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CUPID'S ARROW

OR, A BRIEF HISTORY OF ATTRACTION THEORIES,
WHY WE NEED A SCIENCE OF RELATIONSHIP
FORMATION, AND WHAT THIS BOOK IS ALL ABOUT

The first time Scott sees the delivery-woman on rollerblades, at the Wychwood Branch of the Toronto Public Library, he's lovestruck. For those of you who don't know him, Scott Pilgrim (age: 23; rating: awesome) is a jobless slacker living with his cool gay roommate Wallace Wells (age: 25; rating: 7.5/10) in a one-room basement apartment in Toronto. Scott plays bass guitar in a band called Sex Bob-omb with his friends Stephen Stills (guitar) and Kim Pine (drums), whom he once dated in high school. Oh, and Scott hates smoking and considers anyone who smokes to be evil. Still carrying some baggage from a previous bad breakup, Scott has begun dating Knives Chau (age: 17), a high-schooler, mainly because he finds the relationship easy –

all they do is ride the bus together and talk about her school. Despite Scott's questionable relationship choices, for some time now he's felt an increasing sense of loneliness, a feeling that something isn't quite right.

Anyway, back to the story. Scott is at the Toronto Public Library one day when he spots a mysterious pink-haired woman on rollerblades delivering a package. He's instantly smitten. Later, he finds he can't stop thinking about her. The strange 'ninja delivery girl' even appears in his dreams, skating away before he has a chance to ask her anything. Life just isn't the same for Scott anymore. He's distracted when on dates with Knives and band practice is frequently interrupted by Scott's daydreams. Luckily, he's at a party not long later where he sees the pink-haired woman again. Asking around, he finds out that her name is Ramona Flowers and that she's just moved from New York to Toronto, where she now works as a delivery-woman for the online retailer Amazon. Scott goes up to her and, failing rather spectacularly in his attempts to chat her up, promises to leave her alone forever ... but then stalks her until she leaves the party (not cool, Scott).

The next day, completely forgetting ignoring his (pseudo) relationship with Knives, Scott orders some CDs from Amazon, hoping to get another chance to meet Ramona. Sure enough, Ramona arrives a few days later with Scott's package. Not missing a beat, he asks her out. Umzing and ahing, Ramona reveals that the reason Scott has been dreaming about her is because she's been using the Subspace Highway running through his head as a shortcut for her deliveries. She finally agrees to go on a date with him as compensation for using his mind as a shortcut. This is the moment we've been waiting for: the start of Scott Pilgrim's long journey to win Ramona's love. Along the way, he has to – among other things – defeat Ramona's seven evil exes, find closure over his past relationships, earn various swords and power-ups, and learn self-acceptance through struggle. Should be easy.

These scenes, which I've borrowed from the first of Bryan Lee O'Malley's six graphic novels about Scott Pilgrim,* set up one of the most common and powerful tropes in popular culture: the formation of a relationship between two people. But understanding this process can sometimes be tricky. What is it that draws Scott to Ramona? Why Ramona and not anyone else? What shapes the extent to which that attraction might be mutual? What specifically determines whether Scott and Ramona might form some sort of relationship? And how do two people, complete strangers to each other, go on to consider each other special and unique, to form a lasting relationship with each other?

Unsurprisingly, attempts to answer these sorts of questions have a rather long history. It fascinated the Roman poet Ovid in about 1 CE. His *Metamorphoses*, a fifteen-book narrative poem that has been described as containing 'many large-scale psychological studies,'¹ presents one of the earliest attempts at explaining romantic attraction. In the very first erotic adventure of the *Metamorphoses*, Apollo the archer boasts of his prowess in overcoming the monstrous Python, but makes the mistake of provoking Cupid, the god of attraction and love:

Thou lascivious boy,
 Are arms like these for children to employ?
 Know, such achievements are my proper claim;
 Due to my vigour, and unerring aim:

* There's also a film adaptation of the graphic novel series, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, starring Michael Cera as Scott and Mary Elizabeth Winstead as Ramona. In case it isn't obvious, Scott and Ramona aren't real people. But we can still learn a lot about relationship formation from these fictional characters, so they'll crop up quite a bit over the course of this book. Oh, and you should get yourself O'Malley's graphic novels – you won't be disappointed.

Resistless are my shafts, and Python late
 In such a feather'd death, has found his fate.*

The love-god's arrows, Apollo claims, have no place in an epic. Instead, Cupid should be content with stirring the concealed fires of romance with his burning torch. Cupid's reply is to shoot two arrows. One, with a sharp golden point, strikes Apollo and he immediately falls in love with Daphne:

So burns the God, consuming in desire,
 And feeding in his breast a fruitless fire:
 Her well-turn'd neck he view'd (her neck was bare)
 And on her shoulders her dishevel'd hair;
 Oh were it comb'd, said he, with what a grace
 Wou'd every waving curl become her face!
 He view'd her eyes, like heav'nly lamps that shone,
 He view'd her lips, too sweet to view alone,
 Her taper fingers, and her panting breast;
 He praises all he sees, and for the rest
 Believes the beauties yet unseen are best.**

* If, like me, you find Early Modern English difficult, Anthony Kline's translation might help: 'Impudent boy, what are you doing with a man's weapons? That one is suited to my shoulders, since I can hit wild beasts of a certainty, and wound my enemies, and not long ago destroyed with countless arrows the swollen Python that covered many acres with its plague-ridden belly'.

