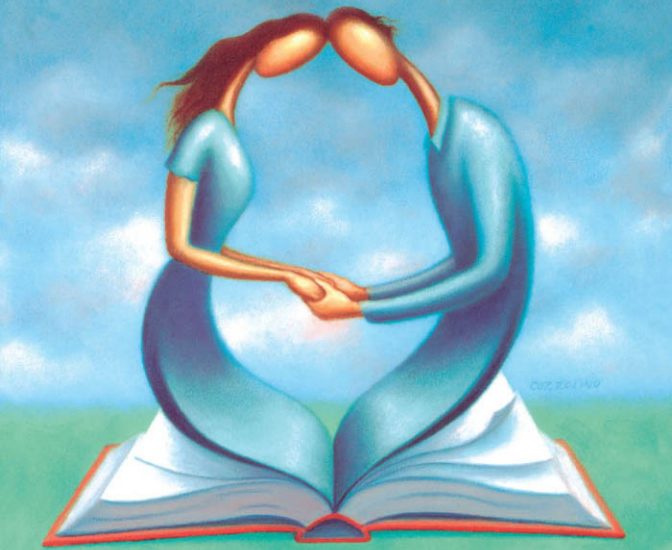
LOVE IS A STORY

A NEW THEORY OF RELATIONSHIPS



ROBERT J. STERNBERG, Ph.D.

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To Alejandra

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PREFACE

Like everyone else, I've spent a lot of time trying to figure out why some of my close relationships have succeeded and others have failed. Like many other people, I've read about relationships, seen various media presentations about them, and gone to counselors who promised to help me understand. I've even spent a portion of my career as a psychologist trying to understand what has worked for me and what hasn't. Curiously, even my own theories didn't seem to give me the understanding I was seeking—either of my own relationships or of other people's.

I started studying love in the early 1980s, focusing initially on its structure. Together with a graduate student, Susan Grajek, I proposed a psychometric type of theory of love.[1] The goal was to discover if love could be understood in terms of its structural building blocks, and if so, to discover the nature of these building blocks. According to that theory, love could be understood in terms of a large number of disparate emotions, thoughts, and motivations—things like caring for another person, communicating well, and being supportive. The problem was that this set of "building blocks" seemed to describe elements of love, but without systematizing them and without suggesting why I or anyone else would love some people but not others.

By the late 1980s, I had proposed a new, triangular theory of love, according to which love could be understood as comprising three

components: intimacy, passion, and commitment.[2] Different kinds of love would comprise different combinations of these components. For example, romantic love was characterized by intimacy plus passion, fatuous or foolish love by commitment fueled only by passion, and consummate or complete love by the combination of all three components—intimacy, passion, and commitment. Although this theory systematized kinds of love in a way that the earlier theory did not, it still did not explain why I, or anyone else, would fall in love or be able to maintain a loving relationship with one person but not another.

By the middle of the 1990s, I was seeing things in a new light. I realized that I needed to understand and systematize the many stories I had heard about relationships. These stories differed widely, not only between relationships, but sometimes within relationships: Two partners might have totally different stories about their relationship, and when the stories were very different, the partners seemed less satisfied. So I began to formulate the view of love as a story.[3] That is the view I present here. The basic idea is that we tend to fall in love with people whose stories are the same as or similar to our own, but whose roles in these stories are complementary to ours. Thus, they are like us in some ways, but potentially unlike us in others. If we happen to fall in love with someone whose stories are quite different, our relationship and the love underlying it are both at risk.

We have collected some data to test the love-is-a-story view, which are described in this book, but our validation efforts are still ongoing, as they are likely to be for a long time. Thus, this book reports a work in progress rather than a final statement of a fully tested theory.

I have written this book for everyone who is interested in love, and that probably includes just about everyone. It's not a how-to book, and it's not a book that panders to a recovery kind of mentality. I've tried to write a serious yet accessible work that may be of value to laypersons and professionals alike. I hope it presents them with a view of love that will answer questions that traditional theories—including my own previous ones—have been unable to an-

swer, such as why we fall in love with the people we do and why we maintain love for some people but not for others.

