

cover story

Love in a box set: what the critics

Stuck for ideas of how to celebrate this Valentine's Day? Let our experts play Cupid with the ultimate cultural date, from dance to poetry to music

The poetry

Selected Poems by John Donne

Are you a swaggering seducer living in constant fear that your numerous girlfriends will find out about each other? Or are you a devoted spouse, sniffing back the tears whenever your beloved so much as pops out to the shops?

Whatever sort of lover you are, John Donne has a poem to suit you. He can do saucy ("Licence my roving hands, and let them go/ Before, behind, between, above, below") and he can do sensitive ("Sweetest love, I do not go,/ For weariness of thee").

If you can't win over the object of your affection with a Donne poem, you should probably just give up. Buy this book, stop boring your loved one with your own semi-coherent romantic jibberings and let the sexiest, wittiest, tenderest love poet in the language do the talking. Or as Donne says: "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love."

James Marriott

Published by Penguin, £8.99

The dance performance

Manon, Royal Opera House

When it comes to ballet, there's nothing so romantic as love gone wrong. So how about tickets to one of the greatest tragic love affairs to grace the dance stage? *Manon*, choreographed by Kenneth MacMillan and performed by the Royal Ballet, is based on the 1731 French novel by Abbé Prévost and tells the story of the ultimate fallen woman.

From innocent convent girl to greedy courtesan and wretched convict, poor Manon is used and abused by powerful men (including her unscrupulous brother) and even Des Grieux's love can't save her. MacMillan's three-act ballet, with a fabulous score cobbled together from music by Massenet, has some of the most sensuous pas de deux choreographed, including a final, desperate goodbye in the swamps of Louisiana that rivals *Romeo and Juliet* for heartbreak.

Present your lover with a ticket on Wednesday. It's on at the Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000) from March 29 to May 16; £5 gets you in the door, £105 gets you the best seat in the house.

Debra Craine

The soundtrack

Call Me by Your Name, limited vinyl edition

This one ticks so many boxes — cinephiles, vinyl addicts and fans of deeply romantic music should all be wowed. And if your other half is a film and vinyl-loving romantic, well, jackpot! The most unashamedly sensual film of last year, Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me by Your Name*, told the story of a love affair between a precocious teenager (Timothée



Weegee's 1945 photograph *Lovers* at Palace Theatre. Below: Meg Ryan and Andy Garcia in the surprisingly stern *When a Man Loves a Woman*

Chalamet) and a dashing postgrad student (Armie Hammer) over one sleepy summer in Eighties Italy.

The equally gorgeous soundtrack, just released as a double LP on limited-edition blue vinyl (£30), features three songs by the elfin American singer-songwriter Sufjan Stevens, including the Oscar-nominated *Mystery of Love*, as well as exquisite oldies by John Adams, Giorgio Moroder and Ryuichi Sakamoto.

Best of all is *Love My Way*, the Psychedelic Furs' dreamy synth classic from 1982, a favourite of Hammer's character in the film and guaranteed to stir the loins in the classiest way possible.

Ed Potton

The album

Forever Changes by Love, 1967

I have personal reasons for nominating this folk-rock masterpiece from 1967 as the most romantic album of all time. My wife walked down the aisle to its opening song, *Alone Again Or*, and we spent countless evenings listening to it over a bottle of wine in one poky rented flat after another.

Yet its tender elegance has universal resonance. Intended by leader Arthur Lee as a summation of the hippy era, the album is as dark as it is beautiful, with baroque strings and mariachi brass gilding words about everything from hummingbirds in the morning to water turning to blood. The melancholic, mysterious cadences

of *Forever Changes* cannot fail to draw back Cupid's bow, although the title is not as romantic as it seems. When a friend of the Los Angeles band broke up with his girlfriend, she said: "You said you would love me for ever!" His reply? "Well, for ever changes."

Will Hodgkinson

The film

When a Man Loves a Woman, directed by Luis Mandoki, 1994

Misremembered as a gushy Meg Ryan tearjerker from the *Sleepless in Seattle* era, this drama is actually made of much sterner stuff.

It is the ultimate relationship movie for long-term couples because it tracks the progress of parenting, the power shifts

between partners and the possibility of pain that

lurks beneath any realistic love match.

Ryan is Alice, an alcoholic teacher. Andy Garcia is Michael, her seemingly perfect pilot husband who tucks her into bed after she

falls, smashed, through the glass shower doors. Their two tiny daughters suffer. Alice goes to Alcoholics Anonymous and Michael resents the new empowered woman. Yet the tears — oh Lord, the climactic tears.

