The Future of Love

Roanne van Voorst

THE FUTURE OF INTIMACY

To love is to be human; it is an experience that robots and algorithms can imitate, but are not yet able to experience. Love is one of the most compelling, guiding forces in our existence: we commit crimes for love, take risks, break hearts, as well as our own boundaries.

Loving and being able to connect with others is the essence of being human: it makes us who we are. But the experience of love is changing. Medicines are currently being invented that can make you fall in love; there are robots to befriend and avatars that promise to be your perfect partner. Polyamory is on the rise; people have longer, healthier sexlives, thanks to new technology you can date anyone, everywhere, and at the same time there is a growing group of people who consciously live alone: the sologamists.

In The Future of Love, future anthropologist Roanne van Voorst investigates first-hand how love is changing. In the clear manner that characterizes her work, she discusses sociological and philosophical literature, shares her interviews with futurists, experiential experts, inventors and above all, gives an insight of her own, longterm anthropological research. From the time she hired a sex doll to the day she tested and matched her DNA with her partner's; from experiencing what it's like to have a digital partner to the testing of all sorts of love drugs; from sexwork to genderfluidity: Van Voorst offers a fascinating and titillating preview of the future of love and intimacy.

About Roanne

Dr. Roanne van Voorst is a futures-anthropologist, writer, (Tedx)speaker and president of the Dutch Future Society. She obtained her PhD in 2014 (cum laude/ with honors) and is currently affiliated to the University of Amsterdam. As an 'anthropologist of the future'; her core research focuses on what she has coined 'sustainable humanity': in times of robotification, digitization and big-data lead decisionmaking, what makes us human? And how does society remain humane? Her current research investigates these topics in the context of public health, in four different country case studies.

Sample translation

Roanne van Voorst
The Future of Love
Translated by Emma Rault

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Preface

I must have been around twenty-two years old when I sat down at my parents' kitchen table one morning. When my father asked me if I wanted coffee, I shook my head. When he asked if I wanted breakfast, I shook my head even more vehemently. 'I just want to be here,' I mumbled. It had been several years since I'd moved out and I was living a pretty independent life—but right then none of that mattered. The night before I'd broken up with my boyfriend, marking the end of a four-year relationship.

We were too different—I knew that.

It was the right decision—I knew that.

But I'd had no idea that ending a romantic relationship would be so tough.

In my late teens I'd fallen head over heels in love—or to be more precise, it was more like love had plowed into me. It was like Dolly Alderton described it: 'I didn't fall in love; love fell on me. Like a ton of bricks from a great height.' Getting together seemed logical; going our separate ways again turned out to be deeply confusing.

The previous night I'd forced myself to break up with him. I felt that it was high time I said out loud what I'd been writing in my journal for months: this is no longer working, I want to be on my

own again.

But when—after hours of talking, crying, hugging, talking more, crying more—I looked out the window of the tiny room I was renting in an apartment I shared with a bunch of other students and saw him walking down the street with big, unsteady steps, furiously rubbing his cheek with his coat sleeve, I was no longer so sure whether this had been the right call. All I knew right then was that I'd never felt so sad before in my life.

Are you okay? my father asked.

I wasn't okay. My body literally hurt. I couldn't sit up properly; I was hunched over the table, propped up on my elbows. My chest felt thick and gluey and it was hard to breathe; my throat felt raw; my eyes were burning.

Then my father did something that was unusual for him: he took off his parent hat and put on his psychologist hat instead—the profession he'd been practicing for centuries. He put me in the picture about love and happiness, or rather about heartbreak and unhappiness. Research shows, he told me, that people tend to describe a breakup as the most painful experience in their life. They are grieving; they feel an acute sense of lack; they are constantly aware of the other person's absence and want nothing more than to have them back. 'She was gone,' is how Nicole Krauss describes that feeling in *The History of Love*, 'and all that was left was the space where you'd grown around her, like a tree that grows around a fence.'

The opposite end of the spectrum is falling in love again: most people experience that as the happiest time in their life. In other words: there's nothing that can make us more intensely happy, or intensely unhappy, than love.

Because love, I'd go so far as to say, *is* life: loving is a fundamental part of being human. Human intimacy is woven into our very being. We need it—as a species and as individuals. That's why the ability and the need to love others is hard-wired into our DNA. Love and lust ensure that we reproduce, but also that we work together, take care of each other and help each other—which

increases our odds of survival as a group. And because love is essential for the survival of mankind, the experience of love *feels* very intense for us as individuals. It's like hunger and thirst—if we weren't able to perceive those signals at the individual level, or perceive them with sufficient urgency, we wouldn't make it as a species.