** Kline's translation: '... so the god was altered by the flames, and all his heart burned, feeding his useless desire with hope. He sees her disordered hair hanging about her neck and sighs, "What if it were properly dressed?" He gazes at her eyes sparkling with the brightness of starlight. He gazes on her lips, where mere gazing does not satisfy. He praises her wrists and hands and fingers, and her arms bare to the shoulder: whatever is hidden, he imagines more beautiful'.

But Cupid isn't finished yet. He shoots another arrow at Daphne, only this one is lead-tipped and blunt – an antaphrodisiac – and 'swift as the wind, the damsel fled away'.² Cupid's retaliation is striking because, with Apollo's own weapon of choice, Cupid demonstrates his superiority in *gloria* – it is Cupid that is supreme among all gods. But there's a deeper significance in Ovid's telling of this myth: attraction is literally an act of god. To be attracted to another is reduced to the scheming of an arrow-wielding love-god. Later depictions of Cupid even portrayed him as blind, not so much in the sense of being sightless, but rather as blinkered and capricious. Hasty, childlike Cupid shoots his arrows and anyone lucky (or unlucky) enough to be struck is spurred to love.

By the Middle Ages, Cupid's arrow had begun to be reinterpreted in terms of developments in optical theory. In *Cligés*, a poem by the medieval French poet Chrétien de Troyes from around 1176, two characters – Alexander and Soredamors – have fallen painfully in love with each other and reflect on the source of their suffering. While Soredamors blames herself, reproaching herself for her lack of self-control, Alexander entertains a more elaborate series of explanations. He proposes that he has been shot through the heart by Love's arrow,^{*} but he's still confused by how it might have reached his heart without leaving a mark. His conclusion? 'That the arrow pierced his eyes ... although this raises an even more difficult question: how did the arrow pierce his eyes without leaving a wound there either?

Having considered things some more, Alexander concludes that the 'arrow' is actually an image of Soredamors. His eyes rely on their transparency to convey or reflect the image of Soredamors

* In medieval poetry, it wasn't always clear where the darts came from, whether they were shot by Cupid, released by the person being gazed upon, or emerged from some other place entirely.

to his heart, where it is interpreted and 'sets the heart on fire'.³ In this interpretation, the eyes are a mirror for the heart and the arrow is a sensation or a sense impression. So, the passage of the arrow from the eyes to heart becomes, in *Cligés*, a metaphor for the reception of an image, harmless until it is comprehended by the heart. It is the heart, and not the eyes or even the brain, that judges the images it receives, liking or disliking them, falling in love or not. But of the many images that Alexander's eyes receive, why is it the image of Soredamors in particular that leads him to fall in love? The image of Soredamors, he says, was deceptively beautiful, an inaccurate representation of the world, causing his heart to be led astray.

CUPID'S STORY REDUX

There's something comical in the image of Alexander, the hapless lover blaming his eyes and heart for deceiving him into falling in love. But it's also in the pages of *Cligés* that we find one of the earliest attempts at understanding attraction and relationship formation from a scientific perspective.⁴ In assimilating the emerging science of perception and optics into his poetry, Chrétien not only provided Cupid with a newfound relevance, he also attempted one of the earliest scientific explanations of how we form relationships with other people. But progress was slow. By the mid-nineteenth century, the seat of perception had moved from the heart to the brain, but the process of attraction itself continued to be explained largely in terms of visual imagery and its effects. Part of the reason for this slow progress, I think, was the belief that studying attraction or relationships scientifically destroys the magic and mystery of it all.

The notion of relationship formation as mysterious and magical is one that remains popular. In the late 1980s, the psychologist Arthur Aron and his colleagues invited university students to take part in a study about their experiences of being attracted to another person and falling in love. The participants, all of

whom had 'become strongly attracted' or 'fallen in love' in the eight months prior to the study, were asked to think about their experiences before writing in detail about the situation in which they first felt that attraction. When the participants' accounts were analysed, the researchers found that almost 10 per cent of respondents believed that the attraction had been sparked by 'mystery' – either something mysterious about the other person or in the situation itself. When a larger group of university students were asked to rate a list of items that they believed had influenced their feelings of attraction, 30 per cent said mystery had a strong impact.⁵

The desire to retain some of that mystery by keeping scientists away is perhaps understandable. When lonely, eccentric scientists with their weird-looking hair* come along, there's a real fear that they will destroy the magic of attraction, reducing everything to formulas and numbers. Except, there's no real evidence that studying attraction scientifically makes it any less enthralling. In fact, a scientific approach to attraction and relationships often raises new questions that need answering, uncovering mystery in everyday or mundane behaviours. Nor will a scientific approach be able to explain everything about relationship formation. In the study I just mentioned by Aron and his colleagues, respondents frequently highlighted very specific, idiosyncratic cues – some characteristic of the other person, such as their voice or posture – that were enough to elicit a strong attraction. The scientific study of attraction can help us understand some of those idiosyncrasies, but it's unlikely to be able to explain every such case.

