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HAPPILY EVER AFTER: THE ROMANCE STORY

PROFESSOR CATHERINE M. ROACH

Introduction

My talk this evening delves into one of the most powerful and omnipresent cultural storylines: “Find your one true love and live happily ever after.” This romance story is ubiquitous in sites from fairytales like Cinderella, to Disney princess movies, rom-com date movies, the lyrics of pop music, the wedding industry, to advertising’s favorite emotional well, and—in my particular focus—in the massive global publishing industry of women-oriented romantic fiction. Romance is a perennial theme in cultural representations both high and middlebrow. We chase romance, we structure our lives around it, we fashion much of our art and culture from it. I aim to trace out the seductive power of these stories of love that have such a hold on us—for better and, often, for worse.

I’ll structure this talk by looking at three related questions this evening, with time at the end for discussion: (1) What exactly is the romance narrative? (2) Is romantic love worth its risks? And (3) What can we learn from romance storytelling about today’s changing norms for gender and sexuality?

Question 1: *What is the Romance Narrative?*

Here, to set things up, I must first tell you that I am a life-long romance reader, a habit I acquired from my mother, who used to keep a giant stack of romance novels teetering beside her bed—she still does actually. I grew up reading her romance novels, have continued to read them. I found them relaxing and fun, a quiet me-time of fantasy pleasure and escapism. Throw in a glass of wine at the end of the day and maybe some chocolate, and I was a contented woman. I’d call myself a passionate fan of the genre, but also an uneasy one.

What exactly is the pleasure of this genre, I’d ask myself? What is the appeal of this romance story that has such a hold on me and millions of other readers, most of them women? I wrote an academic book in order to get answers. I wrote to interrogate my own lifelong fascination with the genre. But I didn’t want to only write from the outside, as a professor of gender and popular culture looking in on the world of Romancelandia in order to analyze it; I wanted to understand and study this story from the inside also. Thus, my research methodology for the book involved spending about five years among communities of romance writers, doing interviews and participant-observation: Here, I joined the UK Romantic Novelists’ Association and in the US, the Romance Writers of America, attending annual conferences and monthly writers groups. As part of that insider work, I wrote and eventually published two romance novels that went along with my academic study, under the pseudonym Catherine LaRoche (she’s my more romantic, exotic alter ego).

I’m taking us here on a journey into Romancelandia: the cultural, literary landscape where lovers meet and match up, which we also internalize as a high-pressure script for how we are supposed to live our own personal lives.



Here's my first argument: even if you never read actual romantic novels—you swear to God you've never picked up one of those books and you never will—you—we all—already *are* astute and well-informed readers of the romance story. You know this story inside out. It's the soup we swim in.

The romance narrative is a central storyline of human culture. Pushing the thesis further: The story of romance is the guiding text offered by the contemporary culture of the modern West on the subject of how women and men (should) relate. Find your one true love—Your One And Only—and live happily ever after. To the ancient and perennial question of how to define and live the good life, American pop culture's resounding answer is through the narrative of romance, sex, and love. According to Stephanie Coontz's history of marriage, a “gigantic marital revolution occurred in Western Europe and North America during the Enlightenment.” Prior to the late eighteenth century, notions of marriage tended to be pragmatically based on economic and political considerations of money, resources, power, and alliance. The sentimental and passionate love-based marriage stood in radical contrast to this older sense. Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the romantic love match came to dominate as the ideal for marriage in Western culture. This romance narrative is now arguably the most influential cultural narrative about how to achieve happiness and fulfillment in the modern Western world, endlessly taught and replayed in a multiplicity of cultural sites. Here we see the romance story is not only a narrative but also becomes, more disturbingly, an imperative: Find your one true love! The happily-in-love, pair-bonded couple (traditionally heterosexual, but no longer necessarily so) is made into a near mandatory norm by the media and popular culture. (More about that bit later.)