A number of people have contributed both directly and indirectly to this book. My early collaborators in my research on love, Susan Grajek and Michael Barnes, both played a part in the development of my thinking. More recently, my collaborations with Anne Beall have also helped me further develop my ideas about love, especially with regard to how it is socially constructed.[4]

Mahzad Hojjat has been an invaluable collaborator in developing the inventory items presented in this book for assessing people's stories about love. Hojjat also collaborated in the validation of the theory, including a study in which members of a large psychology class recounted stories of their love relationships. Neil Wechsler has also been invaluable in the collection and presentation of the stories reported in this book, and in suggesting the teacher-student story.

I am grateful to all these collaborators for their work with me at various stages of the development of my work on love. Sai Durvasula put in many hours of word processing, for which I am also grateful. Finally, I am grateful to Joan Bossert for acquiring the book for Oxford University Press, to Sue Warga for copyediting the manuscript, to Kim Torre-Tasso for bringing the book into production at Oxford University Press, and to all the members of my family, who have taught me so much about love.

The stories in this book are based either on actual individual cases or on combinations of cases developed over the course of many years. However, all names and details of the cases have been changed to render them completely anonymous.

R. J. S.
New Haven, Conn.
August 1997

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I THE STORIES WE TELL

What does it mean for love to be a story? What are the characteristics of stories? How do stories develop? These are the questions addressed in this part. I will show you what love stories are, why they are important, and how understanding them can change your life.

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LOVE AS A STORY

Zach and Tammy have been married for twenty-eight years. Their friends have been predicting divorce for the entire time, and their predictions seem sensible. Tammy constantly threatens to leave Zach; he, in turn, lashes out at her and tells her that nothing would make him happier.

Zach and Tammy fight almost continually, and are something of an embarrassment to their friends, because the fighting is as loud as it is public. Their friends can't imagine a more ill-matched couple and have decided that the only thing that could possibly be holding Zach and Tammy together is sheer inertia.

Valerie and Leonard, on the other hand, are divorced. No one who knows them seems quite able to figure out why. They seemed to have a perfect marriage. Of course, so do many others who merely hide the problems and the pain that they feel within their relationship. But the odd thing here is that Valerie and Leonard, too, thought they had a perfect marriage. They told each other as much, and said the same to their friends. Their children have since commented that their parents virtually never fought, and that even when they did fight, the fights were more in the way of minor disagreements.

Ultimately, Valerie and Leonard split when Leonard met someone at his office and left Valerie for her. Leonard was somewhat embarrassed and ashamed of his own behavior, and could justify it

only on the basis of his finally having found true love. But he admitted that before boredom set in, he had once thought Valerie to be his true love. At last count he was in therapy trying to figure out what was going on.

By the conventional wisdom, Zach and Tammy should have been splitsville, and Valerie and Leonard should have stayed married happily ever after. Their destinies seem to fly in the face of any reasonable prediction, regardless of the theory from which one makes the predictions. Might there be some way of understanding what happened to these two couples?

LOVE STORIES

One way of understanding these couples' behavior is to consider what kind of story each partner has about what love is in their current relationship and about what love ideally should be. A couple's stories of what love is and what it should be may or may not coincide. I wondered whether a couple's survival could depend on whether their individual stories of what love ideally should be were close enough to the stories of the actual relationship they were in. For example, if someone wants to live a romantic fairy tale, but finds herself actually living a war story, she is likely to be dissatisfied. Others prefer the war story, and would feel bored out of their minds in the romantic fairy tale.

What is interesting about Zach and Tammy is that both had stories that viewed love as war. No matter how bizarre or even ridiculous their relationship might seem to other people, the relationship worked for them. It corresponded well to what each of them wanted, and they both wanted the same thing. In contrast, Valerie and Leonard had a relationship that looked good to other people, but it didn't end up matching Leonard's story about what he wanted; ultimately, what he wanted and what Valerie wanted were quite different. They grew up with and still have very different stories about love.

We all grew up on love stories. Years ago, when I was much younger, Erich Segal wrote a best-selling novel and called it, very

simply, *Love Story*. The title was apt—and the book was a huge success in the bookstores and on the screen. Are our real-life relationships influenced by stories such as this one?

We are often told we have to be realistic—to separate the stories we tell ourselves from what's actually going on, to distinguish fact from fiction. The whole point in getting to know someone better is supposedly to find out what the person is "really like," to go beyond what we perceive or imagine the person to be like.

