FANTASY, FICTION, AND FEMINISM:
A STUDY OF FEMINISTS READING ROMANCE

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By

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ABSTRACT

Despite its huge mass-market appeal, the romance genre continues to be the most maligned of the pulp and mainstream fiction forms. While academic critics, whatever their degree of sympathy with readers, claim that romance serves to reinforce traditional patriarchal structures and values, other researchers claim that beneath the obvious patriarchal influences are elements that women find valuable in their lives. By studying the shift that occurred in the 1980s, and though interviewing feminists who read romance, my research seeks to understand not only the influence that the second-wave women's movement has had on the genre, but also the value that feminists place on the reading of romance fiction. If it turns out that academic critics have not kept up with the changes in romance fiction, the image of the contemporary romance reader will require significant change.
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“In the long run, we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die, and the choices that we make are ultimately our responsibility.”
Eleanor Roosevelt
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CHAPTER 1
ROMANCING THE READER

Prologue

On a chilly November evening a few years ago, I arrived home with my two young girls to find a window broken and my front and back doors wide open. Once inside we discovered that every drawer in every room had been dumped, trashed. Within the hour police officers were dusting for fingerprints, swabbing spit off my kitchen floor in hopes of extracting D.N.A., and photographing the destruction throughout.

My initial shock about the home invasion turned to fear, fear to anger, anger to — humiliation! A police officer was in my office taking pictures of, among other things, about fifty previously boxed romance novels with really sleazy covers! “It’s for my research,” I explained apologetically. I don’t think he bought it.

Introduction

Contemporary romance novels have flourished in North America for more than four decades and continue to be a best-selling form of fiction. Harlequin Enterprises, the most widely known of the many publishing companies that produce mass-market (pulp) romantic fiction, reportedly sells one hundred and sixty million novels per year — more than 5.5 books a second. Their books are sold in over one-hundred countries, in twenty-three languages. According to their website, last year Harlequin sold more than 160 million paperbacks worldwide.¹ Harlequin, however, is only one of many publishing

¹ eHarlequin.com
companies that distribute romantic fiction. Additional publishers include Dell, Mira, Jove, and others who produce and market mainstream romantic fiction (as opposed to pulp fiction) with longer, more complex story lines.

A romance novel, according to Estrada and Gallagher (1999) is any work of fiction “whether it’s a western, mystery or science fiction where the primary theme involves a couple falling in love” (2). When I discuss the genre of popular / contemporary romance fiction, I will be referring to the form in general—specifically novels—not to the products of one specific publisher. Since academic critics of the form have not settled on one label for these fictions, I shall be using the terms “romantic fiction, romance, romance fiction, and romantic novel” in their contemporary and popular sense—i.e., as love stories fashioned after the western connotation of romantic heterosexual love—rather than adhering to the long-established scholarly meanings of these terms. (Definitions describing this genre and its subgenres are described in detail in Chapter 2.)

Despite its popularity, the romance genre continues to be the most maligned of both the pulp fiction categories and mainstream genre fiction. Scholar Mairead Owen describes it quite accurately when she comments that "readers of popular romantic fiction still seem to be treated as victims of psychic incompleteness, of lack of education, of a capitalist and patriarchal system of which they are unknowing pawns" (Owen 537). In the face of this pervasive kind of criticism, it is no surprise that women, particularly feminists, who read romance novels—whether they are activists, academics, or homemakers—are often reluctant to admit it.

The negative criticism Owen describes helps to reinforce the widely-held stereotype of the reader of romance novels. Yet there are many fans of romance fiction
who do not conform to this stereotype. For example, Catherine Asaro is a physicist with a doctorate in atomic and molecular theory, a former ballet dancer, a wife and mother. She is not only a reader of romantic fiction, but also a writer of romantic adventures set in outer space. Asaro claims that she has never doubted that romantic fiction is a feminist genre. It is the only genre where the heroine’s desires are given priority, she claims, because it acknowledges the "female gaze." Moreover, the heroine is rewarded for what she values, and the hero is rewarded for appreciating that value (Asaro 1997). Asaro’s assertion that romance novels incorporate elements that may be considered feminist has led me to wonder if, and how, the second wave of the women’s movement has influenced romantic fiction.

It is difficult to determine at what stage of my life I became smitten by the romance plot. I imagine it began when, as a young child, I was read fairy tales such as Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty. As children, my sisters and I were entertained by these stories which I suspect we internalized as a plot for our lives: “boy meets girl; they get married: they live happily ever after”—i.e., the western ideal of romantic love. I enjoyed the idyllic romantic possibilities that kept me reading romantic fiction throughout adulthood. Crystal Kile states that the socialization of little girls into the culture of romantic love begins “in the nursery with Barbie brides and Disneyized versions of such tales as Cinderella” (1992 414). Kile insists that this process of promoting the ideal of romantic love continues through adolescence with cultural rites such as dating and proms, and continues into adulthood with weddings and eventually the nuclear family. Romantic love, she states, is a “complex socially constructed ideal, one which seamlessly reproduces itself in our culture from era to era” (416). I may not have
understood dating and desiring boyfriends as “cultural rites,” per se, but with every song on the radio (“Puppy Love,” “Don’t You Want Somebody to Love,” “Love Me Tender” to name a few), I consumed it heartily and uncritically.

My interest in romance novels continued as a young teenager, most memorably with Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* (1942), a story about seventeen-year-old girl’s first summer romance and first kiss. I’ve read everything from historical, contemporary, category (sometimes called “series”) fictions and mainstream bestsellers, to Jane Austen’s works and other “high-culture” novels regarded by scholarly critics as the feminine Bildungsroman. So when I discuss romantic fiction, I’m talking about the form in a broad sense, not specifically mass-marketed romantic novels and what their publishers call “category romance.” Any novel that has a strong romantic love sub-plot attracts me, but my tastes over the past years have narrowed mainly to mystery or romantic suspense.

Even as I say “my tastes over the past years have narrowed” I am aware that I am distancing myself from mass market romance—a strategy occasionally engaged in by my participants. Sue Thornham states: “romance fiction is regarded as trash by the dominant value system. Its fans, however, choose it in defiance of these values constituting themselves as a site of opposition to dominant culture, operating a symbolic inversion between high and low culture” (2000). We may choose romance fiction in defiance of the values of the dominant culture, but we are often “closeted” about it. I discovered that

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2 In *The Longman Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2006) Kennedy et al describe “Bildungsroman” as German for “novel of growth and development.” It is also sometimes called an apprenticeship novel, as it “depicts a youth who struggles toward maturity, forming a worldview or philosophy of life and leaving behind the concerns of adolescence” (16).
when admitting to reading romance novels, we feminist (professional, academic) readers must also validate ourselves by staking a claim to “high” literature, technical materials, or current publications on politics and world events. Our enjoyment of romantic fiction must be understood to be within a context of more broad and accomplished intellectual reading.

As a feminist who works and studies in an academic environment, I do not admit to being a romance reader unless it’s framed in the context of “research.” While others may think the area of study is interesting, most people assume that I would be taking a negative view. One professor who discovered my area of research told me I should speak to one of her classes, mostly young women, who were more inclined to read "trivial" romance novels than either "literature" or research papers or other such “elevating” material. For most people who are not romantic readers, being a feminist, particularly in an academic setting, is completely incompatible with being a reader of romance.

My interest in the romance genre, and in fiction writing more generally, led me to become a member of the Saskatchewan Romance Writers. This is a group of women writers, some published, who meet monthly to discuss their work and organize writing seminars. As a member of this group, I began to explore my concerns about the apparent contradictions between feminism and romance novels. I hoped to determine how other women reconcile the contradictions. Many of these women, however, would not call themselves feminists. They work/write within the specified guidelines of publishing companies—most often Harlequin. Issues of patriarchy and gender, sexual orientation, race, social class, age, ability are not challenged or even addressed. Primary characters are white, young, good-looking, physically healthy and mobile, and of course,
heterosexual. If the hero doesn’t have more money or social power than the heroine, then there are other qualities that redeem him—perhaps a quest for long overdue justice.

However, a few of the writers did impress me as different. One woman, who would eventually become my participant Lesley, often pushed the boundaries of romantic fiction with her writing, exploring darker reaches of human experience using topics such as childhood sexual abuse. She also created non-stereotypical characters, as in her chubby heroine for example. I felt drawn to Lesley and a couple of others. With them I felt comfortable and accepted as a feminist. Admitting to being a feminist in this group was very much like admitting to being a romance reader within a group of feminist academics. It made me somewhat marginal, not accepted. My last meeting with this group was one in which a woman declared that her idea of a romance novel was one that excluded all but traditionally good-looking, usually white, heterosexual couples. Another woman agreed in a tone that implied she could not possibly conceive of anything else. It was time for me to move on.

But the organization had a good library, and while I was still a member I borrowed some books, intending to reacquaint myself with category romance. I was happy to discover there were a lot more mystery/suspense novels being published now, and that there had been considerable change from the old “nurse and doctor” plots of the forties and fifties. I took one such book while on a trip to visit my sister. The cover featured a handsome male law enforcement officer—I don’t remember the title. My sister spotted the book, looked surprised, and stated that it just didn’t seem like me. In her mind, the book was just too trifling and inconsequential to fit with her ideas of me as a feminist. Her attitude reinforced my guilty feelings about reading romantic novels. I
wanted my public persona to be in sync with my personal pleasures. While I didn’t believe I was less of a feminist or person of intellect for reading romantic fictions, there was no doubt that others would.

Is being a romance reader and a feminist mutually exclusive? In my quest to answer this question I examined what other researchers, academics, and writers were saying about the romantic novel. On the internet I found Kay Mussell, an academic who states that in the late 1970s and early 1980s when she was questioned about the mutual exclusivity of feminism and romance novels, she had been very critical of women who read them. She has since determined, however, that romances have changed with the times. She sees the newer romances as “incorporating feminist themes while still reaffirming more traditional notions about love and family.” She states that many romance writers have “openly claimed feminist values and, in the process, rejected easy stereotypes about themselves and their work” (1997). Feminism, Mussell claims, has influenced romantic novels, both in plot lines and character portrayal.

Even so, tensions about being both a feminist and a reader of romantic fiction exist. Reading is generally a solitary and individual experience, but even more so for readers of romantic novels. While most people will happily discuss popular fiction they have read, such is not the case for me nor for most of my participants. With the exception of the women in the writing group, we read in isolation, preferring others not be privy to our secret pastime.

Romance fiction is not specifically heterosexual. Neither does it specifically exclude ethnic minorities. Naiad Publishing, for example, features lesbian romantic

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3 Kay Mussell is Dean, College of Arts and Science, American University, Washington, D.C.
suspense/mystery fiction. African American and Latin American lines are popular in certain North American locations (see Chapter 5). A comparative study of lesbian and heterosexual romantic novels using similar subgenres—romantic suspense for example—would be worthy of exploration, but is beyond the scope of this project. This study explores primarily heterosexual, “white” romantic fiction.

I intend to investigate the relationship between feminism and romance novels, paying special attention to the impact that the second wave of the women’s movement has had on the form starting in the mid-1980s. I hope to confirm my suspicion that changes I have noticed as a reader are in response to, and influenced by the second wave of feminism. In order to corroborate these ideas, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight romance readers who self-identified as feminists. (For interview questions, see Appendix A. Methodological details are discussed in Chapter 3.)

It is not my intention to interrogate the text of various romantic novels in order to prove them feminist or intellectual. Rather, I want to examine that “uneasy space” occupied by feminist readers of these novels and expose the nuances that make romance reading a compelling pleasure. I hope to determine how readers who identify as feminist engage with the text. Do they find contradictions between the nature of the text and their feminism? If so, how do they reconcile those contradictions? Do they believe that romantic novels have become more feminist? The answers to these and other questions will help me to deconstruct the stereotype of the reader of these novels, to validate the pleasure readers experience in romantic novels, and to come to a better understanding of the value they see in the popular romantic fiction genre. This thesis is an opportunity for
me to formalize these explorations and challenge stereotypes of the romance form of contemporary fiction and its readers.
CHAPTER 2
ROMANTIC FICTION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The Product, its Market, and its Marketers

Harlequin Enterprises has been the leader in the publication of romantic paperback fiction for the past thirty-five years. Although Harlequin published its own first romantic novel in 1949 (entitled *The Manatee* by Nancy Bruff), they had been reprinting British and American fiction since 1939 (Grescoe 30-35). In 1971, under new management and employing fresh marketing techniques, Harlequin's profits soared from $110,000 to $21 million per year. Harlequin novels are inexpensive, uncomplicated, formulaic "category" novels—i.e., numbered texts with a high rate of turnover. The Harlequin brand has become synonymous with mass, or "low" culture, and is identified with the stereotypical female reader who consumes these romances quickly and in large numbers.

I shall define some of the more common forms, quoting specifically from Estrada and Gallagher (1999):

**Category / Series Romance:** Category books are produced in *lines*. Lines come out with new titles monthly, and only a specific number of books are published each month.

Estrada and Gallagher explain that categories are very important to the romance genre as they introduce new trends in fiction “that are exploding or sneaking in the back door” (4).

The following is a list of the most common types of category romance: The Sweet Romance; The Intrigue; The Sensual Romance; The Romantic Comedy; The Mainstream Category (which explores issues and emotions on a deeper level) (15).
Mainstream Romance: Mainstream romance (also contemporary romance) are “stand-alone” books as opposed to Category. Novels have larger word counts, therefore more characters, character development, complexity, and subplots (16).