A different critique of a science of attraction and relationships comes from those who say that scientists have very little to add

* When children are asked to draw a scientist, they typically draw a White man, wearing a lab coat, with strange-looking, dishevelled hair and crazy sideburns. Adults, too, have similar stereotypic perceptions of scientists.

beyond what we already know through common sense. When I tell people that I am a psychologist, I'm almost always asked if I can read their minds.* Once that minefield has been safely navigated and I tell them I'm interested in the study of attraction and the formation of relationships, I'm then usually met by incredulous stares. I know what they're going to say: 'Surely studying attraction scientifically will only tell us what we already know'. My response is that common sense about attraction is often wrong and sometimes dangerously so. To demonstrate this point, humour me a moment and answer this question: do you think opposites attract? Do you think that people who are opposite to each other in their personalities or beliefs are more likely to be attracted to each other?

If you said yes, opposites *do* attract, you're not alone. In one study, my colleagues and I asked university students from the United Kingdom to indicate whether they believed in the idea that opposites attract (along with forty-nine other common-held beliefs related to psychology). Just over 48 per cent thought it was true. In the same study, about a fifth of respondents from among the public in central Europe also believed that opposites attract, whereas among North American undergraduates the figure rises to whopping 77 per cent.⁶ If so many people believe in this seemingly common-sensical idea, that must make it correct, right? Well, no. It turns out that when it comes to relationship formation, opposites very rarely attract. As we'll see in Chapter 6, the evidence from science indicates that there's a much greater tendency for similar people to be attracted to one another, but the belief that opposites attract remains widespread – so widespread, in fact, that it has been included in a list of fifty of the most popular myths of psychology.⁷

Of course, I'm not suggesting that all common-sensical beliefs about attraction are wrong or unscientific. The theories that

* I can, but only when I'm wearing my mind-reading hat and cloak.

non-scientists come up with are an attempt to explain and predict how relationships are formed and, in that sense, they have the same aims as scientists. When you avoid replying to a message from a potential suitor for a couple of hours, a day, or maybe even longer, it might be because that method has 'worked' for you in the past. Or, perhaps, because you've been told it worked for someone else. And maybe it does 'work'. Studying these kinds of common-sensical ideas allows scientists to generate new ideas or uncover new ways of thinking about a topic.* The trouble is that more often than not, common-sensical ideas about attraction offer only a partial account of how relationships are formed. And when those common-sensical ideas are misleading or false, they can have damaging consequences.

For my birthday a few years ago, I was given a book called *Top Tips for Girls*, in which journalist and author Kate Reardon has collected 'real advice for real women for real life'.⁸ I'm fairly certain I was given the book as a joke given that I'm not a girl in need of 'real' advice (I'm less certain whether the book itself is a joke, though it's marketed as 'Non-fiction/Reference'), but the sections on dating and relationships did catch my attention. To say I was dumbfounded by some of the recommendations would be an understatement. Here's one example of a top tip from the book, on 'how to get your boyfriend to commit':

Consolidate his mind by dumping him ... if he is the right one, he will come and get you. If he doesn't, you have done the right thing.

* It was a common-sensical idea that first got me interested in the psychology of attraction. As an undergraduate studying Psychology, I was introduced to the idea that all men are 'programmed' to be attracted to curvaceous women. Having studied this important topic at great depth, I can tell you that this is another myth of attraction. If you're interested, I've written about this research in *The Missing Arms of Venus de Milo*.

I'd be interested to know whether this dating tactic has ever worked, but I'm fairly confident it's an astonishingly bad piece of advice. Or how about this gem on 'how to make him jealous':

Send yourself flowers with no card. They become a non-specific threat.

I'm not even sure why you'd want to make your partner feel jealous in the first place ... Or what about this list of 'how to be a woman men love':

You never utter the words, 'Where is this going?'

You impose a two-drink maximum on yourself when you go out ...

You watch your language.

You say yes.

Well, no, sometimes it's not only polite, but a good idea, to say 'no'. It's easy to poke fun at trite advice that reads like it might be aimed at children rather than women,* but it does highlight why I think common-sensical ideas about attraction can sometimes be dangerous. In fact, much of the advice in *Top Tips for Girls* reflects a familiar theme in common-sensical advice about relationships: you can be successful at finding a partner if you follow certain 'rules' or 'protocols' of behaviour. This rules-based approach to dating was made popular by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider in *The Rules*, first published in 1995, and now part of a lucrative consultancy business offering follow-up books (*The New Rules*, published in 2013, includes advice about online dating), dating journals, seminars, coaching services, and even note cards. Because obviously everyone needs to keep detailed notes about their dates.

* Just in case it's useful, this book also has some excellent advice about 'how to poop at your boyfriend's house discretely'. Remember folks, 'matches and air freshener give the game away'.

