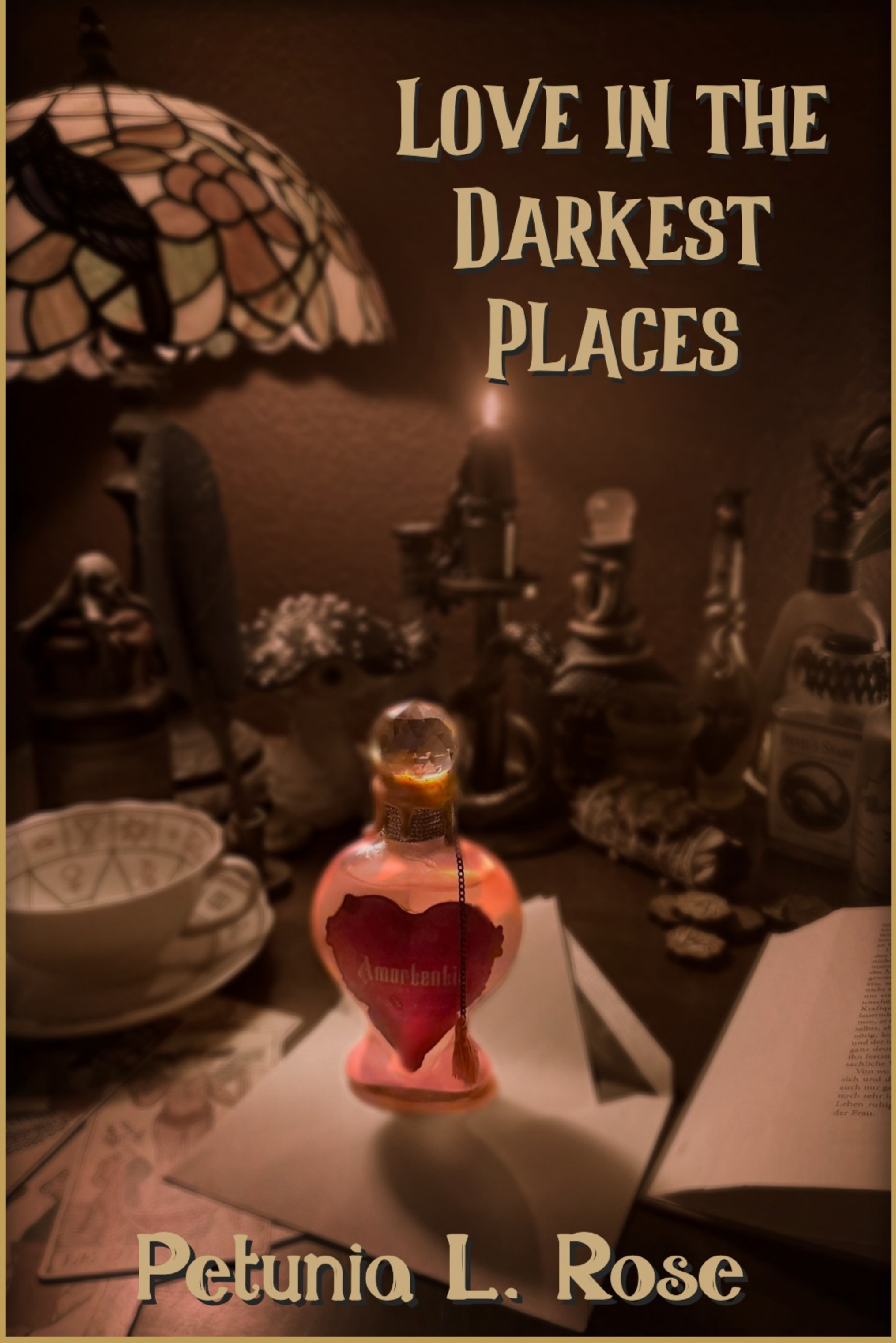
Love in the Darkest Places



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Love in the Darkest Places: Introduction

Writers know that the craft is not just a form of expressing oneself but of *exploring* oneself. Our inspiration for it waxes and wanes with the tides of life pulling us inward as much as they push us to create. Authors like Franz Kafka and Mary Shelley show us their worlds filled with themes that are timeless not just because they revolve around the woes of society but because they investigate the core nature of our humanity. In this book, we indulge together in voyeuristic peeks into their most intimate relationships, adding a third dimension to our readings by discovering and respectfully considering the struggles that inspired them.

Dark writing is not just for those that find fascination in the macabre or grotesque (or what some might call *real life*). It provides a venue for exploring the self on levels that must be reached individually. It compels us to crawl back into memories we thought we'd managed to forget, and processing the emotions they inflict upon us shapes our philosophy on life, love, and identity. We prod at those sensitive scars with morbid curiosity—for all their horrors, they were moments of profound self-discovery and seismic impacts on our relationships, transforming how we experience and define love or relate to others. We manifest our discoveries through this process into tales that are authentic to us and our experiences with the one life we get to live.

