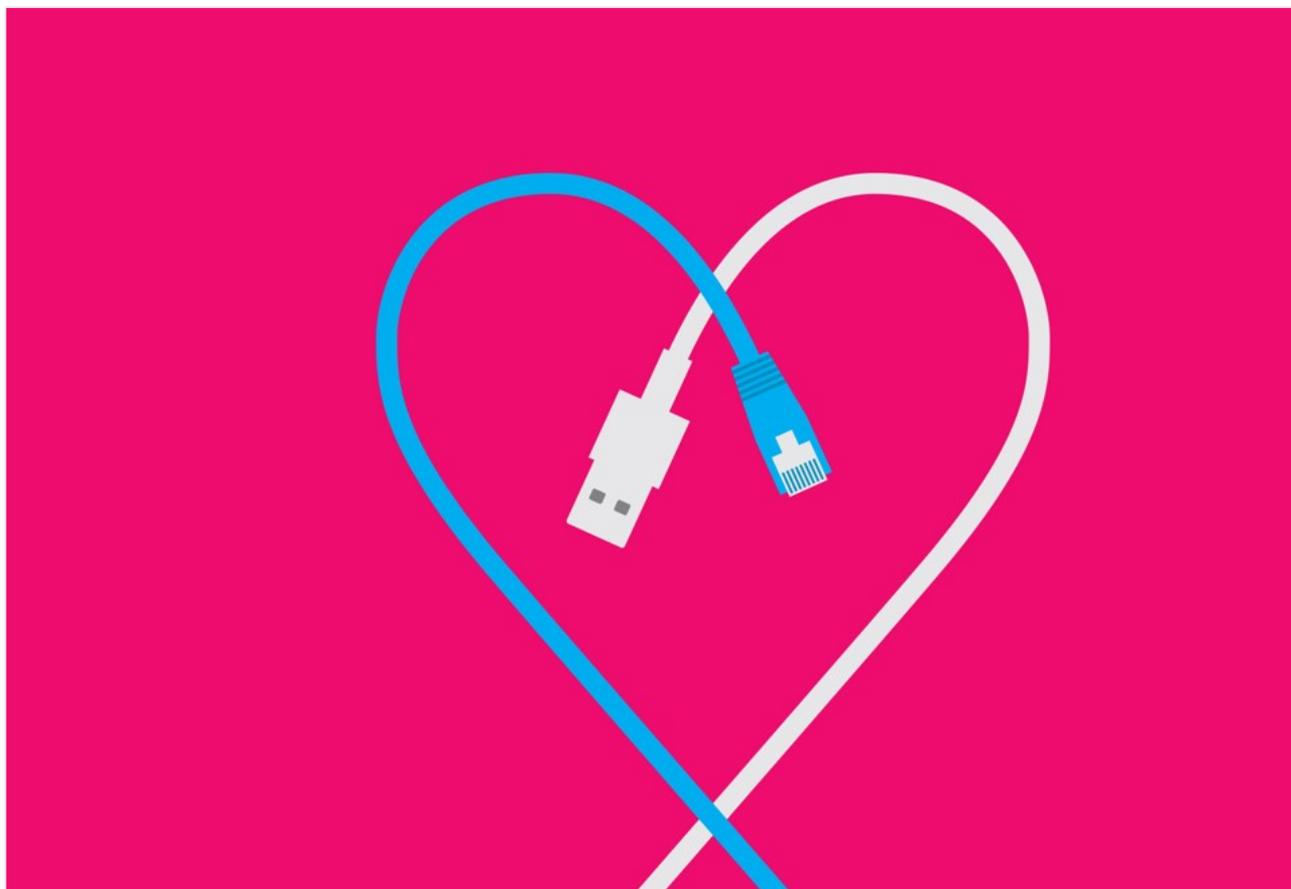


The Atlantic

BOOKS

The (Re-)Invention of the Soul Mate

Through jokes about text messages and tales of a terrible person named Tanya, *Modern Romance* explores what happens when looking for love also means looking for one's "other half."



