

Empowerment versus Oppression

Empowerment versus Oppression
Twenty First Century Views of Popular Romance
Novels

Edited by

Sally Goade



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Empowerment versus Oppression: Twenty First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels, edited by
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For my mother, Dr. Barbara Gunn,
my favorite romance coconspirator

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INTRODUCTION

SALLY GOADE

This book's title comes from the central question evident in popular romance criticism for at least the past thirty years: Are women readers (and writers) oppressed by their commitment to a narrative with an essentially patriarchal, heterosexual relationship at its center, or are they somehow empowered by their ability to create, escape to, and transform the romance narrative into a vehicle for reimagining women's freedom within relationships? In writing that question, I realize that I immediately slanted my wording toward the latter view, and that is probably because I began to analyze romance novels during my doctoral work in English in 1997, with the benefit of having the work of critics such as Janice Radway, Tania Modleski, and Kay Mussell on which to build. These critics and many others gave us theories with which to agree, tinker, and argue; even more importantly, they laid the premise that popular romance deserves a close examination, that it is a dynamic, changing genre despite (even perhaps because of) its formulaic elements, and that it is a genre to which readers are particularly important. This last focus is true in great part because notables as early as Miguel de Cervantes and Jane Austen have "diagnosed" readers, worrying about the effects of romance on the populace, but it is also true because readers sometimes cross over into being authors and critics themselves (as certainly both Cervantes and Austen did).

The nucleus of this collection is comprised of five papers presented on the Romance Fiction panels at the Southwest Texas Popular Culture and American Popular Culture Associations' annual conferences in 2004 and 2005, chaired first by Paul Fleming in 2004 and then co-chaired by Paul and me in 2005. With this exciting and varied collection of conference papers in hand, Cambridge Scholars Publishing editor Andy Nercessian then encouraged me to solicit additional submissions, which I did through an inclusive call for papers in the summer of 2005. In sifting through proposals for this collection, I kept an eye out for submissions with something new to add to the conversation about romance novels, whether it be a new perspective from a unique group of readers (we hear from readers in Hong Kong and India), an examination of a particular romance subtype (included are Christian, African-American, and Gothic novels,

as well as those set in Las Vegas and the Middle East), or a new way of presenting a critical response (here we have a romance novelist's controversial reflection, a critique of the industry as a creative enterprise, an examination of how students negotiate with romance in the classroom, and well known critics "rewriting" their favorite romances).

No matter the perspective, each contributor must at some point address the question of empowerment versus oppression, as have nearly all earlier romance novel critics and authors who have written about the genre. In part, the complexity of the question's answer depends on the definition of "romance novel" with which we are working. The term "romance" is fraught with complications and potential misunderstanding. The earliest prose works (not poetry or drama) were romances—the term "novel" that we now know so well was not coined until the eighteenth century. At that time the romance was finally defined simply because authors felt a need to distinguish it from the new form—novels. Romances were then defined as containing an element of the fantastic and novels as being more realistic and about everyday life (Reeve 111). Novels have, of course, changed considerably since they were first defined, so that now novels may contain many elements of the original romance genre, including the supernatural, fantasy, magic, and even time travel. In his definition of romance for *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, Brian Attebery states that when romance "is used to identify particular kinds of literature it is usually part of a compound." "Women's romance," "western romance," and "scientific romance" are all usable compounds, and each can then be referred to as a genre on its own terms even while all share the general generic label of romance. Attebery notes that "some critics use this trend as an excuse to bump 'romance' up a level from genre to mode" (820). Attebery's discomfort with calling romance a mode and labeling its variations as genres may well be a reaction to the practice of drawing strict lines between forms of romance.

Many categories ("genres" or "sub-genres") of popular fiction, including mystery, science fiction, and fantasy, are offshoots of the big romance genre. What most people call "romance novels" represent one more genre within a genre. These are novels written primarily for women by women, and they focus on the developing relationship of one man and one woman (homosexual romances are a newer innovation and still focus on one monogamous couple). Romance novels are also marked by a convention that harks back to Greek and Shakespearean comedies—the "happy ending" in marriage or betrothal. In her 2003 book, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Pamela Regis gives a comprehensive description of key elements, such as the happy ending, and her work builds on earlier descriptions of romance "formula," notably those of Janice Radway and John Cawelti (an early mentor of Kay Mussell). Regis makes an intriguing observation that marriage, often thought to be *the* happy

ending for romance, may actually come at any point in the narrative. According to Regis, betrothal—the admission of committed love—and freedom for the heroine through her relationship to the hero are the culmination of the romance plot, no matter when legal marriage occurs in the narrative (30). For novelists such as Diana Gabaldon (the *Outlander* series), who write multiple books in a series focused on the same couple, unavoidable separation and ecstatic rejoining can serve the “betrothal” element. Northrup Frye calls this separation of the committed couple the “Penelope motif,” coined for Ulysses and Penelope’s long-awaited reunion in *The Odyssey* (Frye 80). Variations such as the use of long-term marriage and even interesting, complex storylines for other characters can blur the lines between the romance novel and other literature. However, Cawelti’s 1976 description of a focus on the developing relationship and a “moral fantasy” in which the love between hero and heroine overcomes all obstacles still rests at the core of other definitions (Cawelti 40-42).

