

# Love against the odds in books, a Valentine's Day special

A little-known playwright once wrote “the course of true love never did run smooth”, but actually, it does. All the time, in fact. For most of us, falling in love works a bit like this: you meet someone at random, then arrange to meet them, then arrange to meet them a few more times, and before you know it, you're home on a Friday night, falling out over who has the last bit of Popcorn Chicken while watching Big Brother. You would leave them, but you're now worried you've become too old and ugly for the single's market. It's like falling off a log.

But this is not the stuff of great, romantic literature. In novels, love isn't worth a thing unless it's defined by hardships overcome. To do this, authors gleefully scatter an array of barriers in the way of love's young dreamers. Here are 10 ways in which writers have been the metaphorical third wheel in many a fictional romance.

## **1. SHE DOESN'T EVEN GO HERE**

This is your classic star-crossed lovers, whose backgrounds (often beyond their control) render them victims of circumstance. It'd be churlish to not mention Romeo and Juliet (warring families) but far more interesting, I think, are Callum and Sephy from Malorie Blackman's [Noughts & Crosses](#), set in a racism-flipped world where dark-skinned Sephy isn't allowed to pash with the white son of the lowly cleaning lady. I also have a huge soft spot for Catholic Kevin and Protestant Sadie in Joan Lingard's 90's IRA-centric series that started with [The Twelfth Day of July](#).

## **2. HE'S A BIT OF A FIXER-UPPER**

“It's not you, it's me” is certainly true of these difficult nuts to crack. From Mr Big to [Mr Rochester](#), emotionally crippled and wholly unavailable men - far from undesirable - are actually a sexy challenge for many literary heroines. If only [Twilight's Bella could meet Edward's impossible standards](#), if only Anastasia could get her head around Christian's contract, if only Mina Harker could resist [Dracula's](#) allure. Hard work, if you ask me, just get on Tinder, ladies, there's plenty of fish in the sea.

Twilight's Edward and Bella: It's hard to meet the standards of someone who was born in 1901... even if they are the undead. Photograph: Everett Collection / Rex Features/Everett Collection/Rex Features

### **3. I'VE BEEN AROUND THE WORLD AND I, I, I, I CAN'T FIND MY BABY**

Sometimes, when I say writers put obstacles in the path of a couple, I mean just that – actual space and time in the way of their love. Will and Lyra meet in [The Subtle Knife](#) only to then have to move heaven and earth (literally) to be reunited. In the end (spoilers) there is a world between them. Similar story for Viola and Todd in Patrick Ness's [The Ask and The Answer](#) while spiky Daisy meets Edmund in [How I Live Now](#) by Meg Rosoff about half an hour before WW3 breaks out. Unfortunate. It's lucky she has a psychic link with him, enabling her to track him down. In Audrey Niffenegger's [The Time Traveller's Wife](#), it's time itself that gets in the way.

### **4. EXPIRATION DATING**

Is there anything sexier than a dying person? Terminal illness is well hot, right? Well at least it was for Hazel and Augustus in [The Fault In Our Stars](#), Landon and Jamie in Nicholas Sparks' [A Walk To Remember](#) and Tessa and Adam in *Before I Die*. But why let death get in the way of love – just ask Mia in Gayle Forman's [If I Stay](#), or, of course, Cathy from [Wuthering Heights](#).

### **5. I WOULD DO ANYTHING FOR LOVE**

Nothing says “I Love You” like completing a mythical quest for a loved one. Orpheus had to travel into the Underworld and perform his greatest hits for Hades before he was allowed to take Eurydice back to the land of the living (only to then muck it up at the last minute). Rama had to rescue Sita from Ravana, Mal must bring the antlers of Morozova's Stag to Alina in Leigh Bardugo's [Shadow and Bone](#), and pretty much ANY YA roadtrip novel would fall into the “quest” category. I prefer my quests a little darker and Valmont's deflowering of Madame De Tourvel to win the “love” of Madame de Merteuil in [Les Liaisons Dangereuses](#) is much more to my taste.

### **6. FEMININE MYSTIQUE**

It's not just the men who throw a spanner in the works when it comes to love. Sometimes a female character proves just too much of an unknowable mystery to welcome love in. These characters, often too damaged to love or

be loved, pop up throughout fiction, with John Green a notable fan. Both Alaska (in John Green's [Looking For Alaska](#)) and Margo ([Paper Towns](#)) are simply too complicated for their male suitors. The Lisbon sisters prove too much for a whole teenage boy Greek chorus in Jeffrey Eugenides' [The Virgin Suicides](#). Perhaps the ultimate romantic enigma is Margaret Atwood's Oryx in [Oryx and Crake](#): while the horrors of her childhood are clear, we're never invited into her head and she offers little more than "Oh Jimmy" when he tries to love her.

## **7. TIME ISN'T ON YOUR SIDE**

Or, Any Gay or Dark-Skinned Character In A Novel Set Before 1970. The most famous example is Annie Proulx's [Brokeback Mountain](#), and Robin Talley's [Lies We Tell Ourselves](#) goes one better by featuring a gay character of colour in segregated 1960s America. My contribution to the [Love Hurts](#) anthology was to explore historically forbidden love in the navy during the Korean War. Hello sailor!

## **8. THERE THE WHOLE TIME**

Fiction would love us to believe that one day we'll see the reliable best friend or Boy-or Girl-Next-Door in a whole new light and fall hopelessly in love with them. I once announced this never really happened and half of Twitter chimed in with "It did! It happened to a friend of my second cousin!" Please! I can hear the biological clock ticking from here! Anyway, Stephanie Perkins' [Lola and the Boy Next Door](#) does what it says on the tin, and I was keen to explore if you CAN fall for the reliable friend in my new novel *Under My Skin*. Jo in [Little Women](#) bucks the trend by rejecting hapless Boy Next Door Laurie.

## **9. HATE AT FIRST SIGHT**

I hate you! No...wait...I love you! Again, I'm not so sure this one ever really happens, but in the land of fiction it's more than likely that an early antagonistic relationship will bloom into something romantic. The ultimate example is Darcy in [Pride and Prejudice](#), although more recent victims of Hate At First Sight would include Patch in [Hush, Hush](#), Damon in [The Vampire Diaries](#) and Eric in the [Sookie Stackhouse](#) books.

## **10. THE LOVE TRIANGLE**

Well, throw a dart into the YA section of any bookshop to find an example. Sometimes a third party is what makes it so hard to establish where the

OTP really lies. I do accept that sometimes it's hard to choose between two suitors. It happens to me on the daily. The most famous recent example is Katniss, Peeta and Gale in [The Hunger Games](#), although I always secretly shipped Katniss and Johanna Mason to be honest. Ali Condie's [Matched](#), [Twilight](#), Andrew Smith's [Grasshopper Jungle](#) and many more novels have all made three a crowd. Personally I prefer the love triangle in Melvin Burgess's [Junk](#), in which Tar's devotion to heroin split he and Gemma apart.