolstered by
the perception that their love is also fated, written in the stars, orchestrated so that they have no say in it. In Chapter 4, I will explore distortions of love and the relationship between love and suffering. For now, the important point is that in popular culture individuals are regarded as helpless in the face of love – which is not necessarily a bad thing, in spite of its dubious perspicacity.

Indeed, the hand of fate may usefully be blamed for many happy relationships, given the chances of actually finding someone compatible with whom one can tolerably live in close quarters for possibly decades, let alone feel close enough to maintain love. Alain de Botton (1997: 75) discusses “the general difficulty of maintaining an appreciative relationship with anything or anyone that was always around”. His discussion of Marcel Proust’s _In Search of Lost Time_ is instructive. Proust’s narrator is besotted by Gilberte. He cannot stop thinking about her, his every waking moment is taken up with imagining what she is doing and wearing. Eventually, they become friends and his yearning is finally requited. She invites him to tea and he marvels in her beauty and grace. The more he sees of her, however, the more his interest wanes.

...after a quarter of an hour in her drawing room, it is the time before he knew her, before she was cutting him cake and showing him affection, that starts to grow chimerical and vague...[This] suggests that having something physically present sets up far from ideal circumstances in which to notice it. Presence may in fact be the very element that encourages us to ignore or neglect it.

(de Botton 1997: 177, 179)

de Botton cleverly understands and expresses just how fickle our desires can be, remarking conversely that, quite logically, “deprivation drives us into a process of appreciation” (de Botton 1997: 179). In other words, we always want that which seems out of reach. Familiarity breeds contempt, as the old adage goes. The role of romance is to seduce us into believing that we can sustain desire for longer than it takes for the ink to dry on the marriage certificate. Thus, romance serves the dual purpose of maintaining heteronormative institutions such as marriage and monogamy, while giving people hope that a long future with the chosen one won’t turn into bored familiarity. Why else would people spend tens of thousands of dollars on elaborate weddings?
Eva Illouz (1997: 2) draws on this “connection between love and economy”, arguing that “romantic love has become an intimate, indispensable part of the democratic ideal of affluence that has accompanied the emergence of the mass market, thereby offering a collective utopia cutting across and transcending social divisions”. There are clear links between the economic function of marriage and the wedding ritual, which is a rite of passage throughout the developed world and is illustrated and depicted through popular culture – in film plots, for example, where lovers experience intense attraction to the point that they “are willing to endure separation in order to achieve union” (Wilding 2003: 373). The wedding marks the couple’s commitment to an enduring future together, demonstrated by economic markers of consumption and extravagance deemed appropriate for only the most important of social occasions. Marriage thereby becomes one of the modes of cultural transmission and social organization through which society is reproduced (Rosenblatt 1966; Coppinger and Rosenblatt 1968).

Berlant (2011) claims that these consumer-driven institutions work as vehicles for the reproduction of culture and society. She remarks that marriage and weddings rely on and reinforce “the temporality of the workday, the debt cycle and consumer practice and fantasy” (Berlant 2007: 765). In particular, the fantasies of upward mobility, political and social equality, job security and “lively and durable intimacy”, through which one “builds a life”, are reproduced via “the processes and procedures involved historically in the administration of law and bodies”. Romantic love, particularly the discourse of enchantment, governs bodies in particular ways for capitalist ends, reproducing the neo-liberal tendency to what Berlant (2011) calls “cruel optimism” – that is, the continued, mostly illusory hope for realization of the social-democratic promise of a life fulfilled.

But the economic imperative that impels lovers to plan weddings and honeymoons also has a darker side. According to Bauman, consumer culture treats love and relationships much like every other commodity – one shops for love much as one shops for a new outfit (Bauman 2003: 12). If it gives the expected satisfaction, then we keep it; if it’s flawed, we take it back and find a new one. However, I think this fails to account for the enduring nature of the concepts of soul mate and spouse, both of which imply forever, and the expectation – the hope at least – that this one will be enduring. The wedding
and honeymoon are symbolic of this intent to endure, and their playing out represents our enchantment with the chosen other and with love. The sheer amount of money spent on such things is at least partially meant to mark the ceremoniousness of the occasion where one agrees to give up once and for all one’s freedom to love and desire any other. Nevertheless, we have to concede that Bauman is correct at least in claiming that the wished-for eternity of love often dissipates. In the following section, I consider the psychological discourses surrounding love and what it means to be in love.