Add to the potential confusion over the romance genre that the literary time periods in England from approximately 1785 to 1830 and in North America from approximately 1830 to 1865 are called Romantic Periods, that the philosophy springing from these periods is called “Romanticism,” and that popular media has its own Valentine’s Day version of “romance,” and it is easy to see why the term nearly always requires explanation. At a recent talk on romance given to a group of professors from several disciplines, I began by asking them who among them had ever read a romance novel. Only about three of the twenty-five raised their hands. When I asked if any had read Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, the hands came up, but so did the surprised expressions, for surely these great classics could not be considered “romance novels.” Indeed Frye, in his analysis of romance (*The Secular Scripture*), notes that while Austen critiques the romance narrative (and thus helps to transform it), she is also very careful that the right heroine ends up with the right hero in the end, satisfying the romance reader even as the reader feels herself a little above the typical narrative (39-40). Similarly, to romance readers who like to feel a little above the average consumer, a contemporary author such as Gabaldon, who has scoffed a bit at romance novels on her website and playfully alludes to the genre’s stereotypes in her novels, still keeps the story focused on the central hero and heroine, making sure that they are either reunited or that the stage is set for reunion at the end of each novel.

Literary critics have long studied the big romance genre and all of its offshoots. However, for centuries and particularly with an early twentieth century preference for realistic literature, precursors of the modern romance novel have been seen as somehow less than other literature. Robert Scholes has identified this distinction as one between “literature” and “non-literature,” and he calls it an “invidious distinction,” a construction of difference that stems

from an artificial hierarchy in the discipline of English that reinforces the schism readers sometimes feel between what they learn in the classroom and what they enjoy in their personal lives (5). Interestingly, in online and group discussions among romance readers, the readers will often distinguish “their” genre from “literary fiction,” reinforcing the difference (even though most continue to read in both categories) with the kind of distinction that Radway describes in an early article on Book-of-the-Month Club editors’ choices between “serious fiction” and more “popular” choices (527-28). The connections between canonical romance (those works accepted as “classics”) and popular romance novels have been repeatedly noted, however, in overviews given by romance critics such as Modleski (*Loving with a Vengeance* 15) and Mussell (*Fantasy and Reconciliation* 8), and extended in more depth by Regis’s 2003 study.

Within the essays collected here, critics give varying degrees of credence to the idea that what they are analyzing may not be seen as literature; however, one of the gifts given to us by earlier critics is that the value of examining romance, its variations, and its effects no longer has to be rationalized for several pages in every critique before the critic feels justified in continuing. Within this collection, Glen Thomas describes the flourishing Harlequin-Mills and Boon romance industry in Australia throughout Chapter Two; Eva Chen (Chapter Three) cites 2003 statistics showing romance novels accounting for 50% of all popular fiction sales (30); Guy Mark Foster (Chapter Eight) cites industry analysis showing annual sales of romance novels at “\$1.41 billion worldwide at the end of the last millennium” (106). Chapters written on specific types of romance (Christian, Gothic, African-American) demonstrate the vigor of the industry in that many specialized types and category lines remain ever more viable. The very popularity of romance novels serves to merit study, even if only to find out the answer to the facetious question Mussell first asked in the title of a 1982 article, “But Why Do They Read Those Things?” One of Radway’s key purposes in her 1984 book (cited by every romance critic on the planet), *Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture*, was to discover—through ethnographic study—how readers use romance novels. Modleski’s work in the same time period stressed the importance of studying romance because of the light it could shed on how women fantasize, negotiate, and function within a patriarchal society (*Loving with a Vengeance* 112-14).

These critics, along with many others, established the question that still resonates in this book’s title. Radway and Modleski, while often perceived as having markedly divergent interpretations of romance reading, actually both note oppression and empowerment for women in reading the romance. The oppression comes through a view of women’s “false consciousness” in accepting as natural a cultural narrative that keeps them static in power relations, even perpetuating the narrative themselves as writers and eager

readers (Radway 210; Modleski 113). The empowerment is described by Radway through accounts of women defiantly stealing time from their domestic chores for the novels and triumphantly identifying with strong heroines who extricate themselves from ticklish situations even while maintaining their heroes' undying admiration (93-101). While Mussell also argued for women taking a good, long look at the narrative of love conquers all that they were accepting in her early work, by 1997, she was writing the introduction to a *Paradoxa* issue on romance in which she notes remarkable innovations in the genre that also illustrate its potentially empowering effects. Mussell's observations center on two elements in the evolving romance novel: the many types that now exist (making one interpretation of romance's effects highly problematic) and the increasingly blurred lines between readers, authors, and critics, showing the influence that each group has on the others and even the ways in which individuals may affect the genre by serving in more than one position ("Where's Love Gone?" 6).