The opposite is true too. Without love we wither. We don't thrive; we don't grow. Almost everyone is familiar with the famous studies conducted in Romanian orphanages that showed that young children who are rarely touched or comforted by their caregivers grow up to have severe psychological problems: they are unable to form secure relationships or integrate into the wider community. However, what far fewer people are aware of is that recent research has taught us that a lack of love in *adult* life—something you might call 'loneliness'—is also extremely detrimental to the well-being of both the individual and society as a whole. People who are often alone for extended periods of time find it increasingly difficult to interact with others. The lonelier you are, the warier you become of the world and the people around you, causing you to get stuck in a vicious cycle—because it is that very distrust which makes it harder for you to connect with others and which leads to aggressive and maladjusted behavior. This is a worrying finding at a time when many researchers are seeing an epidemic of loneliness, especially among young people—due to technology, the growing cult of the individual, lockdowns. It's also a relevant finding for this book, especially when we consider it in the context of philosopher and psychologist Erich Fromm's famous assertion that 'love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence.' We seek love in order to stave off the unpleasant, but inherently human experience of loneliness.

Although loneliness is on the rise, our experience of love, too, is subject to flux. In fact, it is undergoing rapid change. Many people will have noticed the first signs of this shift in their everyday lives: whether it be the dating apps on their phones, the porn on their computers or the growing number of single or polyamorous people in their extended circle. Over the past few years I have begun to wonder whether we are sufficiently aware of the implications of these changes for our species—and whether there are others who, like me, believe these shifts in how we love will radically

transform the human experience and, by extension, the fundamental makeup of our society.

I spent more than three years doing research for this book. I read hundreds of academic articles and dozens of books about the history and the current state of love, attended conferences and interviewed scholars—both social scientists and futurists. I was inspired by conversations with the members of the Dutch Future Society, an organization for professional explorers of the future, and also conversations with my students at the University of Amsterdam, whose fresh critical perspectives keep challenging—and sometimes exploding—my own beliefs. I also read a lot of prose and poetry about love, watched movies and documentaries, went to intimacy-themed art exhibits and studied relevant sci-fi. (You can find a list of recommended reading, listening and viewing at www.thefutureofintimacy.com, where you can also find visual material pertaining to my research.)

But my most important method for exploring the future of love—as with all of my research and all of my books—is anthropological fieldwork: personal experiences of developments that are currently only taking place on a small scale but that may well be taking the world by storm before long. I use my body, my spirit and the journal I keep about my work in order to make sense of the theory, and to better understand what something might feel like for a person; what emotions, thoughts, joys and complications certain experiences evoke.

To write this book, I took love pills, formed a virtual friendship, hired a rent-a-friend and an erotic masseuse, shared my bed and sofa with sex dolls and flirted with artificial intelligence; I dated and danced in a virtual world and went out into the real world to visit robot brothels. I talked with polyamorous folks, practitioners of sologamy, sex workers; with pansexual, asexual, heterosexual and gay people; men, women and people who don't identify with the gender binary or the idea of a fixed sexual orientation.

I wanted to know how the way love is changing is changing us. I could have anticipated beforehand that this quest might very well end up changing me too—and yet I underestimated the degree to which that turned out to be the case. Some experiences worried or even upset me, as a researcher but first and foremost as a person. For that reason I even ended up prematurely ending a

small part of my fieldwork—I will explain when and why in Chapter 8. Just as many of my experiences were fascinating, instructive and enlightening, though they proved difficult to reconcile with my own love life. During the research period, I fell head over heels in love, got pregnant and gave birth to our daughter. This broadened my view, because I was now experiencing the subject of my studies at first hand—but it also limited my research. You try falling in love with an avatar when your heart already belongs to another person, or try befriending an artificial intelligence that prefers to talk in the evenings when you want your several-months-old baby to know that Mommy doesn't just spend all of her time on her computer.

And yet when I think back to all my forays into modern love while I was writing this book, they bring a smile to my face. Because they not only offered me insight into what love means for people in this modern era, but also into what love will mean for you and me in the near future, and even what role love will play for the generations after us. In short, I learned what love is, but above all I learned what love might also become.

Chapter 2: Six People in One Bed

Building an extension had been long overdue. Three bedrooms were not enough, especially since the six residents of the house made up no fewer than four romantic pairings, and they often found themselves in a situation where two of those six people wanted a quiet night in, others wanted to get hot and heavy, and still others wanted to have a pajama-clad Zoom call with a lover who lived elsewhere.

