

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

# all about love

NEW VISIONS



# bell hooks

*Author of Salvation: Black People and Love*

"A warm affirmation that love is possible."

—NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

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## *T'redo ce*

¥1 EN I WA S a child, it was clear to me that life was not worth living if we did not know love. I wish I could testify that I came to this awareness because of the love I felt in my life. But it was love's absence that let mc know how much have mattered. I was my father's first daughter. At the moment of my birth, I was looked upon with loving kindness, cherished and made to feel wanted on this earth and in my home. To this day I cannot re- member when that feeling of being loved left me. I just know that one day I was no longer J recious. Thtise who had initially loved me well turned away. The absence of their recognition and regard pierced my heart and left me with a feeling of brokenheartedness •\* F°<fc>und I was spellbound.

Grief and sadness

overwhelmed me. I  
did not know

what I had done wrong, And nothing I tried made  
it right.

No other connection healed the hurt of that first a(aan- doiiinent, that first banishment from love's paradise. For years I lived my life suspended, trapped by the past, un- aldle to wove into the future. Like every wounded child I just wanted to turn back time and bc in that paradise again, in that moment of remembered rapture where I felt loved, where I felt a sense of belonging,

We can never go back. I know that now. We can go forward. We can find the love our hearts (ong for, but not until we let go grief amont the love we lost long ago, when we were little and had no voice to speak the heart's long- ing. All the years of my life I thought I was searching for love I found, retrospectively, to be years where I was sim- ply trying to recover what had been lost, to return to the first home, to get back the rapture of first love. I was not really ready to love or be lovect in the present. I was still mourning—clinging to the broken heart of girlhood, to broken connections. When that mourning ceased I was able to love again.

I awakened from my trance State and was stunned to find the world I was living in, the o-orld of the present, was no longer a world open to love. And I noticed that all around me I heard testimony that lovelessness had be- come the order of the day. I feel our nation's turning away from love as intensely as I felt love's



abandonment in my girlhood, Turning away we  
risk moving into a wilderness

## P R E F A C E

of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again. I write of love to bear witness both to the danger in this movement, and to call for a return to love. Redeemed and restored, love returns us to the promise of everlasting life. When we love we can let our hearts speak.

## *Introduction*

# GRACE: TOUCHED BY LOVE

It is possible to speak with our heart directly. Most ancient cultures know this. We can actually converse with our heart as if it were a good friend. In modern life we have become so busy with our daily affairs and thoughts that we have lost this essential art of taking time to converse with our heart.

—JACK KOLLID



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artist might be gay. Perhaps, It is just as likely that the men who splashed paint on the wall were threatened by this public confessing of a longing for love—n longing so intense it could not only be spoken but was dclibcratcly searched for.

After much searching I located the artist and talked with him face-to-face about the meaning of love. We spoke about the way public art can be a vehicle for the sharing of life-affirming thoughts. And we both expressed our grief and annr>yance that the construction com}9any had so callously covered up a powerful message about love. To remind me of the construction walls, he gave me snap- shots of the graffiti art. From the time we met, everywhere I have lived I have placed these snapsh<>ts above my kitchen sink. Every day, when I drink water or take a dish from the cupboard, I stand before this reminder that we yearn for love—that we seek it—even when we lack hope that it really can be hound.

T H E R E   A R E   N O T many }oublic discussions of love in our culture right now. At l>est, popular culture is the one domain in which our longing for love is talked about. Movies, music, magazines, and books are the place where we turn to hear our yearnings for love expressed. Yet the talk is not the life-affirming discourse Of the sixties and

seventies, which urged us to (believe “All you need is love.” Nowadays the most popular messages are those that de-

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clarc the meaningless of love, its irrelevance. A glaring ex- ample of this culniral shift was the tremendous popularity of Tina Turner's song with the title boldly declaring, "What's Love Got to Do with It." I was saddened and appalled when I inter- viewed a well-known female rapper at least twenty years my junior who, when asked about love, responded with biting sarcasm, "Love, what's that— I have never had any love in my life."