Both of the elements noted by Mussell are represented in this collection, which is framed with a first chapter by a romance author critiquing her genre and a final chapter in which notable critics try rewriting their favorite romances. Candice Proctor first came to my attention in the early summer of 2005 when a proposal she had submitted to the Romance Writers of America (RWA) publication, *Romance Writers Report (RWR)*, caused controversy on the Romance Readers Anonymous Listserv (RRA-L) to which I subscribe. Proctor describes how the controversy came to be and her response to it in her "Postscript" to the original essay, both of which are published here as Chapter One. The essay was not published by *RWA*, but it did appear on Proctor's website. Proctor's approach in "Why We Don't Get No Respect" is to put some of the responsibility for the genre's reputation with the general public on to the authors. Intrigued by Proctor's entertaining and direct essay when she submitted it, I decided that it was my "editorial duty" to read one or two of Proctor's romance novels as well. Six novels later, I have to admit that Proctor's novels have a new fan, and I have even included one of the romances (along with Proctor's essay) in the 2006 rendition of the Women's Romance Fiction course I teach. Proctor's website gives details on the seven romance novels she has published, as well as the new "mystery/thriller" novels that she has now begun to publish under the name C. S. Harris.

In response to what he sees as a "dead end" in textual studies of romance, Glen Thomas has focused his attention on the business of romance and within that business, the creativity possible. In Chapter Two, "Romance: The Perfect Creative Industry? A Case Study of Harlequin-Mills and Boon Australia," Thomas examines the production and consumption of romance novels, with particular attention to how the industry has flourished in Australia, where he is a

professor at the Queensland University of Technology. While Thomas sheds light on the often-neglected marketing and production elements of popular romance, his study also highlights the interactive nature of production and consumption, the effect that readers and their interests actually have on the genre.

Thomas's study of the Australian romance industry is only the first of four chapters that lend an international perspective to this collection. Chapter Three is Eva Y. I. Chen's analysis of pleasure in the romance. Working from her position as an English professor at the National Cheng-Chi University in Taipei, Taiwan, Chen traces the complex progression of pleasure as a concept in romance criticism. Her comprehensive overview and detailed analysis identify pleasure as originally a concept linked to oppression (the "opiate" of the people) and then a concept that has swung perhaps excessively toward empowerment, as "a concept standing for reader's agency that is divorced from power politics and textual control" (31). As with the concepts of oppression and empowerment themselves, one of the implications of Chen's study is that pleasure can never be identified as only one idea.

For the reader moving through this collection in order, Chapters One through Three will give a representative sample of varying perspectives, and Chapter Four will offer the first study of a specific type. While Emily A. Haddad is examining the trope of captivity specifically in Harlequin "sheikh novels," she brings to bear many earlier analyses of captivity in romance. Reading her work enhanced my own understanding of the inverted captivity narratives in romances with Native American heroes, a motif I had first seen described by Kate McCafferty in a 1994 *Journal of Popular Culture* article. However, in addition to shedding light on the function of captivity in romance narratives, Haddad's chapter is also a striking example of what Chen calls the impossibility of "divorc[ing]" romance from "the cultural and political" (Chen 39). Haddad asks this key question:

If Harlequins can make heterosexual women feel better about their relations with men, could they not also make white, western women (Harlequin's primary readership) feel better about inter-cultural or inter-ethnic relations? (53-54)

To answer this question, Haddad analyzes changes in the way the captivity trope is enacted in novels published since the beginning of the United States-Iraq war in March 2003. The result is a fascinating glimpse at how fantasy can collide with and be irrevocably changed by reality; it is also an unflinching look at the racial stereotypes that can so often underlie fantasies of exotic danger.

Chapters Five and Six address a different kind of danger in romance, the realization of the Gothic in film and literature. In "Derailed by Detail: DuMaurier, Hitchcock, and *Rebecca*" (Chapter Five), Andrea Austin examines

the famous film based on the 1938 novel that spawned the twentieth-century reincarnation of the Gothic novel, a form that had first reached great popularity in the eighteenth century. Austin's discussion of the conflict Hitchcock felt in making the film goes to the heart of what often characterizes the romance genre as "feminine," showing that "the film presents a counter-aesthetics, working feverishly to contain and neutralize the feminine agency of the detail" (71). In her 1995 *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, Anne Williams contends that there are overlapping and yet separate masculine and feminine forms of the Gothic (1), and Austin's chapter gives us a comprehensive analysis of how these two may converge.

