Afternoon Discoveries: October 22, 2026

Romance, Women's Fiction, & Historical Fiction

AMONG THE LETTERS
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Romance, Women’s Fiction, & Historical Fiction

A young man comes home to rural Ireland in 1937 and finds his old schoolteacher keeping watch at his mother’s bedside. A frontier stepmother finds a penny that foretells her stepson’s future, and a waitress on an East Anglian island learns to float beside a swimmer who never leaves the sea. Today’s stories come from small magazines, a Toronto online journal, and a

Substack romance magazine. The back shelf brings a fifteen-year courtship in Prince Edward Island, a Seattle wife with a secret plan, and fifteen dollars well spent. Each piece asks what we owe the people we love.

All links in today's edition were checked against the linked publication, magazine, or publisher page on October 21, 2026.

Featured Discovery

The Open Door - Michael Barrington

Michael Barrington sets his quiet love story in rural Ireland in 1937, when James comes home from England to a dying mother and a father already buried. His old schoolteacher, Nollaig Clabby, has been nursing his mother every night from a cot beside her bed. Over walks along the lane, copybooks marked by hand, and evenings by the turf fire, the two circle a feeling neither will name. She is fourteen years older and wary of what he thinks he has found. Barrington writes restraint beautifully, right up to a final image of a door left open.

Read "The Open Door" at CommuterLit

The Discovery Desk

The Wheat-Sheaf Penny - Sara Houghteling

Sara Houghteling's story begins in a cabin at Little Pigeon Creek, Indiana, where Sarah stacks coins for winter and wonders how to win over her tall, serious stepson, Brahm. A travelling silhouette cutter passes through, and soon afterward a strange penny turns up, burning her palm and stamped with a bearded face and the date 1909. Sarah becomes convinced the coin is a prophecy and pours her hopes into the boy, pressing her treasured books into his hands. Readers will soon guess who he will become. It is a tender, uncanny portrait of a stepmother's love and its cost.

Read "The Wheat-Sheaf Penny" at Virginia Quarterly Review

Sea Glass Eyes - Vicky Heath

Vicky Heath's narrator, Marina, waits tables at the Neptune Hotel on a small East Anglian island and has feared the sea since she nearly drowned as a child. Every afternoon a handsome swimmer in a shimmering drysuit crosses the estuary, though nobody else on the island has seen him. Jason offers to teach her to float, and his promise of a special suit gives her the courage to wade in. His secret turns out to be tied to the day she almost drowned. Heath's playful flash romance is pure seaside fun with a fairy-tale twist.

Read "Sea Glass Eyes" at Micromance Magazine

This Could Be the Ocean - Heather Dewar

Heather Dewar's Jimmy is packing up his family's house near Lake Michigan after his father's conviction for fraud, two weeks before he

and his mother leave for California. He has skipped graduation and hidden from everyone, including Beth, the self-reliant new girl who stood by him all year. When she rings the doorbell, she wants to talk about the letter he left in her locker. Their walk along the lake becomes a gentle lesson in loving someone who cannot love you back. Dewar handles first heartbreak and family shame with real grace.

Read “This Could Be the Ocean” at The Saturday Evening Post

Do You Wanna Dance? - Sally Basmajian

Sally Basmajian’s prize-winning story opens in a hushed hospital ward, where Mary lies near the end and remembers her late husband, Joe. Money was always short in their shabby flat, yet Joe sang and danced through every lean year, once spinning around the kitchen table to the Gipsy Kings. A night out at the pub, where a younger woman borrows him for a few songs, leads to the son they had nearly stopped hoping for. Years later that son keeps vigil at Mary’s bedside. It is a warm, bittersweet tribute to a marriage set to music.

Read “Do You Wanna Dance?” at CommuterLit

Thank you for spending some time with this afternoon’s edition. Below this point are six more stories of love, marriage, and friendship, three pieces of criticism and craft, and three special recommendations from the back shelf.

