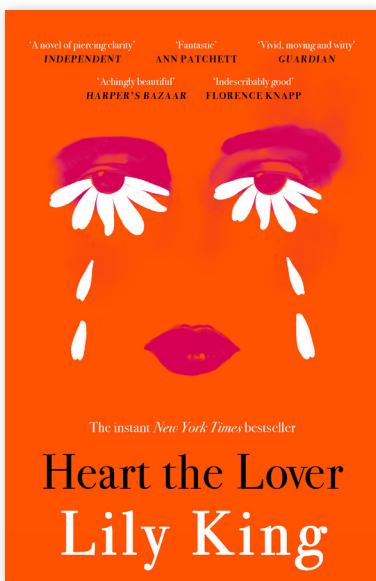


Heart the Lover

by Lily King



PLOT SUMMARY

'You knew I'd write a book about you someday.'

Our unnamed narrator understands good love stories – their secrets, their highs and free falls. But her greatest love story, the one she lived, never followed the rules.

She was in her senior year of college when star students Sam and Yash swept her into an intoxicating world of academic fervour, rapid-fire banter and raucous card games, and nicknamed her Jordan, in reference to *The Great Gatsby* character. Their lives became quickly intertwined – with friendship but also with unpredictable passions and the intimations of first love.

Decades later, she is a successful writer, living a comfortable life with her husband and children, when a surprise visit brings the past crashing into the present, forcing her to confront the decisions and deceptions of her youth.

Written with the precision of poetry and the emotional tide of an epic, *Heart the Lover* is a celebration of literature and the life-long echoes of young love. This is King at her very best, affirming her as a masterful chronicler of the human experience and one of the finest novelists at work today.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

As well as being a love story, King considers the multifaceted nature of modern masculinity in *Heart the Lover*.

On one hand, there is Yash, a true 'lover not a fighter' type of man, who is gentle, intelligent, kind and funny. Yash's father is a prime example of toxic masculinity, stating, 'Every woman is the kind of woman you divorce.' Despite this role model, Yash seems a decent young man committed to his relationship with Jordan – until her time in Paris, after which he bails on their move to New York together.



Shortlist
2026

“From first love and the intellectual fervour of youth to the sobering realities of middle age and loss... beautifully rendered”

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Shortlist
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Jordan is initially drawn to Sam, who is intelligent and attractive, but is verbally and physically abusive, in one scene pushing her over. Sam is deeply religious, to the point that he refuses to have sex with her. Sam subsequently disapproves of Yash and Jordan’s relationship, leading Jordan to suspect he has influenced Yash not to be with her, and yet, later in the story, she discovers how supportive Sam has been to Yash in their friendship.

In the background of the story, there’s also the cautionary tale of Cyra’s rape and murder. Cyra isn’t a girl that Jordan knows well, and the incident isn’t a major plot point. However, King referencing this event is an acknowledgment of the misogynistic society that Jordan exists within; it’s dangerous to be a woman, particularly a young woman, living independently – perhaps for the first time – at college.

In contrast, Silas, Jordan’s husband introduced in the second part of the novel, gives Jordan stability and presents as a safe masculine figure. This is all the more welcome because of navigating their son’s health issues. As a mother, Jordan is responsible for shaping and protecting boys, and it’s her stable and loving home life that she ultimately returns to at the end of the book.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Jordan and Yash’s love story is deeply moving. King shows their developing relationship with such sweetness, demonstrating their closeness in the scene where they cook together and tap their knives on the cutting board, adopting their own private and instinctual communication, and their date scene in the restaurant where they have a deep conversation and the waitress tells Yash, ‘That’s a keeper, hon’.

Yet, Jordan and Yash don’t end up together, which makes *Heart the Lover* seem like a tragic love story – especially so when we find out that Jordan has Yash’s baby and gives her up for adoption, not telling him until he is on his death bed.

Lea tells Jordan that ‘the decisions we make in youth are everything’, advising Jordan to marry Yash. On the other hand, an older, divorced mother, Nobiko, tells Jordan to let Yash go.

If Jordan had told Yash about the baby, do you think they would have ended up together? Or, would Yash’s nature not suit life as a family man? Is Yash the true love of Jordan’s life, or is it Silas, the father of her sons? Was Lea or Nobiko right about Yash, in the end?

QUESTIONS

An Icelandic interviewer asks Jordan: ‘Love in your novels, I think, acts as a form of hope. Why hope?’ Is *Heart the Lover* a hopeful novel? Is love a form of hope? If so, in what way?

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Yash and Dr Gastrell have a heated discussion about the Greek concept of hamartia, a random error of judgement. Yash believes that it means we are all vulnerable to tragedy because we are human. How does this theme echo later in the book?

Under Dr Felske, Jordan studies female writers to become a better writer herself. What do you think King is saying here about literature by women?

Jordan isn't revealed to be Casey Peabody – the protagonist from King's earlier novel: *Writers and Lovers* – until the final sentence of the novel. Why do you think King chose to do this? What impact does it have only knowing Casey as her nickname Jordan?

NEXT STEPS

Jordan, Yash and Sam play the card game Sir Hincomb Funnibuster. Write a poem based on the rules of a game you know, whether it's a board game, a card game or something else. You might own an actual set of rules, for example, in a board game box, or you might write them down in your own words. If you have access to a printed set of rules, you could copy them and cut them up to rearrange them in a different order to make an interesting poem, or see how inventive you can be in writing a poem which has the sense of a list of rules, but is perhaps anarchic or amusing. Have fun with it!

Alternatively, write about your university days, your time spent at college or in education of any kind. Do you have particular stories, memories, anecdotes about those times? Begin writing down your memories - you might be surprised by what other recollections come to you as you start to write. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lily King is the *New York Times* bestselling author of five novels, including *Euphoria* and *Writers & Lovers*, and the story collection *Five Tuesdays in Winter*. Her work has won numerous prizes and awards, including the Kirkus Prize, the New England Book Award for Fiction, the Maine Book Award for Fiction, a MacDowell Fellowship and a Whiting Award. She lives in Portland, Maine.



If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

In *Writers & Lovers*, Lily King tells more of Casey's story, involving how she meets Silas and finds herself in the middle of a love triangle with another man, Oscar.

Normal People, Sally Rooney's bestselling novel also explores young love and its reverberations through a life.

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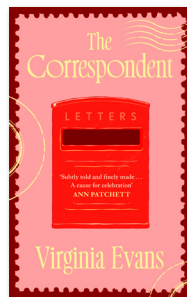
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The Correspondent
by Virginia Evans



Heart the Lover
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