



AN OPEN BOOK

Ask a man what novel he loves most, and you can read him loud and clear. *By Katherine Heiny*

WHEN YOU enter a relationship with someone, you also enter a relationship

with not only his family, friends, and pets, but his favorite books (at least you do if you're a writer). Usually his choices tell you a lot about what dating him will be like—if you're smart enough to pay attention. I once went out with a man whose favorite novel was *Paradise Lost*, but get this, I was still surprised when our time together turned out to be hell.

Then there was the guy who called *Of Mice and Men* the best novel he'd ever read. When I'd show him my writing, he'd say critically, "It's not much like *Of Mice and Men*." I tried to write the way Steinbeck did, or the way Steinbeck might have if he'd written exclusively about relationships and sex, but that didn't work very well. Eventually, I discovered that *Of Mice and Men* wasn't just the best book this man had ever read—it was the only book he'd ever read.

Next was the electrician who claimed his favorite novel was Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, also

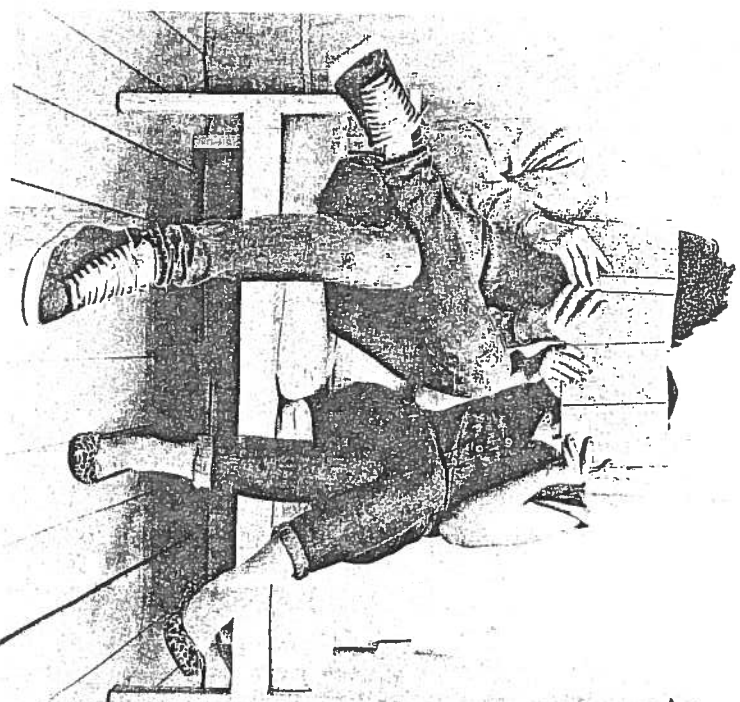
one of my favorites. I took it as a sign that we were meant to be. A couple of weeks later, I realized he was actually talking about *Heidi*. I felt as betrayed as if I'd discovered a secret ex-wife.

Once I went out with a man who told me he loved *The Hobbit*. Please don't ask me why I didn't plunk down my beer and leave right then, because the answer is that it was my seventh beer and I wasn't going anywhere until that man shoveled me into a cab. We actually dated for about three months—but you know that Corinthians quote about how love doesn't envy or boast? Well, love also doesn't make its girlfriend read Tolkien.

One college boyfriend turned out to be gay, but it's okay because he introduced me to Lorrie Moore's *Self-Help*. Another broke my heart, but I think of him fondly because without him, I might never have read Stephen McCauley's *The Object of My Affection*.

There was the writer who gave me a copy of *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich. It became one of my favorites, too—but every time he referred to her as "Louise," I felt a stab of fist-clenching, pupil-dilating sexual jealousy. (I got over it. Now I know Louise's writing so well, we're like old friends.)

After that I had a boyfriend who never read at all, and it was really quite nice as those things go. Another guy's favorite was *Johnny Tremain*—an appropriate choice because he was an eighth grader, emotionally speaking. And one man declared *Great Expectations* the finest book of all-



time, but it turned out he'd read only the first 50 pages. (I found out when he asked why I called my nightgown a "Miss Haversham.") You can see why trust issues drove us apart.

Then I met the man who said his favorite author was Alice Thomas Cooper. Puzzled, I wondered if he meant Alice Cooper (who isn't a writer) or Tommy Cooper (who isn't a writer, either, though he is a magician, and the best writers are also magicians). The next day a librarian told me perhaps he'd meant Alice Thomas Ellis. I fell deeply in love with Alice Thomas Ellis's British smarts and wit at the same time I fell deeply in love with the smart, witty British man who had (sort of) told me about her. We got married (me and the man, not me and Alice Thomas Ellis) 20 years ago, and whenever I reread one of her novels, it reminds me of how happy I was then and how happy I am now.

I don't regret any of my previous relationships (except maybe the Tolkien guy). People learn about themselves from their past loves, and writers learn to write from past books. For the most part, I was very lucky in both. To echo Wille Nelson: To all the books I've loved before, who traveled in and out my door, I'm glad they came along, I really am.

KATHERINE HEINY is the author of, most recently, the novel *Standard Deviation*.

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The author's own favorites: *Gone with the Wind*