Lauren Giordano / The Atlantic

MEGAN GARBER | JUN 18, 2015

Humans, the playwright Aristophanes argued, once had four arms, four legs, and two faces. Our current, more streamlined look—current in ancient Greece, and current, still, today—came about because of pride. Those extra-

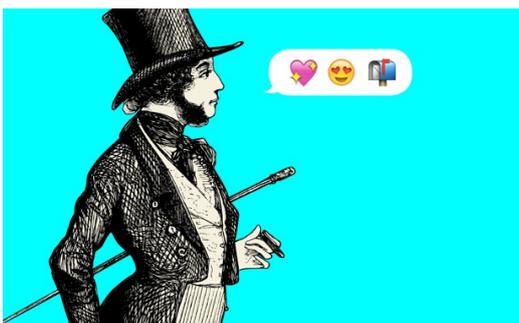
ancient, multi-limbed humans had become arrogant, Aristophanes had it, and the gods, being gods, resented that. Zeus wanted vengeance. So he came up with a plan that was devious in its elegance: He would cut humans in half. This would, he figured, not only instantly double the number of people paying tribute to him; it would also create a kind of permanent humility, forcing humans into a sad state of severance: two bodies, one soul. Joined, but disconnected. Permanently incomplete.

After Zeus had done his work—he did the dividing, and Apollo helpfully sewed up the new creatures, with only the belly buttons remaining as evidence of the surgery—humans wandered the world a little bit lost, a little bit desperate. Sliced souls forever seeking their other halves.

* * *

Today, we don't necessarily think of soul mates in the Aristophenian kind of way, as an epic extension of the plot of [the movie *Face/Off*](#). We *do*, however, tend to think of romantic partnerships with that same, ancient sense of bifurcated destiny. My “other half.” My “significant other.” Pretty much every song lyric ever written by Taylor Swift. Modern coupling, in much of the world, is about much more than mating; it's about, on some level, soul mating. It's about finding—and then keeping—the person who, in ways tiny and huge, [completes you](#). As Phoebe Buffay [summed it up](#): “He's her lobster!”

RELATED STORY



I mention that because of [Modern Romance](#), the new book written by the impish comedian Aziz Ansari (with an assist from the decidedly non-impish sociologist [Eric Klinenberg](#))—which is nominally about the familiar vagaries of living and loving in the age of Tinder, but which is more broadly about the recent re-

A Modern Guide to the Love Letter

invention of the soul mate. It's about the amazing and occasionally awkward things that take place when an entire culture, gradually but also suddenly, transforms its sense of what romance is all about.

It used to be, Ansari notes, that the thing that has traditionally brought cultural codification to the lobsterian ideal of [mating-for-life](#)—the institution of marriage—was mostly a matter of economic and social convenience. Marriage existed not just for reproduction, but for the encouragement of particular economic conditions: unions between families, partnerships that allowed for the efficient running of a household, etc. As Stephanie Coontz notes in *Marriage, a History*, the thing that today we tend to think about as the ending of the love story has historically had very little to do with romantic love: Until quite recently, marriage was simply about “creating conditions that made it possible to survive and reproduce.” It was, Ansari puts it, in a moment of Klinenberg-inflected seriousness, “too vital an economic and political institution to be entered into solely on the basis of something as irrational as love.”

All that, of course, has changed dramatically—and very, very quickly. “When the older folks I interviewed described the reasons they dated, got engaged to, and then married their eventual spouses,” Ansari writes, “they’d say things like, ‘He seemed like a pretty good guy,’ ‘She was a nice girl,’ ‘He had a good job,’ and ‘She had access to doughnuts and I like doughnuts.’” On the other hand: “When you ask people today why they married someone, the answers are much more dramatic and loving. You hear things along the lines of ‘She is my other half,’ and ‘I can't imagine experiencing the joys of life without him by my side,’ or ‘Every time I touch her hair, I get a huge boner.’”

We live, in other words, in a world that is shaped, in ways big and small, by the search for a soul mate. “Younger generations face immense pressure to find

the ‘perfect person,’” Ansari notes—a pressure that didn’t exist in the past when ‘good enough’ was good enough. The gap between the pressure of life between adolescence and marriage (and the pressure of the most previous generations of Americans), and the pressure on young people embark not just on a professional career but on a marriage. In the 1960s, 76 percent of college-aged women and 66 percent of college-aged men said they’d be willing to marry someone who was “good enough.” A similar study conducted in the early 1990s found that 61 percent of men said they *wouldn’t* marry someone who was “good enough” with them.

“Younger generation feel more pressure to find the perfect person,” Ansari notes that “simply didn’t exist when ‘good enough’ was good enough.”

Love has, accordingly, become a pursuit—something we look for and fight for and treat as a fundamental component of a happy and successful life. It’s the “organization kid” ethos, essentially, applied to romantic partnership, and it complicates the dominant, idyllic sense of love as the stuff of Shelley and Shakespeare, as the thing—that warm, soft, trembling thing—that transcends culture and gender and race and class and age and defines, in ways both big and small, what it means to be human.



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Lol! From the anthropological perspective, instead, romance is simply a cultural assumption like anything else. And marriage, that symbol of success in one's search for a soul mate, has become a status symbol—and also, Ansari notes, [summoning Esther Perel](#), a luxury good.