Youth culnirc today is cynical about love. And that cyn- icism has come front their pervasive feeling that love cai- iot be found. Expressing this concern in V 6 *Ali y« Ever Was ted Isn't* Ertoogfi, Harold Kushner writes: "I am afraid that we may be raising a generation of young peo- ple who will grow up afraid to love, afraid to give them- selves completely tr> another person, because they will have seen how much it hurts to take the risk of l(wing and have it not work out. I am afraid that they will grow up looking for intimacy without risk, for pleasure without significant emotional

investment. They will be so fearful of the pain of disappointment that they will forgo the pos- siloilities ref love and joy." Young people are cynical about love. Ultimately, cynicism is the great mask of the disap- pointed and betrayed heart.



When I travel around the nation giving lectures about ending racism and sexism, audiences, especially young listeners, become agitated when I speak about the place Of

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about love always testify that they have received love. They speak from this position; it gives what they say authority. Women, more often than not, speak from a position of lack, of not having received the love we long for. A woman who talks of love is still suspect. Perhaps this is because all that enlightened woman may have to say about love will stand as a direct threat and challenge to the visions men have offered us. I enjoy what male writers have to say about love. I cherish my Rumi and my Rilke, male poets who stir hearts with their words. Men often write about love through fantasy, through what they imagine is possible rather than what they concretely know. We know now that Rilke did not write as he lived, that so many words of love offered us by great men fail us when we come face to face with reality. And even though John Gray's work troubles me and makes me mad, I confess to reading and rereading *Men Are from Mars Women Are from Venus*. Still, like many women and men, I want to know about the meaning of love beyond the realm of fantasy—beyond what we imagine can happen. I want to know love's truths as we live them.

Almost all the recent popular self-help writing by men



on love, from works like *Mm Are. [rom Mars,*  
*Womro ATe from Venffs* to John Wel wood's *Love*  
*and Archenin g*, make use of feminist perspectives  
on gender roles. Ulti- mately, though, the authors  
remain wedded to belief systems, which  
suggest that there are basic inherent dif-

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## INTRODUCTION

ferences between women and men. In actuality, all the concrete proof indicates that while the perspectives of men and women often differ, these differences are learned characteristics, not innate, or “natural,” traits. If the notion that men and women were absolute opposites inhabiting totally different emotional universes were true, men would never have become the supreme authorities on love. Given gender stereotypes that assign to women the role of feelings and being emotional and to men the role of reason and non-emotion, “real men” would shy away from any talk of love.

Though considered the established “authorities” (in the

subject, only a few men talk freely, telling the world what they think about love. In everyday life males and females alike are relatively silent about love. Our silence shields us from uncertainty. We want to know love. We are simply afraid the desire to know too much about love will lead us closer and closer to the abyss of lovelessness. While ours is a nation wherein the vast majority of citizens are followers of religious faiths that proclaim the transformative power of love, many people feel that they do not have a clue as to how to love. And practically everyone suffers a crisis of faith when it comes to realizing biblical theories about the art of loving in everyday life. It is far easier to talk about loss than it is to talk about love. It is easier to

articulate the pain of love's absence than to describe its presence and meaning in our lives.

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Taught to believe that the mind, not the heart, is the seat of learning, many of us believe that to speak of love with any emotional intensity means we will be perceived as weak and irrational. And it is especially hard to speak of love when what we have to say calls attention to the fact that lovelessness is more common than love, that many of us are not sure what we mean when we talk of love or how to express love.

Everyone wants to know more about love. We want to know what it means to love, what we can do in our every-day lives to love and be loved. We want to know how to seduce those among us who remain wedded to lovelessness and open the door to their hearts to let love enter. The strength of our desire does not change the power of our cultural uncertainty. Everywhere we learn that love is important, and yet we are bombarded by its failure. In the realm of the political, among the religious, in our families, and in our romantic lives, we see little indication that love informs decisions, strengthens our understanding of community, or keeps us together. This bleak picture in no way alters the nature of our longing. We still hope that love will prevail. We still believe in love's promise.