**Psychological discourses**

The entry for Romantic Love in the *Encyclopedia of Social Psychology* (Aron et al. 2007) surveys several explanations for how love “works”. The first emphasizes evolutionary anthropology, which suggests that romantic love “evolved to motivate individuals to select among potential mating partners” (Aron et al. 2007: 767). After the initial passionate period wanes and they have mated, they then settle into a calmer, more appropriate relationship for raising children. The habituation theory, on the other hand, supports de Botton’s thesis that familiarity with the beloved results in romantic decline (Aron et al. 2007: 766). The authors claim, however, that romantic love does not necessarily always weaken. Apparently romance is enhanced when we experience exciting and challenging events together – both trauma and intense joy can bolster romantic feelings. Indeed,

One study found that men who met an attractive woman when on a scary suspension bridge were more romantically attracted to her than were men who met the same woman on a safe bridge.

(Aron et al. 2007: 765)

Thus, couples that “do challenging and novel activities together” are more likely to maintain the romance in their relationship (Aron et al. 2007: 766). However, these psychological explanations fail to account for the fact that, these days, people do not need to fall in love to procreate. The broadening of our sexual discourses to endorse recreational sex and sex outside of marriage and monogamy, not to mention common acceptance of individuals who choose to parent without a long-term partner, suggest that we don’t need love to get
sex and babies (Hayes et al. 2012). It also fails to account for the place of romantic love in non-heterosexual relationships.

Branden (2008: 47) argues that in order to understand love, we must first consider “aloneness – the universal condition of us all”. He employs a developmental model based on the maturation of the self through separation and individuation to understand the need for romantic love. As young children, we develop our sense of self by separating from our carers and striving to develop an individual identity. But separation and individuation are not just childhood tasks. We are continually confronted by the need to re-establish our identities – when a romantic love relationship ends, when a long-term partner dies, when our children leave home, we are once again left to determine just who we really are without the context of the particular relationship in question.

We can strive to avoid the fact of our ultimate aloneness; it continually confronts us. A romantic love relationship can nourish us; it can become a substitute for personal identity.

(Branden 2008: 48)

In a society in which extended families are no longer the norm, and in which increased geographical movement makes even the concept of community less common, romantic love helps fill a gap, providing us with a way of identifying that denies or hides, for the time being at least, our ultimate aloneness. But even if it does serve a unique purpose for contemporary individuals, romantic love was not invented by Western industrial society – according to the literature, it has been around for millennia.

Aron et al. (2007: 765) claim that “romantic love has been found in every historical era and in every culture for which data are available”. Notwithstanding the ambiguity of “available data” and the fact that none of the claims in their encyclopaedia entry are referenced, there does seem to be some consensus concerning the long history and cultural inclusivity of romantic love, although it is often noted that the connection of romantic love to marriage is far more recent (discussed below). Evidence can be found as far back as the Ancient Greeks, in the concepts of Eros, Agape and Platonic love (Soble 1989). Tales of Eros in Ancient Greek mythology talk of being shot through the eye with an arrow – love at first sight – where physical attraction
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to another is both piercing and tragic, has the ability to make one insane, and is something over which one has no control. Agape is love as an end in itself, love for someone that requires nothing in return, such as a parent’s love for their child. Platonic love is the love felt between two people without the sexual attraction. From ancient times, through the dark and middle ages and right up until today, love has taken one form or another, sometimes romantic, sometimes altruistic, sometimes tragic, sometimes divine.

But it was only after the Enlightenment and Western industrialization that love became attached to marriage and families. In Ancient Greece, Socrates talks about Eros only in reference to what is felt by a man for a beautiful boy. In that context, families and marriage were completely removed from notions of romantic love (Soble 1989). Throughout most of history and across cultures, marriages were arranged by kin to combine property or as part of the exchange relations between male kin groups, for example, a man giving a sister in order to obtain a wife. Romantic love emerged in medieval Europe, but it was something that happened specifically outside marriage, often between troubadours and ladies. Sir Lancelot, for example, loved his best friend’s wife, Guinevere. In fact, marriage and family remained completely unrelated to Eros until mid to late nineteenth century, while marriage as an institution remained completely heteronormative until the early twenty-first century (Coontz 2005).

