
Marguerite Duras

El amante (The Lover)



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Description

Cuarenta y un años después de publicar su primera novela, Marguerite Duras se convierte de la noche a la mañana, con *El amante*, en una autora solicitada por todos los públicos. Y, además, recibe poco después, en noviembre de 1984, el prestigioso Premio Goncourt. A todos emociona sin duda esta narración autobiográfica en la que la autora expresa, con la intensidad del deseo, esa historia de amor entre una adolescente de quince años y un rico comerciante chino de veintiséis. Esa jovencita bellísima, pero pobre, que vive en Indochina, no es otra que la propia escritora quien, hoy, recuerda las relaciones apasionadas, de intensos amor y odio, que desgarraron a su familia y, de pronto, grabaron prematuramente en su rostro los implacables surcos de la madurez. Pocas personas —y en particular mujeres— permanecerán inmunes a la contagiosa pasión que emana de este libro.

Insightful reviews

Ian Agadada-Davida: **Desire**

The first time ever I saw your face was on the ferry.

I had my head buried in a copy of the South China Morning Post. My father had said, if I read it every day, I would learn about the world around us, and his boy would become a man. Only then would I be ready to take over the family business after him.

He was right, in his way. I was thin and soft and naïve, even though I had just returned from two years in Paris. I was still a boy, at 28. I'm sure I would have continued as a boy, unless I had met you.

I had slept with many girls in Paris, and I bedded plenty more after you, before I married my wife, a virgin until our wedding night. But I didn't sleep with any of these girls out of love or even desire. I fucked them because I could. They came to me eager to be fucked, and we all knew the reason, my family's wealth and increasing prominence in Saigon. They all came to me, because they wanted something that my father had.

My father was not an egotistical man. He did not display pride or shame. He did everything out of duty, even make money, buy property, run a department store and build wealth. But when it came to the girls I slept with (not you), and he always found out about them, he took some delight in my sexual activity. No matter how attractive each one was, he knew that by sleeping with them, I was actually disqualifying them from the race to be my wife and share his wealth. Everyone I slept with narrowed it down to the one I would eventually marry.

I looked up from the Post, some article on inflation, and I saw you taking a seat opposite me. I gazed at you longer than I should have.

Everything about you was wrong. You were Caucasian, white, 15 ½ years old, slim, you were wearing a flowing dress that alternately swayed in the breeze or clung to your body, outlining

and highlighting your petite breasts. And you were wearing a man's fedora and gold shoes.

Once I took all of this in, I tried to resume reading the Post. I was looking down at the page, but I couldn't distinguish a single word, I was thinking of you and I was shaking. Like a boy.

Later the same week, we happened to be on the same ferry again. I didn't see you on board, but when my father's driver (until recently, when he retired, my driver) opened the door to the limousine, I noticed that you were standing near the waterline, apparently deciding what you would do next.

I went up to you, determined to offer you a ride in my car, I mean my father's car. You were apprehensive at first, but I reassured you of my good faith, and you decided to accept. It helped that I was shaking the whole way through our brief discussion.

While we were talking, we stood side on, so that my driver could see both of us, the sides of our faces and the hints of nervous smiles. Something must have touched him, unless he did it out of a sense of duty to my father, for he took a photo of us that day.

He gave it to me when he retired 10 years ago. I have carried it with me, in my wallet, every day since then. Until today, I haven't pulled it out and looked at it again. I didn't need to. That moment, in my eyes, has been engraved in my mind for fifty years. The only difference is that the image confirms that I was there, that it wasn't all in my imagination, you can see both of us. The image is true, and so now is my memory. Only I'm not sure whether I ever wanted to be reminded.

It's not that the photo reminds me of a time when I was a boy. After all, it was you who made me a man, not reading the Post.

Like my father before me, I am a man of duty. I have faithfully taken care of my wife, my family, my family's business. Everything has grown under my watchful and caring eye. I have done the right thing, and I will die a contented man, if contentment is what I am looking for.

No, what that photo and that moment remind me of is my capacity for desire. It is something I eliminated from my field of vision after we parted company, at my parents' insistence, and you returned to Paris, I thought, with your mother.

