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In Defense of Romantic Fiction

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Introduction

Few people realize how much courage it takes for a woman to open a romance novel in an airplane. She knows what everyone around her will think about both her and her choice of reading material. When it comes to romance novels, society has always felt free to sit in judgment not only on the literature but on the reader herself.

—Jayne Ann Krentz

The New York Times' "Sunday Book Review" for May 1, 2009 included many Romantic Fiction novels. On the hardcover list, at number five was Amanda Quick's The Perfect Poison. Amanda Quick was also on the mass-market list at number nineteen for The Third Circle. On the mass-market list, Johanna Lindsey's No Choice But Seduction was listed at 7, which recently was reprinted in mass-market form after being in hardcover for a year. Other familiar authors were listed such as Debbie Macomber, Linda Lael Miller, Fern Michaels, Julia London, and Mary Balogh. Although these authors are being acknowledged for sales, they do not always receive the respect they deserve for raking in such numbers.

According to Publisher's Weekly, in 2007 Romantic Fiction had estimated revenues of \$1.375 billion. This enormous sales figure was generated from the over 8,090 novels published that year (Robbins). In the same year, the highest market share of book sales belonged to romance novels, far exceeding the numbers of the next highest genre: religious or inspirational book sales, which earned approximately \$819 million (RWA).

With all of this success, why does Romantic Fiction continue to be the poor stepchild or black sheep of the publishing world? Although the statistics prove that Romantic Fiction is the leading genre for sales of any type of fiction, critics have never accepted Romances as literature. In fact, society at large looks down upon the Romance novel and, in association, the Romance reader. However, the genre of Romance should be accepted, not merely tolerated as a supplement to the income of the publishers. Due to its place on top of the sales figures,

Romance far exceeds the numbers generated by any literary fiction or nonfiction effort, including that of classic literature, which earned \$466 million in 2007 (RWA).

Therefore, in order to breach the gap between Romantic Fiction and all other more respected genres of literature, one must inquire as to why Romances sell so well. What is inherently within the writing of a Romance that connects to the reader? Also, it is important to question what other factors are unique to the Romance that provides the better access to the readers as opposed to other more accepted genres of fiction. For instance, how do the availability, community, fantasy, and even the portability, of Romance novels make them stand out above and beyond its competitive markets? Looking at the success in the marketplace, the meeting of the needs of its readership, and the message that the authors are sending in these hard economic times, it is time for the publishing community to embrace the Romantic Novel as a full and equal part of the industry.

The Definition

Before taking on the monumental task of discerning the aspects that provide such ample revenue for publishers, it is important to take a step back and define exactly what a romance novel is. The most straightforward and modern definition of a Romance Novel comes from Pamela Regis's *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. "A romance novel is a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines" (19). This definition forms the primary criterion for how Romances will be distinguished in this defense. Nevertheless, Regis states directly following that "this definition is neither widely known or accepted" (19). The reason why the critics may not embrace this definition is that it encompasses a larger expanse of novels written throughout history. According to Regis, the works of Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, E.M. Forster, George Eliot, and many other famous

authors would have their “classic” works of literature redefined as Romances. Furthermore, based on the stigma that the 20th century Romance receives, no author, or author’s publisher for that matter, would want to be stripped of the distinguished air to which his or her works of fiction are entitled.

It is important to add to Regis’s simple definition the one universal element that is in every romance novel: the “happily ever after”.

Romance novels end happily. Readers insist on it. The happy ending is the one formal feature of the romance novel that virtually everyone can identify. This element is not limited to a narrow range of texts: a marriage—promised or actually dramatized—ends every romance novel. (Regis 9)

No matter how dire the present circumstance, no matter how disparaging a character’s past, somehow the Romance author will come up with a happy ending. The expectation of the reader is there, and the author has never, and will never, disappoint. As New York Times bestselling author Susan Elizabeth Phillips states, “What a comforting fantasy this is for a frazzled, overburdened, anxiety-ridden reader” (56).

The definition of the Romance genre brings about the idea that the Romance writer understands the Romance reader. Romances are produced for their readership. The readers of Romantic Fiction are looking for a book to be entertaining, even heart wrenching at times, but, in the end, the fantasy is that no matter what life will be happy. The fantasy ideal will be discussed further in the elements of Romance.

Romance Novels, A History

I wonder that the novel readers are not tired of reading one story so many times, with only the variation of its being rolled in different ways.

—Susana Rowson, a writer of sentimental novels, 1793

In A Natural History of the Romance Novel, Regis’s chapter titles embody the connection between classic literature and Romance novels. One is entitled: “The Best Romance

Novel Ever Written: Pride and Prejudice” (75); another, “The Ideal Romance Novel: A Room With a View” (99). Other studies of Romantic Fiction declare that Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë were the bestselling Romance authors of the 19th century (McKnight-Trontz 10). Based on the working definition of Romance, one would include these writers and their bodies of work as Romances. However, some may disagree with this conclusion, stating that these authors now read in schools have far more literary merit and no explicit sexual content, and therefore, should not be defined as such.