Historicals: Within the historical genre are two categories. Anything from 1066 to 1500 is considered a medieval romance as it deals with knights; honor and chivalry; the French and English at war; herbs and midwives. Anything from 1500 to 1899 is considered historical, containing elements pertaining to the times. Historical romance is a large genre of its own and has spawned several subgenres (17).

Regencies: The Regency romance, while a historical romance, deals specifically with the Regency period of history—approximately 1811 to 1820. “It was a time when Napoleon was pillaging Europe. England secretly drooled over France’s cognac and silks, finally going to war to get them. English society was firmly divided between upper and lower classes, and marriages, especially among the nobility, were still arranged. Women struggled with issues of equality . . . and everyone struggled to maintain the rigid standards of polite society” (17).

Contemporary popular romance is a wide genre from which several subgenres have emerged. The publishing of romantic fiction has become a highly competitive industry, and Harlequin now competes with several newer publishing houses for market share. These newer publishers offer "mainstream" romantic fiction—longer texts, more complicated plots—which are marketed to a wider audience of readers who do not necessarily view themselves as romance consumers as stereotyped by the Harlequin brand. Cultivating new readers through the development of new product lines is a major marketing strategy. The past few years have seen an expansion in the thematic content of
romance novels, beginning with the romantic mystery. I first became aware of this change in bookstores where I could find the same title in the general fiction, mystery fiction, and romance fiction sections. These books are categorized as either “fiction” or “romantic suspense” and are coded in a way that lets their potential readers know that they feature a heterosexual romance subplot. The blending of romance and mystery was followed by the introduction of the paranormal. In these particular novels, main characters—both male and female—have psychic talents or gifts. This paranormal dimension serves to heighten the mystery, which is often accompanied by a heightened level of violence and bloodshed as well. My attraction to this subgenre contrasts with the interests of my research participants, all of whom reject plots that feature violence. While disturbed by the violence, I’m also intrigued by the complexity of the plots and the more intellectually satisfying relationships among the characters. Brought together under mysterious or dangerous circumstances, the hero and heroine must rely on more than their good looks and physical attraction to work out their relationship.

There are readers who would argue that these new plot lines should not be considered romance at all. However, LUNA, a new line published by Harlequin, is advertised as bridging the gap between fantasy/science fiction and romance. What is called “viral marketing” or “guerrilla marketing” consists of online techniques used to advertise this new line: specially designed searches target internet destinations popular with young women likely to be readers of fantasy, paranormal, or science-fiction novels. Harlequin sends in chapters to post on these web sites and, as an incentive, sends gifts to the webmasters. The women Harlequin targets through this online marketing represent the younger demographic—18 to 34-year-olds—which the publisher is making a special
effort to cultivate. “Chick lit” is a term coined to describe the kinds of new lines marketed to this age group, described by Harlequin as “young, single, bar-hopping career women.” These lines are called Red Dress Inc., Silhouette Bombshell, and Flipside (Hayes 2003.)

One of the most recent new lines is a subgenre of the Christian romance. Rebecca Fox describes these as a more “fundamentalist” version of the typical Christian romance novel (2004). They feature a religious ideology that recalls the Promise Keepers (see Martin 2003). Fox describes the books as “paramilitary” and thick with Biblical references—allusions to the Christian militia communities of Ruby Ridge and Branch Davidian fame. Paramilitary, she states, “because they often take on the rhetoric of a hero physically battling and suffering in the protection of those in his realm of responsibility . . . the need to defend one’s clan” (2). It is true that these books are not widely available in mainstream bookstores—at least, not in Canada—but it is worth noting how the Religious Right interprets the recent changes in romantic fiction. Marketing to the Religious Right exemplifies the industry's zeal for responding to every trend and cultivating every possible new market.

Authors and promoters of these books believe that mainstream and category romances are harmful to both women and men, not because they espouse patriarchal values—as some feminist critics claim—but because they are deemed to be emasculating. At some point in all heterosexual romantic plots the hero becomes nurturing and caring toward the heroine. Not only is this nurturing considered “effeminate,” it is also thought to raise unrealistic love expectations in women readers. Promoters of the fundamentalist type of Christian fiction believe that if women want men to love women the way women
love men, women will be disappointed and turn to each other, thus promoting lesbianism. Romance novels produced for the “religious right” are written for both men and women. According to Fox, they are scripts for the performance of gender, scripts in which male characters are hyper-masculinized spiritual leaders and female characters defer to them.

The Scholarly Debate

Why would women who consider themselves feminists read romance novels? I began my research project with the assumption that romantic fiction has indeed changed since the mid-1980s, and that feminists get from their reading experience what they need as feminists. In my own reading, what I have experienced as "feminist changes" to the romance genre began appearing in the mid-1980s. I hoped to confirm my suspicion that these changes were in response to, and influenced by, the second wave of feminism. I was encouraged in this line of argument by Kathleen Gilles Seidel, who claims that editors began making demands on their writers to address more "politically correct" ways of dealing with characters and plot lines (Krentz 214). In my experience, in all but the subgenre of historical romance, gender stereotypes were beginning to change. Male characters were no longer portrayed strictly as brooding, dark, and macho; heroines were given more independence and depth. There were also thematic changes: for example, writers were beginning to pay attention to contemporary social issues, such as single parenting, substance abuse, and child abuse. But do these seemingly feminist changes in characterization and theme account for what feminists need from their reading experience, or is nourishment of their feminism even what they seek from romantic fiction? Perhaps what they need—and get—from romance novels is a temporary escape.
from feminism and the burden of feminist responsibility. The existing literature provides no conclusive answers to this question.

While there is a burgeoning body of scholarship on romantic fiction, most of it addresses the consumption of romance novels by a general female readership. There is no major study of romantic fiction’s feminist readership, although a few scholars do address the subject in passing. For example, Mairead Owen states that, on the surface, romances have nothing to offer feminist readers. She qualifies this, however, noting that romance novels are fairy tales that take the circumstances of women’s everyday lives and demonstrate how a successful outcome can be achieved amid dangers, difficulties, and disadvantages (538). Because feminist readers recognize and live the inequalities and disadvantages of gender on a daily basis, they find that they can relate to the heroines’ experiences. "Popular romantic fiction may superficially be a sentimental tale of romance but beneath this manifest story is a practical survival dream plan" (540). Owen’s brief assertions suggest that romance novels and their feminist readers warrant a closer look.

It was about twenty-five years ago that academic feminists began to study the romance genre, its readers, and its writers. Among the most prominent of the early studies are Anne Snitow’s *Mass Market Romance* (1979), Tania Modleski’s *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982), and Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984). Their research both influenced and reinforced the popular view of readers as traditional, non-feminist women in patriarchal relationships. Snitow claimed that mass-market paperback romances fill a vacuum for women created by their social conditions. When women try to picture excitement, society offers them one vision—romance. When women try to imagine companionship, society offers them one vision—male, sexual companionship.
When women try to fantasize about success, society offers them one vision—the power to attract a man. True completion for women, she stated, is nearly always presented as social, domestic, sexual (313). As that was still the reality for a lot of women in 1979, it was important and necessary that academic feminists look seriously at the form. The problem, however, is the binary assumption that haunted their work: one could not be both a feminist and a romance reader. Kay Mussell describes this dilemma as the “old triangle of romance writers, writing for romance readers, while feminist critics tried to explain the other two for an audience of academics” (1997).

Modleski’s study traces the romance form back to such authors as the Brontë sisters and Jane Austen. She states that much can be learned about romance readers through an examination of the relationships between the heroes and heroines in gothic novels. Male characters in gothic novels are continually thinking about the heroines. Modleski suggests that this attention is every woman’s fantasy. She claims that it is a way of “evening things out” (16) between the sexes. She also suggests that there is a “hidden plot” in romantic novels which reveals the buried anger of the writers. In her view, the writers are protesting the authority of fathers and husbands, even while their heroines seem to consent to it (25).

Quoting the now famous passage from John Berger’s Ways of Seeing (2003), Modleski says that mass culture has turned women into delectable sights for consumption. As a result, women are continually accompanied by images of themselves. Whether a woman is crossing a room, laughing or crying, "she can scarcely avoid envisioning herself doing these things. She has been taught to continually survey herself" (36). Thus is a woman split in two: she is both the surveyor and the surveyed. Modleski
states that the escapist quality of the romance novel is "at once what is laudable and what is deplorable. Women should stop vanishing guiltily behind the scenes, which is unlikely to happen so long as they continue to feel the need to escape" (36). In her view, romances help readers temporarily to believe in the possibility of transcending the "divided self."

"The disappearing act suggests women's suppressed wish to stop being seen in the old ways and to begin looking at their lives in ways that are perhaps yet to be envisioned" (58). In Modleski’s view, the popularity of romance novels suggests that these narratives speak to very real problems and tensions in women’s lives. Romances, while serving to keep women in their place, may at the same time be concerned with female problems. Modleski does not directly state that romance reading is a feminist activity, but does say that “if the popular culture heroine and the feminist choose utterly different ways of overcoming their dissatisfaction, they at least have in common the dissatisfaction” (26). Critics vary on the characteristics of this dissatisfaction.

Janice Radway writes that “romance reading functions for the readers as an act of recognition and contestation whereby the failure of institutions like heterosexuality and marriage to satisfy the emotional needs of women is first admitted and then partially reversed. . . . However, when viewed from the vantage point of a feminism that would like to see these women’s oppositional impulse lead to real social change, romance reading can also be seen as an activity that could potentially disarm that impulse” (1984). Radway claims that women read romance because they are "nurture deprived" (84). Women experience satisfaction reading about the caring, nurturant behavior of the hero, although his nurturing potential is seldom evident initially. In this context, claims
Radway, readers are able to reinterpret the behaviors of their partners and envision something better. But what negative implications does this have for readers?

Radway sees the relationship between feminism and romance as a troubled one. How could romance readers adopt a feminist consciousness if they are having their emotional and other needs met, not through social change, but by reading fantasy? Radway explains that repetitive romance reading gives women the illusion of pleasure while it leaves their real situation unchanged. However, in what reads as slightly patronizing, she suggests that romance readers “are capable of coming to recognize their set of beliefs as an ideology that limits their view of their situation” (Mussel). Critical of Radway’s study, Jen Ang calls this a de-romanticization of the romance in favor of a romanticized feminism. She does, however, praise Radway for leaving the ivory tower and mixing with the readers—her research subjects. Readers are thus taken more seriously and have the benefit of acquiring an understanding of their own reading experience (1998).

While characters and plot lines are undoubtedly changing, some critics appear unaware of these changes. Writing in 1993 Jeanne Dubino bases her criticism of romantic fiction on the more traditional (pre-mid-1980s) romance plots. "The hero is always older, taller, and richer than the heroine, and usually moody, dark and inscrutable." Dubino frames her criticism within the context of capitalism and patriarchy. Romances bolster patriarchal ideology by continuing "to reaffirm the centrality of men in women’s lives . . . and help to reconcile women to their domestic role as house workers" (109). Dubino reminds us that in a capitalist society, the home functions as a refuge, a place of relaxation for the person working outside the home—formerly and still in many
cases, the man. The domestic realm for women has traditionally been a place of work. Therefore, the home is a primary arena where men exercise their patriarchal power over women’s labor. Romance novels help to condition women for subservience by "reproducing, structurally, the real relations between men and women, and combine the desire for a man with the inscription of the reader into patriarchal heterosexual ideology” (116). In Dubino’s view, the danger is that romances teach readers not to trust their own interpretations. "The romantic narrative demonstrates that a woman must learn to trust her man and to believe that he loves her deeply even in the face of massive evidence to the contrary. In learning how to read male behavior from the romance, a woman insulates herself from the need that such behavior must change" (108).

Leslie Rabine views the issue as more complex. A materialist feminist who does not confine her study of romantic fiction exclusively to the concerns of middle-class readers, Rabine suggests that women are not simply fantasizing about a hidden personality in their partners, but see instead heroes and heroines who are reconstructing social roles. Readers believe that their mates lack nurturing characteristics, but see romance novels as modeling the possibility of change (1985). Rabine uses Braverman’s analysis of Taylorism⁴ to relocate her analysis in the world of wage labor. From the perspective of a working-class reader, the fantasy escape experienced by romance readers may resonate with the idea of a revolt of powerless workers (252). The depersonalization

⁴ "Taylor was the first to make a scientific study of industrial management. Taylor’s system of management corresponds to the early development of mass production and assembly line manufacture and is characterised by extreme elaboration of the division of labour the reduction of work to machine-like repetitive operations, and extreme labour discipline and supervision of work, aimed at minimising production time per unit of commodity.” (quoted from: http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/t/a.htm).
of workers through the regimes of Taylorism resembles the state of powerlessness that romance readers experience in their personal relationships. In both cases, women compensate by fantasizing through the heroine, who wins freedom and power through struggle.