As readers, we allow the narrator's hand to guide us through these vulnerable spaces. Dark writing emotionally resonates with us because it often speaks directly to our deepest fears: rejection, abandonment, isolation, death, and the unknown. We journey through worlds invented from these anxieties, and paradoxically, we feel at home. We feel this sense of belonging from the persistent theme of *love* threaded through even the bleakest narratives. In recognizing this,

the loneliest reader forms a bond across centuries with a voice that seems to see them when no one else does.

One of my favorite authors, Franz Kafka, was a primarily German-speaking Jew living in Prague through and after the first World War. He's known for his nightmarish depictions of alienation, cruelty, and an existential anxiety that earned him his own adjective. "Kafkaesque" now refers to situations defined by the oppressive and abstract characteristics found in his works. He developed a short but intense long-distance relationship after Milena Jesenská approached him initially as a reader and translator of his work, but it quickly evolved into something much deeper and personal. Kafka's letters to her often reflect the pain that stained the pages of his manuscripts like his abstract sketches. "You are the knife I turn inside myself; that is love," he wrote. This metaphor of love as self-inflicted suffering echoes throughout his stories like *The Metamorphosis* when Gregor Samsa's internalized sense of worthlessness materializes as the giant insect he morphs into. "Written kisses don't reach their destination, they are drunk on the way by the ghosts," he lamented, mourning their relationship strained by its confinement to pen and paper (Kafka, *Letters to Milena*). Kafka and Jesenská remained physically separated, and the relationship eventually dissolved. Jesenská had already been married and refused to leave her husband, but Kafka's health was also declining. In the end, Kafka died as isolated and emaciated as the Hunger Artist from one of his last short stories, sparing him from the Nazi death camps that would claim many of his friends and family in the few years after.

Perhaps his most famous letter, *Brief an den Vater*, reveals the conditions in which young Kafka formed his sense of identity. In forty-five pages, he spills his truth, detailing the abuse he faced at the hands of his father including intimidation, fear, and belittlement that haunted him throughout the rest of his life. It is not a full condemnation, as he often interrupts himself to

moderate such a tone, sometimes complimenting him and expressing an admiration that only reinforced his own inadequacy. Despite the agonizing work Kafka put into this confession, his mother, whom he'd entrusted to deliver it, never let his father read its words. Although this may not have provided Kafka the form of closure he sought, his drive to write it was undoubtedly inspired by a need to heal and frame his most formative experiences in his own words. In the chapter specifically dedicated to this letter, we will explore just how beneficial this strategy can be for coping with lack of closure. His father may have never read those words, but perhaps he wasn't the one that needed to—maybe it was *us*.

Mary Shelley herself wrote a significant number of personal letters throughout her life to her husband Percy Shelley. Their relationship was wrought with passion but also heartache from fundamental differences in views on love and relationships between them, financial instability, mourning the losses of her infant children. "I am unhappy—very unhappy," she wrote to him, "and it is living away from you that makes me so. I can find no rest anywhere but in your society" (Shelley, *Letters*). After Percy's drowning not even a full decade after their marriage, Shelley kept his heart in her desk, wrapped in one of his own poems. This grim yet creative manifestation of her devotion surpasses even Kafka's dreadful attempt to recover from life's spiritual lacerations.

Mary Shelley's most famous work, Frankenstein, begins with and is structured around letters. Whether intentional or not, Frankenstein also has a strong queer resonance. The monster pleads with his creator: "My companion will be of the same nature as myself, and will be content with the same fare" followed by a desire for the sustenance of love despite it leading to social isolation, "It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another" (Shelley 107). Victor's fiancée writes to him, acknowledging

his lack of romantic love for her in what I would argue is also an indirect acknowledgment of the love for his closest companion, Henry Clerval: “Tell me, dearest Victor. Answer, I conjure you, by our mutual happiness, with simple truth—Do you not love another?” (141). Although there is no evidence that Shelley intentionally wrote it to have such resonance, I proudly place it in my personal canon of queer literature. This is because of how much Victor and his monstrous creation speak to the experience of identity struggle as well as Shelley’s demonstration that such struggles can find honest empathy from those who may be otherwise unable to relate.

When we read these author’s letters, we’re beckoned down the same dark alleys of self-reflection where their fiction was born. We spiral down Kafka’s uncanny and sometimes grotesque rabbit hole of self-doubt and anxiety, and we ache with Shelley in the moral and emotional dilemmas surrounding love and loss. Reading their letters alongside their stories shows that these themes aren’t simply literary devices but rather direct reflections of their personal struggles. The darkness we encounter in their fiction mirrors the darkness they faced when trying to articulate love, intimacy, and fear in private words meant for a single reader rather than the world.

Our writing encourages us to explore the darker corners of our lives just as it did the authors in this book. We feel the matching tones between their stories and letters, and we understand that, no matter how fictional a story is, every word holds truth. We don’t have to know what authors went through to understand how they were affected, and that’s the power of dark writing. We should all explore the corners of ourselves we typically avoid because the darkness is often where our most honest truths are hidden.

About the Author

Petunia L. Rose is a graduate of real life, spending much of her time running a local art collective in her hometown of Gatlinburg, Tennessee. A veteran purveyor of alternative history novels, she first gained notoriety through her award-winning *Gustopher Finnel* series, which explores themes of intergenerational trauma and emotional recovery during a second American Civil War.

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