I already knew the rudimentary mechanics of sex when we stood before each other, a skinny Chinese boy and a skinny French girl, in my bedroom for the first time. As I had done before, I was shaking. Even my tentative erection looked as if it might shake off and fall to the floor. It's funny now, but it wasn't funny then.

Until I met you, I had been lonely. I was even lonelier after I had met you, because of the obsessive love I had for you.

You said, "I'd rather you didn't love me, but if you do, I'd like you to do as you usually do with women."

I asked, "Is that what you want?"

You nodded. Still I knew that you would never love me, that you could never love me.

I said, "You've come here with me as you might have gone anywhere with anyone."

You replied, "I can't say, so far I've never gone into a bedroom with anyone."

You begged me, again, to do what I usually did with the women I brought to my room.

I did my best to comply. Although you were a virgin, I made love to you the way you directed me to. It was different to how I normally did it, well there was one difference, I wept while we made love.

The driver soon learned about you, and so did my father. He could tell I felt differently about you, that I wasn't disqualifying you, that I wanted to marry this white girl, even though you would never love me in return.

He made his position very clear.

"I will not let my son marry this little white whore from Sadec."

I tried to obliterate his attitude from my thinking. But it must have affected me subliminally.

In bed, as we fucked more and more passionately, I would call out, "My whore, my slut, you are my only love." And you and I and my cum and your juices and our sweat would be swept up in a torrent of desire.

For a long time, it seemed as if that torrent would never stop. I didn't know where the waters sprang from, but I definitely didn't know where they were heading.

My father did, and so he built a dam that would contain the flow, and one day the torrent just stopped.

Loving you had made me a man, he knew that, as I did, and although we disagreed wildly, I was reconciled to my future in the family business.

As my father loosened his grip on the reins and handed them over to me, I expanded to two and then eventually five department stores, and then years later with such a solid foundation, I started investing in shopping centres in Australia, until my family became the largest private holder of retail real estate in the country.

Like my father, I am not an egotistical man or a proud one. I do this because of duty. But there was a moment when I contented myself with a smile.

I had just signed a contract to purchase a centre in Australia for A\$30 million. I signed a cheque for a A\$3M deposit and gave it to the Vendor's lawyer. A youngish fellow, he decided to phone my banker and ask whether I had sufficient funds in my account to clear the cheque. The banker asked what the total sale price was. The lawyer answered, and my banker laughed. "There are enough funds in this account to pay the entire sale price in cash."

The lawyer turned to me, squeamishly, and declared that we had a deal. I said, "I was under the impression we had a deal before you phoned my bank."

I enquired after that lawyer once. It turned out he had married one of my property managers and was now running a coffee shop, ironically in one of my centres.

I have two daughters. They run our portfolio, and they do a more professional job of it than either I or my father ever did.

Perhaps, my father was better at taking risks than they are, but to be honest they are pretty good at it. I am proud of them, and he would be too. They have married well, and have given me four beautiful grandchildren.

As I said, I have carried our photo in my wallet for many years, ever since I learned of its existence.

Any other man in my position would possibly say that they had everything that they had ever desired.

For me, that is true, except in one sense that I have tried to overlook for fifty years.

I once desired you, that skinny white French girl in the fedora. I desired you with an intensity that I cannot find words to describe.

I have tried to rationalise and deny that desire. I've tried to convince myself that I only ever desired you once. And that is actually the truth. I did only desire you once, but that one occasion has lasted fifty years.

Now that I am about to die, or think I am, and my family will soon gather around me to say their farewells, I must take a match to this photo and set it alight, like you once set me alight, and perhaps, I will never know, perhaps I also set you alight, if not for as long.

My favourite nurse just brought me an ashtray and a cigarette lighter.

It took me two or three attempts to burn this image. It didn't seem to want to go.

But now it is finished and there are only ashes in the tray, and my failing memory, and when I die and it too goes, there will be nothing left of our desire.



Mural at the Pawpaw Cafe attached to the Brisbane Restaurant "Green Papaya"

Jenna: I first heard of this book decades ago, but initially resisted reading it.