That transformation—the result of, among many other things, the industrial revolution/the women's movement/a good economy/a bad one—has been, in the last couple of decades, complemented by another kind of revolution: the transformation in communications brought about by the Internet. There's the rise of texting, and the related decline of email/phone calls/letter-writing. There's the invention of Match and JDate and Farmers Only and eHarmony and OkCupid and Hinge and Grindr and Tinder, and all those services' attendant possibilities and paradoxes of choice. Our communications are newly instant and newly distant, and that shift is changing not just the culture at large, but also the way we approach the sparking and the maintenance of relationships.

None of which, as *Modern Romance* presents it, is a revelation. The stuff explored in the book—the gender differences in approaches to online dating, the social effects of *friends-with-benefits*-ing, the psychological impact of a swipe-right economy—will feel familiar to anyone who reads magazines and/or is currently single. Ansari quotes all the experts ([Michael Rosenfeld](#), [Sherry Turkle](#), [Natasha Schüll](#), [Helen Fisher](#), [Barry Schwartz](#)) you'd expect to be quoted in a book like this. He cites exactly the research you'd expect to be cited. He sums it all up charmingly and winkily and *am I rightily*, with the same light snark he deploys [in his standup](#). (Telling the story of Tim, an older gentleman who asked his future wife on a date in person, right after meeting her, Ansari points out: “That sounds infinitely cooler than texting back and forth with a girl for two weeks only to have her flake on a Sugar Ray concert.”)

The commonly accepted rules that used to direct coupling—*wait three days to call*, etc.—have largely been rendered obsolete.

Modern Romance reads like a *CliffsNotes* to relationshiping as it is currently experienced by (mostly middle-class, Ansari admits, and mostly straight) Americans. It's the familiar stuff of research and sitcom, distilled into a funny, and highly readable, summary.

And while *Modern Romance*'s revelations aren't terribly revelatory, their telling is refreshing in an important way: They're humanized. They operate at the scale of everyday life and everyday experience and everyday emotion. Too often, the data experts have gathered about the nebulous thing that is “modern romance” is presented precisely as that: *data*. We can read Christian Rudder's *Dataclysm*, about the way the Internet is affecting how people meet and date, or Eric Klinenberg's *Going Solo*, or Michael Rosenfeld's “[How Couples Meet and Stay Together](#)”; what those projects can gloss over, though, are the small joys and also the *crushing existential anxieties* that the new romantic order can provoke in its participants. The “...” that appears during a text exchange, suspending a conversation—and, sometimes, an entire relationship—in a wave of hidden characters. The sexting. The emoji-decoding. The LOL-sharing. The game-playing. The fact that the commonly accepted rules that had crystallized around the technologies that used to direct coupling—*wait three days to call*, etc.—have largely been rendered obsolete.

The fact that everyone, as a result, is a little bit confused, and a little bit

overwhelmed, and a little bit convinced that that last text went unanswered because its recipient was obviously abducted/involved in a terrible accident/convinced to join a doomsday cult that requires its members to cancel their phone service.

Ansari, in the book, tells the story of his dealings with Tanya, a friend of his whom he was interested in in a *more-than-a-friend* kind of way. They hook up one night. He texts her the next day—a good, sweet text, offering just the right balance of “I’m casual” and “I care.” A few minutes after sending the message, he sees its read receipt. He sees the “...”: She’s replying! Yay! And then, right after they started—the dots go away. Minutes pass. Then hours. Then days. He never hears from her again (well, not until much, much later). All the things that could have been—the sweet little discoveries, the dumb little in-jokes, the brunches, the babies, the nights spent on the couch doing nothing but being together, the merged families and furniture and lives—disappear in the blink of a “...”

To deal with “the awful frustration, self-doubt, and rage that this whole ‘silence’ nonsense had provoked in the depths of my being,” Ansari goes to a comedy club. He does a set. He tells everyone about Tanya. He gets laughs. But he also gets, he notes, “something bigger, like the audience and I were connecting on a deeper level.” They understand, together, what it feels like—for better, for worse—to soul-mate. They understood what it means to be looking, with the help of phones and friends and the march of human progress, for one’s lobster.

“I could tell that every guy and girl in the audience had had their own Tanya in their phone at one point or another,” Ansari writes, “each with their own individual problems and dilemmas. We each sit alone, staring at this black screen with a whole range of emotions. But in a strange way, we are all doing it together, and we should take solace in the fact that no one has a clue what’s

going on.”

BOOKS



The (Only) Good Thing About Another *Fifty Shades of Grey* Sequel

No offense to Christian Grey, but there's really just one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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