

# What Happened When the Mother of Non-Monogamy Fell Head Over Heels in Love

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BY NONA WILLIS ARONOWITZ

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Whenever I need some non-cheesy inspiration about the enduring power of romance, I read anarcha-feminist Emma Goldman's famous stump speech, "Marriage and Love." Born in Lithuania to Jewish parents in 1869, Goldman was an influential activist and writer who toured the U.S., risking arrest and deportation to speak to raucous crowds about radical ideas like pacifism and birth control. And almost a century before Dan Savage and open-relationship handbooks like *The Ethical Slut*, Goldman espoused the virtues of non-monogamy.

"Love is free; it can dwell in no other atmosphere," she writes in her essay, which began as a lecture she started giving in the early 1900s. "In freedom it gives itself unreservedly, abundantly, completely." For Goldman, being in

love meant not owning anybody, especially when it came to sex. But it also meant transcending a prosaic, repressive version of love in favor of something more organic and ecstatic. Or as she put it: “How can such an all-compelling force be synonymous with that poor little State and Church-begotten weed, marriage?”

“Marriage and Love” decries matrimony as a transactional “insurance pact,” which satisfies my undying hatred of our modern Wedding Industrial Complex. But the soaring speech is far from un-romantic. It’s the perfect antidote to corny Valentine’s Day bromides for anyone who, like me, bristles at the confines of a single sex partner for life, but loves the idea of an endlessly fascinating soulmate who turns you into a flesh-and-blood version of a heart-eye emoji.



In the early 1900s, Emma Goldman toured the country talking about now-normal ideas like birth control and Free Love.

Until recently, I didn't know that, amid all this touring, Emma was hopelessly in love herself. When she was convalescing from exhaustion at an anarchist doctor's house in Chicago in 1908, she met Ben "Hobo King" Reitman, a brutish radical gynecologist who treated prostitutes and other

outcasts for STIs. She was intrigued by this rough-and-tumble man who'd hopped boxcars so different from the activist dudes she hung around with in New York. Ben quickly became her lover and tour manager, her partner in revolution and lust for three blissful months on the road.



Ben "Hobo King" Reitman called Emma his "blue-eyed Mommy."

At first it was all rapture and fantasy. Ben, who was a decade younger than the 38-year-old Emma and weirdly obsessed with his mother, called Emma his “blue-eyed Mommy,” which...kinky. When he returned to Chicago mid-tour, they wrote erotic letters to each other, in a code that eluded Comstock’s obscenity laws but would make the most avid sexter blush. (She longed for his face between her “joy mountains.”) Sometimes the letters weren’t coded at all: “I press you to my body close with my hot burning legs,” she wrote. “I embrace your precious head.”

But pretty soon, and in spite of her dearly held principles, Emma was crushed by jealousy. After months apart, Ben began sleeping around, per their Free Love policy. Sometimes he’d divulge a a new relationship voluntarily, and other times Emma found out through the grapevine, but each revelation drove Emma absolutely nuts. She appreciated Ben’s high sex drive, but she also bemoaned it. In letters they exchanged while she was traveling and after an especially wrenching confession that Ben had been seeing other women and lying to her about it she told him that his “promiscuity tears my very vitals, fills me with gall and horror and twists my being into something foreign to myself.” Even though she knew she couldn’t condemn his behavior on political grounds, she certainly didn’t

try to play it cool. “I don’t think you love me,” she wrote in another letter. “Maybe while I suffer, you are with someone else.”

I’m not a devout anarchist, but I do understand the concept of runaway emotions interfering with my tidy sexual ethics. For years my schtick has been touting unconventional ideas about love and sex. But I feel a jolt of white-hot jealousy coursing through my body each time my boyfriend faithfully in line with our policy of monogamish transparency tells me he sexted with a Tinder match or had vacation sex while traveling without me. Every single incident makes me feel, as I once confessed to him, like everyone in the world wants to sleep with him and no one in the world wants to sleep with me.

Even if you have no interest in non-monogamy, you may know the inner conflict of adopting a superchill dating philosophy (“nothing serious!”) while secretly desiring a partner who’s itching to wife you up. Is there any woman resolved to master the art of casual sex who hasn’t, at some point, become so obsessed with a hookup that it’s impossible to focus on work? Perhaps, but I’m not one of them. And neither was Emma Goldman.