When I began the research for this project, I was gratified to find that critical views of romantic fiction have changed in recent years. The prominent feminist bell hooks, while mourning the loss of a fifteen-year relationship, describes seeing this graffiti message written on the wall of a construction site: “the search for love continues even in the face of great odds.” For hooks, this message held “the promise of love” (xvi). In her view, when women speak about love, it is more from the position of lack, of not having received the love we long for (xxv). As she writes in All About Love: New Visions (2000):

    Taught to believe that the mind, not the heart, is the seat of learning, many of us believe that to speak of love with any emotional intensity means we will be perceived as weak and irrational. And it is especially hard to speak of love when what we have to say calls attention to the fact that lovelessness is more common than love, that many of us are not sure what we mean when we talk of love or how to express it. . . . This despair about love is coupled with a callous cynicism that frowns upon any suggestion that love is as important as work, as crucial to our survival as a nation as the drive to succeed. Awesomely, our nation, like no other in the world, is a culture driven by the quest to love (it’s the theme of our movies, music, literature) even as it offers so little opportunity for us to understand love’s meaning or to know how to realize love in word and deed. (xxvii-i)

Speaking from her personal experience of romantic relationships trying to flourish in a society hostile to love, hooks notes that popular culture is the one domain in which our longing for love is talked about—both in romance novels and in movies—and romance fiction is the only domain in which women speak of love with any degree of authority
Hooks’ passionate defense of romantic fiction suggests to me that she sees no conflict in being both a reader of romance and a feminist.  

Feminist academic Kay Mussell would agree. In her online article “Are Feminism and Romance Novels Mutually Exclusive?” she responds to the question by stating: “In my experience, the only people who think they are mutually exclusive are people who don’t know much about romances, or about women, or dare I add about feminism.” In Mussell’s view, feminist academics once considered romance novels a backlash against feminism. They believed that as society changed and more women entered the labor force and became “practical feminists if not theoretical or political” feminists, romance novels would simply fade away. That certainly did not happen. In fact they have become even more popular:

... Romances have become one of the hottest areas of publishing. One reason, of course, is that romances have changed with the times. The newer romances incorporate feminist themes while still reaffirming more traditional notions about love and family. Moreover, many romance writers have openly claimed feminist values and, in the process, rejected easy stereotypes about themselves and their work.

More difficult to illustrate, but I think equally important, is change in feminist thinking itself. Twenty or so years ago, when academic feminists first became interested in the romance genre, there was wider agreement among feminists themselves on what the feminist agenda should be—and conventional romantic relationships, widely assumed to be discriminatory toward women, were not part of it. Thus romances were seen as threatening to female autonomy. But as feminism has matured—and as feminist scholars have come to recognize a broader range of female experience—some scholars have challenged those earlier notions in productive ways (np).

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5 Gwendolyn Osborne was part of a panel with editor Vivian Stephens at the PCA, ACA conference in 2002 where she stated that bell hooks had admitted to being a reader of romantic fiction for two decades.
Mussell sees romance novels as having become more "feminist" while still maintaining white, working- and middle-class values, thus becoming less threatening to feminists and non-feminists alike. She believes that feminism has indeed influenced romances, and that contemporary romantic fiction actually addresses concerns that many women share.

A common criticism of romance novels is that they promote the idea of women's happiness through relationships with men. A 1999 edition of CBC television's *Hot Type* hosted a panel on romantic fiction which included Katherine Orr, Vice-President of Harlequin Enterprises; Dennis Duffy, professor of English at the University of Toronto; and Greg Kelly, an unsuccessful romance writer who is now a CBC producer. Moderator Evan Solomon asked what it is that still attracts women to the old "boy meets girl" saga? After decades of feminism, haven't women's needs changed? Why do women still feel the need to be in the arms of a secure man? The appeal of the books, explained Orr, is that they focus on relationships, and women are very interested in relationships. The appeal is not the need for a man but rather, the need to be loved. Duffy agreed, adding that romance readers' needs reflect the needs of mainstream society, namely the need for permanency, a sense of identity, belonging, and stability. Solomon asked Orr if she felt that Harlequin romances were under attack as "low-brow" literature. Orr responded that it certainly was the case in the 1980s, probably because romance is the only genre with a single readership—women. Harlequin was trivialized for doing only one thing. However, said Orr, many of their authors did that one thing right, as their works have made the best-seller lists.

Orr also addressed the shift in the content and characters that happened in the 1980s. She explained how Harlequin "changed with the times" to reflect contemporary
social issues. Romance novels now have children on the covers, and contain stories about "single moms" who fall in love with "guys who fall in love with their kids." While this shift may please some feminist readers, not everyone is happy with the change. Ruth Shalit takes a satirical swipe at the new hero as epitomized by Jake McCall, "the dishwashing hero" of the novel A Father for Always. Shalit unfavorably compares McCall with more traditional heroes like Rosemary Rogers’ character, Steve Morgan. "McCall would surely flee, apron strings flying behind him, at the sight of Steve Morgan," a dashing, dangerous soldier of fortune who erotically (and forcefully) seduces the young heroine. Shalit comments— with great disdain—that the hero-heroine relationship has become an equal partnership, in which the new hero’s lovemaking is "restrained, non-aggressive," while his passion for housework is, by contrast, "evoked with near-pornographic fervor" (Shalit 50). Whatever Shalit’s feminist credentials, she clearly prefers the stereotypical, patriarchal, “take charge” kind of romance hero. Again, this raises the question of what feminists need from romantic fiction: affirmation of their feminist principles or a fantasy escape from them?

Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women (1992) is a collection of essays written by authors of romance novels and edited by Jayne Ann Krentz, herself a novelist. It is designed as a response to the negative criticism of romantic fiction. In her introduction to the collection, Krentz states that romance novels invert the power structure of patriarchal society in that they depict women who exert enormous power over men. But would a feminist reader agree? If that power is merely sexual, it can be seen as contributing to the patriarchal structure, not challenging it. Doreen Owens Malek, a lawyer who both reads and writes romance novels, explains the appeal of romance: "Simply this: a strong,
dominant, aggressive male is brought to the point of surrender by a woman" (Krentz 93). She claims that the fantasy holds so much allure because it dramatizes a battle of the sexes in which the woman always wins. This echoes a theme pervasive throughout the volume, namely that romance is fantasy and escapism, and does not need to serve some higher purpose.

Rita Felski offers a unique perspective on the perception of romantic fiction as ipso facto an inferior form. Her “Kitsch, Romance Fiction and Male Paranoia” (1990) is an analysis of the gendered nature of the high-culture/mass-culture binary. “Kitch” is an appellation used to characterize mass culture forms. Connotations of the word include cheap, vulgar, sentimental, tasteless, and trashy. Literary kitsch, then, consists of “women-centered” forms, such as romantic fiction which, from a male-identified, high-culture perspective, is perceived to “cater to infantile desires for immediate and unobstructed pleasure, as opposed to the intellectual labor associated with high art and in particular with the difficult modernist text.” There is a subtext of castration anxiety in this loathing of mass culture: quoting Andreas Huyssen, Felski notes that “the fear of the masses is always also a fear of woman, a fear of nature out of control, a fear of the unconscious, of sexuality, of the loss of identity and stable ego boundaries in the mass” (np). Situated in the academy, home to the gatekeepers of high literary culture, feminist scholars appear to have internalized its ideology as a component of scholarly rigor. This leaves them in the awkward position of having to recognize romantic fiction’s melodramatic inferiority but needing to redeem the form on behalf of its female readership. As Felski explains it, “the feminist intervention has been largely restricted to a recuperation of that previously categorized as negative—with melodrama now codified
as authentically feminine and even as subversive—rather than a challenging of the terms of the opposition itself” (np).

One researcher who does challenge that opposition is Lynda Crane. A goal of her survey of romance readers was to determine readers’ attitudes toward feminism and whether or not women readers recognize in feminism the opportunity for change. Crane sought to establish whether or not romance novel relationships actually mirror the changes readers long for in their own lives. She also wanted to discover which personality traits readers most value in real-life men and women, and if any change women might desire in their own relationships included greater nurturing characteristics in men. Crane found that her sample group did indeed want changes in their relationships. In fact, seventy-six percent admitted that they wished their partners were more like romance novel heroes, although they were specific about the qualities they wanted in their mates. Overwhelmingly—seventy-nine percent of Crane’s sample—women wanted changes specific to the emotional quality of their relationships. What they seemed to enjoy—and envy—in romance novels was the intimate relationship ultimately enjoyed by the heroine and hero. When asked about what changes they would like to see between women and men, they spoke first of respect and equality, followed by kindness and attention. Crane notes that many of today’s publishers insist that heroes be "warm, sympathetic, understanding men who make good models for husbands" (264). Her sample group preferred independent heroines over traditional ones, although they disagreed with the notion that women should reject "warm, caring and nurturant qualities in favor of more widely valued masculine traits" (266). While Crane’s participants did not identify feminism as a contributing factor in the changes in characters, Crane does
note that "many readers may actually be unknowing advocates of the feminization of culture, while remaining likewise unaware that prior generations of feminists have supported similar views" (266-267). As this suggests, Crane's work clearly asks some important questions about why women enjoy romance novels.

The genre of romantic fiction has evolved considerably since the 1970s and 1980s. By extension, methods of critiquing and researching the genre have also evolved. Like Radway and Crane, my research involves the participation of romance readers. However, it differs in two important ways: first, I interviewed women who self-identified as feminists; and second, I am a romance reader. By confining my study to self-identified feminists, my research takes Crane's project a step further. It addresses specifically why and how feminists read romance novels, and explores the influence of women's political movements—specifically second wave feminism—on romantic fiction. In undertaking this project I hope to contribute to the broader understanding and analysis of contemporary popular romance fiction.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY: THE INTIMACIES OF RESEARCHING ROMANTIC FICTION

In the initial stage of my research, I would occasionally explain to friends and acquaintances that I would be interviewing feminist readers of romance fiction. I would then be asked, “Are there any?” Yes, indeed! In fact, since interviewing my initial eight participants, I have discovered many feminist readers of romance, including scholars.

While the interview component of my research is primary, it is by no means the only form used. This study synthesizes research methods from the Social Sciences and the Humanities. This is both logical and inevitable. A multi- and inter-disciplinary approach made it possible to examine the arguments made by academic critics and compare them with what feminist readers of romance are saying. (My participants’ definitions of “feminism” are discussed in Chapter 4.) My project encompasses research about romance novels and readers, one-on-one interviews with self-identified feminist readers, discussions with writers and editors, and attendance at popular culture conferences where I discovered that popular romance fiction is being researched in every imaginable way, largely by academics who are also readers of romantic fiction. My study is also heavily influenced by my own experience as a feminist reader of romance. I am aware of changes in the novels that, if not entirely “feminist” in nature, are not in conflict with my feminist values. I will also be using various romance novels (in Chapter 5) to demonstrate these changes. I do not agree with Radway, who states that “the romance leaves unchallenged the male right to the public spheres of work, politics, and
power” and avoids “questioning the institutionalized basis of patriarchal control over women” (Thornham 106). As a reader of popular romantic fiction for at least two decades, averaging approximately fifty books per year, I disagree that this is the case with most popular romance fiction of the past few years.

Taking Advantage of Some Postmodernist Insight

My synthetic approach extends to the realm of theory, where I have tried to avoid entanglement in the modernist/postmodernist debate, as I do not subscribe to this binary opposition. Indeed, what is useful about the postmodernist perspective in studying romantic fiction is its deconstruction of such binaries. Modernist philosophy suggests that “truth” is absolute and can be understood through rationalism and logic (Modernism/postmodernism Table nd. See also Croddy nd; Mantilla 1999; Stanhope 1999). Susan Hekman points out that postmodernism challenges dichotomies such as rational/irrational, subject/object, culture/nature (Hekman 2). While postmodernism exposes these binary constructions, feminism exposes their gendered nature. Hekman states that in each of the binary pairs the male is associated with the first element, the female with the second. And in each case, the male element is privileged over the female (5).

John Storey states that postmodernism began in the 1950s and 1960s with the American and British pop art movement and its rejection of the distinction between high culture and popular culture. It was a response to the cultural elitism of modernism. Lawrence Alloway claims to have felt none of the dislike of commercial culture expressed by intellectuals. Rather, he and others accepted the forms of mass culture—advertising, films, television shows, fiction writing—“consumed it
enthusiastically, and discussed it in detail” (Storey 148). These discussions took pop
culture out of the realm of escapism and sheer entertainment, and treated it with the
seriousness of art. The insistence on an absolute distinction between high and low
culture came to be regarded as the “unhip” assumption of an older generation (Storey
148). Postmodernism reads the cultural text, not as the source of value but rather as a
place where the construction and re-construction of value can take place. The most
significant value of postmodernism for the student of popular culture is in its
deconstruction of the binary opposition of high culture and low culture, thus rendering
that opposition meaningless. The political, social, cultural value of anything is always in
flux and can be interpreted and re-interpreted in a number of ways. There is no absolute
categorical difference between “high” and “low,” as there are no easy reference points
from which to assess value (Storey 157).

Some critics regard this as the elimination of standards, and many scholars of
romantic fiction appear to subscribe to this view. They want the easy reference points
that separate the good from the bad, the “literary” from mass marketed fiction. Without
the easy reference points, states Storey, we must work harder, more rigorously, see more
clearly, be more progressive rather than reactionary. We don’t have the security of
inherited guarantees (Storey 157). The emergence of popular culture as a scholarly field
has made the romance form of genre fiction a valid object of research. Much quantitative
research has been done on the increasing annual sales figures of romance novels.
Scholars have also produced textual analyses of novels from a number of different
Perspectives, even comparing the romance plot to those of Jane Austen's novels, and applying theories of life and love that draw on Heidegger. 6

**The Advantages of a Qualitative Approach**

My research is largely qualitative as opposed to quantitative: it involved eight participants, each of whom I interviewed about their feminism and their reading habits. While quantitative research would have allowed me to use a much larger participant base—by using questionnaires, for example—I felt that in-depth interviews with a smaller sample would give me a better sense of the *whys*, and not just the *whats*. For example, I wanted to know more than just what kinds of romance novels feminists were reading—historical, romantic suspense, etc.—but rather, *why* they choose the particular kinds of romance novels they read. Qualitative work allows for a less formal, more friendly researcher/participant relationship, which often results in a richness of data not usually obtainable through quantitative methods.

