

Men are not from Mars, women are not from Venus

February 14 2012, by Jenny Hall



Love helps us learn more about ourselves as human beings, says UTM professor Mari Ruti. (Photo by Caz Zyvatkauskas)

Professor Mari Ruti of the Department of English and Drama at the University of Toronto Mississauga has written about love for both academic and mainstream audiences. Her newest book, *The Summons of Love*, portrays love as a much more complex, multifaceted phenomenon than we tend to appreciate—an experience that helps us encounter the depths of human existence. This is an updated version of an interview we did with her in February 2011, about her popular book *The Case for Falling in Love: Why We Can't Master the Madness of Love—and Why That's the Best Part*. Ruti works at the intersection of contemporary theory, psychoanalysis, continental philosophy and gender and sexuality studies. *The Case for Falling in Love* was written for a mainstream audience and she hopes it will help women and men understand that love

is not a game to be won or lost.

What made you decide to write this book?

It's a mainstream book but it arises directly from my academic work. After finishing my PhD at Harvard in 2000, I spent four years there as assistant director of the Program for the Study of [Women](#), Gender and Sexuality. I taught a course on romantic [love](#), and after many years of thinking about it, I decided I wanted to put those ideas into a book that would be accessible to mainstream readers.

Do you consider it a self-help book?

I consider it an anti-self-help book! It's a hard-hitting critique of contemporary self-help culture. I really take on the whole "Men are from mars, women are from Venus" mentality.

What's the message?

The main argument is that the image of [romantic love](#) that the self-help industry tries to sell is based on a few misconceptions. The first is the idea that love is a game with winners and losers. The second is the idea that men and women are inherently different so that to make romance work, women need to learn to read the so-called male psyche.

I argue that there is no such thing as the male psyche and I also argue that the more we try to manipulate our romantic lives, the more we think of love as a game, the less authentically we are able to love. So basically, whoever came up with the idea that love is a game destroyed its soul.

How did we get to the point where we think that love is a game to be won and that men and women are

opponents?

There was a trend toward turning love into a game via a series of books. It began in the 1980s with *The Rules*. And John Gray came up with his “Mars-Venus” franchise in the 1990s—he’s written 15 books now. By now it’s so ingrained in our psyches, particularly female psyches, that it’s hard to banish.

One of the things that drives me crazy about the self-help industry is that the books that women read are trying to drag us back into the 1950s, into gender roles that are not applicable today in terms of how contemporary men and women behave.

Right. You argue in the book that there is some hope in that young people are thinking differently about love and about gender roles. Can you tell us some more about this?

Yes, this is one of the reasons I wrote the book. As a university professor, I teach 18- to 22-year-olds. I know from experience that their understanding of gender is a lot more fluid than what these self-help books portray.

As research for my book I read 20 to 25 self-help books. Their portrait of men in particular is really strange. Book after book tells us that men are these cave men who are wired to hunt women. They’re wired to cheat on you. They don’t understand emotions. They will forget your birthday. They’re commitment phobic. The young women I teach don’t think of men in these terms and the young men I teach don’t think of women as prey to be conquered. There’s a lot more fluidity and there’s a lot more mutual respect than these authors are suggesting. When you look at younger people you see this clearly.

There's a whole chapter in my book on how television shows and movies that are aimed at young audiences —teen shows — often actually have amazingly progressive gender configurations. They do not perpetuate gender stereotypes, which is one reason I'm so intrigued by the fact that self-help authors are so gung ho about dragging us back into the 1950s. Why? What is their agenda? A lot of these books are aimed at young women. Why are they trying to convince young women to go back to the 1950s when the rest of the culture is moving forward? Why are television shows more progressive than self-help books? What's in it for the self-help industry?

Do you know the answers to these questions?

In my more paranoid moments, I think that they're quasi-intentionally trying to set women's liberation back by a few decades. In my less paranoid moments, I realize that the self-help industry is probably caught up in the cultural machinery that it is perpetuating. They don't necessarily realize the impact of what they're doing.

But even so, my argument is that if you're going to position yourself as a cultural gatekeeper, if you're going to start telling other people what to do, then you should be aware of the implications of what you're saying. I'm pretty hard on self-help authors.

I suppose it's easier to write a book that offers a simple formula than to write a book that says that life is not necessarily programmable or predictable.

Yes. We live in such a pragmatic culture that we are trained to think that everything is controllable. Romantic love is not controllable. The whole point of love is to overflow all of our systems of control. It's not meant to be manipulated.

Why are we so focused on falling in love?

I talk a lot more about this in my most recent book, an academic book called *The Summons of Love*. I think that there's something about the experience of romantic love that gives us access to frequencies of our own being that we can't access any other way. These are sublime feelings — that sensation of blissful happiness and all the problems of the world dissolving. There are very few other things in our lives that allow us to access those kinds of feelings.

Of course this only applies to new, fresh love. But I think we covet that experience so strongly because that's the one of the few ways we can get it. We know that. If we've had it before, we know that it's the only way we can get it again.

It sounds like a drug.

Absolutely!

So what should women—or men—do if they're looking for some advice about love?

One of the main points of this book is that love's failures are not life failures. I think that the self-help industry teaches women to think that when love goes wrong, when their relationships fail, it's because they did something wrong. I'm saying that most times when love fails it's not because you've done something wrong. It's because love is inherently fickle and capricious. Most of our relationships are not meant to last. Most people who get married and stay married had many other relationships before that did not last. That's the whole point.

Often it's the failed affairs that teach us the most, so thinking about

love's failures as life failures is not productive because a lot of time it's the failure that teaches us something really important.

Maybe failure isn't even the right word.

Exactly. Love's mission is in some way much more expansive or much more panoramic than what we are trained to think. It may not be that love's mission is to make us happy in the conventional sense. It may be that love's mission is to refine our character or to help us grow. If you think of it that way, suddenly the failures don't seem like failures.

The experience of love as you describe it almost sounds like it's outside the norms of our culture, which trains us to believe that everything is controllable. It's almost as if being in love is a different way of being.

People do experience love in a transcendent way. What happens is that when it fails we flock to Chapters or Amazon in search of these [books](#) because we want answers and we want those answers to be simple. It's comforting to get some sort of formula because this leads us to think that the next time we'll be able to control things so we won't get hurt. I think there is this tension in that, yes, we experience love in this more expansive, panoramic sense, but when it fails we want it to be simple. Of course it's never going to be simple. We do everything in our power to make it simple but that's completely artificial.

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