



**Book Review: Deirdre Shauna Lynch, *Loving Literature. A Cultural History*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. ISBN: 13:978-0-226-18370-1. 326 pages**

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It is widely acknowledged that emotion is deeply embedded in literary criticism. Even when we aspire to scientific analysis and objectivity, we assume that we share a love of literature. *Loving Literature* is a deep and fascinating exploration of this important assumption. Literary critics and professors of literature are expected not only to know but also to love their work. In the case of professors, they are also required to transmit this love to their students. Lynch's study investigates the historical origins of such expectations, and discusses their implications for readers, students and professors. Lynch does not assume that love is necessarily a healthy emotion: it can also be painful. Readers and literary critics forget this at their peril.

To understand the role of love in literature, Lynch argues that it is necessary to study the eighteenth century and its ongoing discussions of literary history and the canon. The eighteenth century marked the beginning of English as an academic discipline. Lynch examines not only what early critics knew about literature but also how they felt about it. Only when we know this can we understand how literary studies evolved to its present form.

From the eighteenth century, books were closely bound up with the identities of their authors. This gave rise to the all-important question, 'how far should the author's character and position be allowed to influence our feelings about his/her work?' Lynch raises the question of whether it is important to love authors as people. Books, she concludes, and our attachment to them, have exercised considerable influence on our private lives. This influence has an historical context: our perception of books as objects of affection goes back to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century publishing practices, reading habits and even domestic history.

Reading, Lynch demonstrates, is very much a private affair. It can also be a possessive one, as in the case of the book collector. Our passion for books is often a long-term commitment, one that may continue even after the initial passion has declined. How is this possible? Lynch addresses this question in six chapters: 'Making It Personal'; 'Literary History and the Man Who Loved Too much'; 'Wedded to Books: Nineteenth-Century Bookmen at Home'; 'Going Steady:

Canon's Clockwork'; 'Canon Love in Gothic Libraries'; and 'Poetry at Death's Door'.

The most interesting of these chapters, 'Going Steady: Canon's Clockwork', discusses novel reading and its relationship with what was just beginning to be termed 'everyday' experiences. Novel reading coincided with a new recognition of the importance of keeping routines. Walks, meals and other customs were part of the fabric of family life. Reading also became part of family routines: it took place at certain times and served to reinforce the domestic schedule. The literary canon, Lynch argues, became an important part of keeping time and maintaining routines because, by conserving important works of literature, it functions as a bridge between the present and the past, keeping the former in sync with the latter. The canon is the product of enduring companionship with books. The initial passion involved in reading a book for the first time is gradually replaced by something more persistent and permanent. Novels provide the opportunity for long-term commitment. They exert a steadying influence on us as readers. This is why we return to our favourite stories over and over again.

While *Loving Literature* does not provide a definite answer as to 'why' we love literature (this is not the purpose of the study, whose focus is on the consequences of loving literature), it *does* illuminate how and why literature has become part of our lives, and how our love of it is deeply embedded in its very evolution. This is no small feat. As Lynch explains in her introduction:

*Loving Literature* turns to literary studies' eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prehistory – to early definitions of literariness, to histories of criticism, canonicity, literary history, and 'heritage', and, above all, to the emergence during this period of new etiquettes of literary appreciation – so as to examine how it has come to be that those of us for whom English is a line of *work* are also called upon to *love* literature and to ensure that others do so too. (2)

In addition, as Lynch so eloquently reveals in chapter three ('Wedded to Books: Nineteenth-Century Bookmen at Home'), 'It's by reading again and recycling the literature that everyone reads that we craft our own singular individualities' (144). As professors, we often choose our favourite books to teach; in so doing, we share our love of the chosen work, strive to encourage others to share that same love and hope it will become part of their identity.

The final chapter, 'Poetry at Death's Door', concludes that literature is not so much about longing 'for a lost love as for lost loving' (275). *Loving Literature* is an erudite but also entertaining study that reveals not only its author's deep knowledge of the evolution of our affectionate relationship with literature, but also her own

strong passion for its form, content and history. *Loving Literature* is, in other words, all about loving literature not only with the mind but also with the heart.

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### Author Biography

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**Jane Ekstam** is Professor of English at Østfold University College, Halden, Norway. She specialises in nineteenth-century British Literature, young adult literature, intercultural communication, and academic writing in English. She is a member of the Board of the Nordic Association for Canadian Studies, literary editor of *Acta Didactica Norge*, and a member of the board of editors for several international journals. She is currently writing a young adult novel featuring World War One and Two.

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