While *The Rules* is aimed at improving heterosexual women's interactions with men, the subtext is that the instructions Fein and Schneider present are based on common-sensical ideas about what men want from a woman. Rule Number 6, for example, instructs women to 'Always End Phone Calls First' because apparently men are easily bored by women who talk too much. Limiting phone contact – Rule Number 5 is 'Don't Call Men First' – supposedly helps women control the way in which interactions take place and allows them to manipulate interactions in their favour. The problem is that while such rules are presented to us as common-sensical advice, there's simply no evidence that sending yourself flowers anonymously or always being the one to end phone calls actually 'works'. Worse still, the tendency to focus on the minutiae of social interactions – monitoring the words we use, the tone of conversations, the length of time before we reply to a message – actually ignores broader principles involved in forming relationships, as we'll see later in this book.⁹

Even where a rules-based approach is ditched in favour of a more metaphorical approach to dating – as in Steve Nakamoto's book *Men Are Like Fish*, where men are fish to be 'caught' by women – what we're really presented with is a bunch of ridiculously simplistic assumptions about how people are supposed to behave. This metaphorical approach to relationships is best exemplified by John Gray's bestseller *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, where women and men are presented as entirely different interplanetary species. According to Gray, women only care about emotions and feelings, while men only care about things and objects. What both the rules-based and metaphorical approaches have in common is the assumption that gendered behaviours are 'natural', absolute, and universal. Things have always been this way and will remain so forever. What these approaches ignore, however, is the complexities, nuances, and malleability of gendered behaviours.¹⁰

I suppose one reason why so many people buy in to these ideas is precisely because human beings – and, by extension, relationship formation – are complex. Simplifying that complexity into a series of rules of behaving helps to give some people a sense of control. If you only follow these rules, these protocols, these ways of living your life, then perhaps you too have a chance at gaming a successful outcome. Of course, that's just a whole load of nonsense. There's no reason to fear complexity – it's precisely what makes studying and understanding human behaviour so fascinating. And it's also why understanding the science of relationship formation makes so much more sense than relying on common sense.

RESORTING TO SELF-HELP

If common-sensical ideas about attraction don't offer much solace, perhaps the self-help industry could lend a hand. Although self-help books have been read for generations,* it's only in the last several decades that the self-help industry has emerged as a multi-billion-dollar business, with self-help offered through a range of books, television shows, websites, and apps. Self-help sells us the promise of being 'better' – better at work, better at eating, better at tidying our homes, better at sleeping, and of course better at managing our relationships. The self-help industry offers all sorts of advice about how to meet the partner of your dreams, to excel at dating, to find 'the one'. And millions of people have turned to such advice. One survey found that self-help books are one of the most frequent avenues for assistance when people are looking for relationship advice, although much of the literature is aimed at women.¹¹

* The first self-help book is thought to be Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help*, published in 1859, written for the aspirational man wanting to become more reputable. But since then, self-help has primarily been aimed at women.

Might a little self-help be helpful? Let's start by asking what the self-help industry actually suggests. Someone who might know is the sociologist Arlie Hochschild, who conducted an analysis of bestselling self-help books for women published between 1970 and 1990. She concluded that self-help relationship books, while cloaked in rhetoric about egalitarianism and gender equality, actually undermine any attempt at forming emotionally rich bonds. Hochschild showed how self-help relationship books invite women to be emotionally distant, to deny their emotional needs, to be distrustful of others, and to be self-reliant at all times rather than investing in social relationships. For Hochschild, these values brought to mind the image of a 'postmodern cowgirl': 'Her fear of being dependent on another person evokes the image of the American cowboy, alone, detached, roaming free with his horse ... On the ashes of Cinderella, then, rises a postmodern cowgirl'.¹² Rather than expecting to give or receive love from other human beings, the postmodern cowgirl devotes herself to emotional control, forever distrustful of others with whom she might have relationships.

Hochschild's suggestion that self-help relationship books represent an 'abduction of feminism' – borrowing the language of feminism while really offering a hyper-individualised, commercialised view of relationships – is supported by Rebecca Hazleden's analysis of the fourteen bestselling relationship manuals published between 1981 and 2000. These self-help books, she says, encourage readers to seek fulfilment through self-sufficiency and self-mastery, to focus on the self and not others, and to prepare themselves to be 'utterly isolated, cast adrift in a loveless world'.¹³ She characterises the advice from self-help books as prescribing relationships that lack any sort of compassion or mutuality, in which individuals are encouraged to distance themselves emotionally from others and terminate any relationship where self-sufficiency has been compromised.

Far from being books about relationships with others, then, self-help is really about 'loving the self' in order to distance the

self from others. Your only hope, as a disastrously flawed individual, rests on developing self-mastery over your thoughts and behaviours. In other words, your normal psychological functioning is in some way 'defective', in need of fixing. Of course, the work of fixing yourself is never complete – there will always be new areas to improve, new ways to transform yourself, new products to buy, so that the ideal self always remains elusive. To be a 'good' person, you must constantly work at improving your self – and, if you fail to improve, that too is your fault. Obscured in this vision are questions about structural inequalities around gender, race, class, and sexuality – we're invited to ignore inequalities and collective resistance against such inequalities. This individualistic focus helps to legitimise the *status quo*: your thoughts and feelings might be modifiable, but the wider world around you is fixed and unchangeable.¹⁴

Even where self-help has ditched its bitchy tone – think make-over television programmes that tell us how we dress is a problem or magazine articles that pore over celebrity imperfections – and moved towards a focus on self-love and self-care, there's still a deep-rooted problem. In this positivist version of self-help, women are sold the idea that they have intrinsic value, but still encouraged to work on the self. Take the much-repeated self-help mantra that for someone to love you, you must first love yourself. In suggesting that what's really wrong with women is a problem of confidence and self-esteem, such mantras simply reinforce the idea that women are difficult to love and, therefore, need to work on improving the self. Ignored are the social and gendered contexts that penalise women when they *are* confident. But even if you did work at self-improvement, you can never be sure you've got it right: work on the self too much and you're criticised for being vain or emotionally insecure, yet not working on the self raises the risk of being categorised as a failure.¹⁵