Ironically, the feminist critics are the ones that primarily censure these iconic authors as the cause for the modern patriarchal romance.

Ann Douglas, for example, holds the 19th century novels by and for women responsible for many of the evils of mass culture. [...] Harlequins can be traced back through the work of Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen to the sentimental novels of Samuel Richard. [...] Gothic romances for women [...] date back to the 18th century and the work of Anne Radcliffe. (Modleski 15)

Although the printing of mass-market paperbacks began prior to the 20th century, the Romance Novel did not grow into the larger commodity until the 1940s (McKnight-Trontz 9).

The first English language mass-market paperback was indeed a romance, Malaeska by Ann S. Stephens, published in June 1860 by Erastus and Irwin Beadle, pioneers of the dime novel. The success of this romantic tale (it sold about sixty-five thousand copies within a few months of publication) of an Indian princess was such that it helped launch a whole new genre of publishing. (10)

Amazingly, the Native American movement is still a popular portion of the Romance market.

Dorchester has a campaign coming out the Summer of 2009 called “Indian Summer,” that features Cassie Edwards, as well as newcomers wishing to live up to her iconic Native American series.

In the 1890s, pulp magazines became popular, overshadowing the hardcover and mass-market romances that were previously published (11-12). Mills & Boon, a British publishing

company founded in 1908, began publishing “sweet romances” (15). Avon published racier fare in its pocket-sized series with titles such as The Hard Boiled Virgin in 1926 (McKnight-Trontz 13). Although seemingly racy, these novels most likely do not compare with the current market of steamy novels, like Harlequin’s Blaze and Spice lines.

By the 1930s, there were a few publishers that produced mass-market novels, such as Boni, Modern Age Books, and American Mercury Books (McKnight-Trontz 12).

It was not until Robert de Graff’s Pocket Books debuted in 1939 that mass-market paperbacks and romances came of age. De Graff believed he could make a success of his paperbound, 4.25-by-6-inch “Pocket Books” by selling them like magazines [...]. By keeping production costs low (with newer, more efficient presses) and by selling hundred of thousands of copies through a well-organized distribution system, their price could be kept to just 25 cents, a bargain, even then. (12)

Even during the early part of the century, the publishers were focusing on the most convenient, portable object in which to house their fiction. After the success of Pocket Books, in 1943 publishers launched their own mass-market paperback imprints. Most of these companies are still in production today: Bantam Books, Avon, Popular Library, Dell, New American Library (McKnight-Trontz 12). It was De Graff’s system that set the stage for Romance novels to dominate the publishing industry” (Radway 27). Romance became “an entire genre of fiction was sold based on the premise that you could, in fact, tell a book by its cover” (McKnight-Trontz 9). By 1955, only a third of the mass-market paperbacks were originals. Most were reprints of hardcover fiction (McKnight-Trontz 13). Based on the evidence, although the mass-market novel was selling, the publishers did fully embrace the form, and the technology was not as functional as it could have been.

The big spark that created romance the way one would recognize it today is the creation of Harlequin in 1949. A fur trader and former mayor of Winnipeg, Richard H. G. Bonnycastle, launched a small Canadian, paperback only publisher (McKnight-Trontz 15). In its first year

Harlequin produced general fiction, educational materials, and a few romance titles. Within a few years, it became a romance specific publisher. Bonnycastle's wife, Mary, and his assistant, Ruth Palmour, aided him in the reading of manuscripts, creating of covers, and many other of the relevant tasks relating to Harlequin's list (15). The use of female employees in his company probably aided Bonnycastles' sales, seeing as women were Harlequin's target demographic.

In 1957, Harlequin began publishing Mills & Boon's romance titles under its own imprint. The first was Anne Vinton's The Hospital in Buwambo (McKnight-Trontz 15). It took until 1972 for the two companies to officially merge (McKnight-Trontz 16). Acquiring Simon & Schuster's Silhouette imprint in the 1980s, Harlequin officially became the world leading publisher of romance fiction. It still holds that distinction presently, having the highest grossing sales out of all Romances publishers and imprints in 2007 (RWA).

In the 1960s, George Delacorte Jr.'s Dell Publishing began focusing specifically on romance titles as well (McKnight-Trontz 13). This era's romances did not include any sexual activity before marriage or any extra-marital affairs, even at the infamous Harlequin. The plotlines indeed reflected the time in which they were published. "In an era before sexual liberation and the pill, romances offered female readers a taste of illicit freedom" (9). Women were still able to associate with these novels and find these Romances reflected a fantasy in which they desired to indulge in.

Just as in the past, publishers of romantic mass-market fiction were competing with magazines that shared the same readership. "Publishers became convinced that they were competing as much with magazines as with hardcover books. Consequently, paperbacks were increasingly outfitted as 'miniature magazines,' to do battle for display space" (Bonn 101). The content must remain the same, but the packaging must be made over to fulfill the demands of the

readership. The solution was to make the covers stand out against the competition—both books and magazines alike.

