

Romantic love: what's it good for?

Toni Hassan
October 23, 2015

In her best-selling 1970 work *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer urged a great awakening; for women to exercise their freedoms and stop being passive.

The Bachelorette put that to the test, 45 years later.

The female lead, 26-year-old Sam Frost, was indeed in the driver's seat, choosing a man on her own terms. She asserted her virility. In the last few episodes she intensely kissed all the men still standing.

But on the other hand, Frost was an advertiser's dream. Projected as The Ideal, she was slim, symmetrical, fair-skinned and discreet.

Ours is a culture that urges individuality, but then pushes on us perpetual "types". Television does it best. The dwindling list of chosen blokes were all chiselled and sporty.

Hundreds of thousands of us watched it because we structure our whole lives around romantic love, philosophy [Professor Carie Ichikawa Jenkins of British Columbia University says](#).

It's a powerful force, yet we rarely wrestle with what it is. Is it a social norm or is it built into our biology?

In fact, it's both. We are both hard-wired for it and pressured into it. People in their 30s are consumed by fear they are running out of time.

It was my teenage daughter who prodded me into watching the show. Her keen interest made me curious. I groaned at some of it, but ended up grateful for what the "reality" TV melodrama threw up for us to discuss in the ad breaks.

We liked Sam's vulnerability (taking us with her as she exposed herself to the ultimate male gaze); her preparedness to talk about earlier relationships and to make sense of the humiliation of being dumped by Blake, the man of her dreams, whom she met on a different show, *The Bachelor*, just months ago. She burnt toast while the men vying for her attention made elaborate meals. Awesome.

Why, I asked, were the men's occupations often discussed – as if it helped define them – but not Frost's? (She is a marketing manager.)

There were no on-camera glimpses into Sam Frost the entrepreneur or Sam Frost the advocate. What was she passionate about? What contribution did she dream of making to the world? We saw no aspiration beyond finding Mr Right. Yet the program was directed towards young women who presumably have wanted more than that from their lives.

It also irked me that the contestants repeatedly referred to Sam as a "girl" – a lovely, nice girl – not as a woman.

There were some signs we had moved on. Michael asked Sam if she would contemplate proposing to a bloke, just as his mother had to his father. Sure, women "can take things into their own hands", Sam said. Michael was masculine without being macho. Maybe men aren't from Mars and women aren't from Venus.

However, there's finding love and there's finding meaning. The program didn't really explore the latter. There was talk about being "happy together" but little discussion about what that meant.

In his book on love and sexuality, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, philosopher Anthony Giddens says modern relationships feed each partner's needs and can dissolve as easily as they are formed.

Canberra poet John Foulcher has thought a lot about love. He says what attracts people is their scars, not their good points. "You fall in love with their flaws," he says. Sam was haunted by the idea of being heartbroken again. The men, knowing that, spoke to her wound with reassuring words.

Research shows that romantic love is like gender: it comes on a spectrum. You can romantically love more than one person, just as you can be afraid of more than one thing. Sam understood this for herself, admitting a crush for all of three of the finalists.

We wish her and "the winner" Sasha good luck as they give this love-thing a try in the real world. But here's some advice from philosophers and life-long partners Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. Their relationship was, we'd have to say, very liberal, but happiness for them was about finding harmony. It had to be worked at. They said friendship was the key, as well as having other projects, other sources of meaning.

Romantic love is often sold as a replacement for meaning. That's too much to ask of it.

Toni Hassan is Adjunct Research Fellow at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Charles Sturt University, based in Canberra. This article first appeared in [The Canberra Times](#).