As a youngster, I was indignant that the world's best-known novel about Vietnam was written not by a Vietnamese person, but by a French person. I was indignant that the love affair it describes is between a French woman and a Chinese man, rather than between two Vietnamese people. Picture me at the age of eleven or twelve: a sensitive bookish Vietnamese-

American girl, eagerly looking forward to reading this world-famous romance novel that takes place in Vietnam, and to my bewilderment it turns out that none of the main characters are actual Vietnamese people! What a hurtful blow!

Throughout its history, Vietnam has been subjugated and ravaged by many foreign military powers, China and France being principal among them. To my immature preteen mind, the very existence of this book therefore felt like a personal affront.

It took me years to overcome these not-so-rational prejudices, and to deign to give this book a try.

The fact that I had read, and loved, Jean Rhys's tour-de-force novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* the preceding year helped make me more receptive to *The Lover*. *The Lover* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* have a lot in common. Like *The Lover*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes place amid the corruption and sordidness of a soon-to-be-postcolonial landscape. *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes place in the British-occupied Jamaica of the 1830s; *The Lover* unfolds in the French-occupied Vietnam of the 1920s. Both books use the intimate voice of a female first-person narrator to chronicle the sexual coming-of-age of a fatherless young woman who is descended from a Caucasian imperialist family. In both books, the protagonist struggles to define herself against an erratic and emotionally distant mother while also navigating the racial tensions of her rapidly changing country.

The Lover doesn't quite have the broad moral scope that *Wide Sargasso Sea* does: this is likely because it is such a narrowly autobiographical book that one is not sure whether to call it a novel or a memoir. If it is a memoir, it is one of the best memoirs I have ever read, though. Duras is able to bring an amazing degree of insight to her descriptions of her messy childhood and messed-up family. Within the space of scarcely a hundred pages, she is able to bring all these complex characters to life: her tyrannical and mentally unstable mother; her elder brother, a sociopath, and her younger brother, a timid weakling; her schoolmate (and the object of her lesbian crush), the stupid but voluptuous Helene Lagonelle; and, of course, the Chinese-born millionaire lover of the title.

Duras's book also has similarities to another novel about a nubile French teen girl that I read recently: James Salter's *A Sport and a Pastime*. It is scarcely less well-written than Salter's, is perhaps even more absorbing. None of the characters are likable, exactly, a fact that would have bothered me if I had read this book as a child. I am glad that I waited so long to read it, as I can finally appreciate Duras's beautiful writing the way it deserves to be appreciated.

Janet: I loved the strangeness of this woman's interior, her voice, the way such a slim volume can sum up an entire life, compelling and erotic and intellectual all at once.

rereading... it's like craving a certain great dish and you know just who has it on the menu.

Such assurance. I like the way Duras handles the point of view. It begins with an older voice, a woman looking back at her life, a particular moment of her life, and she uses the past tense, whereas when she is in the past, in the point of view of the girl she was, she uses the present

tense. The kind of thing a writer gets a kick out of...

I'd forgotten the way it opens, as the older woman thinks of her face, the ruined face which was already hers at 18, after the events which will unfold in the book. So much packed in to each small paragraph-long section, the resonance of each detail, the mystery of it.

Such a short book, but it packs an amazing punch. Trying to figure out why.

Odd small digressions about two acquaintances in Paris during the war, years after the events of the book, one of whom who turned out to be a collaborator. Sideways glances at the family drama, the poisonous older brother, the weak younger brother, the ambivalent mother, haunted by poverty, living out her life in the French colony of Indochine... but always oblique.

Certain images burn brightly in my mind. Making love behind shutters in a crowded area of town, the voices of the people so close outside. The black limousine in which the Chinese lover, son of a millionaire, waits for the girl every day. The way the mother washes the house in the country out when she's overwhelmed by her own darkness-- a house built on stilts, it could just be sluiced clean, water poured on the floor in buckets, water pooling around the piano legs... And the girl on the ferry on the Mekong in the man's hat and gold lame shoes, waiting for her life to approach, the way that girls do.