If there was a dependence on a set of cliché compositions—a hero and heroine who gaze longingly into each other’s eyes; a contemplative woman in the foreground with her lover milling around in the background—publishers and readers seemed not to care. (McKnight-Trontz 18).

In fact, the covers generally depicted the women’s role in society during the decade or time period they were published in. Those during WWII depicted the fantasy of a family life (18). In the 1950s, a major theme illustrated was a woman choosing between marriage and a career (19). This theme of workplace romances continued into the 1960s, where the woman’s ideal career choice was in the medicinal field (19). The female ideal was always what was depicted on the covers and within the context of the books. In this way, the authors, cover artists, and publishers, all were trying to produce the product most desired by their readership.

In the 1970s, with women’s liberation fully underway, a woman’s role in the workplace changed, and women were depicted on covers as bosses instead of secretaries and doctors rather than nurses (McKnight-Trontz 20).

“Heroines started hammering on the glass ceiling in the 1970s,” according to Harlequin editor Marsha Zinberg, “and sparks soon flew between men of the world and smart, spirited women who had every intention to building their careers.” (20)

In the early 1970s, the female empowerment movement also gave publishers reason to believe that the new candidness about sexual encounters would mean that women readers would be interested in more overt sexual descriptions.

Also at this time, there was a resurgence of the Gothic and historical romance, from the trend previous in the 1940s. Avon books published Kathleen E. Woodiwiss’ novel, The Flame and the Flower, which extended of the length of the Romance. Also, the book had less

ensorship in its subject matter straying far away from the sexist origins of romance novels (McKnight-Trontz 9). The racy subject matter in male novels was considered uncouth and too vulgar for young ladies. Now Woodiwiss has been given the title of “The Queen of Historical Romance.”

Woodiwiss broke onto the scene in 1972 with The Flame in the Flower. The book, which featured such now standard genre tropes as a historical backdrop and flashy sex scenes, was an anomaly in its day, according to her longtime publisher Avon Books, and went on to become a huge bestseller, selling over two million copies after its first four years in print. (Publisher’s Weekly)

The Historical Romance sales figures are not as popular as the paranormal genre in recent years. However, the creation of the Historical Fantasy genre has changed the balance. “Now, paranormal has cast its spell over another popular romance subgenre: historical romance. ‘Both paranormal and historical romances are easily blended with other genres, so there’s lots of cross-pollination,’ says Gina Bernal, associate editor for the romance book club Rhapsody” (Robbins). By combining subgenres that were popular, to the current bestsellers, a new subgenre that will relate to more readers is born and in effect doubling sales figures.

Although romances continued to have feminist themes of equality within the text, the harshest critics tend to be women.

Romance novels which register the highest sales figures of any genre are regularly deplored for their lack of any quality other than entertainment. They were deplored in much the same terms before the Civil War, and in even stronger words before the end of the [nineteenth] century. (Tebbel 10).

Germaine Greer, a popular feminist leader, publicly desecrated romance novels in the 1970s. Greer states that “the traits invented for [the hero in romance novels] have been invented by women choosing the chains of bondage...Such...creatures do not exist, but very young women in the astigmatism of sexual fantasy are apt to recognize them where they do not exist” (Regis 3).

Although the feminist movement at the time, and continuing to today, dislikes the idea of the Historical Romances' message to women, they continue to sell well.

Susan Elizabeth Phillips describes the popularity of this specific genre. "Virtually every historical romance writer who regularly appears on The New York Times bestseller list specializes in the tough guy hero: Catherine Coulter, Johanna Lindsey, Judith McNaught, Amanda Quick. Their success is not coincidental" (56). Although Greer and her contemporaries base their argument on the heroine's lack of power, they have yet to discuss the abilities the female protagonist does have.

I can only shake my head in bewilderment when I hear the romance novel criticized for depicting women as being submissive to domineering men. ... What is the ultimate fate of the most arrogant, domineering, ruthless macho hero any romantic writer can create? He is *tamed*. (Phillips 57-8)

During the Women's Movement specifically, this idea feuds the feminist's patriarchal argument. However, women at that time still preferred the Historical genre specifically. The modern Historical Romance was launched with the help of Woodiwiss's first work, and still remains a strong contender for the most beloved subgenre of Romantic Fiction.

From the early 1980s to the current market, romance imprints primarily focus on connecting and building a community with their audience. The former President of Harlequin, W. Lawrence Heisey, comments on this link to the audience as a major factor in the popularity of romantic fiction.

"Of greater significance is the ability to identify an audience or consuming public, the discover of a way to reach that audience, and finally, the forging of an association in the consumer's mind between a generic product like soap, facial tissue or romantic fiction and the company name through the mediation of a deliberately created image...[Harlequin] would be reluctant to publish anything that might not live up to their expectations." (McKnight-Trontz 28)

Harlequin definitely connects to its readership. Its catalogue has been published in twenty-four languages, one hundred countries, and 100 million books sold (27). The importance of understanding the reader and going out of the way to respect the readers' opinions is one of the main reasons why romances sell so well. The community element of the Romantic Fiction will be discussed further during the marketing discussion.