Michael, now estranged, crashes her 180 days of sobriety party at AA. There's a tense moment. Then he speaks. "My wife is an alcoholic," he says. "And she's the best person I ever met."

The tears. The love. The hope. Best Valentine's movie ever.

Kevin Maher

Available on Blu-ray and DVD

The TV box set

Outlander

Poldark just ain't raunchy enough for a spicy Valentine's evening in front of the box, so how about this kilted pleasure?

Chaste it is not, as a no-nonsense English nurse (Caitriona Balfe), while on a trip to Inverness to rekindle passions with her husband (Tobias Menzies), is catapulted back in time to 1743.

The Jacobite rebellion is rumbling, her husband's ancestor (also Menzies) is a redcoat villain, the scenery is magnificent and, most importantly, there's a strapping warrior on hand to sweep her off her feet in a time-slipped love triangle. Hey, it's complicated.

The sword-wielding battle stuff is a violent backdrop, but really this is about racy passions, where a marital tiff involves a bit of retro-spanking in front of a roaring fire — to which our heroine reacts by booting him in the face. Ah, true love.

James Jackson

Series one to three are available on Amazon Prime Instant Video; series one and two are also on DVD box set

The artwork

Chocolate sculptures by Renzo Martens

Say it with chocolate. It's the failsafe bet. But forget that ribbon-tied box from Rococo. The Dutch artist Renzo Martens has established a collective of artists in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) who, having moulded a portrait head out of river mud, send the 3D-scanned data back to Amsterdam. There, the images are cast in chocolate made by a French-Belgian company that uses African cacao beans. The profits are ploughed directly back into the DRC, given to the artists and used to support locally owned fruit, palm and cacao plantations.

It's confectionery that stands at the vexed intersection between post-colonial politics and rising art world wealth. So munch on that this Valentine's Day. Or better still — not least since Martens is hotly tipped as a rising talent — keep it in a glass case. Cacao, it turns out, is a highly durable medium. It tastes extremely bitter, but then it may last a good while longer than too many of love's sweet dreams.

Rachel Campbell-Johnston

You can buy a chocolate portrait head at Hauser & Wirth, Somerset (hauserwirth.com), for £25.

The play

Everybody's Talking About Jamie

A word of warning: approach your gift of theatre tickets with extreme care. Avoid all relationship plays because,



Renzo Martens's chocolate portrait head. Top: Caitriona Balfe and Sam Heughan in *Outlander*

are giving their Valentines

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like *Romeo and Juliet*, things can go just a bit wrong.

The happy-go-luckiest offering in London is *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* at the Apollo — about a 16-year-old boy who is gay and dreams of being a drag queen. There's not a duff song in the show and the script is buzzy, funny and sharp.

Of course, you are buying for your beloved, not you, but sometimes you can combine the two. So if you like musicals, but he only likes war movies, try *Julius Caesar* at the Bridge, which should please both, although the music is rock.

For a serious history play there is the superb *Mary Stuart* at the Duke of York's. Outside London, look for the tip-top touring productions of *Hamlet* and *This House*, plus the brilliant *War Horse*.

Ann Treneman

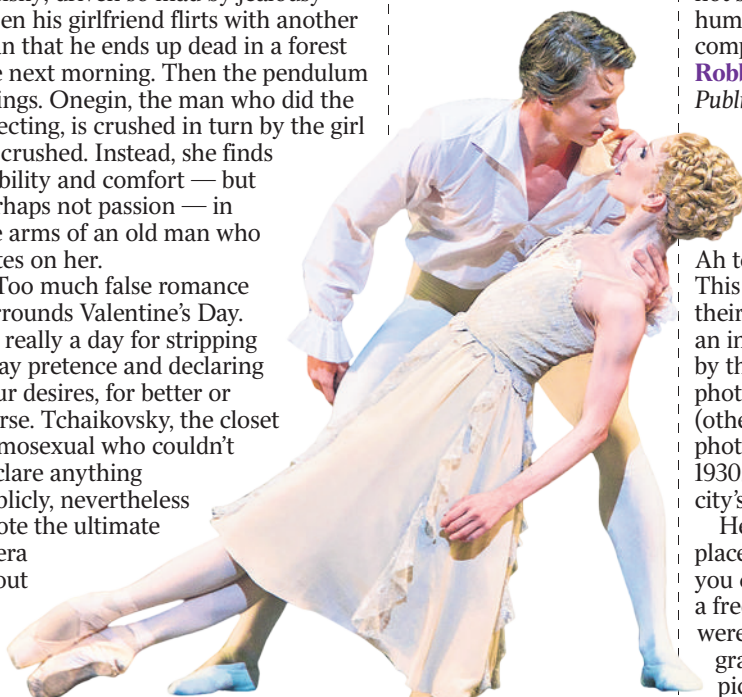
The opera

Eugene Onegin, Tchaikovsky
Like Joni Mitchell, Tchaikovsky looked at love from both sides in his greatest opera, *Eugene Onegin*. There's the

