

# Philosopher's Zone

on ABC Radio National

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Philosophical love stories

28 July 2007

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This week, Friedrich Nietzsche meets the Frankenstein monster and Simon de Beauvoir hangs out with the *Desperate Housewives*, in a philosophical look at some stories of attraction and love.

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## Transcript

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**Alan Saunders:** Hello and welcome to *The Philosopher's Zone*. I'm Alan Saunders.

The word 'philosophy' literally means 'the love of wisdom', but this week we're in search of wisdom about love. And here we're talking about a universal preoccupation, we all want love - even, as we'll find out shortly, the most monstrous of us.

*Philosophy and Love from Plato to Popular Culture*, is a new book by Linnell Secomb, who is a lecturer at the University of Sydney, where she teaches Social Philosophy and Political Theory in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, and in the Department of Philosophy. And she joins us now; Linnell, welcome.

**Linnell Secomb:** Thank you, hello.

**Alan Saunders:** Now, let's just have a look at the way in which you approach the subject, which I think is a very interesting way, because although I suppose all of us are capable to a greater or lesser degree of philosophising about love, in fact when we think about it, or certainly when I think about it, I tend to think about it in terms of stories, my own story or other people's stories, and reflection on these stories, rather than on something purely analytic. And you are interested in stories as well as analysis, aren't you?

**Linnell Secomb:** Yes, I am. So one of the things I was very interested in doing in this book was to bring together stories with a more kind of speculative or analytic approach from philosophy, and not to divorce those two things. To attempt to create a relation I suppose between stories, literature, cultural objects more generally, and the way in which we perhaps abstract from those, in an attempt to find a more kind of universal or generalised way to understand love, but at the same time not to deny the sort of specificity that you find in stories, in literature, you know English or Arts.

**Alan Saunders:** Yes, it used to be said of philosophers in the English analytic tradition that they only read two books of fiction and one was *Alice in Wonderland* and the other was Walter Scott's

*Waverley*, both of which turned up time and time again simply for purposes of illustration. And you are actually interested in not using these cultural productions, novels, TV shows and so on, merely as illustration, are you?

**Linnell Secomb:** That's right. I suppose influenced there by the work of Michelle Le Doeuff, the French feminist philosopher who has analysed the history of philosophy, and she suggests that philosophers often have a tendency to use anecdotes, stories, as you say, literature, as a kind of pedagogical tool I suppose, as an illustration of their theoretical project. But she argues that actually these so-called illustrations are much more central to the argumentation of the book. They play a role that is disguised in a sense, by making them appear to be purely illustration or pedagogy. So what I was interested in doing was to take that seriously and to think about how important observation of everyday life is, for the constructions of philosophical concepts, and so not to separate those out, but to actually somehow try to make those more evident, really.

**Alan Saunders:** Well let's look at a work of philosophy that is also a source of stories, Plato's *Symposium*. Now this is a dialogue between Socrates and several others, and it's a symposium, which is to say it's a drinks party after a dinner party, and I suppose this is where we get the idea of platonic love, but perhaps we haven't understood it properly. So tell us about that dialogue and why that provided a starting point for you.

**Linnell Secomb:** This is perhaps one of my favourite philosophical reflections on love; it's a very lovely discourse. But the reason I was so interested in it is that it does do precisely what I've been trying to talk about, that the symposium was really a series of stories, told by the participants at this drinks party. Each of them is providing an explanation of their understanding of what love is, and providing a sort of valorisation of the god Eros in that process. Often *Symposium* is read in a way that suggests that it's Socrates' story that is the one to be privileged, that gives us the answer to what is love, and that his explanation of love as a kind of ladder, starting from individual, perhaps erotic love of a particular other individual, and then gradually progressing through various stages to a generalised love of the good or the beautiful. This is often seen as the correct story in this series. But I am interested in looking at the relation between the different stories in *Symposium*, and especially to look at the relation between Socrates' story and Alcibiades' story, which is the last one in the collection of stories.

Alcibiades is a young man who comes into the party very late and drunk and he talks about his particular love of Socrates. So against Socrates' idea of a higher, generalised love, Alcibiades is really talking about a particular embodied love. And I think it's important to not just dismiss that, but to think about that in relation to Socrates' story.