My interview questions were semi-structured and open-ended, leaving room for interaction and more conversation. (See Appendix A for interview questions.) I specifically chose this interview method because I find pleasure in this methodological form. I had previously undertaken a much smaller project interviewing women and found that my participants enjoyed the process as well. My romance reading participants were interviewed in a casual setting—my kitchen or theirs. The two-hour long, taped interviews were hyphenated by second or third cups of coffee, and sometimes "off topic" conversations. The informal setting contributed to a level of comfort and trust between

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researcher and participant. The tape recorder, however, was the reminder to us that the session was indeed “research.” Most of my participants spoke freely, taking pride in being sources of knowledge to me. Additionally, remarks and questions that I hadn’t anticipated frequently came up. This resonates with Kristina Minister’s statement in the book *Women’s Words*: for feminist researchers, questions flow both ways. Narrators have the opportunity to interrogate interviewers about the research project and about the interviewer herself (36). While staying within the framework of my research, I found myself exploring places I had not thought to go. Each interview became better because of the one that had preceded it. The interview format—semi-structured with open-ended questions—allowed for a level of information exchange that would not have been possible with surveys or more structured questions. It is the interactive nature of the interview, state Anderson and Jack, that “allows us to ask for clarification, to notice what questions the subject formulates about her own life, to go behind conventional, expected answers to the women’s personal construction of her own experience” (23).

When interviewing my participants I strove to be aware that in my position as “researcher” I might be perceived by my participants as having more power or status. There were no vast race, class, age, or other differences between us. There were, however, a couple of women whom I perceived as significantly more professionally accomplished than me. These particular interviews caused me to feel anxious in terms of how “well” I was “performing” as the researcher. Were my questions sufficiently intellectual and complex? Was I “actively listening” and responding appropriately? I was taken aback to learn that these women perceived me as “the expert” simply because I was
undertaking the research. Additionally, I received comments about how the process was both enjoyable and informative for them.

Thornham states that “feminism forces us to locate our own autobiographies and our experience inside the questions we might want to ask” (5). As both a reader and a researcher, I have had to question the values and assumptions I bring to the research. These very assumptions, however, underline my hypothesis that feminism has influenced the more politically correct changes in the romance genre beginning in the mid-1980s. My knowledge and experience as a reader and as a feminist informed my questions and operated as a focus for assessing the experiences of other feminist readers of popular romance. The traditional relationship between researcher and participant is described as “outsider/insider.” The researcher typically brings an outsider perspective, seeking information from those closely identified with the topic. In that sense my participants and I are not typical. With respect to researchers with an insider perspective, Thornham states: “This feminist researcher is flexible, wandering on both sides of the boundary that separates fan from critic . . . constantly moving between involvement and analysis” (106-7). Throughout the research process I endeavored to incorporate feminist principles, although it is not easy to pin down the essence of feminist research. Brayton states that “what makes feminist research uniquely feminist are the motives, concerns, and knowledge brought to the research process” (CRIAW 53), and points out that an important element in successful collaboration in feminist research is a commitment to the participants in the research (60). While there are many feminisms and feminist approaches, feminist research usually includes listening with respect to others’ experiences, and taking into account how issues of privilege, race, class, culture, ability,
age, location, language, and sexual orientation affect the results of research (CRIAW 10, 54).

General Characteristics of My Sample

Six of my participants were women with whom I was already acquainted. When I discussed my project, they volunteered to be interviewed providing they were guaranteed anonymity. The two additional participants were recommended to me and were new to my acquaintance. Demographically, my sample of eight participants broke down as follows:

- all had some post-secondary education and half had graduate degrees.
- six were married (one was divorced and one was single).
- seven identified as heterosexual.
- all were between the ages of 35 and 50.
- each had been reading romance for a minimum of ten years.
- two identified as being somewhat culturally marginalized because they are Jewish.
- all were employed outside the home.
- all were readers of romantic fiction, but frequency varied from five books a year to as many as twenty books per week.

With respect to occupations/professions, my sample included an academic, a professional writer, an entrepreneur who owns a high tech communications company, a criminal lawyer who also writes, a mediator with Saskatchewan Justice, a support-staff person at a university, an accountant with Revenue Canada, and a woman who evaluates recreation programs for the City of Saskatoon.
My participants are all Caucasian, well-educated, and believed themselves to be middle-class. I did not specifically seek out participants with post-secondary education, or who worked outside the home, or any other of the demographic factors particular to my group. I had three qualifiers: first, that they be women; second, that they identify as feminists; and third, that they be readers of romantic fiction. This demographic limits my research in the areas of race, social class, and sexual orientation. With regard to education, however, it brings up interesting issues. Ann Gray (discussed in Thornham) found that women with higher education tended to align themselves with their male partners and distance themselves from a feminized "low culture" (117-8). This is obviously not the case with my participants, as they have "higher education" and read romance novels.

Introducing the Women

As most of my research subjects insisted upon anonymity, they chose their own fictitious name. The exception to this is Judy, who, as a professional published author, prefers to use her own name. Their profiles are as follows.

Until the day of our interview, Judy had only been a name mentioned by those who knew her at the University, Romance Writers Group, and in the Saskatchewan Writers Guild. She invited me to her home and was very comfortable with the interview process. Our first-time meeting was no barrier to our interview, as Judy's tape was of the longest duration. Judy struck me as a woman very comfortable with herself and confident in her craft. I sensed an openness and "reaching" for truthfulness as she pondered some of the questions put to her. She is a published author in romance and science fiction genres,
has published literary works, and recently co-authored a book of non-fiction. Judy is Jewish, married, has a daughter, a Bachelor’s degree, and is in her mid-forties.

**Heather** is thirty-five, married, mother of three, has a degree in Kinesiology, and evaluates recreation programs. She reads several different genres at the same time and reads one or two historical romance novels per month. I met Heather for the first time in my home on the day of the interview. Heather’s name was forwarded to me as a potential participant. We really didn’t have much chance to build a rapport as she had an appointment following our interview. Her answers were brief but well thought-out.

**Maria** is thirty-nine, married with two children. She is a professional woman who travels extensively for her work and reads very widely, but prefers fiction by Danielle Steel and Judith Krantz. She reads approximately five books per year. Maria has more than one graduate degree. We had known each other only marginally, but in discussing my research project Maria had mentioned that she enjoys romantic comedy films and would be willing to be interviewed for my research project. It wasn’t until our interview that I realized she also reads romance novels! Maria is articulate, informed, energetic, and intelligent. She was very comfortable with our interview and we shared a lot of laughs (and books) during the process.

**Jenny** is in her late forties, married, and has two grown sons. She is an accountant with Revenue Canada. While Jenny prefers category romance (Harlequin) and reads several books per month, she is also interested in non-fiction science texts. I knew Jenny from the Saskatchewan Romance Writers group.

**Anne** is single and thirty-five years old. She works as support staff for a large organization and enjoys Georgette Heyer (Regency romance), and mystery. I had known
Anne casually for about two years. Anne is the one participant who did not identify as heterosexual. She also has never formally “come out” to me. Anne will discuss various gay and lesbian groups and activities that she attends.

**Sandra** is married with two children. She is both an entrepreneur and an academic. She reads up to twenty-five technical articles and texts per week as well as up to twenty pulp fiction romance novels. I have known Sandra both personally and professionally, and like Maria, when I discussed my upcoming research project she disclosed that she reads romance and volunteered to be interviewed.

**Lesley**, who is married with two sons, is also a lawyer who has practiced both criminal and family law. She likes science fiction and mystery with romantic subplots, and reads two to three per month. I met Lesley through the Saskatchewan Romance Writers group. As I mention in Chapter Four, I specifically sought Lesley out as a participant as her writing challenged the conventions of romantic fiction.

**Molly** is divorced with a grown daughter. She has a graduate degree in mediation and has worked as a mediator for the provincial government for thirty years. Molly’s reading tastes are varied and she reads approximately fifteen mainstream romance novels per year. The interview with Molly took place in her home. Molly was the most guarded, least forthcoming participant to interview. She was uncomfortable with her responses, often re-thinking and changing them. I sensed that she didn’t quite trust my intentions for this study and remained guarded. Although I had known Molly casually for a number of years, our discussions had been limited to children and jobs. Molly is the one participant who would have benefited from the anonymity of a survey or “fill-in” questionnaire. She
ended our interview by stating that she was “asked to think about things she had never thought about, and it was an interesting experience.”

**Ethical Procedures**

All aspects of my research with participants were carried out in accordance with “Ethics Guidelines - Research with Human Subjects,” which appears in the SSHRC fellowship guide, and in accordance with the “Tri-Council Ethical Guidelines regarding Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.” The nature of the research, the process of data collection, and the use of research results were fully explained to participants. My interest in popular romance fiction was disclosed to my participants. The taped interviews were approximately two hours in length and took place in either my home or my participant’s home, whichever was more convenient for the participant. Participants signed consent forms (see Appendix B) and received copies for their files. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Tapes and transcripts are stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office. Particular care was exercised in compiling the data from the interviews, especially with regard to establishing the context of direct quotations from this material. Each participant was invited to review the transcript of her interview for accuracy and intent. The results of the research are available to participants upon request. Some of the data collected used in this thesis was also presented at three popular culture conferences.

**Compiling the Data**

My method of reading the interview transcripts involved tabulating the data under several themes. These themes did not correspond precisely with the interview questions, but rather emerged around several binary oppositions as I studied the transcripts:
Feminism as an ideal in the real world.
Grappling with the trash/art binary.
Feelings and the self/other nexus.
Escapism or vicarious adventure?
Romance heroes and real-life partners.
Young heroines and middle-aged readers.
Physicality versus intellectuality.
Literary versus commercial.
Reading contemporary social issues.

I constructed a narrative around each of these themes (Chapters 4 and 5) and came to some tentative conclusions about how feminist readers grapple with the perceived contradictions between feminism and romantic fiction (Chapter 6).

**The Uniqueness of This Study**

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) emphasizes that a project should not harm the participants—indeed, that it should strive to leave the participants better off than before the research (Morris 48). My participants appeared to enjoy the experience of exchanging information and knowledge about romantic fiction with me. They were given bookstore gift certificates as tokens of gratitude for their time. The best example of reciprocity, however, will be my providing more information to, and about, the feminist romance reading community.

As my literature review (Chapter 2) indicates, academic feminists have researched the romance genre since the late 1970s. Most researchers who study the form, however, are not readers of romances themselves. Ien Ang states, "Radway, the researcher, is a
feminist and not a romance fan; the Smithton women, the researched, are romance
readers and not feminists” (1988 183). Until people like Kay Mussel began to speak
about feminist elements in popular romance, most researchers had only negative
critiques—most specifically that reading romance is a non-feminist activity. I am a
feminist and reader of romance. My participants are feminists and readers of romance.
We are therefore able to contribute perspectives to this project that challenge the negative
stereotypes.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS: FEMINIST NARRATIVES FIND A ROMANTIC VOICE

Introduction

The distinctions between serious and popular literature, so dear to the academic's heart are mercifully absent for the non-academic reader, who cheerfully keeps her Doris Lessing piled on the bedside table with the latest Harlequin romance. . . . [I]t seems to me that non-academics do read and for all the right reasons—to see alternatives, to better understand their lives and to survive. (Lebowitz 29)

The spirit of Andrea Lebowitz's words makes me smile. Having tasted the “apple of knowledge” and no doubt enjoyed its juicy intellectual pleasures, the high culture / mass culture binary has become painfully apparent to her. Lebowitz romanticizes that non-academic readers read without a consciousness or concern about “high vs. low” literature. This may be true of some readers. It is not the case with those six of my participants who are not academics. Important to this study, however, is the fact that Lebowitz views reading literary novels by Doris Lessing and reading mass-marketed romance novels as contributing to women better understanding their lives, envisioning alternatives, and developing survival strategies to deal with circumstances that impact our lives.

At a popular culture conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, I spoke with Vivian Stephens, a pioneer of the African-American romance who works as an editor for both Harlequin and Dell. She and I disagreed about the reasons women read romantic fiction. Stephens insisted that women read romance purely for escape and entertainment. The “escape and entertainment” premise is widely touted by editors, writers, and many readers. Indeed, each of my participants cited “escape and entertainment” as their
reasons for reading romance. What my research was telling me, however, was that “escape” is the expected, easy answer that discourages further interrogation. My respondents—and others—shared more complex experiences of engagement in both our formal and informal discussions. For example, a friend—a professor but not a participant in my study—told me about reading romances when she was going through an especially ugly divorce. In each of the books she chose, the antagonist (unfaithful and/or abusive husband) is eventually shown for the jerk he is, and the heroine goes on to be loved in a way that meets her needs and desires. My friend stated that she found comfort in these stories. Her experience recalled a statement by Katherine Pope: “the reader sees herself as not alone in her experiences” (qtd. in Reinhart 154). In reading fiction featuring heroines in circumstances similar to her own, my friend was able to recognize her situation and validate her experience.