Now there are four bedrooms and one kids' room for the resident toddler. 'We have more fun than other people, as long as you're okay with things being a little messy,' the four-year-old opines from underneath the kitchen table. Clad in a princess dress, she is sliding tools around on the floor between our legs. Her mother cracks up laughing: 'More fun than how other people do things, but a little messy. I think that sums up polyamory to a T!'

This group of polyamorous people I'm visiting is the seventh, and largest, that I get to know during my research. Earlier, I'd visited a man in the south of the country who is involved with two women who are also involved with each other, as well as with other men. I had coffee with people in a so-called 'vee' relationship: one woman dating two men who are not romantically involved with each other. The three of them lived together; the men called each other 'metamour' (the poly term for your partner's partner) and appreciated each other as 'close roommates.' I had a long conversation with a young woman who is single but 'very much poly': solo poly, in the polyamorous jargon, which means that someone knows they want a polyamorous lifestyle for themselves but chooses to remain independent, for example by living alone or not entering into any long-term relationships. I spent an afternoon with a family in Leiden made up of one woman involved with two men, one of whom is the father of her child; they told me they practice 'hierarchical polyamory'—in other words, the type of polyamory where one person is the primary partner (in this case, the father of the child), and the other comes second. The opposite of that is 'relationship anarchy,' a group

relationship in which all partners have equal status and there is no hierarchy. This was the case for the family of six whom I visited in the middle of their extension-building project.

We divvy up noodles above the princess's head, and suddenly I feel acutely aware of the fact that I'm the only adult in the room who isn't involved with anyone else at this table. Suze next to me is married to Hans across from me, and she is also involved with housemates Thijmen, Gerd and Anke; Hans is involved with Gerd; Thijmen and Anke are involved too, and Anke also spends two nights a week with a woman she's been seeing for the past two years. And then there's Sietske, Suze's friend and the mother of the toddler—a 'friendship baby' she had with Thijmen—who dates various men and women from outside the household. 'Can you still keep track?' Suze laughs, and before I can reply she's grabbed pen and paper so that she can draw me a 'polycule,' a diagram of their network of romantic and sexual relationships. It's clear that she's done this before. 'It kind of looks like a molecule,' she explains patiently, 'hence the name.'

Welcome to the world of polyamory, a relationship type in which participants openly have multiple loving and intimate relationships at the same time. The key words in that definition are 'openly' and 'loving.' Polyamorists aren't so much about one-night stands with strangers (although that happens too); they maintain long-term, committed romantic relationships with multiple people. And that first word—openly—is there to clarify that cheating *isn't* polyamory. Cheating involves lying and sneaking around and tends to be associated with people who try to be monogamous but aren't successful at it.

The polyamorous people I talked to as part of my research for this book all have very different ways of going about their romantic and domestic lives. They share a home or they live apart, have dinner together every night or only on the weekends. They each have their own bedroom or divvy up the various beds available. They live six to a house or on their own. But as varied as their home lives are, they have just as many things in common, almost as though they make up their own tiny subculture. They tend to be university graduates; they all emphasize that polyamory taught them to communicate their feelings more honestly (most of them have taken a non-violent

communication class); they sometimes talk in their own jargon and share the same convictions—that love isn't finite, but grows when you share it with multiple people; that feelings of jealousy, which even poly folks aren't always immune to, have nothing to do with your partner's behavior and everything to do with your own insecurities; that 'working through it' helps you grow, but it's also important to stay mindful of your own needs and boundaries.

More and more experts are calling polyamory the relationship model of the future. Not that it's a new phenomenon. As a matter of fact, it's been around for ages, but it's gradually making a comeback after a long time out of the picture. At least that's true in the Western world—in other parts of the world it was never out of the picture in the first place.

Making a comeback

Research has shown that over the course of human history, for most of the time non-monogamy was the standard all over the world. For millennia men and women traveled in groups, subsisting by hunting and gathering. During this period our ancestors were only intermittently monogamous: couples tended to only stay together for as long as was necessary to offer their children better chances of survival, as is still the case in many present-day hunter-gatherer communities. Once the vulnerable baby had grown into a robust toddler, it was time for new lust, new love, and new children.

The agricultural revolution put an end to this loosey-goosey way of doing things. It took place roughly ten thousand years ago, when people started developing agricultural tools that enabled them to produce greater yields of grain and other crops than they needed for their own consumption. As I wrote in the preface, these inventions made private property important, private property made inheritance rights important, and inheritance rights eventually made marriage important, which was above all seen as a means of passing acquired capital on from fathers to sons. It was preferable for women to be married as virgins and remain faithful forever, so that the husband

could be sure that any children resulting from the marriage were his true heirs.