One of the most interesting cultural sites where romance stories are told, inculcated, and—a crucial point—experimented with in new forms is in the literal “romance story” of mass market genre fiction. In America, romance fiction is our bestselling genre and a huge money-maker. Romance novels constitute the largest segment of fiction publishing. Romance fiction had a readership of almost 75 million Americans in 2008, including *twenty-nine percent of all Americans over the age of thirteen* (about when I started reading it).

This massively popular genre now racks up over a billion dollars in annual US publisher revenue. It accounts for half of all mass-market paperbacks sold. The vast majority of these books are bought by women; the gender breakdown ranges from 84 to 91 percent for women, with men accounting for nine to sixteen percent of sales. Globally, 200 million Mills & Boon romances are sold every year. Romances are translated into over ninety languages worldwide. These stories have ancient literary roots. Although the current form of woman-oriented genre romance fiction dates from the appearance of 1970's American bestsellers such as Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* (whose bold and bodacious narrative thrilled me as a teenager), we can trace a much longer lineage for such stories. A lot depends on definition. If by *romance novel* one means an Anglo-authored love-based courtship plot resolving to a happy marriage, then the literary ancestry traces back through highlights such as the Mills & Boon publishing empire, the Regency-set novels of Georgette Heyer, and the nineteenth-century masterworks of Jane Austen to Samuel Richardson's 1740 bestseller *Pamela*. If one adopts an even broader definition that encompasses stories about the trials and tribulations of romance and erotic desire, then the earlier and wider context includes the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British amatory fiction of bestselling writers Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood, the poetry of the medieval troubadours, the earliest extant European novel *Callirhoe* (named after its beautiful heroine) by the Greek first-century CE author Chariton of Aphrodisias, and the unapologetically erotic love poetry of the Biblical *Song of Songs*.

What fascinates me is how, even with the possibility of new and more open twenty-first-century norms for gender equality and sexual experimentation, the romance narrative continues to thrive—or, depending on your taste, one might say, to bedevil us. These romance titles spread across a variety of new subgenres. Contemporary-set romances remain popular, as well as romantic suspense and the historical romances that I grew up reading. A setting in nineteenth-century England continues to predominate for the historical, with Scottish settings that allow for covers of bare-chested and muscled Highland lairds also popular. (Sometimes the giant sword clasped upright in the hero's hand is not just a sword.) But the genre has developed in many ways over the thirty-five years I've been following



it. New romance subgenres have popped up such as gay and lesbian, Christian and Amish romance (you probably don't have a lot of Amish here, but it's very big in America), urban fantasy, science fiction, erotic, and paranormal (lots of vampires, of course, and I read a three-wolf shape-shifter ménage romance story the other day). All of this is now available.

Now we need to get a bit more precise. I've been mentioning this sort of clichéd tagline "Find your one true love and live happily ever after," but we need to dig deeper into what that line really means. Here's my next argument: There are nine key elements that make up the deep storyline of the romance genre—and the broader cultural romance narrative.

These nine essential components describe the foundational premise of the core romance story that tellers then spin out into the million and one variations that we read and watch and hear in the pop culture. This type of breakdown helps explain romance's overwhelmingly female authorship and consumers, as in my analysis the story addresses itself to typical female experiences, interests, and anxieties.

These essential elements are: (1) IT IS HARD TO BE ALONE, especially (2) as a WOMAN IN A MAN'S WORLD, but (3) romance helps as a RELIGION OF LOVE, even though it involves (4) HARD WORK and (5) RISK, because it leads to (6) HEALING, (7) GREAT SEX, and (8) HAPPINESS, and it (9) LEVELS THE PLAYING FIELD for women. Let me lay out each point in more detail.