After sharing this story with Vivian Stephens, she conceded, adding that a psychiatrist friend told her he often uses a particular romance with women clients who have survived abusive partners. At the point in the therapy in which the woman is able to accept that romantic relationships are sometimes positive, the therapist presents her with the novel, which serves as a transition back into social interaction with men. The book, says Stephens, models healthy relationships in which the heroine develops power, is treated with respect, and is nurtured by her new love interest. The therapeutic value of romance novels (this approach is referred to as biblio-therapy) is just one of many themes that arose in my research, themes which seemed to go far beyond notions of “escape and entertainment.”
Feminism as an Ideal in the Real World

This chapter addresses the experiences of my participants as feminists and readers of romance. They discuss what being “feminist” means to them individually, how their feminism informs their work lives, personal lives, and romance-reading lives. My participants and I discuss tensions created by being both feminists and romance readers. Together we examine and challenge the stereotypes of both the popular romance fiction genre, and the stereotypes about its readers. (For stereotypes, see Chapter 1.) In this chapter, it will become clear that my participants find meaningful experiences in reading romantic fiction and its many subgenres.

In order to explore these themes with my participants, we first had to settle on the meanings of the terms we were using. The first part of our conversations thus dealt with definitions. How do my participants define feminism in the context of their own lives? Half of my participants do not have experience with feminist theory and are therefore not able to articulate particular forms of feminism that express their personal / political viewpoints. Although feminist theory is not static, it is helpful to have some basic definitions. (See Kourany et al 1999; Overall 1992.) Elliot and Mandell (2001) share the following:

**Liberal Feminism:** Contemporary liberal feminists seek female equality with men by extending to women those rights and privileges being offered to men. They advocate social and legal reform through policies designed to create equal opportunities for women (25).

**Socialist Feminism:** Socialist feminists see women’s relationship to the economy as the origin of women’s oppression. Their goal is to transform basic structural
arrangements of society so that categories of class, gender, sexuality, and race no longer act as an obstacle to equal sharing of resources (27).

**Radical Feminism:** Radical feminists believe, among other things, that women are the first and most-widely oppressed group, and this oppression—patriarchy—is the hardest to eradicate. Patriarchy, defined as a sexual system of power in which the male possesses superior power and economic privilege, is viewed as a social, historical, and political force (31-2).

**Anti-Racist Feminism:** Anti-racist feminists were among the first to conceptualize the multiplicity of female experience and to criticize liberal, socialist, and radical feminists for ignoring race as a category of oppression and analysis. While feminism claims to liberate all women, too often it takes the experience of white women as the universal social norm (35).

**Psychoanalytic Feminism:** Psychoanalytic feminists are interested in exploring the hidden dynamics at work in personal, interpersonal, and social relations, the unconscious dynamics that shape the way we think, feel, and act in the world. While some feminists condemn psychoanalysis, those who find it helpful do not interpret Freud as prescribing women’s subordination. Rather, they read Freud as describing a process that takes place within a patriarchal culture, a process women need to alter in order to end our oppression (37).

While the answers differed somewhat, all my participants identified gender equality as the essence of feminism for them. Their feminism is less about labels and more about action. For example, feminism is more than just a political ideal for Sandra and Lesley. Sandra explained that she is conscientious about employing women for the
mostly technical positions in her company. Lesley, a lawyer, is concerned about social issues, particularly as they pertain to women. She has taken a leave from her workplace in order to work as a pregnancy counselor. Judy and Jenny believe that women now have fewer barriers in relationships and careers than prior to the second wave of the women’s movement.

Maria defines herself as a material/poststructuralist feminist. Her feminism is both personal and political. Her wide-ranging perspective goes beyond issues of gender:

I think the definition that’s usually given is a quest for equality, trying to redress some of the inequities and inequalities in society. But I think in terms of a more personal engagement, it usually comes with a concern for women, and women who are marginalized by all kinds of other divisions in their lives and wanting to better understand their lives.

Maria reveals an awareness of how marginalization in many forms is an obstacle to equality. Her view is a reminder of the gap that still exists between feminist ideals and the circumstances of women’s lives, even after the second wave of feminism. She believes that many of the obstacles that women still face will not be overcome within the lifetime of women alive today. As Maria’s comments imply, we have still not met the challenge of understanding all the differences among women and all the different ways in which women are marginalized. In this sense, feminism is a quest for the kind of understanding that must take place if we are to make real the ideals of feminism.

The next term we needed to define is “romantic love.” How do they define romantic love and the romance? Most of my participants defined romantic love as something distinct from the kind of love that characterizes long-term relationships. Specifically, most defined romance as the initial period in a relationship between two people—whether a man and a woman, two women, or two men—where newness and
sexual attraction are primary factors. Maria identifies childhood influences—fairy tales such as Cinderella and Snow White—that defined romance for her as "the swept off your feet thing." While she enjoys the "comfortable, trusting love" that develops over time, Maria finds the enthusiasm and excitement of a new relationship very appealing. Romantic fiction is about that initial period of attraction in a relationship. Judy explains that romance novels are almost always about "first meets" or new ways of seeing a person you already know. Inevitably they are stories about new relationships in which various forms of conflict conspire to keep the couple apart—or at least unsure of the other’s intentions—until the end of the book. This is not to say that romantic love is not an ideal for my participants in their long-term relationships. Sandra enjoys feeling "pursued" by her husband, who will occasionally surprise her with trips. Maria requests that her husband "sweep her off her feet" and laughs as she explains how he responded by coming home with a big screen television. My participants acknowledge that a "desire to please" on the part of their partner is something that keeps a level of romance present in their everyday lives.

**Textual Preferences and the Art/Trash Binary**

In the early days of feminist literary critique, critics grappled with all the previously unexamined assumptions of a masculine critical tradition. The goal was to revise old critical tools and invent new ones that would be appropriate for understanding the writing and reading experience of women. An early article by Lillian Robinson, "On Reading Trash" (1978) was an attempt to bring some clarity to the division of romances into "classics" and "trash." Robinson proposed that Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is the model for virtually all supermarket novels, from ultra-formulaic Harlequin romances to
the longer and more complex novels of Georgette Heyer. By comparing and contrasting the textual details of Austen’s Regency romances with their mass-produced imitations, Robinson was able to illustrate distinct differences between “good stuff” and “trash.” As already intimated, postmodernist critique has long since thrown these binary categories into disrepute. Many popular romances are indeed trashy imitations of the classics. But “imitation” is a gross over-generalization when applied to all contemporary romances. The term “influence” is a less pejorative way of describing those many novels that implicitly acknowledge Jane Austen as a giant in the long tradition of the romance.

My participants’ reading preferences are quite varied: they read across the quality spectrum, from “trash” to the classics. But this does not mean that they are incapable of discriminating between the novels that represent these polarized extremes. Nor does it mean that they have no preferences. Some prefer light comedy while others are drawn to romantic suspense. Many read Gothic romances—“historicals,” as they are less formally called. Lesley, Anne, and Heather particularly enjoy Regency romances, which are a sub-genre of historicals set specifically in the Regency period, i.e., roughly between 1800 and 1830. Some of my participants read across the many categories (“serials”) of Harlequin, Silhouette, and similar series of short novels that adhere to a fairly rigid formula. Others choose mainstream romances by authors such as Danielle Steele, Karen Robards, and Nora Roberts; these works are generally longer, more sophisticated in terms of plot, characterization and diction, and are roughly on a par with the law-based fiction of John Grisham or the forensic murder mysteries of Kathy Reichs. Given this wide variety of romantic fictions, I needed to clarify terms and concepts such as: literary, commercial, pulp, and “good” versus “poor” writing—terminology common to the
critical discourse of the romance. It was here that I began to note some contradiction in my participants’ narratives.

Romance is the most devalued of all genre fiction (Owen 537) and has a reputation as poorly written. This raises the question: If romance is so poorly written, why is it so widely read? The standard answer is that the romance form ensures a wide readership by catering to the lowest common denominator in terms of its readership’s intelligence, education, socio-economic status, and career trajectory (or lack thereof).

My participants, however, are well-educated and knowledgeable professionals, and are active feminists. It did not make sense that they would spend time reading badly written fiction. Yet, several of my participants agree with the devaluing of romantic fiction, and this may well be an effect of their education—specifically, their internalization of high-culture/lower-culture ideology. An extension of this ideology, the discourse within the romance community, is characterized by its own set of oppositions: the literary/commercial binary denotes a distinction between literary classics and popular fiction. This binary is revealing because it implies that the commercial is un-literary or—worse—anti-literary. As already intimated, within the category of the commercial, the mainstream/pulp binary distinguishes more complex and widely read bestsellers from formulaic genre fiction. Paradoxically, my participants both subscribe to and challenge these binary oppositions.

For example, Anne is quick to join the throng of romantic fiction’s denigrators:

Anne: My first response is not on a feminist/romance level. . . . It’s “how can you put up with reading that crap?” And I’m talking in terms of how badly written it is.

MG: So you’re saying that all romance writing is crap.

Anne: The pulp stuff [is].
This easy conformity to popular perception perturbed me. I know that Anne reads romances that do not qualify as pulp fiction. She discusses these elsewhere in the interview, yet she insists that by and large romance is “crap.” Anne seems to have internalized the modernist ideology of “high” and “low” fiction that still pervades post-secondary English studies—an ideology that could also contribute to many women’s deep ambivalence about being romance readers. Thus I was interested in pursuing the topic further with Anne:

MG: Why is it, then, that you think romance fiction is the one area that would attract only bad writers?
Anne: Because they’ve got to crank it out so fast? I don’t know. Bad writing isn’t any impediment to being published. Danielle Steele can’t write diddly squat and [yet] the woman is a rich and famous writer. . . . The Harlequin and Silhouette and the stuff that’s put out in six books a month—my experience with that stuff is that overall it’s badly written.

Although Danielle Steele’s work would be considered “mainstream” rather than “pulp”—indeed, several of her novels have been adapted for television—here Anne appears to include her in this negative assessment of the literary quality of romantic fiction.

Sandra provides a clearer distinction between mainstream and pulp fiction:

I don’t distinguish a lot between genres. People who read genres are into escapist reading, whether it’s mystery, science fiction, or romance. Within those three genres there are pulp publishers, which Harlequin is. And I would tend to say that those tend to be of lower quality, the reading level tends to be a bit easier. The plots tend to be cardboard, they’re formulaic. But people read pulp within all of those genres. People also read the more complex stuff within those genres.

Sandra states that “the difference is, you can say you’re a mystery reader and no one will say anything negative because it’s across genders—both men and women read it.” She
notes that when women admit they read romance, people assume they read pulp fiction.
Most interesting here are the gender implications: it’s okay to read the pulp fiction variety
of “ungendered” murder mystery and science fiction; it’s not okay to read the pulp fiction
variety of “feminized” romance. One has to wonder what is being devalued by the critics
of romantic fiction: romances or women?

Sandra has a good point. Indeed, all of my participants discussed the narrow
perceptions among non-readers of romance fiction. Sandra attributed this strong
association of Harlequin’s pulp fiction and other romance novels to branding. Clark,
Bernier et al agree, noting that “Harlequin has become a generic term, like Kleenex or
Xerox, but with more negative associations—to the extent that many people pretend to
know what they are like without ever having read one” (Clark et al 357). Sandra’s
comment reminds me of feminism’s detractors—the ones we became familiar with
through the mainstream media during the 1970s and 1980s, the people who had the
opportunity to broadcast their critique of feminism without knowing anything about it.
One has to wonder why, when it comes to women and women’s culture, the “experts”
can still get away with being so uninformed.

As Sandra explains, Harlequin dominates the industry in terms of branding—its
power to stand as signifier of all romantic fiction:

When people talk about science fiction I don’t think of the pulp. I
think about the greats in terms of science fiction and fantasy—very
complex and interesting novels. They’re definitely not pulp fiction
writers. But I think when people think “romance” they think
Harlequin romance. They think pulp. It’s very one-dimensional. But
then it becomes a question of why should you be judged for reading
pulp?
Sandra’s question struck me as important. Why, indeed, should one be judged negatively for reading pulp fiction? I explored this further with her:

MG: Do you think that it is less well written? If it’s the same writer who is writing for Harlequin and then writing for Dell do you think you’re going to see a difference in the quality of the writing?

Sandra: Well I think you see a difference in the writing—the complexity of the sentences.

MG: Even with the same author?

Sandra: Yeah. I think the vocabulary level is lower. I think it’s written at an easier level. In fact that’s why I read pulp. It’s for the speed and the ease. I read pretty well everything. I read a lot of non-fiction now, compared to what I used to read. I read different things for different reasons and I read tons of pulp, although I would never tell people I read pulp.

Sandra, an academic and entrepreneur, is a prodigious reader. In addition to twenty pulp fiction novels, she also reads approximately twenty-five technical articles and at least one book on technology every week. Sandra has not come up with a satisfying answer to her own question about judging those who read pulp fiction: as her self-closeting suggests, she clearly sits in judgment of herself. Nor does it occur to her that the sheer volume of “acceptably rigorous” reading she does might justify her need to balance out her reading regime with something relaxing and different.

Sandra and Anne agree that non-readers of romantic fiction mistakenly associate mainstream romance with pulp fiction. They also agree that pulp fiction is less complex than mainstream fiction in terms of plot, characters, vocabulary, and overall writing style. They claim that even popular novelists who write both pulp and mainstream will write with less literary complexity when writing for Harlequin or Silhouette (category/pulp fiction) than when writing for Dell, Mira, or other mainstream commercial publishers. Grescoe clarifies the distinction between pulp fiction and mainstream, using best-selling novelist Nora Roberts in his example: Nora Roberts was rejected by Harlequin then
accepted by Silhouette. When Harlequin bought out Silhouette, they inherited Roberts who then began writing “fatter, hardcover, mainstream novels for other publishers, which keep appearing on best sellers lists” (130). Roberts describes the difference as follows: Mainstream is the lights and the costumes on a huge stage. Category is Swan Lake in a phone booth (Grescoe 130).