The "Gothic revival" (as Modleski called it) that began with *Rebecca* and was critiqued mercilessly by critics such as Joanna Russ ("Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband") seemed to die out with the advent of the popular historical romance in the 1970s and 1980s, novels that provided several alternatives to category romance. Deborah Lutz's "The Haunted Space of the Mind: The Revival of the Gothic Romance in the 21st Century" details a later emergence of the Gothic romance in the genre's most recent novels. Lutz has a 2006 book in which she focuses attention on the lover-villain-Byronic hero figure in romance (*The Dangerous Lover: Gothic Villains, Byronism, and the Nineteenth-Century Seduction Narrative*), and her thorough knowledge of the most modern Gothic's roots in earlier literature gives her study a depth that readers will find most valuable.

From the Gothic, we move to an entirely different romance novel type with Chapter Seven, Rebecca Barrett-Fox's "Hope, Faith, and Toughness: An Analysis of the Christian Hero." Christian novels would seem to be the perfect alternative for Christian readers who want narratives that combine their religious beliefs with romance and that they can trust to be sexually conservative. Indeed, demand for the novels is great enough that Barrett-Fox describes them as part of "an entire industry" that has built up around them, although interestingly, it is one "devoted to defining, clarifying, protecting, nurturing, defending, promoting, and teaching biblical masculinity" (93). A fascinating element of this chapter is the argument *against* the books from several Christian sources, and the argument echoes non-religious protests against romance readers lost in fantasy, not appreciating reality nor working as hard as possible to make reality the best it can be. Barrett-Fox gives these arguments a thorough airing, but her conclusion is a fascinating one, involving the possibility for transformation through the novels, not only for women, but for definitions of masculinity as well.

In Chapter Eight, Guy Mark Foster examines the fast-growing African-American romance novel, looking particularly at black women authors who portray inter-racial relationships in which the heroine is black and the hero

white. Noting that industry “figures suggest that black women have been readers of popular romances since the genre first emerged with the appearance of Harlequin in the late 1940s,” Foster explores ways in which those readers have had to negotiate with the texts in order to take pleasure in a narrative with a white couple, particularly a white hero, at its center (106). While romance novels in which heroes and heroines are both black now flourish, one of the negotiations black readers have made is to envision romance with inter-racial overtones, a psychological move that brings longstanding conflict into play, especially for politically aware black women who struggle with white men’s role in the historical past. Noting that “the subject of contemporary black women’s sexual relationship to white men largely comprises an unmapped terrain within the mainstream African American literary canon” (125), Foster describes the ways in which several African American romance authors are boldly creating their own maps.

Chapters Nine and Ten both address a connection between India and the popular romance, but they do so in very different ways. In “I find some Hindu practices, like burning widows, utterly bizarre”: Representations of Sati and Questions of Choice in *Veils of Silk*,” Maura Seale uses textual analysis of a Mary Jo Putney novel as a starting place to reveal “the racial and imperial politics of the romance genre” that “have not received much scholarly attention” (132). As Haddad examines the political and cultural underpinnings of exotic danger fantasies in Middle Eastern captivity narratives, so Seale examines the stereotypes and seductive views of otherness that underlie fantasies of Indian life. Seale’s description of sati and of a Putney novel heroine’s “choice” to run from the pyre at her husband’s death invokes an impression of false independence, one the heroine definitely exercises in the novel but one that is dependent on a stereotypical view of cultural practice. In contrast, Jayashree Kamble approaches romance novels from the perspective of how they may help Indian women to break through gender stereotypes and cultural constraints. In Chapter Ten (“Female Enfranchisement and the Popular Romance: Employing an Indian Perspective”), Kamble uses results from a survey she conducted of romance readers in India, as well as textual analysis and her own experience as an Indian woman, to show how romance reading may indeed open a broader world of individual choice.

Amy Lee takes still another approach in drawing the parallel between a culture of readers and the texts themselves in Chapter Eleven, “Forming a Local Identity: Romance Novels in Hong Kong.” She views romance as a reflection of Hong Kong’s history, particularly in the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries, showing that “the evolution of the romance novel in Hong Kong reflects quite accurately the change of attitude towards gender identity” (174). Lee’s analysis is thorough in its presentation of history and of popular

literature's progression within that history. Writing as a part of the bilingual and hybrid culture of Hong Kong, Lee's familiarity with Hong Kong culture gives her an important vantage point, and her examination of how romanticized fantasy of urban life and changing mores reflect the culture highlights the ways in which popular culture and texts may parallel each other in many venues.

One unexpected venue is the American iconic city of Las Vegas, Nevada, and in Chapter Twelve ("City of Fantasy: Romance Novels in Las Vegas") Eva Stowers gives us a lighthearted and perceptive glimpse into how the public's perception of Las Vegas is reflected in the many romance novels set in that glittering city. A Nevada native myself, I am especially intrigued by the increasing attention that Stowers notes the authors now give to the desert landscape of their setting, moving perhaps a little beyond the glitz and fantasy of the casino world.

Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen conclude the collection by exploring the responses of two unique and important groups of romance readers. "Understanding the Pleasure: An Undergraduate Romance Reading Community" (Chapter Thirteen) is my description of the ways in which students in my "Women's Romance Fiction" course negotiate with the romance narrative. Some of the students taking the course, which originated at a women's college, have entered without believing that they will ever truly be romance readers. They have entered out of curiosity, for a needed requirement, or because they want to understand the romance's appeal. Others are romance readers already or discover quickly that they enjoy the texts immensely, and so they appreciate the class as a way to understand their own attraction and somehow make it feel legitimate academically. All of these students negotiate with a variety of texts as they balance their attraction or aversion to romance with what they learn about the popular genre's connection to the literary canon. A sample syllabus for the course is attached as a chapter appendix.

Chapter Fourteen is the exciting culmination of a doctoral project that promises to go much further in book form. Mary Beth Tegan began with an idea to have well known romance critics revisit their favorite works from the genre, "revising" their storylines. "Becoming Both Poet and Poem: Feminists Repossess the Romance" is the result. The participating critics include Modleski, Mussell, Jan Cohn, Nancy K. Miller, Theresa Gregor, Slyia Kelso, Pat Koski, and several others, including Tegan herself. Some chose to revise canonical classics (*Jane Eyre* and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* are among them), while others chose contemporary romances. We are given a sample of each critic's approach to revising romance, as well as thoughtful commentary from Tegan, who honestly analyzes the effects of the parameters and process she set up for the project as well as the project's ultimate results. In the end, Tegan invites other romance analysts to help her extend the chapter as

she completes her upcoming book, to join her and the participating critics in “collapsing further the distinction between critic and reader, subject and object” (273).

Tegan’s chapter and much of the collection speak to the blurred lines between author, critic, and reader that Mussell described in 1997, one of the elements that would point to the power of readers to help transform the genre from within. In the end, though this book’s title accurately describes the question that haunts each study of romance’s relationship with its readers, inevitably we have created a false dichotomy. For as even a healthy romantic relationship will both empower and constrain a woman (and her partner), in striking a bargain with the romance narrative, women romance readers are simultaneously bound to a patriarchal system and emboldened by their own choice and creativity within that system. As individual readers very often grow, change their tastes, and demand innovation in the books they enjoy, so individual critics and criticism itself also grow and stretch, moving beyond first observations to note innovations in the genre and their effects. It is important that those of us published here not suddenly proclaim ourselves as the “new” voices of romance criticism and as such, somehow discreetly separate from earlier “feminist” critics. By definition, those of us interested in and analyzing women’s texts are practicing feminist criticism, and we are building on and benefiting from earlier writers who brought popular romance into the critical light. Lawrence Grossberg has said that empowerment and exploitation of the consumer can be simultaneous (7). For romance readers, critics, and even authors, the key may well be continued awareness of both possibilities.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ROMANCE GENRE BLUES OR WHY WE DON'T GET NO RESPECT

CANDICE PROCTOR

Being a romance writer who reinvents yourself as a mystery and thriller writer is a bit like being a man in drag: people perceive you differently, treat you differently, and genuinely believe you are different.

When I began my new Regency-era mystery series and people would ask me what kinds of books I wrote, I would still answer, “historical romances.” But once I actually sold *What Angels Fear*, I would occasionally say, “mysteries.” Well, instead of sly smirks and condescending *oh*'s, suddenly I was getting widened eyes and admiring gushes. I will admit, initially it was gratifying. Ah, respect at last. Then I started getting pissed.

As a former history professor who has spent a sizable chunk of her life moving around the world, I have always brought a carefully researched sense of time and place to my novels. My romances are just as meticulously plotted and contain the same well-developed characters as my mysteries and thrillers. Yet my romances—despite their hefty advances and starred *Publishers Weekly* reviews—are seen as being less worthy of respect than my hardcover mystery. Why?

In the process of preparing for my new career as a mystery/thriller writer, I slogged my way through literally hundreds of poorly written *New York Times* (*NYT*) bestselling mysteries and thrillers. I encountered cardboard characters, leaky contrived plots, and whopping historical and factual errors. Yes, there are some embarrassingly awful romance writers hitting the *NYT*. But they are no worse than the hack thriller writers, derivative fantasy gurus, and franchised suspense Names who for some reason are accorded more respect. In pondering this phenomenon, I have identified eight possible explanations, some easily dismissed, others more telling.

Romances are formulaic

This explanation—although often advanced—is just plain silly. All genre fiction is formulaic by definition. In fact, nothing is more formulaic than a mystery, and thrillers aren't that far behind. Yet for some reason, romances are criticized for being formulaic when other genres are not.

True, the mating dance ritual tends to follow the same steps, and the Kama Sutra delineated the various ways to make love hundreds of years ago. But then, there are also only so many ways to kill (everything else is just embellishment), and when it comes to motives, they can all be reduced to the standard four: money, revenge, love/lust, and fear. As for another international conspiracy/terrorist attack/plot to end the world? Please.