1. *It is hard to be alone.* Humans are social animals, deeply relational. As babies, we need love as much as we need food or shelter. While there are models for the solitary life, most adults continue to seek connection through family, friends, and community.
2. *It is a man's world.* In this world wherein we seek connection, the stakes are higher for women. Compared to men, women often have less power, less money, fewer choices, and suffer from greater vulnerability and double standards. Women are often socialized into looking after men (and children and elders) and have their needs and interests overlooked by men. "Men," of course, is not a monolithic category in which all men are the same (nor, obviously, is "women"). These situations of inequality vary widely and intersect with categories of race, class, etc. For example, a hierarchy of value grants more social prestige to able-bodied heterosexual men who conform to standard norms of straight masculinity (thus is the romance hero "manly"—tall, muscled, and ruggedly handsome). This hierarchy shames and devalues non-conforming men, as it also limits women, and it justifies violence as a means to exert control. The terms of feminist theory analyze this situation as gender inequality, sexism, homophobia, misogyny, and patriarchy. In terms of the romance story arc, women characters suffer at the story's beginning from living in this man's world wherein the balance of power is stacked against them. The woman's conflicts may include shaming or lack of knowledge about her sexuality, anxiety about weight or appearance, the memory of past trauma caused by a man, an overbearing or inattentive boyfriend, full blown domestic or sexual abuse, low self-esteem, family pressures to get married, workplace discrimination, financial vulnerability due to an inability to earn or control an income, or solo caregiver responsibilities (often for a child). Sexuality entails further challenges and vulnerabilities for women due to disparities in the enjoyment of sex, unintended pregnancy, miscarriage, difficulties of childbearing and birth, and abandonment with children. The romance story opens and begins to play out in this corrupt world that could also be described as the real world.
3. *Romance is a religion of love.* The romance story offers this answer to these problems that it is hard to be alone, especially as a woman in man's world: romantic partner love. The romance story believes in the redemptive or resurrection power of love. Romance entails faith in love as a



positive force in people's lives. In this sense, love functions as religion, the divine, as salvific, as the source of ultimate significance or concern. Romance is a storyline that stakes its claim on the belief that the world is a good place and that despite all of life's injustice and suffering, both love and love stories make the world a better place. The romance narrative is not cynical or pessimistic; its tone is not that of irony. In a jaded world, such an optimistic stance is easy to mock as sentimental sappiness. But the stance is hard if not impossible to deny. Love *does* make the world a better place. The romance story becomes problematic, however, if and when it privileges romance over other forms of love as the best and highest love.

4. *Romance requires hard work.* In the plotline of a romance story, conflicts between the main characters must be resolved and obstacles—both internal and external—must be overcome. Writers talk here of torturing their characters, of making them earn their happy ending.
5. *Romance involves risk.* Love doesn't always work out. In fact, it may fail spectacularly. The story of romance novels, which are technically romantic comedies in that they end happily, can all too easily turn into the failure of love in tragedies such as the iconic *Romeo and Juliet*. This knowledge haunts romance stories as a shadow text: stories may open with a bad boyfriend whom we know is on his way out, or a previous generation's failed romance that is redeemed through the current characters. Romance storytelling is the safe, imaginative space to explore the meaning and shape of this landscape of risk.
6. *Romance facilitates healing.* Love heals all wounds. Love conquers all. While these are clichés that stretch beyond realism into a mythic ideal, love does grant strength to endure many of life's hardships. Because love pulls us out of and beyond a narrow egoism into genuine care for another, it can lead to maturity, generosity, strength of character, and a type of spiritual fulfillment. Such love can give you greater confidence and heal past hurts.
7. *Romance leads to great sex, especially for women.* The romance story is sex-positive. Whether the intimacy level is cozy or spicy, the romance teaches that sexuality is not shameful, dirty, or sordid, but natural, healthy, and empowering. It is a key part of what bonds two lovers into one, through the trust and vulnerability entailed in intimacy. Women in romance novels are always sexually satisfied, even if such satisfaction is only implied by the quality of the lovers' relationship and the story's happy ending. For readers, the romance genre can connect women to their sexuality in positive ways (a theme I heard in many of my interviews).
8. *Romance makes you happy.* The supportive love of a good partner—what the romance story calls “true love”—is a sweetness to be treasured. But despite the romance story's tagline about “living happily ever after,” that happiness is not a simple or facile one. It is a mature happiness, rooted in the poignant knowledge of the inevitable loss of the beloved in death and open to the ongoing challenges inherent in any relationship. There can, however, be an over-the-top aspect to this element. The excess of the lovers' commitment can strike some who are not fans as ridiculous lovey-dovey campiness. Hence the eye-rolling the genre can provoke. But the story must complete its narrative arc. Begun in the suffering and unhappiness of the real world, the romance story ends in the healing and happiness of the mythic world. This is not to say that neither love nor happiness are real, but that the romance story narrates their reality in a mythic way, pushing it into a more perfect fantasy space. The more problematic version of this essential element is the implication that a person *must* be in a romantic relationship in order to be truly happy. When the *narrative* becomes an *imperative*, it puts immense pressure on people to find Mr./Ms. Right. Here, the romance story becomes oppressive if it mandates coupledness for everyone.