The strength of these discrete images is one reason, but there's something else, something more... I'd have to say it's the way the girl's coldness and matter-of-factness create the story's mystery. The narrator, the older self, has that same tone-- but if she was truly as cold as she presents herself, why would she be going back over this moment in her life, the moment that she became the woman she would be for the rest of her life? What is she searching for?

The only likeable person in the book is the Chinese lover she all but destroys in his infatuation for her--not in an evil way, but just in the tough tough tough way of a young girl who has utterly accepted the world as it was presented to her. Her inability to love--or is it really an inability? Or is it something she cannot allow herself? So fascinating to see a young girl who isn't depicted as heady with romance--just the opposite. Here it's the man who can love, but he is weak, as she sees him, because he lacks cruelty, he is weak but he loves her "unto death." She does desire him, but it's funny that the girl can accept her desire, but insists she does not love him. And she is cruel, because she comes from a cruel family, a cruel colony, a cruel society, both aware of her privilege as a white girl in the East, and her shameful poverty.

What is continually fascinating about this book is that a story of a love affair is rarely told from the point of view of the one who does not love. This girl would usually be the obscure object of desire, not the subject. The mood of doom and exoticism and desire is hard to shake.

Mary: The e-book is like being trapped within a deep and hectic dream on a stifling scorching summer time night. A dream steeped in depression and part thoughts and also you get up

choking. Is it Duras' writing sort or the interpretation that creates the sparse atmosphere, the leaping round from current to reminiscence to recommendations to...I'm unsure precisely what. however it labored so beautifully, so tragically. Early within the ebook Duras writes approximately her mom in a manner that did whatever to me. i discovered myself tearing up, my middle beating a bit faster. I placed the booklet aside, picked it up again, re-read, left the room, got here back. This publication unsettled me. It haunted me. If you've gotten misplaced your mother, if you happen to by no means had a courting with her, if she was once or chilly or did not love you....the first thirty pages of this booklet will slay you. And then we meet the lover. And his hands. And his mouth. You want pauses to respire in this book. It plows into your intestine and you are there, correct there, within the jungle, within the heat, within the darkness and you may slightly see throughout the fog. you could simply make out the shadows and shapes of the tale yet you are by no means completely yes what is going on on. you are feeling the lover's breath in your flesh and also you may be squirming, simply because this is often in spite of everything one other Lolita, yet you are not squirming. you are not. you are hypnotised and depressed and misplaced and, like the narrative, you are damaged into pieces.

Jonfaith: My brothers gorge themselves with no announcing a notice to him. they do not examine him either. They can't. they're incapable of it. in the event that they could, in the event that they can make the hassle to work out him, they might be ready to studying, of gazing the straightforward principles of society. There are a plethora of superb stories of the sweetheart through my GR friends. learn those. my very own reactions have been of a decrease cut, extra bruised and backside shelf. i discovered the radical to be one in all shame. Take the lady and her situation, colonials at the down and out. there's a good deal of neighborhood colour but, the characters locate themselves clinging to the fast part of the stick. a very good poet as soon as said, "I pity the terrible immigrant who needs he would've stayed home." Their failure is malignant. It clings to their outfits and hazes their spoiled breath. i discovered the erotic to be negligible as well, a clingy melancholy not like the angelic breasts of the protagonist's schoolmate. there is a knowledge in that, I suppose, despite the fact that ephemeral. Duras succeeds in making the reader uncomfortable. The framing dynamic is among the older chinese language guy and the fifteen 12 months outdated protagonist, wry in her man's hat and gold shoes. That dating is outflanked by way of the Naturalisti pictures Duras weaves of Parisian garrets and the familial disasters of dissipation. My yr of studying (mostly French) ladies keeps in speed with a philosophy of the the following and now. This used to be a detour of benefit.

Nate D: A spectral movement, again and forth, in the course of the sharp distinctive details of memory, sparkling or or both. kin and other. intercourse as technique of taking enterprise in one's existence perhaps. issues that haunt, issues which are lost. the tip of an era, of colonialism, of eu relevance within the some distance east. A rejection of the destroyed past.

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