In the tenth and eleventh centuries AD, rules for marriage were established and a few centuries later, the Church—which was becoming increasingly powerful—also issued rules governing intimacy: sex could only take place in the context of a monogamous marriage, and a marriage could only be between a man and a woman. In the 19th century, monogamy became the standard, partly based on ideas from the Romantic period: during this time more and more people began to believe that we all have one true love, and that it is part of every individual's journey in life to find that person—and hold on to them. Even then various critical thinkers saw that as just a myth for people to cling to. In 1884 Friedrich Engels, for example, wrote that 'the modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife,' and according to Simone de Beauvoir, marriage had an 'immediate corollary' in prostitution: 'From the economic point of view, [the prostitute's] situation is symmetrical to the married woman's,' she wrote in *The Second Sex*, referring to the notion that in both cases women trade their bodies for economic independence. According to Antonio Marro, the author of *La puberté*, there is only one difference between sex workers and married women: while married women are also considered inferior to men (and can therefore be claimed as an object for male sexual gratification), society at least respects married women *as people*.

Of course it's not like cheating didn't happen in monogamous marriages in the past. It was for the most part culturally accepted for men to be unfaithful and seek physical intimacy with a sex worker or their secretary, but women were unfaithful too—because even then we were surrounded by attractive neighbors maintaining lush lawns that seemed so much greener than our own. Human history is filled with adultery, deception, prostitution, tortured longing and trysts with secret lovers. Having sex with someone other than your partner (or trying to) isn't a modern invention, but the idea that there's something wrong with that is. Or rather: was.

Polyamory 3.0

With the rise of the internet, alternative sexual and relationship practices such as non-monogamy have gained ground. The internet makes it much easier to find kindred spirits who are also seeking an alternative relationship style and to support one another and exchange tips. Sexuality scholar Dr. Amy Moors, a research fellow at the Kinsey Institute in Bloomington, Indiana, which studies sex and relationships, discovered that between 2009 and 2016 there was a huge increase in online searches for the terms 'polyamory' and 'open relationship.' In various western countries people are campaigning for polyamorous marriage and other relationship rights, while the number of families with more than two parents is on the rise. In the Netherlands, people interested in learning more about polyamory or connecting with kindred spirits can meet for 'poly cocktails' or 'poly walks' in a bunch of different places. During the last national elections, a number of Dutch politicians came out as poly and promised that if they were elected to the House of Representatives they would support polyamorous rights. And although it's currently impossible in most places for a child to have more than two legal parents, there are banks that will allow a polycule to take out a mortgage together. Various dating apps allow people to specify that they are poly; there are even some, such as Feeld, that are specifically for people who are polyamorous, in an open relationship or interested in group sex. In the Netherlands there is the popular 'Polyam' podcast, and a polyamory Facebook group with more than 2,500 members, where people ask questions and exchange advice: 'What hotel has beds big enough for three people?' 'My husband and his other lover are celebrating their one-year anniversary, any gift ideas?')

But, as I will show later, if polyamory is indeed the future of love in the west, we are a long way behind the rest of the world. And yet I was determined to get to know the small but growing group of western polyamorists better.

Chapter 5: In Love with an Avatar

The techno music was so loud it was like the beat was reverberating deep into my chest and stomach, causing all my cells to start buzzing and tingling—a tickling, fluttering sensation that gave me an irrepressible urge to giggle.

I was standing in the corner of a near-empty club in the virtual world where I'd been spending the past several nights. About thirty feet away from me an attractive woman my age was dancing on her own. She was wearing a bikini top and a short skirt that swayed as she moved, a Hawaiian flower lei around her neck. Her tummy was flat and she had strikingly wide hips, in line with the current beauty ideal in the western world—YouTube is full of workout routines that promise to give you a Kim Kardashian figure; plastic surgeons frequently get patients who bring in pictures of celebrities: I'd like this butt, please, and this slim waist to go with it.

The girl I was checking out had exactly that kind of hourglass figure. As she was dancing she looked me in the eye a few times. Her gaze wasn't flirtatious, but she didn't seem uninterested either; curious, if anything. And yet I hadn't been able to work up the courage to hit the upward arrow on my keyboard to make my avatar walk over to her.

I had my avatar glance from left to right, but no luck—no sign of a bar where I could nurse a drink and play it cool, no acquaintances to have a chat with. It was her and me; now or never.