How did romance, marriage and family become so intimately connected? While it is clear that we as a society are slowly diverging from the ideal of the heteronormative nuclear family, the fact still remains that young women – intelligent, educated young women – are lining up to spend fortunes on fairytale weddings and honeymoons, are taking their husbands’ names, and treading the traditional path to family and domesticity (Ingraham 2008). I personally attended two weddings last year alone, one for a friend, another for my partner’s niece. Both were magnificent affairs featuring many bridesmaids, plenty of beautiful flower arrangements, champagne, and the traditional long white dress and veil. One couple went to the Maldives afterward, the other on an extended tour of the USA and Mexico, including resorts such as Cancun. Both have settled into domesticity and are planning families. Clearly, normative values surrounding romance and the wedding are alive and supporting huge industries in fashion, beauty, catering and international travel.
In the scholarly literature there is a great deal of debate over whether romantic love is a cultural construct (e.g. Lystra 1989; Person 1991; Jankowiak and Fischer 1992; Illouz 1997; Munck 1998; Wilding 2003). Person (1991: 383) for example, argues that “the best evidence that romantic love is not hardwired... but is a cultural construct is the fact that there are so many cultures in which it is virtually absent”. However, Jankowiak and Fischer (1992: 149) argue to the contrary that romantic love is definitely not unique to the West; that indeed, it is “characteristic of many non-Euro cultures, for example, China”. Nevertheless, whichever side you take, it does seem that romantic love takes on a very peculiar form in our Western society, and it is this cultural milieu that provides the context for this book. That peculiar form is characterized, as we have seen above, by “an intense attraction involving the idealization of the other within an erotic context...[which] carries with it the desire for intimacy and the pleasurable expectation of enduring for some unknown time into the future” (Wilding 2003: 373).

The geography of love is marked by the very public definition of love’s expectations, along a trajectory where “going out together” morphs into being a “couple”, which is inevitably followed by public displays of affection and commitment culminating in the wedding. These public displays assist in the constitution of identity and subjectivity and outline the expectations within which the couple experience their life together. It is “a closing off of emotional ambivalence...a movement away from contingency towards unity and towards an emotional paradise of reciprocity and certainty” (Wetherall 1995: 128). These expectations remain strong in spite of the high levels of divorce and infidelity in the West. Indeed, as I will discuss later in this section, infidelity and divorce form part of the narrative that paradoxically reinforces romantic love as grounding for intimate relationships. Wetherall (1995: 128) agrees that discourses of romance provide a trajectory of the life of the couple, which is experienced as a “form of relief from the search for meaning” so clearly lacking, as Berlant (2011) points out, from many peoples’ lives.

We move from the image of the couple (usually newly met) locked in a maelstrom of ambiguities, partial disclosures, interpretations and formulations of their relationship to the predictable ending of romance which stifles other interpretations and imposes its
With the uncertainty of any particular marriage lasting, it does seem reasonable to think that two people who can say they love and cherish each other after decades of living together must have been destined for each other. It is common knowledge that at least half of marriages end in divorce, and yet we still believe in the idea of fate and lifelong romantic love. This discourse runs so deeply that even serial romances don’t deter us or alter our thinking on the subject. On the contrary, the fact that some couples do live happily ever after seems to be enough to give us the hope necessary to sustain the discourse. B.F. Skinner (1953) famously conducted a scientific experiment that illustrates this point. He trained rats to press a lever to obtain food, then instead of feeding the rats each time they pressed the lever, he made them wait for one minute. He discovered that rewarding the rats with food intermittently (instead of each time they pressed the lever) made them press the lever more often, not less, as he had expected. Apparently the intermittent reinforcement is enough to keep the rat hooked. Poker machines work the same way.

The discourse of the loving marriage

Are we then simply like rats hooked on love through intermittent reinforcement? Or is there something more complex than mere Pavlovian psychology going on here? I suggest that romantic love remains so ubiquitous because the discourse of the loving marriage is deeply and insidiously ingrained in our collective psyches. Indeed, the myth of enduring marriage persists in spite of the evidence that the larger percentage of marriages end in divorce, that infidelity is a fact of life and that time and again our expectations of that institution are proven to be too high.

…the real fault in the situation lies in the ethos of modern marriage, with its insane ambitions and its insistence that one person can plausibly hope to embody the eternal sexual and emotional solution to another’s every need.

(De Botton 2012: 117)
Here, de Botton defends infidelity against what he sees as the insanity of the romance discourse. “Some people would never have fallen in love if they had never heard of love” (La Rochefoucauld, cited in de Botton 2006: 76), he quips, while also pointing out, as we have already discussed above, that current discourses of love and marriage are “kept alive by modern capitalism” through the nuclear family, which supports current market structures (de Botton 2006: 77).