Readers like to think they're learning something from their fiction

For many readers, fiction is Education Lite. Novels with pathologist protagonists contain all sorts of juicy tidbits about forensic science; legal thrillers teach the curious about the law, while political thrillers give them a peek at the nasty inside maneuverings of our government. What do romances teach?

Well, some women read historical romances to learn about history. Unfortunately, while some historical romance writers, such as Laura Kinsale and LaVyrle Spencer, are meticulous in their research, far too many treat their books like adult versions of playing dress ups. As a result, readers seriously interested in history are more likely to go to historical mysteries or straight historicals.

What romances really have to teach are emotional lessons about love: how to tell a good man from a bad one, the importance of honesty in a relationship, the value of trust. These are worthy lessons. Unfortunately, the inescapable reality is that emotions are not valued very highly in our society, probably because they are of more interest to women than men (see #4 below). Then there is the fact that while not too many readers have committed murder or plotted to end the world, most have fallen in love and had sex. It's one of the reasons romances traditionally had their greatest appeal among the young (I'm not going to touch the reasons why today's teenagers seem to prefer fantasy over romance).

There are also those who would argue that some of these "love lessons" are not particularly well taught. True, we have moved on from the days when romance heroes routinely raped their heroines and—instead of being castrated, jailed, or at the very least jilted—were forgiven simply because they acted on the mistaken assumption that the women involved were no longer "pure." But

all too many romance heroes are still sulky, bad-tempered, borderline abusive men who are miraculously redeemed by the love of a good woman. I don't know about you, but that's one lesson I don't want my daughters to learn. There are enough codependent women in this world as it is.

The most popular romance writers aren't necessarily—or even usually—the best “writers,” but simply the ones who most successfully hit their readers' fantasies

This is true. But it is only slightly less true of thriller/suspense/fantasy writers.

Some of today's successful thriller/suspense/fantasy writers create wonderful characters, write riveting dialogue, and have a memorable way with words. They are rare. Most of the genre writers hitting the *NYT* today are there because their pacing is nicely modeled to appeal to an audience weaned on television, or because they came up with a really, really clever high concept (even if it was badly executed).

Who hasn't read the hyper successful thriller writer who resorts to the laughable tactic of having both his protagonist and his antagonist gaze at their reflections in order to describe them, who regularly stops his story's action for a series of information dumps clumsily framed as flashbacks, and makes so many historical and factual errors that he has spawned a small industry devoted to detailing his best howlers? At the moment, I am listening to the audiotape of a book by a hugely successful male writer of non-happily-ever-after love stories. His point of view bounces around like the proverbial ping pong ball, there isn't a hint of conflict anywhere (let alone on every page), and he spent the entire first half of his book presenting his main characters' backstories in a narrative that would have put me to sleep if I hadn't been counting reps. The fantasy he's writing to? That it's never too late to find true love (even if the characters must ultimately lose out in order to maintain the author's claim to pseudo-literary status).

While many people do not like to admit it, the fact remains that all genre writing is about satisfying readers' fantasies. Some of these fantasies are easy to spot: No matter how bad things look, a hero will save the world from destruction. A clever detective can and will catch each and every killer. Good always triumphs over Evil.

Other fantasies are admittedly subtler. My husband recently read three mysteries in a row, each by a different (male) writer, in which the protagonists were all laughably the same: a middle-aged male, happily free from the demands of any and all dependent females and living a Huck Finn-type life in a

cabin in the Everglades/on a boat in the Caribbean/in a Florida marina. Everyone see the secondary fantasy at work here?

It has been suggested that one of the reasons sales of traditional romances (as opposed to, for instance, chick lit or romantic suspense) have flattened lately may be because the fantasy that romance writers are selling—the idea that love is the most important thing in the world, and that a woman can find lasting happiness in the arms of one man—simply isn't as widely held as it once was. Of course that still does not explain why female fantasies are ridiculed when male fantasies are not. Except, is this common assumption really true?

The first time I visited my friendly neighborhood used bookstore, I was stunned to wander into a room labeled Men's Fiction. Here was a genre I didn't even know existed: books about gritty, macho men fighting wars, riding the range, breaking all the rules as soldiers of fortune. I have recently come to know one of those writers, and he is very good (he even ghost wrote five books for a bestselling romance writer who shall remain nameless). I have never heard the authors of these books complain about their lack of recognition and respect. They know that what they're writing appeals only to their target audience, they know why, and they accept it.

It's the patriarchy's fault

This rationale goes something like this: romances are despised because these are books written by women and for women, and things related to women are always despised in patriarchal societies such as ours. This argument is the darling of academics and women's studies-types (as a card-carrying feminist who authored a scholarly book on attitudes toward gender discrimination in Revolutionary France, I can say that).

Yes, it is true that women are still what Simone de Beauvoir called "le deuxieme sex." We are still scantily represented in the US Congress. Professions dominated by women (whether secretaries in the US or doctors in the old USSR) are still underpaid and lacking in prestige. But while all that doubtless plays a part, it is also a convenient excuse that can all too easily keep us from engaging in the kind of soul-searching we need to be doing.

