

# Cardiac Arrest

Andy Medhurst, on the way to his letter-box, wonders whether Valentine's Day is a Good Thing

It happens every January. Shop windows that had been full of robins and parcels and aerosol snow suddenly sprout hearts - paper hearts, plastic hearts, inflatable hearts. The whole cardiac carnival signals that the first big post-Christmas festival of spending is on the way.

Valentine's day has indistinct origins in pre-Christian early spring festivals which celebrated the beginning of the end of winter and the regeneration of the natural cycle of growth and fertility. It was the period when the birds began to mate and the sap began to rise. Now it's sappy in quite a different sense - it's all pink icing and froth and teddy bears, an iconography of infantilism.

It was the mid-Victorian period which saw Valentine's Day assume the form it has today. One Victorian cynic, J D Chambers, observed that it was 'a much-degenerated custom, the only observation of any note consisting merely of the sending of jocular, anonymous letters... on the first page of which is seen some ridiculous coloured caricature of the male or female figure with a few burlesque verses below.'

The introduction of the penny post was the key factor in making February 14 the busiest postal day of the year outside Christmas. Previously, the day had been marked by the upper classes demurely exchanging tokens of love while the peasants seized the chance for sanctioned debauchery. The Victorians erased the latter element: Valentine's Day can be slushy or funny, but its iconography remains curiously chaste - it's all about romantic love but it's never about sex.

This, perhaps, is why to-

day's cards have largely forsaken the human caricatures that offended Chambers in favour of animals. To walk into a greetings card shop at this time of year is to enter a menagerie of mush. All the eye can see is cuteness and cuddliness - cuddly cats, cuddly koalas, cuddly crocodiles, all decked out in hideous electric pastel shades.

There are mice in top hats, hippos on bicycles, intertwined giraffes under the caption 'Wanna Neck?' and innumerable refugees from the softer end of Disneyland. Even Garfield and Snoopy, creatures one might expect to treat the whole circus with amused disdain, come over all sappy. It's a nightmare of coy evasiveness.

Such pathological cuteness is not confined to the popular end of the market. Open the broadsheet newspapers on February 14 and you'll find the professional and caring classes engaged in a mass stampede back to the nursery. 'Heffalump loves his Mrs Tiggy winkle oodles and lots', 'Squidgy-Bum wants Nibbles to play with his dangly bits'; there's column after column of this kind of drivel.

Valentine's Day becomes the excuse for regression, for yearning after a world where losing your teddy was the biggest tragedy life could offer, a time when Nanny dished up tapioca for tea. In other words, a time when the real and painful contradictions of mature adult relationships hadn't yet begun.

The other function these baby-talk declarations of devotion have is to serve as the exact opposite of the lonely hearts ads. Where the latter plead 'I want someone', the Valentine's message boasts, 'I've got someone', which can be extended

to mean 'I'm part of a couple'. Valentine's Day, it hardly needs to be said, is an overwhelmingly heterosexual institution, and worse still it subscribes to what Richard Dyer has labelled the 'Barbara Cartland model' of heterosexuality.

Like Barbara, Valentine's Day is festooned in pink, it's the one day when heterosexuals reclaim that colour from its recent gay associations. It is possible to buy gay Valentine material, though I suspect that depends on where you live. Here in Brighton it's easy to purchase cards on which sun-tanned hunks hide their genitals with cardboard hearts, but how do they sell in Darlington or Dundee?

The media use Valentine's Day as the excuse for going overboard on romance. Famous couples appear on chat shows, side by side, daytime tv gets all broody, while in every women's magazine available there'll be a Jane Asher showing you how to bake a heart-shaped cake. At no other time of the year is the institution of the couple venerated to such an extent - it all adds up to a terrorism of togetherness.

Another aspect of this terror are the jokey cards, often quite cruel in their implication that you send them to people you definitely don't fancy. This targeting of the supposedly undesirable has a long history, it was common in pre-industrial villages for the local 'old maid' to receive vindictively parodic Valentine's messages. The senders rarely identify themselves, and this aspect of anonymity is the other key part of the Valentine game.

Receiving an unsigned or cryptically-coded Valentine is supposed to send the recipient into a frenzy of speculation. It's a rather giggly,



teenage activity, the sort of thing plotted in *My Guy* and parodied in *Viz*. In any case, though I suppose I risk revealing my own paranoia here, there's always the distinct possibility that the anonymous card is only meant to send you up - taking one seriously could be fatal.



So there's a streak of smugness and cruelty about Valentine's Day too, a reinforcement of the primacy of heterosexual coupledom that can simultaneously stigmatise those who are outside that institution. But this is well-hidden under the soft surface of those huge quilted

cards, those eiderdowns in envelopes that some people feel compelled to send.

If you peer through the frills, slice through the sugar and elbow your way through the canoodling koalas, Valentine's Day has one message above all others: isn't it nice to be nauseatingly normal?