A review of the relevant scholarly literature appears to support the argument that the “marriage for love discourses” are relatively recent (Cott 2000; Coontz 2005; Wood 2011). However, the neo-Marxist, economic rationalist argument seems a bit too neat. Nuclear families arose in the wake of increased wealth and opportunity. Generations no longer need to live together under one roof in order to survive financially; women are more independent and no longer need to marry to survive. Women and men have a choice of whether and who to marry. The ability to marry the person you desire and love was originally seen as liberating, and still is (Clulow 1993; Cott 2000; Chambers 2001). Indeed, we scoff at the person who marries for convenience, social status or money – in our society, the only truly ethical option is to marry for love. Although increased technology and vastly improved transportation means that people are moving around geographically more than ever before and global markets have opened up opportunities that appeal to young couples and families, it seems rather a stretch – too much like conspiracy theory – to suggest that capitalism by itself is responsible for the concept of the loving marriage.

Indeed, in an era where individuals are more independent than ever before, people are choosing to get married and have children, or to set up nuclear households outside marriage (Cott 2000). It is true that the current high-priced housing market in Australia, where I live, leans towards smaller families, but that is not necessarily a global trend. Housing in almost every other Western nation is cheaper than here in Australia, depending upon whether you are situated in intense urban or more suburban or rural locations. A more subtle explanation is therefore needed, perhaps a combination of economic necessity, market pressure, a characteristically modern Western desire for acceptance and validation, and the need to believe that there is something outside oneself and one’s fragile human existence that survives us and leaves a legacy for future generations (Bauman 2004).
In spite of the enduring impact of religious influence in the Western world (Newport 2012), the psychological literature shows there is a clear gap in our perceptions of mortality and all that that means (Shaver and Mikulincer 2012). Newport (2012), Gallup Editor-in-Chief (of the famous Gallup Polls) reports that Americans at least, are still highly religious, but clearly even religions – at least those dominating the West – strongly support marriage for love, although the more fundamentalist of these are outspoken about their contempt for the concept of a “soul mate” (Keller and Keller 2013). Clearly, there remains a need for the romance discourse to make sense of our relationships. The need to believe in the romance discourse also compensates us for the fact that our liberal-democratic society has a definite tendency towards individualism, and yet, as human animals, we need to interact, not to isolate (Branden 2008). It also compensates for the fact that we, as individuals, aren’t very good folk psychologists (Goldie 2007). In spite of feeling “as one” with a romantic partner, we likely know very little of their inner lives, let alone our own. People are notoriously irrational when it comes to most things and romantic love probably sits somewhere on the rationality scale between our self-image (which is always predicated on skewed perception) and what we know of others (which is always predicated on what they are willing to show us). Of necessity, we operate within “bounded rationality” in which decision-making is necessarily limited by how much information we have, how intelligent we are, and how much time we have or are willing to take in doing so (Simon 1972).

de Botton (2006: 15) argues that “every fall into love involves the triumph of hope over self-knowledge”. At the same time as serial romance fails to hinder us in our quest for our soul mate, we also are not hindered by the fact that the person with whom we are currently in a relationship could easily be replaced by any number of people. Indeed, I would argue that this fact is most vehemently denied – we much prefer to believe that the end of a relationship or loss of a love simply means that we were mistaken in thinking we had found “the one”; so we must keep on searching until we do. We might also argue that love not only triumphs over self-knowledge, but also what appears before our very eyes. The loved one is always unique, different, idealized as the perfect match (de Botton 2006). As long as we can sustain that fiction, we stay “in love”. As we will see in Chapter 4,
even abuse can be obscured or accepted if we fail to understand the difference between appearances and actualities. The narcissistic partner, for example, initially comes across as attentive, will put you on a pedestal and idealize you, lulling you into a false sense of the security and enchantment of romantic love (Lowen 2004). Our lack of psychological knowledge or understanding of much human behaviour allows us to miss certain cues that should be “red flags” when the narcissist’s façade starts to crack (Lowen 2004; Hayes and Jeffries 2013). Romantic love blinds us to flaws, at least initially, until we are comfortable enough to accept each other for who we are. When the “real” self differs too much from the idealized self, we may find ourselves making excuses until it becomes glaringly clear that love has turned into abuse.

Love is also associated with ownership and licence (Burns 2000; Wilding 2003; de Botton 2006). Although there are many more open and polyamorous relationships today than ever before, the popular heteronormative, *Twilight* version of romantic love implies possession. Thus, infidelity and absence without reason are seen as offences against the relationship. The degree to which we treat our beloved as property rather than with the respect and trust due to them as our equals, directly reflects the extent to which we have bought the heteronormative discourse of romantic love. I would argue that this applies equally to same-sex couples as it does to heterosexual ones. The push for marriage equality is a clear example of this.

Another interesting element of contemporary romance discourse is that it often conflates sex and love, a phenomenon that again, is relatively recent (Illouz 1997; de Botton 2006; Hayes et al. 2012). Up until the mid-eighteenth century – and arguably even later – there was a clear separation between love, sex and family (Coontz 2005; de Botton 2006).