Think about this: Anne Rice, J. K. Rowling, Sue Grafton, and Sue Monk Kidd are all women writers. While Rice and Rowling appeal equally to both genders, I suspect that a hefty majority of those reading Grafton and Kidd are women. Yet their books are not despised as being written by women and for women.

The romance genre rewards quantity over quality

Many romance writers churn out three, six, even ten books a year. I use the expression *churn out* deliberately. While there are some rare, gifted authors who can write wonderful stories in clear, insightful prose at an astonishing pace, most such books are frankly abysmal (although some could have been wonderful if their authors had spent another six to nine months writing them).

This is a genre where advertising budgets are small and name recognition is therefore very important. The more books an author produces, the better known she becomes, and the more books she sells. Hey, presto, she's on the bestseller lists. If all a reader wants is to mainline her fantasy fix, I guess that's all right. But is it really so surprising when other people look at these books and label them "trash"?

By focusing on the tastes of "hardcore" romance readers, the genre narrowed itself down to the extent that a potentially broader readership has been lost

This is an interesting hypothesis.

Look at the way mysteries have expanded in the last thirty years. Where once we had mainly British manor house whodunits and hardboiled American private detectives, we now have police procedurals, historical mysteries, cozies, serial killer suspenses, etc, etc, etc.

What happened with the romance genre during the same period? The opposite. From the diversity of the early years, romances narrowed down to the point that not long ago a major house announced that their historical romance authors would only be allowed to set books in Regency or Victorian England, or Scotland. If you didn't want to write contemporary romantic comedies, romantic suspense, or pseudo-historical, sexy romps with Regency dukes or men in kilts, you were pretty much out of luck. True, things do seem to be getting better. As romance imprints watch their share of the market dip, they are scrambling to try to attract new readers. But it's going to take the industry a long time to live down the bride/secret baby/cowboy/Navy SEAL stereotype. Like the old bodice ripper tradition that still plagues us, this is something we did to ourselves.

It's because of the sex

This is a touchy one. Not all romances even have sex. Besides, why should romances be the only books despised for their steamy sex? Other genres have sex too, right?

I have this theory that a big part of the appeal of serial killer novels is the illicit thrill some people get from reading about kinky, deviant sex. I know, I know: everyone who reads them says they like finding out how serial killers think (see *Education Lite*). Except that Charles Gramlich, a friend of mine who not only writes horror and fantasy but also happens to be a professor of psychology at Xavier University, says that the portrayals of serial killers in most suspense books are way, way off base. And is it really a coincidence that as serial killer books have waned in general popularity, the genre has found a new home amongst romance writers now writing romantic suspense?

A few years ago, when some of the better selling romance writers started toning down the sex in their books in an attempt to go mainstream (and acquire more “respect”), readers became downright angry. Some savvy new writers, all too eager to fill their books with explicit, repetitive sex scenes, saw their sales shoot up high enough to land them on the *NYT*.

Romance writers tend to get really, really irate when people accuse them of writing pornography for women. We think of pornography as something exploitative and dehumanizing, we think of *Hustler*, we think of *men's* pornography. That isn't what turns women on. Women are turned on by Rhett sweeping Scarlett up into his arms and snarling, “Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.” Women are turned on by...romance. And we know it.

Look at the way we promote our genre and ourselves

Intrigued by the skyrocketing popularity of a newish fantasy writer, I recently pulled one of her books off the shelf in my local bookstore, opened it at random, and found myself reading a graphic description of three people engaged in a sex sandwich. Nothing I had read about this author even hinted at the blatant erotica in her books. (And here I thought she was making the *NYT* because she was a good writer!)

Now we all know that kinky sex is a big, big part of why that author's books are selling so well. But she has somehow managed to escape the snide winking and smirking directed at romance writers. How?

Because she doesn't use sex and pink hearts to market her books.

You know what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the cheesy covers that still appear all too often: the traditional torrid clench, or the newer ones featuring a bare-chested male model (usually headless, for some bizarre reason) posed with his hand dangling strategically, suggestively, near his crotch (I am indebted to Monica Jackson for her hilarious blog, “Got coochy for that hint o' dick?”). I'm talking about the male model contests and the authors who promote themselves by handing out red garters and chocolate body sauce. And

then there are the authors' websites that scream, "Sizzling Sensuality! Hot Heroes!"

Why do we do this to ourselves? Because this embarrassing kind of nonsense helps sell the books. We might hate to admit it, but the fact remains that many women read our books as much for the sexual titillation as for the romance, and we know it.

Don't get me wrong: I enjoy sex every bit as much as the next person. I have no moral or religious objections to healthy erotic representations of human sexuality in art, print, or film. But since I'm no longer thirteen, I admit I find it beyond boring to read about the sex act in repetitive, excruciating, gratuitous detail, while lurid purple prose makes me want to cringe.