When discussing the 20th century Romance novel, five authors who have influenced the genre specifically are: "Georgette Heyer, Mary Stewart, Janet Dailey, before her self admitted plagiarism, Jayne Ann Krentz, and Nora Roberts" (Regis 107). Each author has been reflected on bestseller lists and received awards, and most importantly, each produced quality books.

Heyer, Stewart and Dailey, have influenced literary canon by perfecting the language and complexity of plot in their work. Jayne Ann Krentz, also known as Amanda Quick, has perfected and explored the character of the male protagonist (Regis 108). Nora Robert's "out Trollopes Trollpe" with the sheer mass of novels she has published (108). She has mastered the "perfect pitch" to ensnare the interest of the largest audience possible. Her novels are even placed in the Fiction section more often than in the Romance section in libraries and bookstores (Bouricius 37).

Each author has mastered her own specific subgenre as well, influencing those who came after her. Georgette Heyer is the master of Regencies. Mary Stewart of Suspense. Janet Dailey regenerated Western Romance. Jayne Ann Krentz's had a new infusion of the Futuristic Romance and continues to writing Historical and Historical Mysteries as Amanda Quick. As for Nora Roberts, she embodies all of the above, although has refashioned Time Travel and Crime specifically (Regis 37-8).

Themes of Romance

The world wide popularity of romance novels is testimony to the way the familiar codes are universally recognized by women as cues for their deepest thoughts, dreams, and fantasies.

—Linda Barlow

Jayne Ann Krentz has divided Romantic Fiction into seven different themes that relate to every Romance novel. These elements all relate to the readers expectations of the author.

The first thematic element of Romances is the idea of fantasy. Krentz believes that critics that set their minds against the genre because they seem to think that readers cannot discern the differentiation between reality and the fantasy in a romance (2). “Most people understand and accept the way in which fantasy works when they sit down to read Ludlum, King, McCaffery or the others” (2). There is never any doubt the differentiation between conventional writing and the compelling creation of fantasy. However, the critics seem doubtful that women can discern what a fantasy is, and whether or not it is realistic. Fantasy is an element that takes the reader out of the everyday circumstance and takes her away from the issues in her life, and opens up new experiences that the reader may not ever experience outside the realm of fiction. Why is it that young readers can discern the difference between reality and fantasy when reading the critically acclaimed Harry Potter series, but readers of Romantic Novels of an a more advanced age cannot?

Susan Elizabeth Phillips, author, describes how fantasy relates to her reading of romances, which connects to the next element—female empowerment. “The fantasy these novels offered me was one of command and control over the harum scarum events of my life—a fantasy of female empowerment” (55). The empowering or feminist element is Romance novels is often debated.

The scenes that make my heart beat faster are seldom the love scenes. Instead, my favorite scenes are always those in which the spunky heroine thrusts her chin

up in the air and lays down the law to a towering, menacing, broad-shouldered male. (Phillips 57)

According to feminist writings, Romance novels are propaganda to force women to accept their oppressed existence beneath men. The patriarchal society supposedly sets up women to enjoy the fantasy of being dominated by men.

[I]t is precisely because readers misunderstand their liking of particular stories that they can easily be persuaded to purchase tales that contribute to their continuing oppression by perpetuating a false view of their social situation. In this theory of mass culture, ideological control is thought to be all pervasive and complete as a consequence of the ubiquity of mass culture itself and of the power of the individual artifacts or texts over individuals who can do nothing but ingest them. (Radway 6)

The issue that is raised yet again is that women are incapable of being intelligent enough to discern what they read. The idea that women can be spoon-fed information and never question or comprehend what they read is more insulting to women's intelligence than the idea that the patriarchal male society is producing the Romantic Fiction. Take for example a scene from the Susan Elizabeth Phillips novel Just Imagine. In the scene, the female protagonist and her friend are conversing about their paths after facing much turmoil.

“Womanhood has been hard coming to you, I think. But then I suppose that it's hard coming to all of us. Growing up seems easier for men. Maybe because their rights of passage are clearer. [...] For women it's more confusing. We have no rights of passage. Do we become women when a man first makes love to us? If so, why do we refer to it as a loss of virginity? Doesn't the word loss imply that we were better off before? I abhor the idea that we only become women only through the physical act of a man. No, I think we become women when we learn what is important in our lives. When we learn to give and to take with a loving heart.” (347)

This statement seems much related to women's identities and could never be mistaken for society enforcing a domesticated womanhood on these clever female characters. It takes reading many romances, from different subgenres and authors, to fully understand the complex nature of the romance in influencing women's lives for the better or the worse. This concept of female

empowerment is highly sought after by the readership.