For its part, the impulse to raise a family has been well-known to the largest share of humanity since our earliest upright days in east Africa. In all this time, however, it seems to have occurred to almost no one (until very recently, evolutionarily speaking) that this project might need to be fused together with constant sexual desire as well as frequent sensations of romantic longing at the sight of our fellow parent across the breakfast table.

(de Botton 2006: 118)
Is it too ambitious to think we can achieve all three through the one relationship? Branden (2008: xxiii) argues that love “is one of the great possibilities of our existence, one of the great adventures, and one of the great challenges”, claiming that “it refuses to be extinguished because it answers profound human needs”. This essentialized view of romantic love sounds tempting, but if we as humans have such “profound needs”, why has romantic love only been discovered recently as the natural answer to those needs?

I suggest that it does indeed attempt to address some human needs, but those needs most probably are an artefact of our culture and economy more than any essential part of human nature. Perhaps we have evolved to the point where we are more emotionally and sexually developed, more articulate about what our needs are, and romantic love has evolved as the perfect answer. More likely, however, romantic love is merely a best-fit paradigm that is beginning to unravel because civilization, in its ever-evolving character, has changed to the point where the perfect answer is beginning to look quite flawed. Hence the amount of spaghetti we all carry around in our heads about it. Or perhaps civilization and technology have evolved to the point where distortions of love are allowed to occur unchecked or unnoticed. I suggest that it is not romantic love per se, or even the spaghetti surrounding it we have cause to be wary of. Rather, it may well be the perversities of romantic love and the ways in which it can be stretched out of proportion, bent and broken that should be cause for concern. In itself, romantic love has a lot going for it, including companionship, shared values, sexual fulfilment, emotional support and self-discovery (Branden 2008; Sioux 2011). It is when romantic love is misused to justify abuse and disrespect that it becomes dangerous. In the following chapters, we shall explore some of the ways in which love gets distorted and the impact that has on the individuals involved and on society in general. For the moment, though, I shall explore two more discourses – the first, pathologizing love, is pseudo-psychological; the second, the romancing of parental love, returns us back to enchantment from another angle.

Pathologizing love

There is an enormous market in self-help books on love and intimate relationships, ranging from how to hook the partner of your dreams, to how to get over a break-up, and everything in between.
A quick survey of an online bookstore conducted at the time of writing identified so many of these that I gave up counting after 200. This alone should convince us of the pervasiveness of romantic love in society, but there is more. I am now receiving spam emails about everything from how to attract a man, to how to control a woman, what makes women tick, what makes men tick and how to have great sex. Admittedly, I have had the junk filters on my email removed for research purposes, but the sheer amount of self-help information circulating on the internet is nothing short of astounding. Websites such as 2knowmyself.com and Wikihow.com share a wealth of information and tips about falling in love, finding your soul mate, coping with relationship problems, how to break up with someone, how to recover when someone breaks up with you and so on. The following surveys some of the more prominent and enduring tips and pieces of advice offered online.

M. Farouk Radwan, author of 2knowmyself.com, has produced a range of self-help e-books, one of which is titled, *How to Make Someone Fall in Love With You* (2008). He claims that his book is based on sound psychological theory, though he himself has no formal qualifications.Crudely, he claims that research is the key – get to know your potential love-object, then show her how much like her you are. People like to fall in love with people they can identify with. Once you’ve established a connection, do many memorable things together. Following Aron et al. (2007) above, Radwan argues that experiencing fun (or some other memorable experience) with someone, makes them more attracted to you.

Many of the tips about how to attract someone focus on being unavailable – the “we always want what we can’t have” discourse mentioned earlier in this chapter. Under the heading “How to Make Someone Fall in Love With You” on wikihow.com, the following advice is offered:

Be unavailable. It’s human nature to want what we can’t have. You shouldn’t be rude or blow the other person off, but making yourself seem busy and full of other friends and projects will make you appear more desirable.³

Loveblab.com advises, “guys love a mystery”, so don’t tell him your entire life story on the first date. Be mysterious.⁴ Along the same lines,
a blog by Wicked Sago talks about the “law of scarcity”, comparing love to economics:

In economics, the law of scarcity states that if what you desire is in limited supply or seemingly limited supply, its perceived value increases. This also increases the urge for people to want it and want it immediately.  