**Alan Saunders:** We should perhaps talk about what Alcibiades' reports, as it were. He of course was quite a prominent Athenian, and pretty good-looking as well, he was noted for his beauty, and he talks about how he actually tried to seduce Socrates, which is interesting, because you have probably the best-looking man in Athens making a play for a notoriously ugly man, Socrates. And Alcibiades is

really a pupil of Socrates, and he gets knocked back by his teacher. Why does Socrates say No? What's wrong with a bit of embodied love?

**Linnell Secomb:** Well, I think there's two ways to interpret this. I think perhaps the dominant interpretation of this would be that Socrates is attempting to guide Alcibides toward his preferred model of love: love of the abstract, good, love of the beautiful, love of wisdom and knowledge. So an eroticised and particular relation is the antithesis of that. So this is often interpreted as the reason why Socrates wouldn't be interested. But I wonder if perhaps what's going here is more to do with the nature of love itself, where love in our own everyday experiences, love is often heightened by the object of our desire being unavailable, or making herself or himself unavailable. So it's a kind of strategy of courtship really, it's intrinsic to flirtation for example, that one is not quite sure where the exchange will lead. It's also central to traditional courtship where traditionally the woman would be unavailable to the pursuing man, and so I wonder if this unavailability of Socrates is actually an exacerbation or has the effect of an exacerbation of love. I suppose I think that also because there's a reference in another text by Plato, *The Phaedrus*, to Sappho the poet, and a positive reference to Sappho, and so I think that perhaps we can trace an influence that Sappho may have on Plato, Socrates' thought, and this kind of idea is evident in Sappho's poetry as well. So you know, this is not your traditional conventional interpretation, but I think it's useful to pursue these other approaches to these texts.

**Alan Saunders:** Is this also something to do, the relation between our Alcibides and Socrates, is it also something to do with the teacher-pupil relation? These days, if you teach in a university and you show any sort of particular sexual, especially sexual interest in a student, the United Nations gets called in. But is it that Socrates is recognising that the student will be attracted by perhaps the sexual charisma of the teacher and once you've got his attention, you then direct him to other things. That's the idea, isn't it?

**Linnell Secomb:** Yes. So I think that there's very clear evidence that in this context of early Greek, the development of early Greek philosophy, that there is a very different relation between the philosopher and the student, and that that certainly does involve erotic strategies, and in fact I think we can probably see that there's almost an equation between the erotic desire for more and the philosophical desire for more knowledge, you know, that this somehow also comes across in *Symposium*, and it's definitely not something that would be appropriate in today's context.

**Alan Saunders:** There is another story that perhaps we should mention in *Symposium*, and it's a very beautiful and I think a rather romantic one; the one that we get from, of all people, the comic playwright, Aristophanes. Tell us about that.

**Linnell Secomb:** Yes, this is a lovely story. It's the story - I think people will recognise it immediately, of the original human being cut asunder by the gods in revenge, and these two bifurcated paths of one individual wandering in a lonely way around the world seeking each other, and that when they do find each other, this kind of reunion of the original whole, which has been

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separated by the gods, is the event of love. This is what love is, and I think that actually in our own experience this is something that we often feel to be the case, you know, in that moment of passionate especially early love, infatuation and so on, it feels like this is the one and only person in the world who could satisfy this love, and so it has a certain plausibility in that way. Again I think that this is a story that shouldn't be dismissed outright and should be kind of thought about in relation to the other stories that are presented in *Symposium*.

**Alan Saunders:** Well, talking about wandering the world looking for love, let's just turn briefly to *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's novel, and perhaps even the film versions of it. Frankenstein's creation - whom we often rather unfairly I think, refer to as the monster - but Frankenstein's creation wants a friend and wants love, doesn't he?