Somewhat oddly connected is the theme of the subversive nature, which corresponds to the female empowerment. Usually the female character is able to overturn the patriarchal power structure by the end of the novel. The hero usually is not marriage minded, living up to the macho male, working with his baser instincts. However, the female overturns his desires and transforms the male protagonist into the perfect gentleman. He renounces his male claim and the society that inflicts his domination over his ladylove. Secret Desires of a Gentleman by Laura Lee Guhrke is a Historical Romance that inverts societal aims in order to see to the love of the protagonists. The character of Phillip is brought up with a certain rulebook in which he cannot bring himself to do anything that would be found to be improper. What would be improper would be to marry the love of his life, Maria, a daughter of a servant. However, society does not look down at him taking a mistress. “If she were a courtesan, he could have her and be done. If she were a lady, he could marry her, have her, and be done. But she was neither, and that was the damnable part of it all” (199).

Maria ends up owning her own business and property, embracing the idea of being a female bachelor, but is still too lowly of for a Marquess’s attentions. She never allows his desire to overturn her integrity and matches his wits, blow by blow. By the end of the novel, he has forgotten his strict sense of conduct that had been instilled at him since childhood and declares his lifelong longing to Maria and his fear of not being worthy of her (Guhrke 352-3). As set forth by Krentz (5), Maria inverts the idea that the woman is socially destroyed for partaking in that which is perfectly acceptable by men—sex before marriage—is more often than not included. In the end, the woman wins which is a quality that is attractive to the readership.

The integration of the male and female is the fourth theme, and also related to those previous. The male and female protagonists exchange character and personality traits that make

it easier for the hero and heroine to have a “happy ending”—an important element of the definition of the Romance Novel. Neither completely transform into the opposite sex. Nevertheless, by going against the societal norms expected of each gender, they are able to grow individually and as a couple (Krentz 6). One example of the integration of the male and female is in the Paranormal Romance, The Magic Knot by Helen Scott Taylor. Rose and Niall have a connection through their backgrounds and some of their magical ability. However, they both have to forget about their own insecurities in order to trust each other. Niall has to learn to express himself and get over his tendency towards jealousy and embarrassment in order to connect with Rose. Rose has to find her courage and instincts before, as well as get over her self-consciousness to accept Niall into her heart.

Another interesting piece of this element is the many novels that have a female character masquerading as a male. In Kathleen E. Woodiwiss’s Ashes in the Wind, the female protagonist, Kit, is introduced as a male. Only a few chapters in is it revealed that she is a woman. The male protagonist does not know of her true sex until much later. Once the two finally get over the obstacles in their relationship, they both admit to their feelings progressing towards one another before the female’s charade was dropped.

The fifth, and extremely important theme in the genre of romance, is the celebration of life. Marriage may be belittled initially by either of the protagonists. Still, the marriage always ends happily and the birth of children is honored and often a solution to the problems between the couples as opposed to a disparaging event (Krentz 6). The “HEA” or “Happily Ever After” syndrome is the conclusion for all romance novels. Johanna Lindsay is famous for her pirate-themed historicals. In one, Gentle Rogue, the main characters are forced to marry because James, the hero, “compromises” Georgina. They have a large dispute over the reason why James came after her in the first place, which he will not admit to, that he is in love with her.

“My God, and to think I’m going to have your baby.”

“The devil you are! I’m not touching you again!”

She was stomping away from him when he heard, “You won’t have to, you stupid man!” and James felt poleaxed, or kicked in the arse by a berserk mule, which was no more than he figured he deserved at that moment.

But Georgina wasn’t the least bit interested in his reaction. High dudgeon carried her out the door, slammed it for her, and kept her from hearing what began and chuckles, but soon turned into delighted laughter. (325)

Unbeknownst to Georgina, James is thrilled that she is pregnant. And she cannot give up her pride and admit she is happy she is caring his child. They are both very stubborn, but eventually end up with a wonderful marriage that plays out through the remainder of the Malory-Anderson series. The embracing of a child no matter the circumstances surrounding the birth does not always happen in reality, is another form of fantasy, but an extremely optimistic one.

The sixth element relates to the fantasy as well. This aspect of the novel is the reader identification to the protagonists. If the author fails to relate the female reader to the hero, heroine, or both simultaneously, the book will fail. The heroine may simply be a placeholder in the grander scheme of the plot. Or the reader may place herself in the role of seducer or whichever character is being seduced in the ultimate fantasy scenario (Krentz 5).

The last element is the duality of the hero. Going along with the idea of integrating the male and female, is the initial complexity of the hero. The hero must play the part of both the antagonist and the triumphant protagonist at the same time. The reader must find the male lead both alluring and appalling (Krentz 7). In the contemporary novella, *The Road Taken* by Megan Hart, the male protagonist is an enigma. Jake is originally described as a man on the road, a continuous traveler. Assumed to be a stereotypical truck driver, the reader assumes he is only wants a one-night stand. Molly, the female protagonist, takes for granted that the man will be in and out of her life quickly. However, he gives her his business card, and she eventually comes to visit him. Jake’s real existence is the opposite of what Molly and the reader have expected. He

is a widower with a child and intended on having a serious relationship with her. Giving her his card was to ensure that Molly could find him if she wished to pursue him seriously. Although unrealistic, the story shows that the hero may have all biases against him until he proves his worth.