Special Recommendations can be found near the bottom of the article.

More From the Discovery Desk

April 28th, in the Kitchen - Charlie Hill

Charlie Hill's short story takes place on an ordinary Saturday morning in a family kitchen, with eggs and beans on the stove and cherry blossom outside. A mother tries to rescue her daughter from dull grammar homework by raising the summer holiday, and she recalls a double rainbow on a Welsh beach. Her daughter remembers only a smelly caravan and parents who argued. The gap between their memories sets off something unexpected in the woman. Hill captures a single moment of fierce, impossible love for the people right in front of us.

Read "April 28th, in the Kitchen" at Fictive Dream

The Widows Club - Rosemary Harp

Rosemary Harp's darkly funny story follows a circle of friends in Chicago, together since childhood, who are not widows and do not want their spouses to die. They simply enjoy imagining how gracefully they would grieve. Over blackberry tart and coffee, they invent gentle, poetic exits for husbands and wives who skip the laundry and leave their imprint on the couch. Their newest recruit, refined Alissa, insists the game is terrible and then grows curious. Harp's satire of long marriage and female friendship is sharp, sly, and surprisingly tender.

Read "The Widows Club" at Pithead Chapel

All Things Mended - J. E. Dyer

J. E. Dyer's flash romance finds Nelly waiting in the kitchen of the farmhouse she has shared with Ed for forty-nine years. They have a

hard-won reservation at Reid's, the fanciest restaurant in the region, and Ed is dawdling in the bedroom. When he finally appears, he is wearing old denim coveralls covered in holes and patches. Nelly is mortified until Ed presses her hand to one of the patches and explains why he chose them. It is a sweet, funny portrait of a long marriage held together by small acts of care.

Read "All Things Mended" at Micromance Magazine

Nebraska - Francesca Cannan

Francesca Cannan's Jazz names a campus barista Nebraska after the thrift-store shirt he wears on the day they meet. Over a few visits he draws swans and flowers in her lattes and admires her geometry joke T-shirt, and then one day he is simply gone. Months later, on a snowy walk across the green, she slips and looks up into familiar brown eyes. He owes her a coffee, he says, for leaving without saying goodbye. Cannan's light meet-cute is a cozy winter treat about noticing the people who notice us.

Read "Nebraska" at Micromance Magazine

Wild Garlic Season - Susannah Atkinson

Susannah Atkinson begins with two seventeen-year-olds on Selsley Common making a pact to travel the world together at twenty-eight. Ten years of commutes, nursery runs, and missed calls later, Nell turns up soaked on Lina's London doorstep with a rucksack and a hand-drawn itinerary for Stroud. Her mother is slipping away, and she needs something to look forward to. Their weekend brings wild garlic soup, a cold brook, and a pub that has lost its jukebox. Atkinson, a counsellor, lets the story close on a quieter and more honest note about grief.

Read “Wild Garlic Season” at Every Day Fiction

A Happy Landing - Sharon Frayne

Sharon Frayne sends a grumpy hot-air balloon pilot over the Rio Grande outside Santa Fe with one very difficult passenger. Gina, a teacher from Welland, Ontario, has parked where she should not and arrives with Franca, an emotional support chicken in a knitted sweater. Hank, still bitter after his divorce, has long practised throwing at one target from the air. When the balloon drifts over his old homestead, a freshly laid egg finally finds it. Frayne’s comic romance is bright, silly, and full of second chances.

Read “A Happy Landing” at CommuterLit

Beyond the First Shelf

What Counts as Historical Fiction? - Emma Darwin

Novelist Emma Darwin answers a reader’s question in her advice column for Historia, the magazine of the Historical Writers’ Association. She compares the definitions used by Margaret Atwood, the association itself, the Historical Novel Society, and the Walter Scott Prize, then asks whose lives history has tended to leave out. She also notes how the Second World War has recently earned a shelf of its own. Her sharpest point is that true historical fiction shows how hearts and minds differed,

not just haircuts and menus. It is a generous guide for readers and writers alike.

