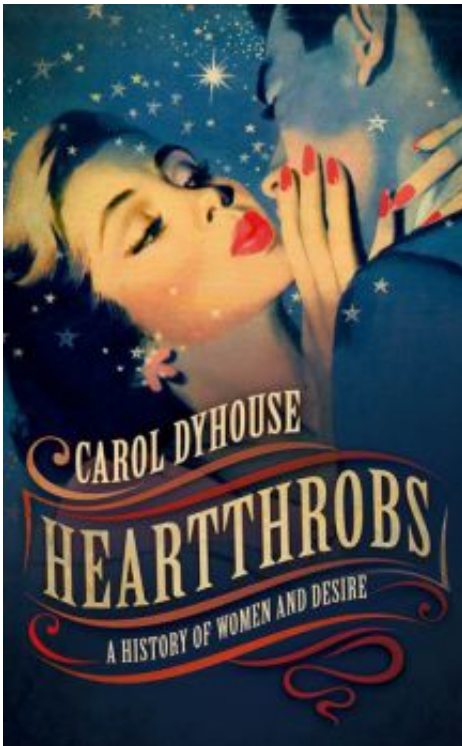


# What makes a heartthrob? It's not what men think

February 15 2017

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Heartthrobs, A history of women and desire, By Professor Carol Dyhouse

Alpha males beware. You're not what women want. At least, not unless you have a damaged, vulnerable side that makes you ready to be tamed.

While nearly two centuries have passed since moody Mr Rochester gave Jane Eyre the run-around, it seems the tropes and narratives of romance have barely moved on.

In her latest book, *Heartthrobs. A history of women and desire*, University of Sussex Emeritus Professor of History Carol Dyhouse looks at what creates heterosexual female desire and finds that those knee-trembling moments for women are just as pervasive today, even if their lives—and their expectations of men—are completely different to several generations ago.

In reviewing the heroes of novels, magazines, films and a parade of popstars over the decades, Professor Dyhouse shows how economics and technology have shaped women's passion as much as the accessibility of the men themselves.

For Victorian women, a man was a passport to security and a future. Without marriage, the well-to-do would have remained being supported by their father, or brother. "I don't think you would have found much discussion of heartthrobs," she says. "It would have been irrelevant."

But it was already apparent that sensitivity in a man was a big draw for women. The musician and composer Franz Liszt attracted droves of female fans, eager to collect his cigar stubs.

And despite being podgy and lame, the 19th-century poet Lord Byron caused women to swoon over him through his writing.

"He came across as empathising with and understanding women," says Professor Dyhouse. "He has a vulnerability. Women living quite constricted lives would write letters to him offering to meet him under the bushes in Green Park, which is not what you would have expected of women at that time."

With the advent of cinema, it also soon became apparent that the traditional ideal of masculinity was not what women craved. Many of the most popular screen idols – Montgomery Clift, Rock Hudson, Dirk

Bogarde and Richard Chamberlain – were gay (even though this was never revealed during their careers).

"There's often this assumption that women go for alpha male types, but historically that hasn't been the case at all," says Professor Dyhouse.

"Women don't always like what men think they ought to like. For example, what appealed to women about the flamboyant pianist Liberace was the fact that he was respectful and courteous."

She sees the 1970s as a turning point, with women no longer regarding men essentially as meal tickets. "Feminists always used to say that feminism liberated men as well as women. If you don't need a man to provide for you, you can relate to them more as human beings."

But, while the heroines of contemporary films and novels are more self-possessed, and the heroes less brutal, the rules of romance have remained the same.

As the massive popularity of the books and films of Fifty Shades of Grey have demonstrated, the most satisfying outcomes for women are the situations in which they are taming and transforming a damaged man.

"This is what intrigues me as a social historian," adds Professor Dyhouse. "Because falling in love as a young woman and expecting it to last forever is not how it is any more. A more modern idea is that [women](#) are using romantic fiction as a political agenda. They are writing about how, through the influence of a woman's love, a man becomes husband material."

**More information:** Heartthrobs. A history of women and desire: [global.oup.com/academic/produced...65837?cc=gb&lang=en&](http://global.oup.com/academic/produced...65837?cc=gb&lang=en&)

Provided by University of Sussex

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