

A Higher Love

DREAMS OF LOVE AND FATEFUL ENCOUNTERS: The Power of Romantic Passion

by Ethel Spector Person, M.D.
W.W. Norton & Co., \$18.95

This beautiful, timely book fills an important gap in the literature of psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis. Some might say it fits into the category of popular literature—but that would be mistaking graceful prose and accessible theory for an absence of scientific and philosophic weight. As Dr. Person, a clinical professor of psychiatry at Columbia University and director of the Columbia Psychoanalytic Center for Training and Research, convincingly shows, theoretical views of romantic love have run the gamut from patronizing to denigrating. Most frequently, psychological and psychiatric theorists have simply ignored the subject.

Romantic love has been compared to obsession, mania, psychosis, infantile dependency, childish wishes, and other abnormal or immature mental states. It has been officially viewed as disruptive to normal life and destructive of human relations, producing unwanted consequences—from divorce to parenthood to suicide—or, at the very least, resulting in some of life's most colossal disappointments.

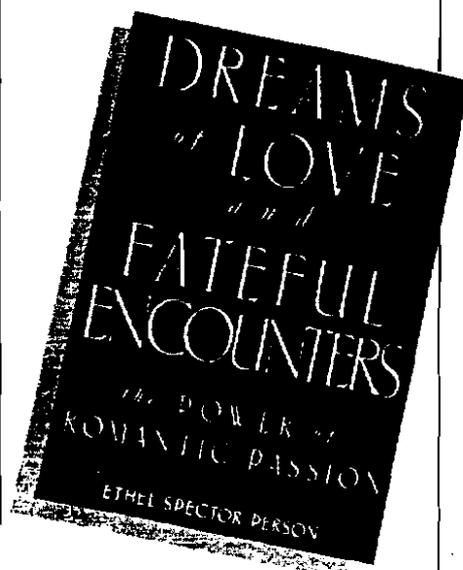
One would never know from these views the wondrous things romantic love also produces: marriages lasting more than half a century, with their inspiring if often mundane loyalties and sacrifices; children, grandchildren, and even dynasties, who share this love as it grows and changes; psychological transformations that rival any produced by psychotherapy; and perhaps above all, a transcendence, however temporary, that is one of life's most precious experiences.

Drawing evidence and insight from the lives of her acquaintances (one hopes and suspects that many, despite the author's denials, are patients), from biography and autobiography, philosophy and fiction, Person restores romantic passion to its proper place in the pantheon of emotions.

Although she does not shrink from acknowledging the downside of romantic passion, the author recognizes that countless ordinary and extraordinary human beings have risked much for love, and that they have not simply been stupid. Person reminds us that transiency does not invalidate any experience, that happy or even unhappy endings do not negate love's value, and that passion outside of the usual rules—extramarital, homosexual, or across large age gaps—can be as lasting, fulfilling, and important as more conventional forms of love.

Dr. Person does this with an intelligence and style rarely encountered in psychological writing. Her command of the literature of love is wide-ranging and powerful, yet never pedantic—the writing is clear, subtle, and beautiful. The book has already attracted the attention of the literary community, and it will no doubt have a place in the literature of philosophy as well as psychology. It would be ironic and regrettable if Person's refusal to resort to jargon were to stand in the way of the book's acceptance by practitioners in psychiatry and general medicine.

Yet I concede that the book has its shortcomings. First, a frank



reference to the author's patients would have been valuable. It's puzzling that Dr. Person finds such openness a breach of confidentiality, when psychoanalysts have always accepted case studies (often masked, to be sure) as data essential to their field. Second, Person needs to distinguish between the literature of biography and that of fiction, which are of different value to psychological theory. Finally, the book would have benefited from in-depth analysis of the real cases she touches on—say, that of Lord Asquith or Victor Hugo, or better still, recent cases of which Person has direct knowledge.

Still, I consider *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters* a major contribution to the science of human behavior, as well as to the psychology and philosophy of the emotions. Even when Person has already made her point, the writing makes it a pleasure to grasp the same theme again in a slightly different way. It is one of those rare books in which the prose style helps to advance the viewpoint; it puts us in the proper frame of mind to grasp its complex message about human affections. Above all, the book rights a long-standing wrong about notions of romantic love.—MK