Like it or not, things like pink feather boas, life-sized, cardboard cutouts of the Topaz man, and ridiculously clichéd titles taint the image of the entire genre. All those red garters and hint o' dick covers may help boost individual print runs, but at what price? As long as the industry indulges in this kind of nonsense and encourages quantity over quality, respect will remain illusive. We can either change that, or embrace it and just quit whining.

Postscript

When the above essay appeared on my website in July of 2005, I heard from numerous romance writers and readers, some from as far away as Australia and Europe. Most welcomed the essay's analysis and responded positively to its conclusions. But a significant minority reacted with near hysteria to one of their "own" breaking ranks and failing to recite the officially sanctioned line as recently articulated in a series of articles in the *Romance Writers Report*—i.e., romances are fabulous stories with wonderful characters and positive messages of empowerment and commitment created by some of the best writers writing. I was accused of everything from arrogance and condescension to having no love for the genre, despising happy endings, scorning sex scenes, and even disliking pink. Curiously enough, it was the suggestion that a romance's success depends mainly on how well it does or does not satisfy its readers' fantasies that aroused some of the most emotional reactions.

Whether we like it or not, modern genre fiction typically fails or succeeds commercially not so much because of the "quality" of its writing (by which I mean vivid characterizations, graceful use of prose, avoidance of clichés, etc) but because of the extent to which it plugs into reader fantasies. Those of us who are in this business as a business rather than as a hobby like to see ourselves as professionals, and part of being a professional is learning to take long, realistic looks at our business.

Yes, the romance industry gets some undeservedly bad press; there are some incredibly bright, talented women in the genre who write graceful, emotionally rewarding stories. But we do ourselves a severe disservice if we continue to tell ourselves and each other that what we have here is simply an image problem based on blind prejudice. There appears to be a common but oddly naïve belief among romance writers that if we could just reeducate the public and get them to actually read our books, then everyone would see that they were wrong about the genre. In fact, many of the complaints I examine in my essay come from women who read our books—or who used to.

As an historian, I have been trained to analyze. The general public's perception of the romance genre comes from something, and those with the genre's best interests at heart would do well to listen to what our critics are saying rather than simply dismissing their comments out of hand. Much of the public's perception of our industry comes from the titles, the covers, the prose, the way we promote ourselves, the things we write about and the way we write about them. The dilemma is that these are the same things that help sell our product to our most dedicated readers and may not even be things we want to change.

Titles and covers are mostly—although not entirely—out of writers' control; the other issues are not. Our genre has been enormously successful in the past. It recently went through a severe crisis and is now, it seems, emerging as something quite different. Can't we have a frank, adult conversation about where we go from here and how we get there?

Candice Proctor

Candice Proctor graduated Phi Beta Kappa, summa cum laude with a degree in Classics before going on to earn an MA and PhD. in history. A former academic, she has taught at the University of Idaho and Midwestern State University in Texas. She also worked as an archaeologist on a variety of sites, including a Hudson's Bay Company Fort in San Juan Island; a Cherokee village in Tennessee; a prehistoric kill site in Victoria, Australia; and a Roman cemetery and medieval manor house in Winchester, England. Most recently, she spent many years as a partner in an international business consulting firm. Her publications include seven historical romances, the Sebastian St. Cyr Regency mystery series, and a nonfiction historical study of the French Revolution. Her novels are available worldwide and have been translated into some sixteen different languages. Proctor is also a Hurricane Katrina survivor and is currently rebuilding her home in New Orleans, Louisiana.

CHAPTER TWO

ROMANCE: THE PERFECT CREATIVE INDUSTRY? A CASE STUDY OF HARLEQUIN-MILLS AND BOON AUSTRALIA

GLEN THOMAS

This paper forms part of an ongoing project that examines romance writing, publishing, and reading in Australia as a Creative Industry. The aims of the overall project are three fold:

1. To examine the conditions of production of romance novels
2. To analyze the way in which romance fiction is consumed
3. To outline and map the romance milieu within Australia as a Creative Industry.

I have taken this approach because it is apparent that textual studies of romance fiction have, in my opinion, reached a dead end. Textual analysis of romance fiction has, over decades, shown that romance fiction is highly conservative, based upon normative views of heterosexual romance, and, in the opinion of most critics on the topic, disempowering for women. Certainly, romances have traditionally been regarded by feminist critics as a means of reinforcing sex-role stereotypes of both men and women. For example, Modleski argues that romances “inevitably increase the reader’s own psychic conflicts, thus creating an even greater dependency on the literature” (57). In the same vein, Snitow argues that romance novels “reveal and pander to [women’s] impossible fantasy life,” in that these texts depict a world of romance between men and women that is unattainable (320). Further, Snitow suggests that in romance, “the price for needing emotional intimacy is that [the heroine] must passively wait, must anxiously calculate” (320); these conclusions are