But a clean separation of fact from fiction simply isn't possible in the context of personal relationships, because we shape the facts of a relationship to conform to our personal fictions. In many ways, we are a composite of our stories. As Immanuel Kant pointed out in *The Critique of Pure Reason,* if there is an objective reality, it is unknowable. All we can know is the reality we construct. That reality takes the form of a story.

Love really is a story, then—only we, rather than William Shakespeare or Gabriel García Marquez or Erich Segal or Barbara Cartland, are the authors.[1] Stories about love have existed throughout the ages, and the basic themes and plots of these stories have changed little. What has changed, however, is how these stories play out in day-to-day living, as well as the popularity of some stories compared with others. We relate better to love stories—whether in novels, plays, soap operas, or elsewhere—than we do to the self-help books or magazine articles containing lists of generic steps we are supposed to take to understand and improve our relationship. So perhaps we should be paying more attention to the love stories in our lives and less to these logically prescribed step-by-step lists. The problem with the lists is not that they aren't rational; it's that they just don't work, even if they are presented as part of a course of psychotherapy.

Conventional therapies to improve people's love lives don't work if they address only the *effects* of the stories we tell ourselves—in other words, our understanding of why the relationship failed. We need to look at the stories themselves.[2] People can go from one therapist to another, one marriage counselor to another, and find things getting no better. That's because what are being treated are symptoms rather than causes, much the way an aspirin treats the symp-

toms rather than the cause of an illness. An aspirin may lower the fever associated with a virus, but it won't cure a person of the virus. What's worse, the fever associated with a virus is not caused by the virus, in any case. It's a reaction of the body, which is attempting to raise its temperature in order to kill off the virus. In treating only symptoms, therefore, we may actually make things worse.

In the case of a relationship, symptoms of failure—whether they be depression, agitation, or anxiety—are signs that something is wrong. Receiving psychotherapy or taking pills may alleviate the symptoms of depression or anxiety without doing anything at all to improve the relationship that is causing the problem. We may end up tolerating a relationship that continues to be wrong for us—one that is a bad match for our own personal ideal love story—when what we really need to do is either change our relationship or change our story.

The movie *When Harry Met Sally* was quite successful when it appeared because it explored the idea of love stories and especially how stories about love differ from those concerning friendship. Harry's relationship with Sally and his perceptions of her fit into his preconceived notion of a story not about love, but about friendship. Despite their close relationship, Harry spent many years seeking romance from other women. He ultimately changed his story about love, in part because of his relationship with Sally. But until this story changed, Harry could not view Sally in a romantic way, no matter what either of them did. When Harry changed his story, his relationship with Sally improved and even transformed itself.

People will always be romantically involved, and so there will always be people trying to understand, improve, and transform their intimate relationships. People go to great lengths to do so: They talk to one another, to friends outside the relationship, to family members, and to therapists. They buy books, attend courses, and watch videos. But how successful are people in their attempts to make their relationships work? The divorce rate, which in the United States and many other countries hovers around 50 percent, gives us a clue, but only a limited one. We can all think of relationships that will probably not break up but are nevertheless unhappy. Most of us can count on one hand the relationships we know that really *are* happy.

Either intimate connections are impossibly difficult or, somehow, our attempts at understanding and improving relationships are failing to take into account an important aspect of what goes into maintaining them. This is where the idea of love as a story can be helpful: Each of us has an ideal story about love, and it may be the most important thing we can learn about ourselves.

RELATIONSHIPS AS STORIES

When we first meet someone, we naturally want to get to know that person better, to see whether they think the way we do. We want to match up our first impressions with realities, to substitute fact for fiction, truths for stories. We imagine, in getting to know someone, that we replace a "fiction" with the "reality" of nonfiction. But if we think about first impressions, about the rituals surrounding mating and marriage, this replacement is often not what really happens. We come to relationships with many preconceived ideas. These ideas, or stories, are not right or wrong in themselves, although they may be more or less adaptive—that is, more or less healthy in promoting a good fit to the environment. What is viewed as adaptive varies over time and place. For example, one culture might view love as an indispensable part of marriage; another culture might view love as irrelevant to marriage. In both cultures, these values are likely to be taught not as somewhat arbitrary matters of cultural convention, but as matters of right and wrong. What are viewed as "realities" are rather perceptions of realities—stories. The story gives the relationship meaning in the context of our lives. Sometimes each partner in a relationship sees different meaning in the same actions or events, because each interprets the actions or events in terms of a different story.