This harks back to Bauman’s (2008) point that in our “Liquid Society”, we tend to think about relationships like shopping. Much like other commodities, love is about supply and demand – the more people want us, the higher our value, and the better deal we can make in a love match. The woman who could have any number of potential lovers because she is so beautiful/clever/ rich/ endearing is worth more to us as a partner because having her also increases our own worth in the market. A moment from my own dating history confirms this – upon finding out I had started dating a very popular person in my 20-something social group, one of my friends came up and said to me, “H left M for YOU?” – the implication that H could have done better did hurt, to an extent, but also afforded me a certain status in the group thereafter. Obviously there was something about me that others had failed to appreciate!

In spite of the parallels to shopping, counsel typically advises against standing in line waiting for Mr or Mrs Right. Squidoo.com suggests that you “let him chase you”,6 as well as keeping dates short so he’ll want more. Notice that most of this advice is aimed at heterosexual women. When it comes to giving men advice, the focus is on how to attract a woman rather than how to make her love you. Many of the sites advise that women are most attracted to the “alpha male”. Attractwomenbooks.com, for example, claims that, “in general every woman wants a man. More specifically the alpha, the chief of the tribe, the leader of the pack. And not the needy, weak, and the easily manipulated chump” (emphasis in original), and then, “sex appeal is fifty percent what you got and fifty percent what people think you got”.7 The focus on hegemonic masculinity consolidates the gendered discourse of self-help websites, which entreats women to be sexy but not needy, while advising men to be the “leader of the pack”. In both cases, women and men alike are pathologized when
it comes to relationships – don’t be needy or weak, be confident and independent!

Apparently people in general have difficulty following this advice because there is also a plethora of websites and books offering insight into how to cope with unrequited love, how to keep a relationship going, and how to recover when someone breaks off a relationship with you. These sites focus on the pathology of love, drawing on traditional and folk psychology, positive thinking methodologies, assertiveness training and even addiction therapy. Clearly, romantic love and attraction occupy a huge role in heterosexual lives, yet so many are not coping with or are confused by the discourse.

With respect to non-heterosexuals and transgender individuals, there appear to be very few websites devoted exclusively to LGBT romance advice, although there are plenty of pornographic sites. Much of the advice that is available comes in the form of forums, dating sites and articles posted on LGBT-focused sites. However, the advice seems to mirror the heteronormative narrative. In an article on examiner.com, the writer advises lesbians that yes, even they are entitled to the perfect relationship:

If you are single and you can’t seem to “get it together” to reach your dream of being “settled in” with a woman you can build an exciting future with, what are you waiting for? I speak to too many single lesbians who complain of this fact.8

In many of the forums, lesbians discuss the difficulty of distinguishing between friendship, attraction and love and this appears to complicate the pathology of love. Another issue is falling in love with a heterosexual friend, which compounds the unrequited love discourse because the relationship was never a possibility. The following remark, made in a “Lesbian Relationship Challenges Support Group” forum, is common:

I understand. My first love was the same… Met her in 2003, I couldn’t tell her, as she was straight… It use [sic] to kill me seeing her with someone else (specially as it was a guy). I was “best friend” to her…9
For gay men, infidelity appears to be the most common issue. A letter on thegaylovecoach.com states:

I met my ex-boyfriend while living abroad and, according to him, it was love at first sight. Everything went wrong when we moved in with his parents. We would constantly fight, he became insanely jealous, we’d even get physical.

On Christmas he decided to go on a trip with his friend. He met another guy who he had sex with. He accepted he cheated on me, but that wasn’t the reason he didn’t want to be with me anymore.\textsuperscript{10}

The same site also offers the following advice to singles:

The first step is to define your vision for your ideal partner and relationship when developing your dating goals for the New Year. What are the qualities you’re seeking, and of those characteristics, which of those needs are negotiable versus deal-breakers?\textsuperscript{11}

For both gay men and lesbians, the advice offered on many of the sites appears to be similar to the advice offered to heterosexual women, suggesting that notions of romantic love and long-term relationships have infiltrated the non-heterosexual community and suffer the same pathologies to a relatively similar extent, contributing to homonormativity.

Lesbians, in particular, seem prone to the romantic self-help ideology. Gay men, on the other hand, tend to gravitate towards pornographic and sex-related sites. One possible explanation is that women are well-trained in romance discourses and so assume that other women will feel as they do. Anecdotally, that often appears to be the case – two women with a bad case of romantic fluffiness must logically be double the trouble. The pathology of neediness, possessiveness and fusing of identity spreads across sexualities and genders and speaks to the pervasiveness of romantic love discourses in our society.

