

# Humphreys' unlikely romance with history

Novel authentic to point of feeling raw

## REVIEW

The Reinvention of Love by Helen Humphreys (Harper-Collins, 309 pages, \$29.99)

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FOR POSTMEDIA NEWS



The Reinvention of Love has all the elements of a steamy romance novel: It features famous characters from history, a love triangle, sex and intrigue. And yet it is unlike anything one would normally expect to find filed under "romance."

Helen Humphreys's latest novel is the story of how Charles Sainte-Beuve, a leading literary critic in 19th-century France, became friends with Victor Hugo and then had an affair with his wife, Adele.

Adultery in Paris. Sounds familiar, right?

Now consider the fact that Sainte-Beuve isn't good looking, he's prone to weight gain and to top it all off, suffers from hypospadias, a birth defect that affords him the genitalia of both a man and a woman (as did the historical Sainte-Beuve). This androgyny allows him to pass easily for a woman when he dresses up in his mother's clothes and assumes the identity of "Charlotte" to secretly rendezvous with Adele.

There are many things that are compelling and poignant about this book. For example, the sweetness and acceptance with which Adele receives Charles Sainte-Beuve. If anything, she seems to love him more for having such a prominent feminine side; almost as if she were getting two lovers — Charles and Charlotte — instead of one. This becomes increas-



Helen Humphreys takes part in WordFest, running Oct. 11 through 16. Tickets and info at 403-237-9068 and [wordfest.com](http://wordfest.com).

ingly understandable the more one gets to know the macho and egomaniacal Victor Hugo.

Trapped between the gender stereotypes of his day, Sainte-Beuve could be both arrogant and pathetic, and I was impressed at how much I grew to care about him anyway.

The book is written as a series of first-person entries: journals, letters and random musings by Charles Sainte-Beuve, Adele and Dede, one of Adele's daughters, who was living her own troubled romance. Most of the story is narrated in the present tense, which lends the prose a certain immediacy, but then, inexplicably, Humphreys will switch to the past tense. Some might find this irritating or confusing.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention another exciting "character" in the book: 19th-century Paris. Humphreys paints a vivid picture of the times, filled with snippets of gossip as

various works of literature we now consider the classics were being published, critiqued and gossiped about.

I was also moved by the latter portion of the book where we read Dede's struggles to keep her sanity in the shadow of her father's monstrous ego and her own failed romance. In a way, Dede's experiences helped clarify some of the choices her mother made; choices in an era that left women with few options.

Be warned: This is a novel that's authentic to the point of feeling raw. The diary style of the book allows for a warts-and-all disclosure of the characters' lives. As well, much as in real life, each character's consciousness tends to flit from one subject to the next without necessarily lingering too long in one place. People accustomed to the more epic portrayals of historical fiction may find this unsatisfying, but it felt real to me.

I do have a few minor quibbles with the book, however. I rather wish that Sainte-Beuve's friendship with George Sand, a female novelist who defied convention by dressing in men's clothing, had been covered in more depth. Especially because the parallels between them, like those between Adele and Dede, are almost poetic.

And one puzzling error: On Page 175, Sainte-Beuve is annoyed with Marcel Proust's take that art can transcend the man. But Charles Sainte-Beuve died in 1869 and Proust wasn't born till 1871. So how could Sainte-Beuve have read his essays? Was it simply an error or did Humphreys mean to give Sainte-Beuve a sort of omniscient voice to speak with readers? I suspect the former.

The Reinvention of Love is witty and poignant, and you're willing to drop some of your assumptions about how historical fiction should feel, I think you'll enjoy it.