Other researchers have argued that the self-help industry hasn't simply abducted feminism but is actively anti-feminist because it

reproduces stereotypes of human behaviour and encourages us to adopt conservative, traditional gender roles. Common themes in the self-help literature include the depiction of women as being 'naturally' interested in forming monogamous, long-term relationships and the instruction to take responsibility for finding and securing partner. This helps to reinforce gender-based inequality by making women responsible for any flaw in social interactions, blaming them for being too emotional, too needy, too obsessive.¹⁶ But it isn't just women who are portrayed stereotypically. In the world of self-help, men are dismissed as lumbering fools – emotionally stunted, driven by biological urges, and preoccupied by sex and attractiveness above all else. But as we'll see in Chapter 4, there's very little evidence to support any of these stereotypes.

You may have also noticed that the self-help industry assumes its audience is exclusively heterosexual – and usually middle-class and White, too. That's no accident. Women are almost always presented as desiring heterosexual relationships, with constant references to 'your boyfriend' or 'your man'. Research by Sue Jackson, for example, has shown how the word 'lesbian' is avoided in girls' letters to an Australian teen magazine and how readers are encouraged not to identify themselves as queer. This erases any possibility of fluidity in the sexuality of women and renders invisible the lived experiences of queer women. You're encouraged to subscribe to the ideals of heteronormativity and, if you don't, then there's something inherently wrong, puzzling, or exotic about your existence. And even if you *are* a heterosexual woman, the advice on offer is bleak. You're sold the idea that you're fundamentally alone in the world and encouraged to take a 'professional' attitude towards attracting men.¹⁷

To follow the advice presented by the self-help industry would mean endorsing what Rosalind Gill describes as a form of 'intimate entrepreneurship'. Sure, 'true love' can be found, but the emphasis is on being entrepreneurial in finding 'Mr Right'. As one article from *Glamour* put it: 'the man of your dreams is not

about to appear in your living room brandishing a Tiffany box while you're watching *Eastenders*. You've got to go out and find him first – and that requires a plan'. So, you'll need to set dating goals, draw up checklists, quantify the characteristics you'd like in a partner, structure your day so that you're constantly prepared for life-changing encounters, and practice 'men-ology' – studying men, anticipating their needs, and taking responsibility for managing everyone's emotions. Although much of this is presented as empowering, the dis-empowering need to find, please, and keep a man is always in sight.¹⁸

You don't have to be a feminist to find these ideas about relationships disappointingly bleak. But the problem isn't just that the self-help industry reproduces the worst stereotypes of gendered behaviour – and tries to get you to part with your hard-earned cash on the back of those stereotypes. When we get down to it, the advice on offer is often so banal to the point of being useless – 'if you like someone, it's a good idea to be friendly' was one ingenious piece of advice from *Glamour* magazine¹⁹ – or, worse, based on pseudoscience. A common trope in women's magazines, for example, is the wheeling out of 'experts' – usually with no actual expertise other than the number of followers they have on social media – who make misleading, contradictory,* or clichéd claims

* Contradictory messages can even be found within the same text. In Janice Winship's study of *Woman* magazine, she showed how women's magazines perform 'ideological juggling acts' in which a kaleidoscopic array of conflicting elements coexist. Take, for example, the claim that a woman's appearance doesn't matter so long as she's happy and confident with her body. A great-sounding idea, except that it's misleading – as we'll see in Chapter 3 – and, worse, often presented side-by-side with articles and adverts for the latest fad diet, cosmetic surgery, celebrity weight loss, and the paramount importance of appearance. Women are told to accept and love their bodies while, on the very next page, women's bodies are scrutinised and shamed.

about attraction that may actually be detrimental to readers and their relationships. The real science of relationship formation is sidelined in favour of anecdotes by these so-called experts, as well as press releases by companies – selling everything from shampoo to dating services – looking to self-publicise their brands.

Maybe I'm being overly critical of self-help relationship advice. But it's hard not to feel as if the possibility of populating the world with more caring people and helping people to form mutually benefitting relationships just doesn't figure in the schemes offered by the self-help industry. Instead, imagine a world of lonely cow-girls and cowboys, trusting no one, depending on no one but the self. Imagine a world in which we treat ourselves as products to be sold and in which relationship formation is akin to job interviews or military campaigns. A world in which you detach yourself from any sort of emotional connection, in which the most heroic act you could perform would be to face the world on your own. A world in which you craft a space for yourself by evicting everyone else – and particularly anyone who might care for you or who might need care themselves. It would be a very sad world indeed.