I would argue that it even spreads across other, non-erotic love relationships, that we romance some non-sexual relationships in many of the same ways. One particularly interesting example is the romancing of parental love.
Romancing parental love

It might seem to be stretching the point to connect romance with parental love, but as I will demonstrate, we adopt many of the romantic discourses outlined above in our relationships with our children. Indeed, parental love may be even more romanced than the average heterosexual relationship. Parents often literally fall in love with their children from birth, and continue to gush romantically about them until they reach puberty – often beyond. To date, there is no research or literature relating to romantic parenting, and so the following analysis is of necessity based on my observations of and musings on parental and family culture in popular media and culture. It does not pretend to be authoritative, but rather raises questions about the role of love in parenting, the relationship parents in Western society have with their children, and the intersectional implications of this. I appreciate that this analysis is purely speculative, but hope that it provides some insight into how we as Western parents relate to our children.

First and foremost, I want to point out the special place that children, and especially babies, have in the lives of modern affluent and semi-affluent families. How many parents have held their newborn baby for the first time and felt an overwhelming rush of feeling – a mixture of delight, affection, and incredulousness, leading to complete enchantment with and devotion to the child? No amount of dirty nappies, puking or crying can dampen the ardour of the truly infatuated parent. The infatuation continues through toddlerhood and into primary school. Many an infatuated parent has stood at the gates of their child’s preschool and cried as they watch their precious baby wave goodbye on their first day. The first rudimentary strokes of pencil on paper, first teeth, locks of hair, innumerable photographs and other memorabilia are stowed away as precious treasures. Enormous amounts of money are spent on soft toys, building blocks, dolls, toy cars, cutesy clothes and gadgets; then later on electronic and computer equipment, mobile phones, books, bags, school trips, name brand shoes, clothes and toys (Faw 2012; Cornish 2013). No starry-eyed Romeo ever spoilt or gushed over his beloved so much as today’s middle- and upper-class parents do their children.

I remember delighting in dressing up my daughter when she was a baby, crooning to her, stroking her cheek, cuddling her and thinking she was perfect. Living away from my parents and family, I discovered
how to care for her through the many books available on the subject, from *What to Expect the First Year*, to *Toddler Training* and so on. Parental discourses are no less dominated by the self-help industry than other romantic love discourses. Parenting books and websites abound. Essentialbaby.com.au, for example, is littered with pictures of cute smiling babies wrapped in soft towels, and offers articles about every stage of growth and every issue involved in parenting, from breastfeeding to whether they should be using a dummy, to how to recognize when your baby has a headache. Huggies.com.au sports a sleeping baby next to the headline: “perfection like never before deserves protection like never before”. Clearly, where we fail to find the perfect spouse, we get a second chance with our perfect baby.

Television shows, such as *Modern Family*, caricature these discourses, but they are careful to maintain their integrity and make them inclusive. Gay partners Mitchell and Cam adopt an Asian child in the first series, and proceed to gush, spoil and fawn over her every move and sound. Series such as *The Middle* and *Malcolm in the Middle* spoof this parental romancing, but they can do so only because they depict working-class families who cannot afford to romance their children the way Mitchell and Cam do. They want to give their children everything, but they are thwarted by lack of income, overburdening jobs, and school bullies.

Romantic parenting appears to be a fairly recent phenomenon, one that I suggest is symptomatic of the obsession our society has with romance and romantic love, not to mention youth, beauty and social status. Our children become a part of us in the same way our adult intimate partners do, but they also represent us and all that we stand for (Brummelman et al. 2013). Parental love is therefore, I would argue, edging towards a form of narcissism. Any failure of the child is reflected on the parent and many parents also live through their children, through their accomplishments, talents and aspirations, particularly where they were denied themselves in their youth (Brummelmann et al. 2013).

The rise of a specifically white, middle-class mode of romantic parenting appears to have begun early in the twentieth century and coincides with the rise of affluence leading to increased leisure and consumerism, in particular of film and television (Seiter 1995). Prior to that, at least from the eighteenth century onwards (Aries 1973), children were loved and cared for by parents and extended families
and communities, but the rise of film exposed us to the idealization of the child (Newman and Smith 1999), most specifically in the invention of Shirley Temple and the notion of “cuteness” (Merrish 1996: 186). Young Shirley began her career at the age of three, and in 1934, at the age of four, achieved international fame in Bright Eyes, a film written especially for her, and which was closely followed by Curly Top, Heidi, and a long list of others. In each film she starred as the child ingénue and with her cute dimpled, smiling face and head full of ringlets, little baby doll dresses and tap shoes, she danced, sang and giggled her way into the hearts and minds of her adoring audience. She was the first celebrity to be merchandized through dolls, tea sets and clothes and she captured an entire generation (Klotman 1979: 124). When television became popular in the 1940s and 1950s, her films were some of the first and most popular to be shown.