teenage, infatuated Tatyana, scribbling midnight valentines to a man who will crush her with rejection. There's Lensky, driven so mad by jealousy when his girlfriend flirts with another man that he ends up dead in a forest the next morning. Then the pendulum swings. Onegin, the man who did the rejecting, is crushed in turn by the girl he crushed. Instead, she finds stability and comfort — but perhaps not passion — in the arms of an old man who dotes on her.

Too much false romance surrounds Valentine's Day. It's really a day for stripping away pretence and declaring your desires, for better or worse. Tchaikovsky, the closet homosexual who couldn't declare anything publicly, nevertheless wrote the ultimate opera about

Below: Vadim Muntagirov and Sarah Lamb in *Manon*



Armie Hammer and Timothée Chalamet in *Call Me by Your Name*

the exquisite anguish of doing exactly that. And the music! Ravishing, wistful, tender, torrid: it's all there.

Richard Morrison

Opera Up Close, now touring, tickets £20 (operaupclose.com); *Scottish Opera*, touring from April 27, tickets £12.50 to £80.50 (scottishopera.org.uk)

The novel

Days Without End by Sebastian Barry

The most romantic novel of recent years is far, far away from the Hallmark slush of bouquets and boxes of chocolates. Instead, it brims with blood, cordite, sweat, galloping horses, scalping — and men in frocks dancing.

Days Without End by Sebastian Barry won the Costa book of the year in 2016. Rightly so. It is a beautiful tale of two raggedy-trousered lads, Thomas McNulty and John Cole, who meet in a frontier town in 1850s America. They fall in together, making a living by dressing up as ladies and dancing with the women-starved miners, who are after tenderness rather than sex. Then they join up and fight in the Indian wars and the civil war. Along the way they take in a Sioux girl and form a tight little family in a violent America.

Although it has epic sweep, it is a touching story about a love that does not speak its name — and that very human urge to find yourself in companionship.

Robbie Millen

Published by Faber & Faber, £8.99

The photograph

Lovers at Palace Theatre by Weegee, 1945

Ah to be young, sexy and shoeless. This glorious, beautiful pair, lost in their lustful abandon, were shot with an infrared camera at the cinema by the photographer and photojournalist Arthur Fellig (otherwise known as Weegee), whose photographs of New York between the 1930s and 1950s helped to cement the city's mythology.

Here its seedy movie theatres are places of heady romance; somewhere you could steal a kiss and a fumble, be a freer version of yourself, even if you were sitting next to somebody's grandma. My favourite part of this picture is the voyeur — not the one

behind the camera, but the one behind the lovers, surreptitiously lowering his 3D glasses for a better look.

Nancy Durrant

The print is available at the Photographers' Gallery, £2,500 plus VAT, unframed (thephotographersgallery.org.uk)

The comedy gig

Bron Batten: Onstage Dating

Somewhere between experimental theatre, comedy and live Tinder banter, this Melbourne-based performer's show is the perfect date night for couples who want to see someone having a more awkward time than them.

Batten has previous in colliding the real with the simulated: her Edinburgh Fringe show *Sweet Child of Mine* brought her parents up on stage with her. And over the course of this new hour, she scoops up a volunteer from the audience and goes on a date with them right there and then.

She uses the 36 questions *The New York Times* suggested you need to ask if you want to fall in love with each other (see

36questionsinlove.com, or try this sample: "Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?"). And she will, according to reports from the show's runs in Australia and New Zealand, clash audience participation with modern courtship like you've never quite seen before.

Dominic Maxwell

Soho Theatre, London W1 (020 7478 0100), February 13 to 17

The exhibition

Charles I: King and Collector

Life is sweet but exhausting and even the most devoted lovers get weary sometimes — you can see that on the lined faces of Jan Gossaert's *Adam and Eve*, c 1520 (see cover), the exquisite oil in the Royal Academy's spectacular new show *Charles I: King and Collector*.

The exhibition is the perfect Valentine's Day date since it's all about togetherness: 150 artistic beauties from the unrivalled collection of Charles I, reunited for the first time since the 17th century. Old flames can see old Flams. How romantic. Just watch out for the apples in the café.

Alex O'Connell

Royal Academy (020 7439 2000) until April 15, tickets £18