**Linnell Secomb:** Yes, that's right. So I think this is a really interesting story of love, and I think the way that Mary Shelley tells the story is particularly interesting. Dr Frankenstein creates out of body parts taken from corpses, this new being, and gives life to this new being, which has a kind of monstrous aspect as it's put together from bits and pieces of dead bodies. And this creature, Frankenstein is then horrified at his creation and sort of deserts the creature. The creature then wanders the world seeking friendship, but is constantly rejected because people are so frightened by the difference that he represents. I think this is an interesting story because it hints at the kind of possible monstrosity of love. At the same time that we also empathise with the creature, you know, that we all have that experience of seeking love, of being rejected, of feeling monstrous in those kind of situations, and that points to some of the paradoxes in love, both the pleasures of love and the pain of unrequited love, of rejection, of love going wrong, and I think this story kind of reveals that in rather a poignant way.

**Alan Saunders:** Yes, it's actually quite a Gothic theme generally. I can think of a story by H.P. Lovecraft which is a bit similar to that, and of course *The Phantom of the Opera*, which I have to point out is a novel and a very, very fine film starring Lon Chaney senior, and nothing else. But it's common there as well. And talking about movies, Universal Pictures, who made *The Phantom of the Opera*, also a few years later made *Frankenstein*, starring Boris Karloff as the creature and directed by James Whale. And then they had enough material left over for a sequel, which is also based quite closely on the novel, called *The Bride of Frankenstein*, where Frankenstein makes a monstrous bride for his creature and there's a lovely scene at the beginning of that, where we see the creature going through the vaults of a cemetery looking at corpses in open coffins, running his hand across the face and saying inquiringly, 'Friend? Friend?' He wants a friend and he's instinctively driven towards people who are like him, which is to say, dead.

**Linnell Secomb:** Yes. I think that's really interesting, and this significance of the desire for friendship that becomes evident at that point. I think what you're raising there is this really interesting issue of how difference and sameness affects the love relation as well, and in the book I reflect on that quite a bit in different ways. But it's the creature's difference, his monstrosity that frightens people and undermines the possibility of love. But I wonder also whether this sense that

love works better between people who have a lot in common also undermines the possibility of the sort of adventure of discovering otherness, or discovering difference, and this is something that Nietzsche talks about and I bring Nietzsche together with the Frankenstein story because Nietzsche has really interesting little reflections on both love and friendship. But what he seems to be indicating is that for him, a more genuine or authentic love would involve a search for the beyond, you know, beyond our own experience, so that we'd be challenged by the difference of the other. So this is something that I wanted to point out in that chapter as well.

**Alan Saunders:** This is the only time I think I've ever felt tempted to call myself a Nietzschean, because I'm fatally attracted to the other.

Now let's race ahead to the 20th century. You read Simone de Beauvoir's reflections on love alongside *Desperate Housewives*. Now I'm not sure how she would have felt about that, but how did the two, the TV show and the philosophy, how do they illuminate each other?

**Linnell Secomb:** Beauvoir may well have been appalled by this, but I found it really instructive to think about this popular culture, you know perhaps trashy, TV show and the way in which it does in a way reflect on and reveal the difficulty of the love relation for women in particular. And Simone de Beauvoir in her reflections on the woman in love, suggests that love is difficult for both women and for men, but for women in particular, there's a way in which, because women in the context she is writing about have less power, are unequal and so on, that a love relationship tends to turn them into both slaves and tyrants; slaves to the man that they want to maintain in their lives, but tyrants also, in attempting to keep him, not let him escape. And so I think that this very interesting idea that Beauvoir develops, is evident in some of the scenes that are depicted especially in the first series of *Desperate Housewives*, when really what's depicted is extremely funny and we can see how strange, how weird, the sort of courtship rituals are that are depicted in *Desperate Housewives*, and they reveal both of these aspects; the way in which women can become slaves in a partnership and can become tyrants. And so even though I think there's a lot else going on in *Desperate Housewives* that is very different from the way that Simone de Beauvoir talks about the love relation, there is that aspect in common that I thought was interesting.

**Alan Saunders:** Just finally, another French thinker, not exactly a philosopher but a literary critic and social commentator, Roland Barthes, he wrote about love, too, and you read him alongside the movie *You've Got Mail*, and the movie, the much older movie that it's based on, *Shop Around the Corner*. So tell us how Roland Barthes comes into that, or that comes into Roland Barthes.