When discussing both reading and writing, the authors among my participants spoke in terms of the binary opposition of “literary” and “commercial” (or “genre”) writing. Thus I needed more clarity about what the distinction meant to them. What differences do they perceive between literary and commercial/genre writing? I explored this topic with Lesley, who believes that “literary” writers are not as interested in plot. She related a revealing experience she had in a writing course; it is well worth quoting in full:

Half the class were genre writers and half the class were literary. And it was really interesting because we’re critiquing each other’s work. It was fascinating to me what a difference it makes in whether you write genre or not. . . The type of critique you got was completely different from the different writers. . . . [L]iterary writers are relatively uninterested in plot. They’re primarily interested in characterization, and in fabulous use of language. Genre writers are very much interested in plot.

One of the things we did in that class was to have assorted pictures laid out on a table and we had to pick one and write a story about it using the picture as a base. So I chose a picture of a teenage boy in a hospital room and there is a man dressed all in black with a black hat who’s holding out a silver cup of wine to the boy. I have a great interest in the Hutterites.

I wrote about this kid who had appendicitis and had to go the hospital. People from his Hutterite colony visit him. He is struggling in terms of being a Hutterite in a non-Hutterite place and cultural kinds of things. . .

Because I’m a romance writer, I put in a romantic subplot. . . . Nobody knows he’s Hutterite because he’s in a hospital gown and he’s next to another boy who has a very pretty sister visiting him. He buys her a coke from the vending machine in the lounge and so on. All the literary writers
said lose that scene—it’s got nothing to do with the story. This story is about this culture conflict the kid is feeling. I thought that was interesting. I liked the scene. I thought it fit very well with the story, but I was trying to do a different thing than they would have done. The genre writers didn’t have any trouble with that scene. They just saw it as part of the story and focused on what can we do to make the story better. But every one of the literary writers said “lose that scene. It’s the weakest part of the story.”

Lesley summed up this incident sarcastically: “I guess having a romance is not acceptable.” “Is it so far removed from real life experience?” I asked her. “No!” she answered emphatically.

Why did the literary writers in her class reject this sub-plot? Why is romance “the weakest part of the story”? People’s lives are made up of various relationships, including romantic relationships. Teenagers are expected to be engaged in romantic relationships. Why, then, are dating and romance acceptable in everyday life but not in literature? Why does the seamlessness between the literary text and linguistically-mediated life—an idea celebrated in postmodernist writing—stop short of including romantic fiction? Again, I am reminded of the gap between feminist ideals and the real world: there is still a division of labor by sex in which men are responsible for the “important” things—war, politics, commerce—while women are in charge of love. This assumed division of labor no longer fits the facts on the ground. More to the point, feminists are still fighting the battle against the male propensity to defend against their ineptitude in the sphere of love by devaluing it—and, by extension, the literature that celebrates it. What is most disheartening is that women—feminists included—continue to internalize these assumptions.
Despite postmodernism's assault on literary realism, critics of romances still fault them for their so-called unrealistic endings. Lesley surmises that literary writers take it on faith that a happy ending isn't realistic:

MG: So they are the pessimists of the writing world, whereas the romance writers are the optimists of the writing world.
Lesley: A real literary ending in my experience tends to involve something so ambiguous you really don't know what's happened, or else it's negative. It can't have an upbeat "and then they lived happily ever after" thing.

I find Lesley's subtle stereotyping of "quality" literature—the "real literary"—interesting. Both the realism that dominates the modernist aesthetic and the open-endedness of postmodern writing eschew the kind of closure demanded by the plot of romantic fiction. Implicit in Lesley's comment is a critique of this aesthetic: for her, the absence of closure at the end of a novel constitutes a kind of literary mystique—a cultivation of ambiguity for its own sake. It raises a question pertinent to the high-culture/low-culture issue: By what rules is it decided that the convention of closure, which characterized the novel for more than 300 years, is inferior to the open-endedness of modern fiction? In keeping with this subtle critique, Lesley dismisses the idea that contemporary, mainstream romances are always poorly written, noting that what is now considered "commercial" may someday be considered "classic"—an idea that would come up again in the course of the interviews.

Judy articulates the difference between literary and commercial writing as "something my students ask me all the time. I've never come up with a good answer. The best I can do is to say 'literary' is writing that wants to be art, whereas commercial books are written to entertain." Regardless of which audience she is writing for—the literary or the commercial—Judy's style is consistent: "I still work to make my characters
come alive, the setting come alive, the plot involved, and all of that.” Although she seems unaware of how her experience in the writing course reflects the still prevalent view that there is an unbridgeable divide between high and low literary cultures, Judy’s challenging of the literary/commercial dichotomy places her among those writers of romantic fiction for whom postmodernism’s deconstruction of this binary has been a liberation:

There certainly are some commercial books badly written. I’ve encountered hundreds of them. As I become a better writer myself, I’m more aware of that. But there are poorly written literary books also, and there are some commercial books that are very well written. In my mind this is a snobbism.

It does not take an expert in esoteric theories of deconstruction to figure out that some novels are well written while others are not—and that the high-culture/low-culture binary is thoroughly inadequate for determining which is which. Judy’s combined experience as a reader, writer, and teacher of novels easily exposes the impoverished critique that continues to keep romantic fiction “in its place.” Her invocation of snobbism resonates with Lesley’s implicit critique of the high-culture mystique.

Judy feels that since literary books are not written with the single purpose of making money, this somehow gives the people who write them a sense that “they are above the writers of commercial fiction, that they’re doing it for the sake of art, not to make a living.” Judy discusses her own successes in both areas:

My first literary book had a press run of five-hundred. My first romance had a press run of one-hundred thousand. That’s actually a low run, but it was because I was a new author. I think some literary writers are envious or feel there must be something wrong if a book is liked by that many people—that it must be the lowest common denominator. Whereas if a literary book is elite in some way, and can only be appreciated by a few intellectuals, then it must be better, because intellectuals have a better sense of aesthetics.
Judy states that literary writing will sometimes impose itself between the reader and the story. Readers of the “literary” want to be aware of how language is used: “Language is used to tell a story as much as are character and plot and so on. Literary work also tends to be more experimental and sometimes more difficult to read, meaning the reader has to put more of him or herself into it to be able to understand and feel involved with what’s going on.” Judy points out that the difference between literary and commercial is also a matter of publishing categories. In most bookstores, almost all fiction is commercial fiction: “There may be a few of the great classics, which are considered literary—like Dickens—but he wrote it as commercial fiction. It was popular fiction when he was writing it.” Indeed, it was Charles Dickens who invented the cliffhanger: he published his novels a chapter at a time in his newspaper. He ended each chapter with a cliffhanger as a way of getting his readers to buy the next issue. The history of Dickens’s novels lends support to Lesley’s point that what is now considered “commercial” may someday be considered “classic.”

Clearly, my research sample is characterized by a wide variety of reading preferences. While Judy enjoys classic romances, such as Jane Austen, Anne finds pulp fiction unpalatable and describes the writing as “crap.” But Anne enjoys Regency, which is regarded as within the category of pulp fiction romance; the distinctions she makes among literary, mainstream, and pulp are ambiguous. By contrast, Sandra, who does an enormous amount of reading, understands where and how these lines are drawn: when she seeks out non-academic or non-technical reading, she chooses pulp romance fiction—two or three novels per day—for the speed, ease, and escape. Lesley believes that the introduction of “romance” into a story is enough to have it dismissed by writers.
who identify as “literary.” As writers, Lesley and Judy are wary of the “good writing/bad writing” dichotomy, asserting that in every case they put as much literary expertise into all writing projects, whether for literary or commercial purposes. A common thread runs through all of their narratives: those who do not keep their textual preferences a secret are continually on the defensive about them; those who want to avoid having to defend their preferences are closeted readers of romantic fiction. Clearly, the negative perceptions about romances and their readers are internalized by some of my participants. I needed to examine their feelings about others knowing of their textual preferences and allow them to speak as freely as possible about these feelings.

Concealment versus Disclosure

As already intimated, I undertook this project in part to help reconcile my conflicted feelings about being both an avid reader of the romance and a feminist. Except within very “safe” environments—the Saskatchewan Romance Writers group, for example—I am embarrassed to have others know that I enjoy reading romantic fiction. Checking out the romance section of bookstores is a clandestine activity for me. I covertly read the paperbacks by the pool waiting for my kids to finish their swimming lessons or while traveling anonymously on airplanes.\(^7\) Thus I can read myself in Jayne Ann Krentz’s observation:

> Few people realize how much courage it takes for a woman to open a romance novel on 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 (1).

\(^7\) When approached by friends or strangers my reading material is tucked away in a bag or under a jacket.
The issue of anonymity was a concern for most of my participants, but especially crucial for two. These women, both professionals with graduate degrees, expressed very strongly their fears about their intellect being questioned and their credibility compromised if their closely guarded secret were exposed. Well-known professional women believe they have the most to lose—their professional reputations and the respect of their colleagues.

Maria, for example, requested that I keep all identifying information about her extremely vague in this study. Maria is a professional whose work often takes her to various locations around the world. It was only during our interview that Maria revealed to me that she reads romance. She had previously stated that she was a fan of romantic comedy movies, and thinking we could make a link between movies and books, she agreed to be interviewed. Maria reads, among other writers, Danielle Steele, whose novels she describes as “formulaic” and “trashy.” I asked her if she was comfortable revealing to others that she reads Danielle Steele and other such authors:

Absolutely not! It’s perceived to be so unintellectual. Quite honestly I don’t think Danielle Steele’s a very good writer. She writes in a formula sort of way. It’s not intellectual. And especially for me as a professional woman you just are very afraid of seeming unprofessional or unintelligent for enjoying the sort of triviality of these books and I do think a lot of people see them as trivial or trashy.

I asked Maria if she actually believes that they are trivial and trashy. She replied: “No, I don’t. I think because they’re entertainment and escapism, they provide a way to get away from the more unpleasant things in life and engage in a fantasy life. And I don’t think that there’s really anything wrong with that.” While Maria is intellectually aware of, and can articulate, the problems with the “high culture/mass culture” binary, she has nevertheless internalized the view of romantic fiction as “trash.”
Maria struggles with the conflict between her personal pleasure and public perception. If romance is generally regarded as unintellectual, “trivial and trashy,” then agreeing with the public perception keeps Maria within the realm of acceptability and safeguards her professional reputation. With me, however, she is comfortable revealing her true feelings—that she does not, in fact, believe what she reads is trivial or trashy:

“Maybe some of the dominant discourse in it in terms of roles of women and so on can be a bit problematic. But I really like being able to create a space where I can just put that aside and just enjoy a good read, or a good story, or whatever, to take me to a different sort of place.” Maria asked me if I am forthright about my own reading of romances. I explained that I am now, but only with some people, and only because I can explain my romance reading as research; that legitimizes it. Maria responded:

I just don’t tell people I read this stuff. When people say what do you read I’ll have another novel that I’ve been wanting to get to—you know, like Kathy Reichs. Something like that I’m more comfortable telling people I read than Danielle Steele. . . . But I don’t tell people I read this other stuff.

Ultimately Maria’s position is that romance novels are not trivial and trashy. They offer escape and fantasy. While some may equate escape and fantasy with trivial and trashy, Maria (at least privately) rejects that equation and finds value in them. In later discussions with Maria I explored the question of which issue was more difficult for her—the romance reading material being considered unintellectual or being considered unfeminist. Maria conceded that both are difficult, but there are more tensions about being feminist. She speculated that there is a sense of “You’re a feminist! You’re supposed to know better!” (than to read fiction that supposedly reinforces patriarchal values).
Sandra is an academic and entrepreneur whose work also takes her to various parts of the world. In her professional life she is very self-confident. Being a reader of romance is a secret that Sandra does not readily share. She discusses concerns that feminism may in part be to blame for negative attitudes about readers of romance:

If I let people know I read romance fiction, the stereotype is that I’m stupid, an airhead, and have no intellectual capability. There’s the association that if you’re interested in romance then you must be like the ditsy dumb blonde. You’re this stupid person. And I actually think part of that came from feminism. I think in the early roots of feminism there were different schools of feminism. . . . There was certainly one that was anti-man, anti-traditional role. And the epitome of the traditional roles wasn’t necessarily doing the housework, though that’s where a lot of the discussion came around, it was . . . the romantic trappings, the beauty contests, the “putting yourself up” for the man, the dressing up to impress. . . . That represented someone who was deluded or playing into patriarchy. And in fact by playing into patriarchy, [you were] supporting it and allowing it to continue.

Sandra is smart, accomplished, and sought after as an expert in her line of business, while romance readers are seen as unintellectual, stupid, and “airheads.” She identifies as a feminist, yet believes that most feminists would see romance readers as playing into, and supporting, traditional women’s roles as dictated by patriarchy. To remain “legitimate” as a professional person and as a feminist, she must protect the secret that she is a reader of romance. Sandra’s projection of the “blame” on to feminism is not necessarily unjustified. In Watching Dallas (1985), Ien Ang explains that the early feminist notion of a happy ending was at odds with popular romance fiction’s happy ending. Heterosexual “Utopian happiness” was framed within a patriarchal context – the woman having given up her independence and subjugating herself to the paternalistic protection of her man (122).
Some of my research subjects said that revealing their enjoyment of romantic fiction depended on whom they were talking to and the level of trust in that relationship.