A major fault that critics have credited to these elements that make up the formula is that gets done and redone, over and over, and will continually be used by authors forevermore. As Elaine Wethington, professor at Cornell University stated:

Romances are all the same. This view is reinforced by the sympathetic academics, who try to identify commonalities across the genre of romance. Their analytic approach obscures the fact that many different types of romance novels are written, and that they appeal to varied audiences. Most studies of romance novels utilize only a handful of novels. Most importantly, they don't compare and contrast different types of romance novels.

An additional response to this accusation is to mention the sales of romances.

Because of the figurative language, allusions, and plot elements of the best-loved stories are so familiar and accessible, romance writers are often criticized for the lack of originality of our plots (which are regarded as contrived and formulaic) and the excessive lushness or lack of subtlety of our language. In other words, we are condemned for making use of the very codes that are most vital to our genre. (Barlow and Krentz 16)

If indeed romance authors are single-minded enough to reuse the same formula repeatedly, that formula earned romance imprints over \$1.375 billion in 2007 (Robbins). Therefore, there is no need to change the formula. Another Romance author Penelope Williamson comments at the harsh attacks readers get for embracing the familiarity of the Romance novel.

I truly don't understand why the romance genre is so belittled. Yes, there are romances out there that are silly, under-researched or poorly-written, but I'm sure the same could be said for mystery, western, and horror books. As a college grad, I wish people would give me more credit to be able to sort out the good writers from the bad. Yet I feel as though I have to put book covers on all the romances I read just to avoid those "why are you reading that trash" comments—as if romances were only one step above comic books. (125)

The seven elements depicted above are what relate so well to the readership. The authors purposefully create stories that will be appreciated by those who read their work. Romantic Fiction provides an accessible fantasy, in accessible packaging, that attracts the reader. When the entire product is focused on the consumer, it is all but inevitable that it will sell well.

The Readers

Tina is the person who introduced me to romance novels, who got me to appreciate them and realize how fabulously cool they are, not just as an introduction into the publishing world, [...] but because they're the perfect story. You have a strong female protagonist, a compelling male lead, a conflict that keeps them apart, and then, after a lot of nail biting, a satisfying conclusion...the ultimate happy ending.

—Princess Forever, Meg Cabot

Now that it has been ascertained what a Romance novel is, the history of the genre, as well as the elements that make it worth reading, we must discern who is reading the genre. Not surprisingly, over 75% of Romance readers in 2007 were female. About half were married, and the remainder were never married (37%), divorced, widowed or separated. (RWA).

Refreshingly, the statistics overturn the stigma of unmarried women being the only people to read a Romance novel. About 40% of the readers were between the ages of 25 and 44, and an even split of 30% were under 25 or over 45 (RWA).

The majority of readers are well educated with 42% of the readership having a bachelor's degree or higher. Over a quarter have some type of college degree and 15% have a post graduate degree (RWA). Women of intelligence and education still chose to read these books, which hopefully change the feminist approach that women cannot discern the meanings beneath the surface of the romances.

As to the sales statistics: 54% of Romance readers purchase five or less Romances per year with 36% buying new books. As far of source for the books, a quarter of readers still use the library, which aids the publisher's library market, while 31% buy romances at a mass

merchandise, and 22% purchase them at a mall bookstore. Only 16% go to a freestanding bookstore (RWA), which shows that convenience is a key element in the purchase process. If more books were offered at box stores or the grocery store, more would sell. Readers chose Mystery, Thrillers, and Action plots as the top favorite within the genre. Historical British Romances and Inspirational were also well received.

The Community

Writers write things to give readers
something to read.

—Finding Forrester

The readers of Romantic Fiction also have intriguing facets to their enjoyment of the genre. The communities that are built between the authors, publishers, and readers are unlike any other fandom. In the current age of the virtual world, there is a lot of dialogue between romance authors, publishers, and readers.

The community of romance readers and writers are a loving, loyal group: RWA conferences rally thousands in support of one another and the cause; book clubs and trade publications court and cultivate aspiring novelists and armchair critics alike. “There’s a collegiality and a generosity that is beautiful to see,” says Deb Werkman, romance editor at Sourcebooks. (Robbins)

The romance community is growing daily with the use of the Internet. Publishers, authors, fans, organizations, and social networking websites have all cropped up, connecting those who adore the genre of romance. “Authors adore their fans, as is evident on the numerous blogs, websites, and MySpace pages. When the two mix, it’s a mutual admiration society, with both sides talking about the characters like they’re old friends” (Robbins).

Websites like Night Owl Romance, provide incentive for readers to interact with their favorite authors. Conversing on blogs can win you books, gift cards, etc. They have begun virtual book signings in which you can purchase the book and have a signed copy with a few extra goodies mailed to you, instead of going into a bookstore (Night Owl).

Like fans of a fantasy series, e.g., Harry Potter, Romance readers have become a cult following. Certain authors, subgenres, and even cover models have become the basis for similar fanaticism. According to Eric Selinger, PhD, and English professor at DePaul University in Chicago,

“Romance readers really are in touch with one another and with authors. They’re now able to get their voices heard by publishers and editors in a way that’s never been true before. [...] There’s simply a constant stream of feedback going on, a cycling back through that community.” (Robbins)

The Internet is nurturing a new kind of fandom. This is a fandom in which all aspects of the creative process of writing a romance, the technical process of book production, the publicity of getting the word out, and the joy of relating to fellow readers, can all be done in one place. The capabilities of such a community are innumerable. And all of this fervor is over something as seemingly insignificant as a little romance.