There was Schtick Emma: uncompromising, independent, against possessing any lover. And there was Real Emma, the human woman: someone who believed in Free Love, but couldn't practice it with a man she felt blew every other out of the water. She was a polyamorist's worst nightmare, a person who would confirm suspicions that open relationships only work until one person actually *falls in love*. Ben, an otherworldly lover, had ruined her ability to enjoy an affair with a mere mortal:

*Do you think that one who has heard the roar of the ocean, seen the maddening struggle of the waves, who has been carried up to snow-peaked mountains; in short, do you believe that one who has known all the madness of a wild, barbarian primitive love, can reconcile one's self to any relationship under civilization? I believe you have unfitted me for that, hobo mine.*

The affair with Reitman, which went on for several years, shook Goldman's political beliefs to the core: "I have no right to speak of Freedom when I myself have become an abject slave in my love," she wrote. She even condemned her own "Marriage and Love" lecture because it was "hateful to me...I used to think it could perform miracles, poor fool that I was." Emma knew she had to hide her anguish and pessimism from her public; her ideas were already so radical, she worried, that any inkling

of personal failing would discredit her. She eventually began giving a new lecture called “False Fundamentals of Free Love,” which made a distinction between promiscuity and real love: “Your love is all sex,” she wrote Ben around the same time she first gave the lecture, “with nothing but indifference left when that is gratified.”

Meanwhile, Emma’s anarchist crowd openly fretted that Ben was a bad influence. Alexander “Sasha” Berkman — Emma’s longtime friend, onetime lover, and intellectual soulmate — didn’t approve of the guy he deemed as having “no rebel spirit” and who “didn’t belong in our movement.”

Anarchist photographer Senya Fleshine and Emma’s other friends thought Ben was vulgar and opportunistic. Emma and Ben had fantasized about moving to Australia, escaping the demands of work and the judgments of others, but that plan fell apart when Ben couldn’t keep it in his pants.



Emma's intellectual soulmate, Alexander Berkman, disapproved of Ben.

This love affair is highly downplayed in Emma Goldman's autobiography; she never lets on that her relationship with Ben led to questioning her life's work. But her inner conflict is the basis for Candace Serena Falk's 1984 biography, *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman*, a book I devoured in a single sitting. Through their letters, it tells the story of "a woman who could not envision these two powerful forces — love and anarchism coexisting peacefully in her life." A Kirkus reviewer dismissed Falk's book

as “monotonous, trite,” and “mired in trivia”; the idea that one’s personal life could undercut and pose doubt to their ideology was “ridiculous.” The same review also pronounced Falk’s book as “inferior” to *Emma Goldman: An Intimate Life* by Alice Wexler, another biography published the same year. Wexler, of course, knew of the Reitman-Goldman affair and had seen some of the letters but she deemed them “unimportant” for her book. “Reducing her story to a saga of relationships...suggests the tendency of even contemporary feminists to collapse the political into the personal, losing sight of the anarchism that was surely Emma Goldman's most enduring passion,” Wexler wrote in a letter to the *New York Times* in 1985.

For me, discovering this tortured side of Emma was like the moment I realized Beyonce was nearly undone by Jay Z’s infidelities. Holy shit: “the baddest woman in the game” is feeling “jealous and crazy”! The person who once seemed to me to be the emblem of a Strong Woman was also a vulnerable, fallible person I could relate to. It made me feel better that a seemingly unflappable visionary like Emma Goldman had a complex emotional life and that even radicals like her and Ben Reitman were susceptible to retrograde cultural messages about men and women. (Ben wasn't always upfront with Emma about sleeping with other women the old-fashioned model of non-monogamy.)

Emma couldn't give herself a break about her inconvenient feelings. But if love is, as she wrote, "the defier of all laws," then a person in love can't expect themselves to be a perfect law-abiding human. The rational rules of polyamory can feel just as incompatible with the emotional reality of being in love as the narrow dogma of marriage. A painful truth I've learned the hard way is that the moment I decide to love someone, I also risk losing them, regardless of how monogamous we agree to be. That risk is viscerally terrifying, and abstract principles offer little consolation.

I am even less of a self-help junkie than I am a devout anarchist, but an analogy from sex therapist Esther Perel's bestselling *Mating In Captivity* has stayed with me: Fire needs air in order to burn. "The grand illusion of committed love is that we think our partners are ours," Perel writes. "In truth, their separateness is unassailable." There will always be air between us and the people we love — that's what makes them so endlessly fascinating. Would Emma have pined for Ben as much if they were attached at the hip? Or were her torturous fantasies of his sexcapades kindled by his absence? I have worried in my own relationship that the air will come at the expense of eventually losing him — too much air, after all, blows a fire out. But I also have come to believe that missing someone, craving someone, is my best hope of maintaining the kind of magical,

liberated love Goldman knew "all the power on Earth" could never subdue.