As Heather says,

people kind of look at you askance, like you have no mind, and why are you reading these kinds of things. But people I trust and that I really know, I wouldn’t be afraid to say to them, “Oh yeah, I’m reading this book,” or whatever. With other people I’d probably just keep that to myself until I felt that comfort zone.

Heather explains that disclosing as a romance reader depends on how much she trusts, or how well she knows, the person. Closeted romance reading seems almost on a par with secret drinking in the morning: both drinkers and readers are taught to think of themselves as debased addicts, rather than—to paraphrase bell hooks—seekers of an alternative to an unrelentingly loveless world (2000 xxvii).

Jenny, a member of the Saskatchewan Romance Writers, experiences feelings similar to Heather’s. As a chartered accountant and manager with Revenue Canada, Jenny is subjected to the “conservative” and “rule-follower/enforcer” stereotype. The fact that she enjoys romances (both reading and writing them) is almost inconceivable to those with whom she works. She discusses an uncomfortable situation in which a senior manager was introducing her to a group of new employees:

[He said “this is so and so and she does such and such and she also writes those little books.” Well, the way he said it . . . came across as a distinct pat on the head . . . , and when people are predisposed to think of it that way, it puts my credibility as a professional on the line, which means that I have to work that much harder in someone else’s eyes to overcome that. So I am careful as to when and where [I share my life as a reader and writer].

Jenny explained that the new employees were clearly uncomfortable and unsure how to respond: “Should they make a comment on this or not? They all have to stop and think
very hard about how they are going to handle this and what they are going to say to me so this is not a good thing in their minds.” Jenny believes that she was seen as

the stereotypical little housewife writing her sweet little candy floss stories with a sweet little candy floss mind to go with it. I think that’s how they look at it. They think it’s candy for the mind—that there is no substance to it. There is nothing of redeeming value, social or otherwise to this, therefore the person is tarred with the same brush—nothing of redeeming value there. I honestly believe that’s what they think.

Jenny derives pleasure and satisfaction from her hobby—her creative outlet. But with her professional reputation at stake, she is careful about sharing. At stake also, are Jenny’s personal feelings of self-esteem. In trying to reconcile her sense of her writing skills with a “sweet little candy floss mind,” Jenny must negotiate not only how co-workers imagine her as a professional, but how she sees herself as a writer.

Judy, the professional author and writing instructor, experienced a similar response in regard to her literary writing:

At first I found I didn’t want to tell anybody I was writing romance but that made me angry with myself, so I did, and I noticed that other people assumed that my literary work could not be any good because I also wrote romance. Then for three years in a row literary stories of mine won awards in the [Saskatchewan Writers’] Guild’s own award program. After that they changed. It was like, “Ok, maybe romance writing is alright because clearly her literary writing is Ok.” The attitude changed because I had proven myself in a literary field. But if I had been only writing romance I never would have had respect. In fact, ______, from whom I’d taken a class, told me I was wasting my talent. Other people thought I was only doing it for the money.

Judy claimed that she felt that comment was elitist. She reiterated that it is as though there is something wrong with making money as a writer, unless you are Margaret Atwood or Guy Vanderhaeghue—that you are wasting your time writing romantic fiction, even though you are successful.

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While Judy is quite comfortable these days as a writer in several genres, I wanted to pursue her past feelings in more detail. I discovered that her embarrassment was not just about writing and reading romances, but also about how romance is packaged. In speaking about a Romance Writers of America conference, Judy discusses the issue of book covers:

One year they gave us book covers . . . that would fit a paper back book, so if you were reading a romance you could put this nice leather cover on it and no one would know you were reading a romance. One of the issues the RWA wanted to work on was that a lot of intelligent, capable women they knew loved reading historical romance but were embarrassed by the clinch covers, especially since back then the covers had nothing to do with the characters.

"Clinch covers" is shorthand for the cover images on paperback romances that feature heterosexual couples in exaggerated passionate embraces. According to Judy, because the romance writers' union took action, things are changing: "Often you'll see lace or crystal goblets or something other than those clinches with the half-naked woman."

Heather also believes that whether or not the books are well written, the covers embarrass readers and cause non-readers to devalue the genre:

I'm very skeptical to pick up a book that has a picture of a man and woman scantily clad or in a "wonderful" position or whatever. I actually move away from those. I don't want to see those, whether that would be a good book or not. That drives me away. And when I have read some books by an author I liked and then went to a paperback [section] and found those were the pictures that were on the paperback and I was just appalled with them.

People do judge a book by its cover, even if that cover just vaguely implies "romance."

More important, people judge the readers. While my participants are intelligent and accomplished women, the pervasive negative stereotype of the typical romance reader is one that they recognize as unchallenged in the public realm. Until the romance is more
widely accepted by the general public as a “legitimate” form of fiction, many of its readers will remain closeted.

**Escape and Vicarious Adventure versus Textual Pleasure**

Paul Grescoe states that the clichés about writers of romantic fiction are many, a predominant one being the assumption that “they are ill-educated secretaries or loveless spinsters who write to escape their humdrum lives” (127). Indeed, non-readers of romantic fiction sometimes describe romance readers as “lonely” women who are “missing” something in their lives. I do not, however, see myself or my participants as “clichés.” I read romances—specifically, romantic suspense—because I like to imagine myself having an adventure outside the realm of my everyday existence. Although my life can get hectic and my usual mantra is “peaceful is good,” I sometimes crave the thrill of another, more dangerous life but safely confined within three- to five-hundred pages. I say “safe” because I know that the heroine will overcome tremendous odds, and will come through, if not unscathed, at least having won more than she has lost. It is a validation that I can reach successful outcomes in my own ways.

Given all the negative stereotyping of both writers and readers of romance, it is ironic that writers of romances sometimes create characters—readers or writers of romance—who are denigrated by other characters. Meagan McKinney’s romantic suspense *In the Dark* (1998) is an example. The heroine, Alyn, learns of the disappearance of her wealthy aunt and visits the family estate in hope of finding clues to her aunt’s whereabouts. While searching her aunt’s bedroom, Alyn discovers a secret:

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8 A friend of mine who does not read romance fiction (and who shall remain nameless) stated that she believes that romance readers “have something missing” (emotionally, socially etc.) from their lives.
On all four walls of the enormous bedroom were narrow little bookshelves richly trimmed in walnut and gold. The shelves were filled to the breaking point with paperback Harlequin romances. . . . Her aunt’s yearning was so obvious, so astounding, so obsessive that it tore at Alyn. . . . It was bald and poignant. Sad. (60)

Why would a romance writer create this lonely romance reader? The aunt inevitably becomes the story’s victim. While the aunt’s romance reading doesn’t actually kill her, her “bald and poignant” yearning blinds her to danger. Paradoxically, Alyn must align herself with a dangerous man (the hero) in order to solve the mystery. In creating the aunt’s story, McKinney both exposes and reinforces the negative stereotypes about romance readers in the form of a cautionary tale. For example, if a woman is seduced by the kind of romance that fiction depicts—especially if she is middle-aged and unmarried—she may also be seduced by some form of danger or, worse, live an unfulfilled life. McKinney then overturns this same cautionary tale by having Alyn fall recklessly in love with a dangerous hero. Why? McKinney is articulating, in a self-reflexive manner, the general angst among romance readers of being “discovered” (and punished) by those who regard them as “missing” something in their lives. The aunt, after all, is lacking both emotional and social connections, and is physically “missing” as well, literally disappearing from the page.

Charlotte Vale Allen, in her novel *Dreaming in Color* (1993) dismisses writers of romantic fiction. Her character, Eva, is a very successful author of romances who supports her daughter and aunt through the sales of her commercial fiction. She has, however, published some literary work and Alma (Eva’s aunt), who represents a modernist perspective within the high-culture/low-culture binary, dismisses Eva’s romantic texts.
“Charlie and I think you should stop writing rubbish and get back to serious work.... He thinks you’re wasting your time and talent.... You loath it and it’s changing you. Since you started writing those books you’ve become hardened in a way that doesn’t suit you.” (143)

Allen’s meta-fictional narrative voices the very clichés about romance writers of which Grescoe speaks. Like McKinney’s, Allen’s deployment of these clichés is intended either as an absurd postmodern touch, or as a provocation of anxiety in the reader—probably both. Either way, they are examples of these authors having it both ways: they boldly proclaim that the romance aesthetic is alive and well and attuned to the latest literary trends, while cheekily disarming their critics by being the first among them.

Do romance readers read to vicariously enjoy adventures they are lacking in their own lives? Or do they read to validate their own personal view and experience of the world? If so, do they see any parallels between their own lives and those of romance characters? Whether they are romance writers, readers, or both, the “lonely woman” stereotype seems incongruent with the lives of my participants. I asked my participant Lesley, how closely, if at all, the lives of characters in romance novels reflect her life. She responded: “not very closely at all.” It depends, she added, on what she is reading. Would she like her personal experience to relate more closely to that of the characters? “Oh no! Those characters are going through horrible experiences. But it’s very interesting to read. I think it would be very uncomfortable to live.” Lesley is quick to distance her life experience from the content of the romantic mysteries she prefers by claiming that the only way her life reflects anything related to them is in her practice of criminal law. Ironically, earlier in the interview, she had described a story inspired by an experience of a colleague:
I remember a short story I wrote in an afternoon after one of my colleagues dumped on me that his wife had just left him for another man. He was totally devastated. I was just feeling horrible for him. There was nothing I could do to help him. I took on his pain. And I wrote a short story with a happy ending where the wife leaves the husband for another man. It helped me deal with it. I think that’s one of the reasons why my stuff tends to be quite dark and deals with realistic issues. Those are things that I struggle with.

Lesley struggles with real-life issues and confronts them in her writing. She manipulates them by creating situations in which there can be a positive outcome. While Lesley doesn’t acknowledge her life as similar to characters’ lives, she does recognize that her work life inspires her writing and helps her to reconcile distressing situations. Sandra had a similar response. When asked how closely characters’ lives reflect her experience, she stated, “Not at all, but it would be nice to have more excitement in life”—this from a woman who travels extensively on lecture tours about her work!

Lesley and Sandra may well have experienced my question negatively. In the current climate of opinion about romantic fiction, to ask a romance reader how closely the characters’ lives reflect their own is a little like asking if her life is a soap opera, with all that this implies, such as “you can’t get your life together” or “you are a drama queen and therefore should not to be taken seriously.” Lesley and Sandra tend to downplay the drama, both positive and negative, in their own lives, perhaps as a way of distancing themselves from what they fear their reading habits say about them.

Maria spoke about a novel that made a huge impact on her as she was growing up. *Papa’s Wife* is about a woman who works as a housekeeper for a man: she ends up marrying him, changing religions, and moving to a different country to be with him. Maria’s grandmother read her this book, and Maria actually used it for several book reports in high school. In many ways, this novel reflected her grandmother’s life. Thus,
Maria’s response to my question about characters’ lives reflecting readers’ lives was puzzling at first, yet ultimately consistent with the responses of Lesley and Sandra:

Maria: I don’t think they really reflect my experiences at all. I haven’t had the same degree of trauma that most of the heroines in romance novels have had. [LAUGHTER] I don’t even come close. I think they reflect some of my feelings, you know, the concern and jealousy and that kind of thing. But, no, for the most part I don’t think they reflect my experiences.

MG: I’m just thinking back to your grandmother where you said that you thought that one particular book is something that touched her on a very personal level.

Maria: That’s true, that’s true. That’s right and maybe that’s why I remember it so well and why I still have a copy of it. That’s true. That one, I think, speaks to some part of my family history that I’m really curious about and that I never had the opportunity or the bravery—my grandmother was a fairly intimidating woman—to ask bluntly, "why did you convert from Judaism to Christianity?"

Ultimately, Maria realized that there were similarities between the fictional woman’s life and that of her grandmother. Maria in a sense “owned” the story because it is linked closely to that of her family. In making this connection, Maria is able to identify other elements of romantic fiction she enjoys. What particularly resonates for her are the themes of friendship between women in certain stories, and an emotional connection to characters’ feelings of loss:

... I like The Ranch and the friendship among the women, because I do think I relate to the loyalty that friends show each other. I think I can relate to some of the broader themes that are brought out in the romance novels. I think I’ve felt the loss. What they do in the book is they take that sense of loss and exaggerate it, magnify it.

Maria sees the experiences of the characters as extreme and excessive—in a word, melodramatic—but the feelings resonate with her, particularly the feelings of loss. This phenomenon has not gone unrecognized by feminist theorists and critics of women’s preferred forms of popular culture. Indeed, the feminist reworking of Raymond
Williams’ idea of the “structure of feeling” acknowledges the cultural competency of women—their ability to project themselves into the melodramatic imagination, to recognize an emotional structure in the text which is felt as “real” and which makes sense to them (Thornham 111). And yet, as Rita Felski points out, the “feelings” evoked by romances are a primary reason for their bad reputation. Quoting cultural critic Gillo Dorfles, Felski writes that

“every ambiguous, false, tearful, emotional exaggeration brings about that typically kitsch attitude which could be defined as ‘sentimentality.’” These pejorative connotations of sentimentality, defined as “emotional weakness, mawkish tenderness .n.n. nursing of the emotions,” (Concise Oxford Dictionary) are of course a modern phenomenon. Like “romantic,” to which it is closely allied, “sentimental” has come to denote a range of cultural responses considered embarrassing and outmoded, rendered anachronistic by the ironic consciousness characteristic of the modern age. The devaluation of the term has been accompanied by its feminisation—the “man of feeling” was a commonplace figure of the eighteenth-century novel, and the identification with sentimentality and associated phenomena such as romance and escapism reveals as its implicit referent those texts consumed primarily by women. (Felski np.)