My Story, Your Story

When Tyrone met Samantha, he thought he had found the love of his life. He had made mistakes before, but not this time. Samantha seemed to have everything he was looking for, even things he had

thought he would never find. She was beautiful, smart, sexy, outgoing, poised, and interested in sports, and she had a good sense of humor. Best of all, she was interested in him. Tyrone suggested to Samantha that they go to a Cubs game together; she accepted.

Within a month Tyrone and Samantha were dating steadily. In two months they were an item. After three months Tyrone was beginning to have second thoughts. He was pretty sure that Samantha was seeing at least one other man on the sly, maybe more than one. The whole story was beginning to have a ring of ugly familiarity to it—a woman who can't be trusted, who pretends to be true but cheats the first chance she gets. Tyrone was glad that he had gotten to know Samantha better, before it was too late. After some ugly scenes, the relationship came to a bitter end. Tyrone was glad it had; so was Samantha, who hadn't been seeing anyone besides Tyrone and didn't want to be with a man whom she had come to view as delusional.

While Tyrone may seem delusional, perpetually imagining that his partners are cheating on him, in a sense we are all like Tyrone. As we begin to get to know people, we start to project our own thoughts and feelings—the wisdom we've acquired as well as the emotional baggage of our past—onto them. As a result, though we feel we are getting to know a person more intimately, we may not really be doing that at all. On the contrary, we may be creating a story that has less and less to do with what the person is really like, and more to do with what we *imagine* that person to be like. Indeed, we know people only through our own perceptions of them.

You're not like Tyrone, you say. Perhaps you are more like him than you realize. I was once talking to a famous love researcher about his relationship with his wife. This individual is a leader in the field of close relationships, elite among those people who have sought a psychological understanding of such partnerships. He described to me how one day, after more than two decades of marriage, he was having a conversation with his wife in the living room. The fire was burning, it was twilight outside, and the setting couldn't have been more romantic. His wife made an offhand comment, and all of a sudden his whole perspective on the relationship changed. He real-

ized that the way he was viewing the relationship and the way she was viewing it had just about nothing in common. More than twenty years, and somehow he hadn't noticed. Further conversations confirmed, at least for him, his new hypothesis. And his marriage eventually ended.

This love researcher was no Tyrone. Yet he was as susceptible to illusions as any one of us. Was his new perception correct? Really, there is no way to know for sure. Like Tyrone, he started with one story and replaced it with another. His wife, like Samantha, had her own, different story. There is no objective, "right" story of a relationship, or at least none we can know.

If you have any doubts, just talk to two people going through a divorce. As often as not, it will sound as though each of them is describing a different marriage. The relationship one partner depicts is likely to have little or nothing to do with the one the other describes. That's a major reason they're divorcing: Their stories about the relationship they are in have diverged to the point where there are virtually no points of similarity.

Divergence of stories is not limited to failing relationships, however. In collaboration with Michael Barnes, I did a study in which we asked couples to fill out questionnaires that asked how they felt about their partner and how they thought the other felt about them.[3] In some of the questions, each partner had to guess how the other partner would respond. On a scale of 0 to 1, where 0 indicated that the person just guessed at random how the partner would respond and 1 indicated that the person always guessed correctly, the correlation between how the partner actually responded and how the individual thought his or her partner would respond was a mere 0.3. In other words, there was only a modest relationship between how the individuals responded and how their partners thought they would respond. People had only the foggiest idea of how their partners really felt about them. And these were couples in stable relationships! Imagine what the results might have been for couples in failing relationships. In my experience, as often as not, when one partner indicates dissatisfaction or even asks for a divorce, the other partner feels caught totally off guard. Yet if one were to ask the

partner wanting a divorce if the news was unexpected, that person would probably say that he or she had warned the other dozens, even hundreds of times. The two partners' stories about the relationship have so diverged that their communication has become largely an illusion. In contrast, relationships are more likely to succeed when common stories generate shared worldviews, assumptions about relationships, and interpretations of events—all of which form foundations for good communication.

The fact that people have different stories of love highlights an important point about love: Trying to figure out what love "is" can be a frustrating and futile effort, because it's not quite the same thing for any two people. It's a story to everyone, but what's in that story can differ widely from one person to another. At the same time, though, two people in a relationship need somehow to create a shared story in addition to their individual ones.