9. *Romance levels the playing field for women.* Here is the real happy ending for women. In a romance story, the central woman character always wins. By the end, our heroine is happy, safe, financially secure, well loved, sexually satisfied, and set up for a fulfilling life (as is the hero). A warm circle of friends supports them; bad guys have been brought to justice; families are reconciled. The main characters go from conflict to harmony and from disequilibrium of power to equality. Unlike in real life and much of literary fiction, women never lose in the love relationship—a huge part of the genre’s appeal. Women always gain power in these stories. The romance story is thus a woman-centered fantasy about how to make this man’s world work for her.

And there you have the deep structure of the romance storyline.

An analysis of the human condition. A prescription for happiness. A blue print for how to live the good life?

An illusion. A recipe for disaster. An addiction. The brainwashing of individuals by power structures with something to gain?

You decide.

Me, I think it’s some of all of the above. And more. So let’s keep going; let’s dig deeper.

Question 2: *Is Romantic Love Worth its Risks?*

Here’s another argument: This romance narrative I’ve been talking about plays such a pervasive and central role in the culture because it offers a safe fantasy space to try to figure out why romantic love is so complicated, with such razor’s edge potential in our lives for good and for bad. It’s a cultural site to work through the perennial conundrum and the risky business of love. I’ll unpack into this argument by telling you a romance story, as example.

Acclaimed romance novelist Beverly Jenkins wrote, in 1996, an historical novel called *Indigo*. Jenkins is a major, successful novelist in America: A *USA Today* bestseller, she has published over thirty novels and just received the Romance Writers of America Lifetime Achievement Award. She is one of the first and most well-known African-American romance novelists. She specializes in novels that portray 19th century black American life. Although Jenkins wrote *Indigo* twenty years ago, the novel has become a classic and is much discussed, partly because of its controversial prologue that provides a frame story for the main plot. I’ll outline it for you as a way for us to interrogate more closely the promise and pitfalls of romantic love.

Indigo’s prologue is an epistolary narrative, told through letters, which functions as backstory to the novel as a whole. It’s a type of “text of terror.” It recounts the how and why of an African-American man literally giving himself into slavery in order to be with the woman he loves.

David Wyatt is a free, land-owning black man in 1831 America, working as a merchant sailor. In the two letters that constitute the novel’s preface, David writes to his sister Katherine to explain that he’s given up his freedom in order to marry his pregnant lover, an enslaved woman on a Southern plantation: “For the love of a woman named Frances Greateon, I have forsaken all I am and given my freedom over to her master. I am a slave now, Katherine.” He feels deeply the incomprehensibility of what he’s done, “but Katherine,” he tries to explain, “to be near her I would carry water in hell.” Jenkins’s story, after this preface, follows Hester Wyatt, the grown daughter of David and Frances. Hester has become the Michigan owner of a freedom house on the Underground Railroad and a conductor of escaping slaves. She harbors a wounded man who turns out to be Galen Vachon, a famous conductor and fabulously wealthy free Creole black man, handsome as sin. Romance ensues, including an eventual reunion of



Hester with her long-lost mother Frances, all on the eve of the Civil War, with its promise of liberation for all African-Americans.

In regards to this prologue's text of terror, Jenkins sympathetically defends her character David's action, with great rhetorical persuasion, based on the notion of *love*. She argues that love can be a practice of freedom, even when it occurs within—sometimes precisely *because* it occurs within—a culture viciously tainted by the violence and dehumanization of racism. Given David's love for Frances and given the institutionalized slavery of their time period, David *had* to give himself into slavery to be with her. His love and the situation, Jenkins implies, led him inexorably to that choice.