The community commitment shows the importance given to all players involved in the Romance genre. The open dialogue between those creating the novels and those reading create the perfect way to produce what will sell. It is the best way to produce market research, know the consumer, and satisfy both the bottom line and provide the best product for the intended readership.

Distinctive Marketing

Me? In love with a pig? Wait 'til I tell the guys in marketing.
—The Muppets Take Manhattan

Almost all publishing houses use some sort of branding on authors with multiple books, especially if their books are a series. Romance is quite similar in this regard except for the fact that they have lines of novels, not just series or author branding. Harlequin, Inc. has nine imprints: Harlequin, Silhouette, Spice, Mira, HQN, Kimani, Luna, Red Dress Ink and Steeple Hill. The imprint that uses the publisher's name has: Harlequin Presents, Nonfiction, American Romance, Blaze, Historical, Intrigue, Romance, Medical Romance, Special Releases, and three Spanish lines (eHarlequin). Each imprint has its own specific cover look and typeface, and each line in turn has some unique facets as a calling card to readers. Each marketing plan makes it easy to find the books the readers want. When the reader shops, while the author's name is still a calling card, the physical display on the cover is the real branding.

Along with the branding of Romances, comes the interesting phenomenon of authors being published by multiple publishers and multiple imprints. Although this occurrence does take place in general fiction, it seems perfectly normal in the Romance industry for a writer to publish with more than a few publishers during their career. Ann Stuart, who has over 70 books published, has worked with the imprints: Dell, Ballantine, Doubleday, Harlequin, Silhouette, Avon, Zebra, Onyx, and Mira (Krentz 87). The allowance for an author to choose another publisher, perhaps to work with an editor or for a change of pace, without causing an issue in business relationships is truly remarkable.

When an author works with different lines or publishers, the reason may be to work with a different subgenre. In addition, an author having multiple pseudonyms is more than accepted. The majority of the time, the information of which author belongs to which pseudonym is readily

available. As already discussed, Jayne Ann Krentz, Futuristic author, is the same person as Amanda Quick, Historical author, and who, when writing Contemporary stories, goes by Jayne Castle (Krentz-Quick Online). In this way, the author distinguishes herself in each subgenre. There is no stigma attached to an author if a Historical reader picks up an Amanda Quick book but dislikes Paranormal or Science Fiction stories, and would never purchase a Jayne Ann Krentz.

Another benefit resulting from the author writing in another subgenre is that the book may be moved away from the Romance stacks in the bookstore or library. For example, when searching for a work by Laurell K. Hamilton, a Science Fiction and Fantasy Romance author, one may find the work is stacked in the Science Fiction section rather than with the Romances. Although her novels follow the definition of the Romance novel, that they deal with the courtship of the characters and end happily, they are considered primarily Science Fiction. Also, despite some of their explicit erotic content, they are in the same section as series such as J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings and Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials. The opposite takes place as well: an author generally housed in the Fiction genre may be placed in the Romance section. For instance, Anne Rice, author of The Vampire Chronicles, wrote a trilogy of erotica novels in the 1980s. She wrote under the pseudonym A.N. Roquelaure. The Claiming of Sleeping Beauty, Beauty's Punishment, and Beauty's Release became a bestseller and earned more revenue than Interview with the Vampire (Riley 74). These books were originally housed in the Erotica section. However, in the modern market, the publisher now places Anne Rice's real name along with the pseudonym, and in some bookstores, they are placed in the Fiction section beside Rice's other novels. In either case, by moving the works to different sections, the store or library may be opening the author to new readers and increased sales.

Other interesting marketing has taken place within classical literature. Signet Classics has a new line of Jane Austen books that were released in December of 2008. Each of Jane Austen's six most read books is now covered in metallic covers with contemporary illustrations. The books include an afterward from a bestselling author of Romantic Fiction. Eloisa James provides the afterward for Pride and Prejudice; Sabrina Jeffries for Emma; Stephanie Laurens for Northanger Abbey; Mary Balogh for Sense and Sensibility; Diane Johnson for Persuasion; and Julia Quinn, who herself was coined by Jill Barnett as "our contemporary Jane Austen" for Mansfield Park (Quinn). The price point for these books is only \$4.95, which helps readers pick them for economic reasons. These additions also add to the idea that Romances evolved from such respected authors.