**Linnell Secomb:** Roland Barthes wrote a lovely reflection on love called '*A Lover's Discourse*'. That book is fragments of reflections; it's really made up of very short pieces, just a paragraph or a page or maybe two, reflecting on and referring to the work of many other philosophers, writers, psychoanalysts, and so on, and he brings together this very strange amalgamation of very disparate sorts of thoughts about love. I think what he's doing in '*A Lover's Discourse*' is what we often see as a kind of this post-modern pastiche, you know, bringing together bits and pieces and refiguring the

meaning of those bits and pieces in this bringing together. But one of the things that Barthes explicitly says in '*A Lover's Discourse*' is that he is wanting to refute the negation of the sentimental. You know, we often think of romance literature, of romance film, as sentimental and not very valuable intellectually, and he is wanting to challenge that because he thinks love, and especially the sentimental, has been denigrated. And I think we can see the history of this from feminist philosophers, who have often been very critical of love, as Simone de Beauvoir was as we've seen. And his interest is to find what's moving about the sentimental, and also of course, what's dangerous about the sentimental; he also reflects on that. So I was interested in thinking about *You've got Mail*, which is perhaps one of the most sentimental films that's come out in recent years, to try and think through how we might approach this film from this perspective of wanting to not just denigrate and dismiss the sentimental, but to imagine something a bit deeper that's going on there. In reading *You've Got Mail*, I tried to apply various different strategies that Barthes has developed, some of which attempt to reveal deeper meanings behind the surface of the text and others which simply work on the surface of the text. So I was trying to look at both aspects and approach this film through both aspects. I guess I would say that I ended up feeling that in many ways *You've Got Mail* simply reproduces a very traditional story of boy meets girl, there's an initial falling in love, there's frustration in the love relation but ultimately they find each other again. It reproduces that without challenging it, despite the fact that it uses internet dating, a quite kind of new technology of love, as a central mechanism in the film. So I was interested in both that new aspect, but the fact that nevertheless, it reproduces a very orthodox representation of the love story.

**Alan Saunders:** Can I just ask you what you mean and perhaps what Barthes means by sentimental? I was talking to a friend recently and I said of a mutual acquaintance that her problem was that she was a sentimentalist without being a romantic, by which I meant sentimentalist in the Oscar Wilde term, Oscar Wilde said a sentimentalist is someone who doesn't know that an emotion has to be paid for; and so this is someone who sort of flickers from emotion to emotion but is incapable of what I think of as the serious romantic search for love. So are you talking about sentimentality in that sense, or are you actually using it as a synonym for romance or being romantic?

**Linnell Secomb:** No, I think there is a difference; I don't think it's quite a synonym. Barthes doesn't clearly define what he means here. My sense from reading '*A Lover's Discourse*' though is that he is referring to the sort of love where you risk everything; you don't employ rationality, you don't hold yourself back from the danger of love, and this is a type of love that we can often feel sort of anxious about, that this is a very dangerous strategy, you know, you might lose all in adopting that strategy. So my sense is that this is what he means when he talks about the sentimental in '*A Lover's Discourse*'.

**Alan Saunders:** Well, Linnell Secomb, it's a lovely book. The book is called *Philosophy and Love: From Plato to Popular Culture*, it's published by Edinburgh University Press, and I've been talking to the author, Linnell Secomb. Linnell, thank you very much indeed for joining us.

**Linnell Secomb:** Thank you, Alan.

**Alan Saunders:** The show is produced by Polly Rickard with technical production this week by Janita Palmer. I'm Alan Saunders and I'll be back next week with another *Philosopher's Zone*.

## Guests

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<http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/departs/gcs/staff/profiles/lsecomb.shtml>

## Publications

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Title: *Philosophy and Love: From Plato to Popular Culture*

Author: Linnell Secomb

Publisher: Edinburgh University Press

URL: [http://www.eup.ed.ac.uk/edition\\_details.aspx?id=12682](http://www.eup.ed.ac.uk/edition_details.aspx?id=12682)

ISBN 978 0 7486 2367 9 (0 7486 2367 1)

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**Saturday 1.35pm**  
repeated Monday 1.35pm

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**Alan Saunders**