Jenkins evokes here bell hooks, a renowned theorist and cultural critic on issues of race and feminism in America. Hooks wrote a well-known essay entitled "Love as the Practice of Freedom" in which she argues for the political and healing power of love: "The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others. That action is the testimony of love as the practice of freedom." This concept, however, of love as the practice of freedom is a complicated one, as exemplified in this narrative of David and Frances. I argue that there are dynamics of both freedom *and* bondage at the heart of romance stories—both fictional and real-life—dynamics that can lead to a nexus of liberation and domination, of empowerment and loss of self, all in the name or service of love.

If love and freedom are tightly related, how is it that love seems so often to lead us astray into some of life's worst binds and heartbreaks? Does, for example, *Indigo's* backstory regarding David count as such heart-breaking tragedy, when his love for Frances leads him to forsake his own freedom? How can David's act of giving himself into slavery be compatible with true love? Jenkins herself raises these questions in her author's note at the back of the novel, when she quotes the factual slave narrative that inspired her own fictionalized version. In an oral history recorded as part of the Federal Writers' Project dating from the 1920s and 1930s, a former slave told the story of an acquaintance, a free man named Wyatt who gave himself into slavery in order to marry a slave girl: "He was crazy to do that. That love is an awful thing, I tell you. I don't think I would give my freedom away to marry anybody." Jenkins has her heroine Hester echo this assessment in the novel, after Hester recounts her parents' story to Galen: "Love must be a terrible thing," Hester concludes. Later, she adds that love "brings only sadness," as she lists all the examples she knows of tragic and unrequited love, including a local black and white couple unable publicly to live out their love because of her time period's racism.

The clichés tell us that love heals all wounds, that love conquers all, and yet an obvious opposite truth, captured also in cliché, is that love blinds. Love can blind us to our own best interests, to our very self-preservation. Besotted, we waste our love. We can love badly, to our disadvantage, someone unworthy of our love. Bondage themes of sexual desire and love as trap and battle, cause of blindness and confusion, the spouse as the "old ball and chain"—all these are perennial themes spun out about the darker side of love.

As early as the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, British amatory fiction writers cautioned how erotic love can breed illusion. Eliza Haywood—a precursor of today's popular romance novelists, along with Aphra Behn (buried in Westminster, who was herself the first Englishwoman to earn her living through writing)—particularly championed this theme. Haywood was a top-selling author of her day, along with Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift. Her writing gained her a tagline from the contemporary poet James Sterling, grand enough to breed envy in any twenty-first century romance author: Haywood was the "Great Arbitress of Passion." The cover of Haywood's 1725 publication *Fantomina, or Love in a Maze* bears as epigraph the couplet by the English poet Edmund Waller: "In love the victors from the vanquished fly. / They fly that wound, and they pursue that die." In these lines, love is literal battlefield, a space where victors wound and then flee and where any left-behind lovers foolish enough to mount pursuit can only fail. No second chances or happy endings here.



In *Fantomina*, Haywood warns readers (women readers, in particular) of these dangers of love through her heroine's angry musings when she learns of the faithlessness of her lover Beauplaisir. False expectations, fruitless hope, endless waiting, despair, deception, betrayal, cheating, and lies—along with plenty of lusty “Happiness as the most luxurious Gratification of wild Desires could make” and the passionate Bliss of the “strenuous Pressures of his eager Arms.” (It's a great story—go read it!) Such is the mixed lot of those who love.

So, the great conundrum: Is love worth the risk? Sexuality is perhaps the messiest, the most complicated and dangerous, aspect of human embodiment. It raises complex psychosocial issues: the vulnerability of opening oneself to another; the instability of male gender and sexual identity in mother-reared patriarchal societies; women's fear of men's assault—and men's fear of such assault—in a world that bears witness to the willingness of so many to use rape to humiliate and control; and finally, the sheer chaotic power of desire to derail reason. All this creates a conundrum in the culture, a type of trap in the messages constantly fed us: *You want to love, you must love, love is good for you, and yet love can also be bad—even deadly.* This puzzle of erotic love is portrayed and explored in the endless permutations arising from the pop culture wells of romance storytelling, which we consume in massive quantities, in fantasy exploration of how the puzzle can ever work out.