Just as the graffiti proclaimed, our hope lies in the reality that so many of us continue to believe in love's power. We believe it is important to know love. We believe it is important to

search for love's truths, In an over-whelming  
number of private conversations and public

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dialogues, I have given and heard testimony about the mounting lovelessness in our culture and the fear it strikes in everyone's heart. This despair about love is coupled with a callous cynicism that frowns upon any suggestion that love is as important as work, as crucial to our survival as a nation as the drive to succeed. Awesomely, our nation, like no other in the world, is a culture driven by the quest to love (it's the theme of our movies, music, literature) even as it offers so little opportunity for us to understand love's meaning or to know how to realize love in word and deed.

Our nation is equally driven by sexual obsession. There is no aspect of sexuality that is not studied, talked about, or demonstrated. How-to classes exist for every dimension of sexuality, even masturbation. Yet schools for love do not exist. Everyone assumes that we will know how to love instinctively. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, we still accept that the family is the primary school for love. Those of us who do not learn how to love among family are expected to experience love in romantic relationships. However, this love often eludes us. And we spend a lifetime undoing the damage caused by cruelty, neglect, and all manner of lovelessness experienced in our families of

origin ated in relationships where we simply did not know what to do.

Only love can heal the wounds of the past. However, the intensity of our woundedness often leads to a closing

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of the heart, making it impossible for us to give or receive the love that is given to us. To open our hearts more fully to love's power and grace we must dare to acknowledge how little we know of love in both theory and practice. We must face the confusion and disappointment that much of what we were taught about the nature of love makes no sense when applied to daily life. Contemplating the practice of love in everyday life, thinking about how we love and what is needed for ours to become a culture where love's sacred presence can be felt everywhere, I wrote this meditation.

As the title *All About Love: New Visions* indicates, we want to live in a culture where love can flourish. We yearn to end the loneliness that is so pervasive in our society. This book tells us how to return to love. *All About Love: New Visions* provides radical new ways to think about the art of loving, offering a hopeful, joyous vision of love's transformative power. It lets us know what we must do to love again. Gathering love's wisdom, it lets us know what we must do to be touched by love's grace.



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THE MEN IN my life have always been the folks who are wary of using the word "love" lightly. They are wary because they believe women make too much of love. And they know that what we think love means is not always what they believe it means. Our confusion about what we mean when we use the word "love" is the source of our difficulty in loving. If our society had a commonly held understanding of the meaning of love, the act of loving would not be so mystifying. Dictionary definitions of love tend to emphasize romantic love, defining love first and foremost as "profoundly tender, passionate affection for another person, especially when based on sexual attraction." Of course, other definitions let the reader know one may have such feelings within a context that is not sexual. However, deep affection doesn't really adequately describe love's meaning.

The vast majority of books on the subject of love work

hard to avoid giving clear definitions. In the introduction to Diane Ackerman's *A Natural History of Love*, she declares “Love is the great intangible.” A few sentences down from this she suggests: “Everyone admits that love is wonderful and necessary, yet no one can agree on what it is.” Clearly, she adds: “We use the word love in such a sloppy way that it can mean almost nothing or absolutely everything.” No definition ever appears in her book that would help anyone trying to learn the art of loving. Yet she is not alone in writing of love in ways that cloud our understanding. When the very meaning of the word is cloaked in mystery, it should not come as a surprise that most people find it hard to define what they mean when they use the word “love.”

Imagine how much easier it would be for us to learn

how to love if we began with a shared definition, The word “love” is most often defined as a noun, yet all the more astute theorists of love acknowledge that we would all love better if we used it as a verb. I spent years searching for a meaningful definition of the word “love,” and was deeply relieved when I found one in psychiatrist

M. Scott Peck's classic self-help book *The Road Less Traveled*, first published in 1978. Echoing the work of Erich Fromm, he defines love as “the will to extend one's self for the purpose of

nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.” Explaining further, he continues: “Love is as love does. Love is an act of will—namely,



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of love that was clear was the first step in the process. Like many who read *The Road Less Traveled* again and again, I am grateful to have been given a definition of love that helped me face the places in my life where love was lacking. I was in my mid-twenties when I first learned to understand love “as the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.” It still took years for me to let go of learned patterns of behavior that negated my capacity to give and receive love. One pattern that made the practice of love especially difficult was that I constantly choosing to be with men who were emotionally wounded, who were not that interested in being loving even though they desired to be loved.

