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Families facing a loved one's illness

BOOK REVIEW

Perrine Moran, *Love Songs: Listening to Couples*

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Book Review by Martha Doniach*

Love Songs: Listening to Couples by Perrine Moran (2025) is a beautifully written and easily accessible book that explores love and its intricacies from a couple psychoanalytic perspective. The author's creative use of love songs highlights the book's originality, deepening our understanding of how couples relate to one another and, importantly, how this relationship connects to our understanding of the self.

Moran's unique way with words is both poetic and musical, reflecting her earlier professional background in literature and the arts. The book's compelling start instantly engages readers in its core themes:

"The journey starts with two lives in one body. Through the protective amniotic fluid, sounds are heard: the rhythm of a heartbeat, the melody of a voice. Then, from inside to outside, the cord is cut. The experience of being inside the other is lost forever, and the process of relating to another begins." (p. 1)

Moran considers the profound link between music and human relationships in the opening chapter. This thought-provoking examination of music's significance in psychoanalysis is followed by six chapters, each focusing on a specific aspect of couple dynamics, roughly tracing human development from infancy to adulthood: "Connections", "Push and Pull", "Disappointment", "Difference", "Enmeshment",

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“The Unspoken”, and “Separation”. These themes are accompanied by iconic love songs from artists like Cole Porter, Leonard Bernstein, and Bob Dylan. To deepen our understanding, each chapter explores the meanings behind the songwriter’s music and lyrics, skilfully intertwined with clinical examples that expand our perspective.

I admire the depth of Moran’s research into the intersection of music and psychoanalysis. This enables her to engage with and differ from conventional psychoanalytic writing. For instance, she includes fascinating details, such as the date of the discovery of the first human-made musical instrument and Freud’s aversion to music.

Moran’s musical knowledge is also evident in her detailed exploration of various aspects of love songs, revisiting one of the book’s central themes: cultivating the ability to remain separate while being together in a couple relationship. Dylan’s “raspy voice” (p. 34), conveying his anguish, is juxtaposed with melodic repetitions in the folk (love) song, *Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right*, which echoes Dylan’s first important romantic relationship. Moran points out how song repetitions can mirror a couple’s recurrent accusations towards one another. In Sinatra’s version of *I’ve Got You Under My Skin*, Moran conveys how all the nuances of his rendition, including his voice, help us understand the many layers of enmeshment and dependency.

I found Moran’s exploration of the concept of “disappointment” – frequently encountered in couple therapy yet rarely explored in couple psychoanalysis – especially compelling. By pointing out its crucial developmental significance, Moran adeptly connects the French roots of the word to a broader understanding of disappointment, linking it to Klein’s depressive position, disillusionment, and recognition of reality.

Similarly, Moran demonstrates her extensive understanding of psychoanalytic theory by citing notable theorists such as Freud, Klein, Winnicott, and contemporary scholars like Mary Morgan, Warren Coleman, and Christopher Clulow. I admire how Moran adeptly simplifies intricate theoretical notions such as Holding and Containment, Couple State of Mind, and Shared-Unconscious Phantasy, connecting them to a specific love song and directly applying these concepts to clinical practice. This approach gives the book a distinctive edge, making it relevant not only for psychoanalytic practitioners but also for professionals in related fields and beyond, to a wider readership.

Moran eloquently presents the complexities of “difference” through the famous love song *Somewhere* from *West Side Story*. She encourages us to reflect on racism and cites critical clinicians in the field, including Fakhry Davids. Additionally, her clinical examples provide valuable insights into working with interracial and



intercultural couples, a topic that has received little attention in the field. By courageously sharing her experiences of growing up in a cross-cultural environment, Moran powerfully connects us to the deeper struggles associated with “difference”. It is commendable that the author weaves this personal narrative into the book while maintaining its scholarly tone.

Furthermore, I value Moran’s acknowledgement of the limitations of a classical psychoanalytic theory based on a traditional heterosexual nuclear family model, and her endorsement of revitalising psychoanalytic concepts instead of entirely dismissing them. She recognises that Psychoanalysis has its roots in Western culture yet emphasises the importance of considering new family forms and cultural diversity. Moran argues that a crucial component of the book’s theoretical model is the infant’s relationship with their primary caregiver because this interaction determines whether trust in others develops or not (p. XV).

Moran’s remarkable creativity shines in the final chapter, where she uses a film script to illustrate her work with the daughter of parents facing later life and its impact. This illustration vividly highlights the delicate nature of working with older couples nearing the end of life and the profound effects on them, particularly when one partner is dealing with an illness such as dementia. Reading this moved me to tears.

Equally, Moran’s inclusion of a playlist that readers can access through digital streaming services is innovative. Her use of film and music emphasises the benefit of engaging with resources beyond the text and powerfully conveys the author’s message about the importance of interacting within clinical work in ways that extend beyond intellectual comprehension. She states, *“A song offers a bridge between the subjectivity of the therapist itself and the shared dynamic of the couple. Even if the song is never mentioned to the couple, I believe that something of a common experience is communicated and conducive to change.”* (p.112)

Moran reminds us how music—love songs in particular—can immediately transport us emotionally to a moment, place, or era; for this reason, the music is deeply personal. I highly recommend this unique book to couple therapists and anyone interested in deepening their understanding of human relationships and the music and love songs that enhance the text.