HOW TO GET BEAUTIFUL WOMEN INTO BED

Clicking on the link took me to a page that promised to teach me 'the art of meeting and attracting beautiful women.' This wasn't some hoax or gimmick! No, this was 'cutting-edge psychology' combined with years of experience 'in the field'. A video starts to play: a professional-looking young man tells me he was never able to attract women, but his life changed when he found the 'system.' The promises keep coming. For a small sum of money, I too would be taught how to overcome my geekiness (wait ... who said I was geeky to begin with?), I would learn the secrets of approaching women without being rejected, I could go to classes and bootcamps where 'game-changing' laws of attraction would be revealed. Best of all, I would learn 'STEALTH ATTRACTION

skills' to get women into bed 'IMMEDIATELY (WARNING: THIS STUFF REALLY WORKS)'. Welcome to the world of the pick-up artist.

Pick-up artistry has its origins in the 1980s, and particularly in Ross Jeffries' dubious – because they're based on neuro-linguistic programming* – speed seduction theories.²⁰ The interconnect-edness offered by the Internet allowed a small 'seduction community' culture to emerge in the 1990s and it was in this online community that Erik James Horvat-Markovic – who goes by the name Mystery – made himself known. Mystery was the first personality within the seduction community to offers hands-on

* Neuro-linguistic programming or NLP consists of a diverse collection of psychological techniques that aim to improve people's lives. Its supporters claim that there is a connection between the neurological processes, language, and behavioural patterns that are learned through experience or 'programming'. By using an imitative method of learning, called 'modelling', NLP practitioners claim to be able to 'recode' the way the brain responds to stimuli to produce new behaviours. It was this aspect of NLP that Jeffries claimed to use in his seduction techniques to, among other things, show men how to 'install the super get laid attitudes in yourself', 'fake like you're warm and friendly', and 'swiftly detect women who are wackos, low-lifes, crazies and scum'. By modelling the skills of seduction experts, he claimed that any man could acquire new seduction skills that would allow him to attract women. While some pick-up artists have moved away from some of Jeffries' more strident claims about modelling, most still borrow basic elements of NLP. Sadly, for its proponents, there's very little evidence to support the theoretical basis of NLP or its effectiveness as a method of changing behaviour. The consensus of scientific opinion is that NLP is a pseudoscience. In reviewing NLP and other methods of therapeutic change, psychologist Stephen Briers concluded that 'NLP is not really a cohesive therapy but a ragbag of different techniques without a particularly clear theoretical basis ... [its] evidence base is virtually non-existent'. Donald Eisner similarly writes that 'NLP has no empirical or scientific support as to the underlying tenets of its theory of clinical effectiveness. What remains is a mass-marketed serving of psychopablum'.

tutelage in what would become known as 'bootcamps' – workshops where pick-up artists guide students into social settings, like bars and high streets, to pick up women. His 2007 book *The Mystery Method: How to Get Beautiful Women into Bed* is one of the most prominent texts circulating in the seduction community and provides a systematised approach – 'an algorithm for getting women' – in which men are given a complex seduction script that will help establish trust and give them the tools to communicate with women. The goal, of course, is to 'get laid'.

While Jeffries and Mystery continue to ply their trade, it was not until the publication in 2005 of Neil Strauss' bestseller exposé *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* that the seduction community rose to prominence. Strauss spent two years within the seduction community and, having learned the tricks of the trade from various 'masters of seduction' (Jeffries and Mystery among them), describes his transformation from 'average frustrated chump' – or AFC – to womaniser and master pick-up artist (he gave himself the moniker 'Style', which seems to be the thing to do among pick-up artists). Since the publication of *The Game*, the seduction community has grown to become a worldwide phenomenon and AFCs who feel inadequate, lonely, or insufficiently masculine are encouraged to cough up money to learn a suite of seduction techniques, attend bootcamps and promotional events, watch 'infield' videos of coaches picking up women, and get private coaching from master pick-up artists. The self-help sell here is that the AFC, armed with the right tools, need no longer be frustrated.

There has been a lot of discussion and debate about the seduction community, particularly the extent to which it perpetuates patterns of misogyny and propagates practices that encourage the objectification, denigration, and ill-treatment of women. Terms like 'negging' (making negative comments or backhanded compliments to lower a woman's self-esteem, so that she'll hang around to earn approval) and 'cavemanning' (aggressively escalating physical contact) are now part of popular discourse, but also

provide a glimpse of the sense of entitlement pedalled by pick-up artists. While pick-up artists often dismiss such criticisms on the basis that interactions between women and men are a 'game', it's also clear that much of this stuff can be placed on a continuum of misogyny that includes rape and murder. It also shouldn't come as a surprise that pick-up artistry bleeds into the world of the involuntary celibates or incels (men who can't find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one), where resentment, self-loathing, racism, a sense of entitlement to sex, and endorsement of violence against sexually active others are all common.²¹

These discussions are essential, but let's ask a different question: is pick-up artistry scientifically valid? This is an important question, given that pick-up artists claim their techniques are based on psychological evidence. Mystery, for example, frames his book within a scientific context, explaining that he studies the 'science of social dynamics', offering readers an 'advanced algorithm thirteen years in the making'.²² Readers are encouraged to go out into the field to 'improve their calibration', advised to adopt a 'decimal rating scale' to rank women's appearances, and taught how to trigger a woman's 'hard-wired attraction switches'. Other pick-up artists have taken issue with the way in which Mystery's structured approach results in 'social robots', merely parroting seduction scripts regardless of the context. This has led to a new movement of pick-up artistry, known as the 'natural game', which involves a more free-flowing, improvisational approach to seduction, but even here pre-tested routines and set formulae of coordinated strategies are common. So, is there any truth to the claim that pick-up artistry is based on scientific evidence?