I wanted to know love but I was afraid to surrender

and trust another person. I was afraid to be intimate. By choosing men who were not interested in being loving, I was able to practice giving love, but always within an unfulfilling context. Naturally, my need to receive love was not met. I got what I was accustomed to getting—care and affection, usually mingled with a degree of unkindness, neglect, and, on some occasions, outright cruelty. At times I was unkind. It took me a long time to recognize that while I wanted to know love, I was afraid to be truly intimate. Many of us choose relationships of

affection and care that will never become loving because they feel safer. The demands are not as intense as Itwing requires. The risk is not as great.

So many of us long for love but lack the courage to take risks. Even though we are obsessed with the idea of love, the truth is that most of us live relatively decent, somewhat satisfying lives even if we often feel that love is lacking. In these relationships we share genuine affection and/or care. For most of us, that feels like enough because it is usually a lot more than we received in our families of origin. Undoubtedly, many of us are more comfortable with the notion that love can mean anything to anybody precisely because when we define it with precision and clarity it brings us face to face with our lacks—with terrible alienation. The truth is, far too many people in our culture do not know what love is. And this not knowing

feels like a terrible secret, a lack that we have to cover up.

Had I been given a clear definition of love earlier in my life it would not have taken me so long to become a more loving person. Had I shared with others a common understanding of what it means to live it would have been easier to create love. It is particularly distressing that so many recent psychologists continue to insist that definitions of love are unnecessary and meaningless. Or worse, the authors suggest love should mean something different to men than it does to women—that the sexes should respect and adapt to our inability to communicate since we do not share the same

language. This type of literature is popular because it does not demand a change in fixed ways of thinking about gender roles, culture, or love.

Rather than sharing strategies that would help us become more loving it actually encourages everyone to adapt to circumstances where love is lacking.

Women, more so than men, rush out to purchase this literature. We do so because collectively we are concerned about lovelessness. Since many women believe they will never know fulfilling love, they are willing to settle for strategies that help ease the pain and increase the peace, pleasure, and playfulness in existing relationships, particularly romantic ones. No vehicle in our culture exists for readers to talk back to the writers of this literature. And we do not really know if it has been truly useful, if it promotes constructive change. The fact that women, more than men, buy self-help books, using our consumer dollars to keep specific books on bestseller lists, is no indication that these books actually help us transform our lives. I have bought tons of self-help books. Only a very few have really made a difference in my life. This is true for many readers.

The lack of an ongoing public discussion and public

policy about the practice of love in our culture and in our lives means that we still look to books as a primary source of guidance and direction. Large numbers of readers embrace Peck's definition of love and are applying it to their lives in ways that are helpful and transformative. We can spread the word by evoking this definition in day-to-day







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low were present but my partners were not committed to making love the order of the day. When someone has not known love it is difficult for him to trust that mutual satisfaction and growth can be the primary foundation in a coupling relationship. He may only understand and believe in the dynamics of power, of one-up and one-down, of a sadomasochistic struggle for domination, and, ironically, he may feel "safer" when he is operating within these paradigms. Intimate with betrayal, he may have a phobic fear of trust. At least when you hold to the dynamics of power you never have to fear the unknown; you know the rules of the power game. Whatever happens, the outcome can be predicted. The practice of love offers no place of safety. We risk loss, hurt, pain. We risk being acted upon by forces outside our control.