I'd entered into this virtual world in order to experience the friendship and romance of the future, but I felt clumsy, as if I didn't understand the rules of the game yet. One of the issues was that I'd been assigned an avatar which I felt didn't accurately reflect my personality. I'd spent the past hour trying to trade it in for a different appearance, but that had proved trickier than expected: I got lost in a store that offered hundreds of pairs of legs, faces, vaginas, washboard abs, lips and skin types for sale. There were the complete bodies of the Kardashian sisters, along with—for some reason that escaped me—that of Harrison Ford.

Those physical features didn't come for free, and they were anything but easy to obtain. You had to pay for them using a virtual currency (that needed to be purchased with real-world money). After my credit card had been declined and I'd tried two other payment methods that didn't work either, an experienced player told me that even following a successful transaction many people spend three long, frustrating days designing their avatar. I decided to settle for the default look that every new user of the platform starts out with.

There was just one small problem: it was a man. And I am and identify as a woman. But never mind—I didn't have the patience for perfection. I was eager to experience what it's like to experience love and intimacy with others in a virtual world.

Millions of people have preceded me in doing so, and it looks like many more will find virtual friends and lovers over the next few years. This development could have a major impact on how we experience human intimacy; it could even transform our understanding of what love is or what friendship means.

Interrealistic

One of the places where people enter into avatar relationships is Second Life—a virtual world that has existed since 2003 and where about 550,000 users log on every month. In Second Life, avatars build up companies, go to school, clean their homes, work out, go to church, visit strip clubs or brothels, go to concerts or walk in funeral processions. Meanwhile, virtual friendships and romances blossom between them. You can get married in Second Life; virtual couples even end up having virtual children. This is possible in other 3D worlds too: Utherverse is a somewhat similar digital meeting place modeled on Amsterdam's red-light district. Often these types of platforms are called 'games,' but according to the users I talked to, that term doesn't do justice to their experience. This specific group of users form important relationships with each other in these virtual worlds. They don't come there to amass points or achieve goals, but to meet their loved one or their best friend.

Virtual role-playing platforms offer them another life. A virtual existence where they can live their dreams, complete with their dream appearance. Where they work out, even as they're sitting behind their computer at home frustrated by how out of shape they are. Where the backyard is perfectly manicured, the car gleaming, the living room full of high-end designer furniture. Where they're a pole dancer or lead guitarist in a band—jobs they normally wouldn't be brave enough for, or wouldn't even want to do. Where they found their soulmate even as they're lying alone in their bed, or where they go out with friends every day, even as they feel lonely in their daily lives.

Most users are young—between twenty and forty. It's not surprising that it's these people who are finding a second home online. In some ways, their world is much bigger than that of previous generations. Young people nowadays can do and experience literally anything online: other countries, concerts, archives, bodies. As a result of the lockdowns of the past few years, it even became mandatory for them to attend class online. At the same time their world has become so much smaller: during their online travels, they constantly see their own reflection—in their profile pictures on social-media platforms or, in virtual worlds like Second Life, in the form of avatars. They can go anywhere they want, and do, but at the same time their gaze is constantly focused on themselves.

After first spending days perfecting your avatar, plumping up your butt, making your hair even wavier, getting a new outfit, 'you fall in love with your virtual self,' one user stated. She was serious. The walls of her virtual home were lined with dozens of framed pictures of her virtual self. Another user posted on Reddit that she'd just experienced the highlight of her day: '*Can costume her; in love with my avatar*.'

In the course of my research I realized that Second Life, Utherverse and other virtual environments don't offer their users a parallel world so much as a virtual world that partly bleeds over into the real, physical one. Users feel like they are on another planet, but you enter that 'other' world from your—very real—laptop; you build your avatar with body parts that you buy with the salary you earned in your normal everyday life. If you're paying a sex worker or the band that's

playing at your wedding, you have to whip out your actual credit card. Second Life's residents spend more than 0.8 billion USD every year. These are worlds where every virtual action can have implications for the user's real life, or for the lives of other users. IT consultant David de Nood dubbed this an 'interreality': a hybrid total experience of physical and virtual reality.

During my research I found that the boundaries between the virtual and the real world become blurred in other ways, too. When your avatar eats a lot, you find you're not hungry in real life; and once you've grown addicted to life as an avatar, your real life doesn't seem as much fun anymore.

Quotes:

"An intense journey through science, literature and film in search of the meaning of love, complete with entertaining fieldwork. This is how we are going to experience love and sex in the near future!" - Trouw

"Roanne van Voorst shows how love is changing and with it, us humans too." - RTL Nieuws

Rights:

Ms Orli Naamani
LannooMeulenhoff
Amstelplein 34
1096 BC Amsterdam
orli.naamani@lannoomeulenhoff.nl