Read “What Counts as Historical Fiction?” at Historia

Historical Romance Isn’t a Costume Drama: The Era Is the Pressure System - Tasha L. Harrison

Tasha L. Harrison, who writes the Romance 101 newsletter on Substack, takes aim at historical romances that choose an era the way we choose a font. She argues that a period can work in two honest ways, as a pressure system of laws, money, and marriage markets that drives the conflict, or as rich sensory texture around characters with more modern values. Neither approach is lesser, she insists, though each makes its own promise to readers. Trouble starts when writers never decide which book they are writing. It is clear, encouraging advice for any romance writer.

Read “Historical Romance Isn’t a Costume Drama” at Romance 101

What Do We Really Mean By ‘Women’s Fiction’? - Rachel Howard

Rachel Howard was dismayed to see her debut novel, a story of family life narrated by a woman, labelled women’s fiction on early book lists. In this Literary Hub essay she gathers six pieces that helped her think through how books get gendered. Her list includes Catherine Nichols querying agents under a man’s name, Meg Wolitzer on the second shelf, and Elena Ferrante on authorship and anonymity. Howard is frank about the dread the label caused and hopeful that writers can find freedom anyway. It remains a useful reading list on a label that still divides readers.

Read “What Do We Really Mean By ‘Women’s Fiction’?” at Literary Hub

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Special Recommendations

Mrs. Spring Fragrance - Sui Sin Far

Sui Sin Far, the pen name of Edith Maude Eaton, grew up in Montreal, and this is the title story of her 1912 collection about Chinese families in Seattle and San Francisco. Mrs. Spring Fragrance quietly helps her young neighbour Laura escape an arranged betrothal so she can marry the baseball pitcher she loves. Meanwhile her husband overhears a line of Tennyson, receives a gossiping letter, and begins to fear that his wife’s affections have strayed. Gentle comedy carries sharp observations about immigration and exclusion. The misunderstanding resolves with warmth and wit.

Read “Mrs. Spring Fragrance” at Project Gutenberg

The Hurrying of Ludovic - L. M. Montgomery

L. M. Montgomery opened Chronicles of Avonlea in 1912 with this comedy of a courtship that has lasted fifteen years. Ludovic Speed has walked down Theodora Dix’s lane twice a week all that time without ever proposing. Anne Shirley, visiting nearby on holiday, decides the slow suitor needs a push and recruits Arnold Sherman, an elderly widower from Boston, to pay Theodora some attention. Jealousy works

faster than anyone expected, right up to a dramatic moment in church. Montgomery's Prince Edward Island charm is in full bloom here.

Read "The Hurrying of Ludovic" at Project Gutenberg

A Pair of Silk Stockings - Kate Chopin

Kate Chopin published this story in Vogue in 1897. Little Mrs. Sommers finds herself with fifteen unexpected dollars and plans every cent for her children, from shoes and fabric for shirtwaists to new caps and sailor hats. Faint with hunger at a crowded department store counter, she rests her hand on a pile of silk stockings, and something in her gives way. One small indulgence leads to another, from boots and gloves to a fine lunch and a matinee. Chopin's quiet ending makes a single afternoon of pleasure feel enormous.

Read "A Pair of Silk Stockings" at Wikisource

Thank you for spending part of your day among the letters with us.

Many of today's pieces turn on small things that carry a great deal of love. A patched pair of coveralls, a swan drawn in latte foam, and a penny with a familiar face all hold more than they seem to. Others ask how long anyone should wait, whether for a proposal, a reply, or a door to open. Romance and historical fiction give that waiting a shape we can hold. We hope a few of these stories keep you company this evening.

I hope one of today's pieces gives you somewhere worth staying for a while.

Take care!