When individuals are wounded in the space where they

would know love during childhood, that wounding may be so traumatic that any attempt to reinhabit that space feels utterly unsafe and, at times, seemingly life-threatening. This is especially the case for males. Females, no matter our childhood traumas, are given cultural support for cultivating an interest in love. While sexist logic underlies this support, it still means that females are much more likely to receive encouragement both to think about love and to value its meaning. Our overt

longing for love can be expressed and affirmed,  
This does not, however, mean that women are more  
able to love than men,

it is intended as our natural state.” Most males are not told that they need to be upheld by love every day. Sexist thinking usually prevents them from acknowledging their longing for love or their acceptance of a female as their guide on love's path.

More often than not females are taught in childhood, either by parental caregivers or the mass media, how to give the basic care that is part of the practice of love. We are shown how to be empathic, how to nurture, and, most important, how to listen. Usually we are not socialized in these practices so that we can be loving or share knowledge of love with men, but rather so that we can be maternal in relation to children. Indeed, most adult females readily abandon their basic understanding of the ways one shows care and respect (important ingredients of love) to resocialize themselves so that they can unite with patriarchal partners (male or female) who know nothing about love or the basic rudiments of caregiving. A woman who would never submit to a child calling her abusive names and humiliating her allows such behavior from a man. The respect women demand and uphold in the maternal-child bond is deemed not important in adult bondings if demanding respect from a man interferes with their desire to get and keep a partner.

Few parental caregivers teach their children to lie. Yet

continual lying, either through overt deception or with- holding, is often deemed acceptable and excusable adult



male behavior. Choosing to be honest is the first step in the process of love. There is no practitioner of love who deceives. Once the choice has been made to be honest, then the next step on love's path is communication. Writing about the importance of listening in *The Healing of America*, Marianne Williams calls attention to philosopher Paul Tillich's insistence that the first responsibility of love is to listen: "We cannot learn to communicate deeply until we learn to listen, to each other but also to ourselves and to God. Deliberate silence is a powerful tool, for the healing of a heart or the healing of a nation. From

there we move up to the next rung on the ladder of healing:

our capacity to so communicate our authentic truth as to heal and be healed by its power." Listening does not simply mean we hear other voices when they speak but that we also learn to listen to the voice of our own hearts as well as inner voices.

Getting in touch with the lovelessness within and letting that lovelessness speak its pain is one way to begin again on love's journey. In relationships, whether heterosexual or homosexual, the partner who is hurting often finds that their mate is unwilling to "hear" the pain. Women often tell me that they feel emotionally beaten down when their partners refuse to listen

or talk. When women communicate from a place of pain, it is often characterized as “nagging.” Sometimes women hear repeatedly that their partners are “sick of listening to this shit.” Both cases



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## “LOVE \$t3NC TO THR. N.1TIOfi”

A gracefully written volume ... —her treatise offers a deeply personal ant)— in this age of chicken-soupy psychobablil an unabashedly honest view of relationslii]3s. —*Entertisinment iFeekf)*

‘be word ‘love’ is most often defined as a noun, yet ... we woul<l all love bet- ter if we used it us n verb,” wriles bell hooks us she comes out fighting and on fire in Af/ dbotif be. Here, at her most pmvocnlive and intensely personal, the renowned scholar, cultural critic, .and feminist skewers our view of love as romance. In its place she offers a proactive new ethic for a people and a society bereft with lovelessness.

As tell hooks uses her incisive mind and mzor-sharp pen to explore the question “What is lover\*” her answers strike at both the wind and heart. In thirteen concise chapters, hooks examines her own sea i’t:li for emotional connecction and society's failure to provide a model for learning lo love. Raxing the cultural paradigm that thq ideal love is infused Willi sex and desire, she provides a new path to love that is sacred, redemptive, and heal- ing for individuals and for a nation. The t/tne *Reader* declared bell hooks one of the “100 Visionaries Who Could Change Your life.” *All About Love* is a powerful affirmation of just how profoundly she can.

“Eet'h offering from hell hooks is u inuj<it- event, as she has sri inu<ili to give us *Toronto Sun* Mayu

Angelou

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