Here's a notion: *Erotic, romantic love may be the most dangerous thing we do to ourselves.* Love can and does go dreadfully wrong. The rake, in reality, rarely reforms, even though the culture makes such bad boy scoundrels look darkly appealing. The cruel truth is, love can break your heart; shred your self-esteem; ruin your finances; leave you with unwanted pregnancy, disease, and social shame; get you killed by a stalker who won't let go.

Such examples of love are clearly not in the practice of freedom. Such examples do not liberate ourselves or others, to recall hooks's words; instead of freeing us *from*, they involve us *in*, actions of domination and oppression. These dark and tragic stories of love are in fact the opposite: love as the practice of bondage, or, more precisely, what I call love as bad bondage. Such love can entail bondage to an unworthy partner, bondage within cycles of abuse, and bondage to low self-esteem such that one feels undeserving of anything better in one's love life.

We arrive at the heart of my thesis in this second question we're exploring: *Romantic love—as a life practice among lovers and as a literary-cultural narrative—is a conundrum of freedom and bondage.* Love presents the enigma that it simultaneously both binds and frees the lovers. Put another way, the bonds of love entail love as a practice of avoiding bad bondage while learning to accept—and even to revel naughtily in—good bondage.

So, love *is* bondage. But it's a good bondage. Love as the practice of freedom results in good bondage. This binding involves a restriction of freedom that is key to popular culture's vision of romantic love. The culturally iconic Christian marriage vows, for example, tie the knot, bind two partners together: “I take thee . . . to have and to hold . . . forsaking all others, as long as we both shall live.” Love becomes an act or experience of freedom precisely *because* that love binds you to one very specific and special other. “By binding me, you set me free,” as one songster rhymes.

Romance fiction portrays true love as both binding *and* freeing and, ultimately, as freeing *because* it is binding. This paradox is a tricky one and raises the complicated questions of empowerment and self-deception at the heart of much suspicious feminist analysis of the Romance genre. *Indigo* continues to provide illustration, since David's decision to enslave himself makes this point about love so acutely: He makes himself a literal slave for love; how can that be good? In this vision of the romance narrative, love is a self-slavery in which you bind or shackle yourself to another and give up certain freedoms, but willingly, forsaking such freedoms as lesser in significance and as ultimately forfeitable. Yet, we can ask, did David's selling of himself into slavery in order to be with Frances go too far, into the earlier described problematic loss of self? It's not hard to argue yes. David gives up self quite literally: the self-determination of legal freedom for the political, economic, and social bondage of slavery in the antebellum American South. Frances herself protests David's decision: “To her credit,” he writes his sister in the novel's



preface, “Frances was furious upon learning what I’d done and refused to speak to me for days.” David has given up too much to be with her and should not have gone so far, Frances argues.

David’s defense, however, is that he only gave up his outer self, in order to gain his heart’s true desire. To put it another way, as a black man living in a time when slavery and racism curtailed the physical, political, economic, and social freedom of so many African-Americans, David chose to define freedom for himself. The one freedom whose exercise he refused to give up, the freedom he staked his life upon and declared most precious to him, was the freedom to love. While bell hooks argues *love is the practice of freedom*, in composing her novel Beverly Jenkins offers the twist that the ultimate *freedom is the practice of love*. Jenkins talks about “the freedom only love can bring”—the freedom to fulfill one’s being in fully-partnered union. When it comes to love, romance storytelling suggests that there is no difference between the practice of freedom and the practice of good bondage. True love equals freedom equals good bondage. David was right, in other words, and so is Jenkins: *David becomes most free when he sells himself into slavery to be with his beloved Frances*. It is a paradox so contradictory as to be absurd. And yet it is true, or else love—from this perspective at least—means nothing. Such is the conundrum presented by this vision of romantic love.