The short answer is, no, not much. In her textual analysis of *The Mystery Method*, Amanda Denes describes how pick-up artists like Mystery have misappropriated scientific evidence to further their own ends.²³ She argues that pick-up artists rely on faulty, armchair interpretations of psychology, biology, and physiology

to make pronouncements that dehumanise women and that are reflective of rape scripts. Take, for instance, Mystery's 'Cat Theory', in which he ridiculously explains that women are like cats because they don't take orders, like shiny new things, and 'rub against you and purr when they like you'. Metaphors like these are a common trope in the world of pick-up artistry, with men being urged to 'train' women by rewarding positive behaviour and punishing negative behaviour. This dehumanises women, presenting them as biological animals in thrall to their genetic programming, lacking any sort of personal agency, their bodies all responding in the same way to seduction techniques.

It's not just that the theory underlying pick-up artistry is dubious, it's also that they don't appear to have a grasp of the scientific studies that they rely on. Pick-up artists place a great deal of importance on physiological responses to touch – or what pick-up artists refer to as 'kino' – when seducing women. But as Denes shows, pick-up artists have misappropriated scientific studies to make grand claims about human behaviour that are not supported by any actual evidence. Worse, she argues, the implication of methods of seduction that are claimed to be flawless is the perpetuation of false beliefs and myths about interpersonal interactions, behaviours, and sexuality. In misappropriating the language of science, Mystery and other pick-up artists reduce interpersonal relationships to unfounded biological imperatives and show little or no awareness of the social, economic, and cultural contexts in which relationships are formed.

Similarly, in her interviews with British pick-up artists, Anna Arrowsmith discusses how they frequently resort to pseudoscientific references and beliefs that have very little basis in fact.²⁴ A good example of this is the notion of extreme gender differences, that women and men represent different species that behave in very different ways. But, as we'll see over the course of this book, gender differences in attraction and relationship formation have been greatly exaggerated. Arrowsmith concludes her analysis of

pick-up artistry by saying that although pick-up artists want to portray themselves as being respectful of women and their needs, their reliance on pseudoscience and their desire to control women's behaviour means they remain trapped in their own misogyny. In her view, the techniques being taught by pick-up artists like those she interviewed in her study were unrealistic and unhelpful.

Even if we conclude that the theories underlying pick-up artistry are faulty, do the techniques actually work? The trouble is that there isn't actually any real evidence that it does. Claims of GUARANTEED SUCCESS are based on anecdotes, but anecdotes don't make for good science. And anyway, anecdotes of failures are just as easy to find as claims of success, though sadly the men who fail at picking-up often blame themselves for being unable to master the 'tools' of the trade, rather than questioning whether the methods are faulty.²⁵ Moreover, many of the techniques preferred by pick-up artists – such as negging, ignoring the 'bitch shield' (a woman's natural reaction to rudeness), and isolating women so as to be better able to 'conquer' them – fly in the face of evidence from science (as we'll see later in this book). Even if evidence of its success is scant, one might argue that helping men who suffer from social anxiety or shyness to be more confident must be a good thing. And I'd agree, except I'm not convinced that pick-up artists are the best people to help.

But there's a deeper rot here. Even if you buy into the stereotypes of behaviour and the pseudoscience, even if you're motivated not by empathy but by the promise of sex, even if you've been lured in by guarantees of beautiful and willing women – even then it's difficult to get away from the feeling that something isn't quite right with pick-up artistry. This isn't to suggest that all pick-up artists are nefarious and perverse. It's certainly true that some pick-up artists have turned away from the manipulation inherent in much of the seduction community, offering instead suggestions on how to become more likeable men, seeking to teach the

'unskilled' how to communicate and interact with women. Even here though, there remains a sense of entitlement – that men are inherently deserving of women's affection, so long as they are on the road of self-improvement.

And, of course, it's a slippery slope from this more 'humane' version of pick-up artistry to weaponising newly learned tools to maximise the number of women seduced and to viewing women as objects to be debugged, conquered, and discarded. Is it really any surprise that the men who are most likely to use the methods of the seduction community are those who believe they're entitled to sex and those who are willing to manipulate others to get what they want?²⁶ Any time pick-up artists encourage us to view women as obstacles that need to be overcome through manipulation, to believe that sex is more important than compassion and respect, to prioritise men's entitlement over women's experiences, the seduction community deserves the criticisms it receives. And, of course, the willingness to manipulate and deceive that still permeates much of the seduction community doesn't bode well for healthy relationships. When looking for healthy relationships, we can do better than rely on pseudoscience and misogyny.

THERE ARE NO LAWS OF ATTRACTION

If common sense is frequently nonsense and if self-help 'experts' and pick-up artists have sold us a pseudoscientific view of attraction, what are we left with? In this book, I want to offer a different perspective on attraction and relationship formation, one that's based on decades of research and scientific evidence. I'll be asking what a real science of attraction looks like and what it has to tell us about the factors involved in forming relationships with others. And I'll show that a science of attraction, based on real research by psychologists and sociologists, has much to offer in terms of a valid and evidence-based approach to relationship formation. Rather than relying on common sense, pseudoscience,

or personal anecdotes about what works, I'll suggest we should instead look to the evidence provided by scientists.