Our Story

Not only does each person have a personal story of the relationship, but each person also has a conception of a joint story that he or she believes the couple shares. The shared story may or may not correspond to either individual's story, and of course the two partners may have different conceptions of the shared story. Consider Beth and Blake.

Beth and Blake have been together twenty years, and both are happy in the relationship. They are proud of the fact that they have stuck it out for twenty years and that although there have been a few tensions, especially around their two children, their marriage has been relatively trouble-free. In many ways, they are the model of the happy couple. Maybe not in every way, though.

Beth has been seeing David for six months, almost seven. David is divorced and is not interested in remarrying. Curiously, leaving Blake is one of the last things Beth could imagine doing. She really is happy with him, but in a tranquil and somewhat unexciting kind of way. She finds that seeing David generates a kind of excitement in her life that she just doesn't get with Blake.

Beth feels guilty over her relationship with David. She knows it doesn't make any real sense, and what's more, if Blake found out, he would be out the door in a minute. There would be no reconciliation—not for Blake. He is just too proud. One part of her wants to terminate the relationship with David right away, before it's too late. But another part of her—which seems to exist in parallel with the first—just can't seem to let go.

Beth has a curious ambivalence about the whole situation. Her actual story about her relationship with Blake is a positive one. Their shared story is also very positive, but what, exactly, is that shared story? She knows that Blake's conception of that shared story and hers can't be the same. When she is with Blake, she knows she is pretending. The actual story with Blake is just too far from her ideal story. Sooner or later, something's got to give. Beth is not sure what it will be.

The case of Beth and Blake was actually more complex than it appeared, because, unbeknownst to Beth, Blake was also seeing someone else, and having almost exactly the same thoughts as Beth. Had they communicated to each other their sense of the stagnation in the relationship, they might have repaired it. Instead, each sought to keep the other in the dark.

Beth and Blake both appear to be pretending, when in fact they may have more in common than they know. Sometimes the story a couple shares is so threadbare it cannot withstand the slightest of tests. A recent article in a national newspaper told of an engaged couple who had just split up over a lottery ticket. The woman bought the ticket and gave it to the man to hold. The ticket was a winner and the woman wanted it back—it was hers. The man didn't see it that way—it was theirs, and he believed that the man manages the money. Now it's a matter for the courts to decide. The couple discovered, too late, that their views on relationships were not very much alike.

It is often said that with time partners become more alike. Part of the reason for this perception is that people not only attempt to choose partners with matching stories, but also act in ways that actively shape the behavior of their partner, to make it a better match

to their story. In other words, if the partner does not quite conform to the desired role, the individual will act in ways—consciously or unconsciously—intended to encourage the desired behavior on the part of the partner. The result of shaping can be that an individual finds him- or herself playing a role in a relationship that he or she before would never have imagined possible. It may or may not be an agreeable or even acceptable role for the individual. If the role is not acceptable, the individual may find the relationship to be exerting power over her that he or she does not welcome.

Relationships are powerful and transforming, changing us in ways we may not want. It is not only our love story that moves us to act, but our partner's love story as well. And the situation is complicated by the fact that each of us has multiple stories about love. How do these multiple stories play out? Are they conscious? We turn to these questions and others in the next chapter.

OUR MULTIPLE STORIES OF LOVE

Typically, each of us has multiple stories about love, not just one. These stories underscore the fact that not only is love not quite the same thing for different people, but it is not even one simple thing for us individually. Consider the case of Aaron and Lucy.

Aaron has been seeing Lucy for seven months. It's the second time around for both of them, but they both have been acting as though this is it. They've discovered they both want the same things out of life and that they are compatible. When they're together, everything is calm and relaxed—at last. Both came from contentious marriages that almost never allowed them to be calm or relaxed. What a change! They are starting to talk marriage and children—a life together. Conversations that started out as about a hypothetical future somehow have become about what now seems like a real future. Lucy isn't quite sure how the speculations so quickly transformed themselves into something more. It just seemed to happen.

Unfortunately, other things were also happening. Three weeks ago, Aaron wouldn't have cared about Dottie. Now he is thinking that maybe he does care after all. On a week-long business trip, he met Dottie, an assistant manager at the plant he was visiting. As the week went on, it seemed to become more a story about Dottie than about the business trip. He started off trying to sell her machine parts, and ended up trying to sell her himself. Aaron is totally confused.