I want to finish with a last question: one that asks about gender and erotica in Romancelandia and that brings us to that most famous, or infamous, recent contribution to the romance narrative: the international block-buster *Fifty Shades of Grey*, whose trilogy, I’ll remind you, was written here in England. So:

Question 3: What can we learn from romance storytelling about today’s changing norms for gender and sexuality?

Another way to put it: What’s up with all the erotica these days? How is it that romance has gotten so *spicy*? To review, in 2013, E.L. James was the world’s top-earning writer, with an estimated income of \$95 million. Her trilogy has sold over 125 million copies in 52 languages. The first book *Fifty Shades of Grey* set records for the fastest-selling paperback ever. Sociologist Eva Illouz takes this mainstream success of *Fifty Shades* as indicative of an “immense change in values . . . in Western culture—as dramatic a change, one might say, as electricity and indoor plumbing.”

If you thought the *Fifty Shades* megahit was a one-off—some weird publishing blip—recent trends prove you wrong. Erotic romance novels—i.e., stories of scorching sex with a love plot that resolves to a traditional happy ending (which is the case with *Fifty Shades*, a very conventional romance story in that regard)—have been maintaining a dominatrix-like presence on the bestseller charts. They may lack the stratospheric sales of *Shades* but this subgenre has launched new boutique publishing houses and the careers of many new authors onto the bestseller lists. Mainstream romance novels also have more erotic content (“hotter all the time,” authors told me in interviews).

Here’s why this trend matters: because woman-authored and woman-centered erotica is an important part of the sex-positive revolution now unfolding, with its emphasis on equity and inclusion for sexual and gender diversity and against sexual harassment and sexual assault. (I think the #MeToo movement is active on your side of the Atlantic as well.) I see the rise of erotica as part of this current cultural moment: an affirmation of women’s sexual pleasure. These are tales of *cliteracy*: not simply of people falling in love, but of women experiencing the fullest sexual satisfaction while doing so, having hot sex with lovers who know how to deliver. This is an anxiety-provoking message for a culture more comfortable with male arousal and satisfaction than its female counterparts. And women *like* sex in this storytelling. Their desire is taken as a good—not a shameful—thing. This is an affirming message that can help us get past cultural slut-shaming around women’s desire.

These stories do deep work. In a culture where women are still expected to look sexy and young but are shamed or dismissed when they do, this impossible double bind exerts intense pressure. *Be hot but pure*, women are told,



especially young women—I hear this from my students at university all the time. How to navigate this treacherous terrain marked by such contradictory signposts?

The more-or-less mainstream romance erotica creates a safe space—a transgressive, unruly, shared fantasy space of solace and possibility—for working through problems of sex, which are multiple for everyone, but especially for women. Here, romance storytelling is about trying to figure out the fraught problem and Gordian knot of female heterosexual desire in a male-centered world, within rape culture. Although the label “mommy porn” can be used to shame readers or belittle the genre, I quite like its frolicsome potential. In this genre women work out, within the realm of fiction, and make up, through the pleasures of the text, some of the inevitable cost to a woman’s psyche of toxic ambivalences around sexuality and gender, even as these cultural binds are slowly uncinched.

So, yes, here is our new normal: a fresh sexual revolution, with sizzling fiction authored by women as a feisty part of it. Where is this erotica taking us? A BDSM romance like *Shades* is just the beginning. Same-sex romances—particularly gay male—are now almost mainstream within the genre. How about polyamorous erotica, singledom stories with happy-for-now endings, or asexual romance?

Ideally, all this storytelling opens up space in the culture. It queers—by which I mean it questions and transforms—oppressive norms. It leads us toward a goal of equity and inclusion in support of sexual, racial, and gender diversity. We get to see if we can write and read our way into a better future.

We’re not there yet, but we’re getting closer.
I think romance storytelling helps us get there.
And in my books, that’s a good place to be going.
Happy reading, and happy endings, to us all.

NOTE: For all references to sources mentioned herein, and for fuller development of the lecture’s arguments, see Catherine M. Roach, *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

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