At the core of this book is an idea that I'd like to try to sell you. The idea is a very simple one: there are no 'laws of attraction.' There are no rules to follow, no guarantees of success, no fool-proof methods or strategies for getting someone to date you, let alone jump into bed with you. If that's what you're after, then I'm sorry to disappoint you so soon. But if my own research has convinced me of one thing, it's that promises of guaranteed methods for attracting and keeping a partner are always hollow and empty. Human psychology is incredibly complex, and trying to reduce the processes involved in relationship formation to rules or laws is an exercise in futility. But while I'll show why I believe there are no laws of attraction, this isn't the same as arguing that there is nothing to be gained from studying the processes involved in attraction.

In this book, I'll reveal the four key factors that shape the formation of most relationships. First, I'll discuss the surprising and powerful effects that geography has on relationship formation. It may seem obvious, but decades of research have shown that one of the strongest predictors of whether any two people will form a relationship is sheer physical proximity. Proximity facilitates relationship formation because it reduces the 'functional distance' between two people, increasing the likelihood that they'll interact and perceive themselves as part of the same 'social unit'. But, as I'll show in Chapter 2, proximity also exerts an influence on relationship formation through some not-so-obvious ways. And I'll also present the results of my own research into how our perceptions of our surroundings have an impact on whom we find attractive.

Second, I'll show that appearance matters. No surprise there. Compared to less attractive people, physically attractive folk get treated better, and that includes getting asked out on dates more frequently and even having sex more often. The sad truth is that as much as we might protest otherwise, we judge books by their covers all the time. But what about the old stereotype that men

care more about a partner's appearance than do women? In Chapter 3, I'll argue that rumours of men's shallowness may have been greatly exaggerated. For first impressions, and particularly for interactions in real life, it seems that physical appearance matters to most people, irrespective of their gender.

But, in Chapter 4, I'll show that aside from physical attractiveness, there's a wide range of other characteristics that matter when it comes to relationship formation. In fact, characteristics like warmth and trustworthiness are highly valued in prospective partners and the strange thing is that possessing these traits can even make an individual *appear* more physically attractive. And as for the stereotype that nice guys finish last, I'll show that it's just that – a stereotype. Finally, in Chapter 4, I'll show how situational and individual factors can affect how we perceive another person. I'll tell you why crossing a wobbly bridge could alter perceptions of attractiveness and I'll present the findings of my 'love-is-blind' bias studies that show how our perceptions of romantic partners are biased.

Third, in Chapter 5, I'll reveal that liking is mutual. One person's liking for another usually predicts the other person's liking in return. But what's more, experimental evidence suggests that one person's liking another actually causes the other to return the appreciation. Conversely, psychologists have shown that even the slightest hint of criticism can be damaging. This is why playing hard-to-get doesn't work: years of research shows that being vague and stand-offish doesn't get you very far. You might think, then, that flattery will get you everywhere. But be warned: if praise clearly violates what we know is true, we lose respect for the flatterer and wonder whether the compliment springs from ulterior motives.

Lastly, I'll suggest that one of the strongest predictors of relationship formation is the degree of similarity between two people. Those who share common attitudes, beliefs, demographics, and values are much more likely to form relationships than those who are dissimilar. Experiments have even shown that people often

approach and form relationships with others whose attractiveness roughly matches their own – what psychologists call ‘assortative mating’. But psychologists have also shown that dissimilarity breeds dislike: we assume that others share our attitudes, and when we discover that they don’t, we usually dislike those people. So, do opposites ever attract? Some dating ‘experts’ would have you believe that the best relationships are those in which two people complement each other, but as we’ll see in Chapter 6, the tendency of opposites to form relationships has very little evidence in its favour.

While the focus of this book is on romantic attraction, most of the evidence I’ll present also helps to explain the formation of any sort of relationship, whether it’s friendships, short-term sexual relationships, or long-term romantic relationships. We’ll also see just how far these factors still matter in new forms of relationship formation, particularly in online dating. And while I’ll highlight group differences where there are any, I’ll also reveal how the four factors of attraction I’ve mentioned previously exert very similar effects across groups of people, including those that differ in gender identity and sexual orientation. But does this mean that all the mystery of attraction can be explained away? Not necessarily. Scientists can explain the general processes involved in attraction very well, but ultimately some aspects of attraction will remain beyond the realms of explanation. As we’ll see in Chapter 7, outside the experimenter’s laboratory, the sneaky hand of chance – what psychologists refer to as ‘serendipity’ – remains a powerful influence on the formation of relationships.

To conclude, in this book I’ll explore how four factors – proximity, physical attractiveness, reciprocity, and similarity – affect the formation of relationships. But to repeat the point I made a short moment ago: these factors do not constitute laws of attraction. To put it more bluntly, this isn’t a self-help book. Nor is it a manual to help you or anyone else get laid. This book doesn’t come with guarantees of success in romance or the promise of

immediate success in dating. But, even if the factors we'll look at do not constitute laws of attraction, a better understanding of their effects may be useful in our everyday lives. The science of attraction and relationship formation can't guarantee you a date tonight, but it can point the way towards forming mutually benefiting relationships with other people.