They were still popular in the 1960s when I was growing up and I remember being glued to the television, enamoured by her talent and charm, along with that of Doris Day and Elvis Presley. For me she framed girlish perfection and undoubtedly contributed towards both my parents and my own views of femininity, girlhood and parental romanticizing. “Cuteness” became a culturally recognized sign of perfect childhood to which one was required to respond with “culturally specified normative emotions” (Merrish 1996: 186). Merrish (1996: 186) argues that adoring the cute child requires a “logic of identification” in which we embrace the cuteness as something we can identify with and want to be (or want our children to be). What little girl of my generation and the one before didn’t want to be just like Shirley?

Doris Day and Elvis Presley, on the other hand, taught me all about romantic love of the adult kind. The line was fine, however. No one ever had sex in those early films, at least not in the ones I was allowed to watch, and so it took me some time to differentiate between the two kinds of romance. Indeed, it wasn’t until the 1970s that film and television regularly featured couples in double beds, let alone being intimate. No doubt all this sexless romancing influenced entire generations, which is probably why young and middle-aged women alike have such trouble defining the boundaries of love and sex. In Chapter 5, I discuss this issue and the ways in which love and sex become separated in some contexts, while becoming conflated in others.
Love outside the heteronormative

Judging by the recent heavy campaigning across the globe for marriage equality, many same-sex and transgender couples want marriage equality and legal surrogacy so that they can set up nuclear households and raise children like their heterosexual counterparts. At the other end of the continuum lies “beats” and men who have sex with men, open relationships, polyamory and consensual sadomasochism, sex workers and adult entertainers (Barker 2012). The enchantment of romantic love is challenged by these “deviancies” because they demonstrate how people can flourish outside heteronormativity (and homonormativity) even in the face of outright legal and social discrimination and exclusion. However, although there is much scholarly debate about the topic (e.g. Bauman 2004; Weeks 2007; Halberstam 2013), I would argue that so far, these challenges are largely unheard and unnoticed by the general public.

Disney has produced several non-white princesses, and even one that refused to get married, but it has yet to have two princes or princesses fall in love. Some schools have books with stories of “Two Mummies” and television series such as Modern Family make gay families respectable, but only because they conform to the loving, monogamous family paradigm. Queer as Folk came closer to challenging homonormativity than Glee, but in the end it too succumbed to the romantic love discourse as well as to stereotypes of LGBT characters and the loving couple discourse, as did The L Word. Clearly, that which challenges the hetero- or homo-normative must remain invisible, relegated to specific spaces, accessed in the shadows of everyday culture where it cannot corrupt families or offend the mainstream.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which contemporary discourses about romantic love influence our understandings and expectations of relationships. There is clear evidence of pathologies and contradictions – between romance and marriage, between deviance and normativity, between adult love and parental love, and between love and sex. These contradictions impact the ways in which we engage in meaningful relationships, understand and apply the notion of love, and reveal that the more glaring are the contradictions, the
more tenaciously we appear to stick to them. Zigmunt Bauman (2003) argues that these contradictions necessarily arise out of our “Liquid Society”, which is characterized, among other things, by

...[t]he uncanny frailty of human bonds, the feeling of insecurity that frailty inspires, and the conflicting desires that feeling prompts to tighten the bonds yet keep them loose....

(Bauman 2003: viii)

Bauman (2013: L107) argues that Liquid Society treats relationships like networks, thereby missing the essential merits of connectedness: “Network stands for a matrix of simultaneously connecting and disconnecting. In a network, connections can be entered on demand, and can be broken at will.” Thus, we are faced with a logic of non-recursive relationships that promises enduring intimacy, while at the same time preventing it by creating the conditions for conflict and separation. Desire and romance thwart each other:

Desire is the crush to consume...and is therefore an urge to destruction. Desire is contaminated from its birth by the death wish...Love is, on the other hand, the wish to care, and to preserve the object of the care...[It is a] centrifugal urge to expand.

(Bauman 2003: 9)

Romance confuses and conflates love with desire and is therefore inherently contradictory. It is also intimately connected to specific identities and subjectivities, the nature of experience and the role of representation in social life (Weatherall 1995). Sioux (2011) argues that this logic is underpinned by the addictive euphoria experienced when romantic love is encountered. Perhaps it is the addictive nature of romance that fuels the continued acceptance of these contradictions, or perhaps it is due to the fact that these discourses are implanted in our psyche. Chapter 3 explores the impact of romantic discourses further through an analysis of media, film and popular culture depictions of romantic love and the ways in which these distort our views of love, relationships and femininity.