Additional crossover marketing has come together in the Young Adult market. Dorchester used to have its own YA imprint called Smooch, while other publishers still maintain a YA imprint in order to engrain younger readers into enjoying the Romance genre. One example of this practice is HarperTeen's use of The Princess Diaries series by Meg Cabot. Cabot changed imprints near the end of her series, and they repackaged the materials. In the final installment of the series, Princess Forever, Princess Mia, the protagonist writes a Romance novel and tries to get it published under a pseudonym. Now that the Princess Diaries series has concluded, HarperTeen teamed up with its sister imprint Avon to publish that novel, Ransom My Heart, in January of 2009, giving writing credits to both Meg Cabot and her character, Princess Mia Thermopolis. In this way, the YA readers may for the first time try out a Romance novel. Based upon Mia's depiction, Ransom is a Romance by definition that also includes explicit sexual content.

The unique relationship between Romantic Fiction and library markets varies between libraries. Ann Bouricius (with the American Library Association) published a book to guide librarians. The Librarian's Guide to Love in the Stacks provides any librarian the tools to understand the Romance reader.

The June 15, 1996 issue of *Library Journal* contains a piece by George Watson Cole originally published in 1884 that is a "plea for the masses." In it, Cole points out that "the library is in existence by the grace of the public, and it is its duty to cater to *all* the classes that go towards making up the community in which it is established." (36)

Library Journal also provides a quarterly romance review to aid librarians who do not read the genre themselves (40). Bouricius provides a four-step evaluation of the different ways libraries take towards Romances. The first level is that libraries keep "quality literature," and therefore the "bodice busters" are kept in the lobby for people to exchange as they will (37). The next level is that the Romances are allowed in the library, but kept out of sight (37). The third level is that Romantic Fiction is bar-coded and linked to the generic record of "paper back romance" (38). The final level is that "The library will notice that the circulation figures for these 'paperback romances' are high. Therefore, the library will eventually realize the wisdom of giving each book its own catalog record instead of a generic one" (37-38). It seems absurd that a library would not want to give its constituency the types of books that they want to read.

In an ideal world, romances would have full records that are searchable by author, title, series title, and category line including number. The MARC record would include notations of any prequels, in order. Various pseudonyms would be cross-reference. (42)

Other Fictional genres are allowed certain rights. However, it seems that in the library system, the idea that Romances are not real literature is upheld more often than not. What is important is that this book was produced and distributed to libraries; so hopefully, the systems may change in time.

Sales

If you really like it you can have the rights,
 It could make a million for you overnight.
 If you must return it, you can send it here
 But I need a break and I want to be a paperback writer,
 —The Beatles

The most telling reason for the publishing industry to accept Romance Novels as an equal to the remainder of its publications and abandon the black sheep syndrome is that Romance Novel sales have continued to beat the sales of the other genre and have, in fact, increased despite the current economic times. For the latest market totals freely available, Romance novels greatly outdistanced the other genres in 2007:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------|
| • Romance | \$1.375 billion |
| • Religion/Inspirational | \$819 million |
| • Science Fiction/Fantasy | \$700 million |
| • Mystery | \$650 million |
| • Classic Literature | \$466 million |

Moreover, sales continue to rise. Harlequin reported that its revenue for the first quarter of 2009 was up 13.5% with operating income up 19.1% (Publisher Weekly 5/9/2009). In comparison, HarperCollins had operating income drop by 75% for the last quarter of 2008 (Huntington News). In addition, last January HarperCollins announced a voluntary retirement packages to lower its personnel costs (Publisher Weekly 1/27/2009). In this down economy, one cannot argue with success. Taking the Romance Novel genre out of the closet just means good sense for the bottom line.

Conclusion

She's writing, she's writing, she's writing a novel.
 She's writing, she's weaving, conceiving a plot.
 It quickens, it thickens, you can't put it down now.
 It takes you, it shakes you, it makes you lose your thought.
 —“Open Book” Cake

After evaluating the distinguishing qualities of the Romance genre, the differences all equate to a singular conclusion. From the origination of the mass-market Romance, one key factor has always been in place: pleasing the reader. Romance authors themselves have entirely originated as Romance fans (Krentz 3). Therefore, the emphasis for the publisher has always been to produce the most convenient, bestselling, high quality product.

The thematic elements and formulaic style are both put into place to please the desires of the reader. The high emphasis on the fantasy and creating a release from the commonplace existence is what generates high sales. The portability of the mass-market paperback provides a novel that can go to and from anywhere, and is also printed with materials to make the price point within any budget. The availability of Romance novels in places where one would normally go to run errands helps the readers access the product within their daily lives. The community provides an outlet and a place to find acceptance by people who do not go along with the societal aversion to the art form.

All of these elements also provide the publisher with the sales they desire in order to produce materials that may be worthwhile, but not nearly as lucrative. Even with the recession, the numbers will probably stay strong, even if they are not equal to the 2007 revenue of \$1.375 billion, as it is the very economic form of entertainment. The first quarter Harlequin sales prove the continuing success of the genre. So in defense of the Romance novel, while it may be looked down upon by the industry and by society, it is important that as consumers the country supports the efforts of that which has defined so much of the current mass-market culture. It is

the American thing to do, to cease the negative attitude towards a very commonplace and well-known genre. Romantic Fiction is not going to go away, so as a society, it is best to accept what has been criticized for so long. Give the public what it wants, and reap the rewards of continuing sales and success.

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