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Love_unconditional, selfless, unchanging, sincere, and totally accepting_is worshipped today as the West's only universal religion. To challenge it is one of our few remaining taboos. In this pathbreaking and superbly written book, philosopher Simon May does just that, dissecting our resilient ruling ideas of love and showing how they are the product of a long and powerful cultural heritage.

Tracing over 2,500 years of human thought and history, May shows how our ideal of love developed from its Hebraic and Greek origins alongside Christianity until, during the last two centuries, "God is love" became "love is God"_so hubristic, so escapist, so untruthful to the real nature of love, that it has booby-trapped relationships everywhere with deluded expectations. Brilliantly, May explores the very different philosophers and writers, both skeptics and believers, who dared to think differently: from Aristotle's perfect friendship and Ovid's celebration of sex and "the chase," to Rousseau's personal authenticity, Nietzsche's affirmation, Freud's concepts of loss and mourning, and boredom in Proust. Against our belief that love is an all-powerful solution to finding meaning, security, and happiness in life, May reveals with great clarity what love actually is: the intense desire for someone whom we believe can ground and affirm our very existence. The feeling that "makes the world go round" turns out to be a harbinger of home--and in that sense, of the sacred.

Simon May is visiting professor of philosophy at King's College London, and Birkbeck, University of London.