The very traits of sentimentality and “feeling” that mark romantic fiction as “embarrassing” are the traits that Maria and other readers find important and compelling. Their cultural competency goes unrecognized by modernism, which has much to answer for. For implicit in this passage is a theme explored in full by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar: they assert that modernism, which demoted romantic fiction to the wrong side of the high-culture/low-culture binary, was “a reaction-formation against the rise of literary women [which] became not just a theme in modernist writing but a motive for modernism” (156). In Gilbert and Gubar’s view, modernism was by and large “a men’s club.” Insofar as postmodernism is an attempt to deconstruct the high-culture/low-culture
binary, it is also an attempt to expose the masculinist assumptions within which this binary is grounded.

My participant, Heather, sees herself as an independent, strong person. She interprets her experiences about romance novels from that positive, personal level: “I don’t have the man who comes in and saves my life or whatever—completes things or takes over. Because that’s not the way my life is.” Heather identifies closely with the heroine of romance—not with her traumatic experiences or extravagant adventures, but with the quality of her character. She identifies with the strong, independent, assertive heroine who validates Heather’s image of herself. She rejects the man-to-the-rescue story line, both in her personal life and in the texts she chooses to read.

Judy’s expressions are similar to Heather’s, but also involve her perspective as a writer:

I often read and write to have experiences that aren’t my own. One of the things I like best about writing is the ability to explore other types of lives and other situations, but I still identify with characters I read so there still has to be enough personality traits there that fit mine. . . . Those sorts of things I still find in both the male and female characters in the romances. It is not necessarily her characters’ lives with which Judy identifies but rather, their positive character traits: loyalty, determination, the belief that you fight for what you think is right. Additionally, she enjoys both reading and writing about women’s lives and careers that are a little different from the mainstream: “I often choose occupations for my characters which are different. They also involve a heck of a lot of research. I wrote about a hero who was an air traffic controller and a woman who was a hot air balloon pilot. I got to go in the tower at the airport here and go on a balloon ride so I could find out more about it.” Writing her characters’ experiences is enjoyable for Judy, particularly
when her research offers her new experiences. When reading, however, it is the heroines’ characteristics with which she identifies—loyalty, determination, moral courage.

Ien Ang notes in her critique of Janice Radway’s landmark study of romance readers that Radway neglected the topic of what is pleasurable about the pleasure of romance reading (quoted in Thornham 108). What my study reveals is that the qualities that characterize romance heroines and romantic fiction’s validation of feeling are paramount pleasures that cut across both reading and writing activities. If my participants occasionally have lives that mirror characters’ lives in romances, they do not want to acknowledge it. As Lesley states, the characters often suffer horrible experiences that would be very uncomfortable to live. But neither are these romance readers “lonely” women with minimal lives whose sole reason for choosing romances is escape and vicarious adventure. Most are in relationships that they claim to enjoy. I thus needed to examine how the heroes of romantic fiction measure up to my participants’ “significant others.”

**Romance Heroes versus Real-Life Partners**

Reading romances in the seventies and early eighties influenced what I (unconsciously) looked for in a real-life partner. I would choose a novel knowing that the worst man in the story—the alpha male—would be the hero. The alpha-male hero would appear to hold dark secrets. The hero would treat the heroine badly, but all the while the sexual tension between the couple would grow. Eventually a situation would arise to turn the cool, aloof hero into a nurturing lover of the heroine. Tania Modleski states that male characters in romances, while treating the heroines badly, are nevertheless continually
thinking about them. She suggests that this is every woman’s fantasy, and that it is a way of “evening things up” between men and women (16). While this formula was predominant in historical romantic fiction, it was also a major theme in contemporary romance of the sixties and seventies.

This archetype became a code for romantic fiction readers. The bad boy, alpha male was really—deep down—a good man. Often the “dark secrets” he withheld had to do with information he had about another potential suitor for the heroine. This rival for the heroine’s love is eventually revealed as the one with the bad moral character. My young self bought into that twisted version of the Two-Suitor convention.9 In my teenage years I shunned many truly worthy young men in favor of “bad boys.” According to critic Jeanne Dubino, I was not alone:

The romantic narrative demonstrates that a woman must learn to trust her man and to believe that he loves her deeply even in the face of massive evidence to the contrary. In learning how to read male behavior from the romance, a woman insulates herself from the need that such behavior must change (108).

I was very curious about how my participants read and interpret male characters in romance novels, and how this interpretation translates into their own lives. Did they develop dysfunctional behaviors in their youth? Do they find that romance heroes influence what they look for in real life partners? If so, in what ways?

My participants’ responses varied. All, however, were very adamant about a particular issue: none would read a novel with an alpha-male hero, and would leave unfinished a book depicting sexual aggression or violence on the part of the hero. Maria is especially forceful in her expression of repugnance:

9 In courtship novels, the heroine loses or rejects one suitor, only to marry someone who is more admirable and socially acceptable.
What really bothers me is when they do sexual violence and then the victim ultimately falls in love with the aggressor. . . . I hate that rape fantasy shit! I can’t stand it, first of all because it’s just false. When you talk to rape victims this is not an experience that is reflected in the realities of their lives. I find it offensive, and I also find it dangerous because rape and sexual assault is so prevalent. Judith Krantz does that—women are reading this crap. And one in nine are raped. If you are one of the ones raped and you get thinking about it and have this guilt. I absolutely hate that twist and I won’t read a book that does that.

I mentioned to Maria that the dark, brooding, nasty character is common in historical romance, and he inevitably turns out to be the one that the heroine is going to love.

Maria responded that this sort of plot justifies violence: “It takes . . . away from looking at [violence] in a systematic way. It individualizes it. It excuses it because good is going to come of it—because you’ll fall in love with this beast.” While it is true that the romantic suspense novel continues to evolve to contain progressively more violence and bloodshed, the heroes and heroines perpetrate none of this mayhem; crossing that line would be completely unacceptable to my participants.

Maria is clear about what she dislikes in a romance hero. But does she think that those she finds attractive influence what she would find appealing in her own partner?

“Oh yeah,” she replies: “My husband hates it when he sees me pull out a Danielle Steele. It’s like ‘oh shit . . .’” Maria continues:

You want to have that romance. And when we first met we truly did have it. . . . It was so positive. It still is. I really have a very, very good marriage. But like I said, you move from a phase of that romantic attraction and excitement to a sense of security and comfort and trust that I would not trade for the world. But sometimes I really miss the sense of excitement . . . when you see each other for the first time that day, the first words out of your mouth aren’t “Ok did the plumber come?” So when I read romance novels or see a romantic movie I harken back to wanting that kind of consistent pleasure. And I think he feels it too. He just feels that it’s more incumbent upon him to create that atmosphere.
It’s not the hero per se but rather, the romance between hero and heroine that attracts Maria. And her husband correctly senses that it is not another hero she wants, but the romantic excitement.

Lesley, like Maria, strongly rejects the alpha-male hero. While Lesley does compare fictional heroes with her husband, it is in terms of both “strengths and flaws.”

When you read a romance you are in a sense taking on the hero as a potential partner in your mind, so you do notice their strengths and their flaws. . . . I guess that’s why I don’t care for historicals with these real overbearing nasty males. I just can’t relate to them at all. I just think—why would anybody want anything to do with someone so miserable and so nasty.

Alpha-male heroes, like Jane Austen’s Mister Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, were once prominent in historical romantic fiction. However, their arrogant, controlling, and secretive nature is repugnant not just to Lesley but to all of my participants. Yet Lesley recognizes that all characters must have both flaws and strengths in order to be truly interesting. For example, the juxtaposition of a hero who is a rule-breaking military rogue with the delinquent teen he is trying to mentor, exposes a man who may be self-centered and arrogant, but who accepts difficult challenges, and is committed, loyal, and caring when the need arises. (Evolving representations of gender are discussed in Chapter 5.)

Heather finds that rather than romance heroes influencing what she wants in a partner, the opposite is true. Her husband’s characteristics influence what she admires in a hero: “There are probably some things that I see in my husband that I see in the partners in the romance novels, and that is being a sensitive person.” Heather feels that what she enjoys in her marriage is nicely in sync with the relationships she reads. Similarly, Jenny expresses the ways that romance novels reflect the relationship she has with her husband. “One of the things that I would like them to reflect—and they generally do—is the
potential for two people to have a long-term, positive, committed, sharing relationship. I’m not allowed to tell tales on my husband but I am seldom bored in any room in the house.” For Jenny, the relationship between hero and heroine is validating, and she feels that they portray what is possible in relationships—most particularly her own.

Judy states that when she was young, reading about romance heroes sometimes influenced her choices in partners. Occasionally, however, it would be the other way around: “I was reading one of Kathleen Woodiwiss’ books and I was seeing that the hero in the book I was reading had similar traits to those of the guy I was living with.”

She continues:

I don’t think romances would make a woman dissatisfied with what she has or would cause her to have an unrealistic expectation of what she might get if she is not yet in a permanent relationship. They are fantasy to some degree. They certainly may seem realistic but what really comes through to me is the fact that these people love each other enough to work to overcome any conflicts they have. I would certainly look for that in a partner.

Judy has been married for twenty-two years and claims that while she and her husband have certainly had conflicts and bad times, they share a particular view: “Yeah, I might have to compromise a bit on my own individual needs but it’s worth it for the sake of the relationship’s needs.” Judy believes that this is something that romances demonstrate, and she sees it as positive.

Leslie Rabine maintains that romance readers, believing that their mates lack nurturing characteristics, see romantic fiction as modeling a possibility for change in real-life relationships (1985). This theory is inconsistent with what I found with most of my participants. For example, Anne is a reader of Dorothy Sayers’ romantic mysteries—novels that began as popular fiction but which are now treated as classics by many
critics of British literature. When, in the context of Sayer's *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937), I asked Anne a question about her admiration for Lord Peter and Harriet's relationship—if and how such admiration influences what she looks for in a partner—Anne replied:

I would suggest that it's the other around. I was attracted to Peter and Harriet, who are mystery solvers—who over the course of four books meet, fall in love—and that's why I read those four books. I like them because they were already what I wanted. It wasn't that I met them and went "oh gosh, I wish I had that."

When asked how realistic that might be, Anne replied: “Their kind of relationship was already the kind of relationship my parents have so I’ve already seen it in real life, so I know it does occur. So I know these things are possible.” Anne’s parents have been married for forty-five “very good years” and are still “gaga over each other.” Echoing Heather, Anne claims that real life—in this case her parents’ bond—determines what relationships she likes to read in romance. She emphasizes that what she admires about Harriet and Peter is the quality of the interaction between them. This is not fantasy, Anne claims, because such interaction is alive in her parents’ marriage.

Sandra, as with so many of my other participants, values romances because the theme of successful relationships is dominant: “I think sometimes what they are is a reminder not to take for granted what you’ve got that’s good. A lot of the focus is on human relationships, and most other novels don’t focus on that in the same way. . . . The focus in romance novels is on relationships.” She makes connections between romance relationships and real-life ones, not in terms of what hers are lacking, but in terms of what she has and what she wants to continue to appreciate about them—a loyal and attentive partner / lover, a good father to her children, and so on.
While all of my research subjects read romance because they enjoy the romantic attraction and excitement between the heroine and hero, of utmost importance is the quality of the relationship. Rather than undermine my participants' current relationships, the novels they read reinforce the importance of their own personal relationships with their partners. This is a far cry from the stereotypes of readers and writers of romantic fiction that emerge in many of the most well-regarded studies of the romance—even some by feminist researchers. This may have something to do with the relative maturity of the subjects in my sample. This raises the question of how the age difference between middle-aged readers and youthful romance heroines affects the reading experience of feminists. These are subjects discussed in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5
BETWEEN THE SHEETS:
CAN FEMINIST READERS FIND SATISFACTION
IN THE PAGES OF ROMANCE FICTION?

Introduction

The 1980s and 1990s were decades of turmoil and conflict for writers, critics, publishers, and English departments across North America. The issues were diversity and difference. In the American academy, in a climate of intense “political correctness” backlash, the canon wars raged:

For those speaking in defense of what in the American context has been called “multiculturalism” (an inclusive curriculum that speaks to all forms of diversity—including racial, ethnic, gender, religious, and class differences), there is considerable irony in the self-portrayal by right-wing PC critics as “defenders of freedom of speech.” Such critics generally represent the constituency of white, male, privileged authors whose writings and teaching have traditionally ignored or silenced the majority in the name of “universal truths.” (Stasiulis 1995 166).

The canon wars, fought on the terrain of race/class/gender, trickled down to the mainstream media through the American cult of intellectual celebrity featuring such critics as Edward Said, Henry Louis Gates, and bell hooks. As the American public perceived it, these were arguments about whether the literature of “high culture” could be expanded to include more titles by women and African-Americans—not whether the high-culture/low-culture binary was valid in the first place.

The Canadian academy had its own version of the culture wars, although nothing quite so raucous as those south of the border. In Canada, it was not conflict in the academy, but in the publishing industry which, in 1988, actually made it as far as the
Within creative writing, to be non-racist and even anti-racist for many white writers in the 1970s meant to write sensitively and evocatively about Native people and people of colour, whereas in the late 1980s and 1990s, this is being defined by some Native and racial minority writers as "usurping their voice," and appropriating their cultures, which constitutes a racist act. It was this latter definition of racism, reflected in a set of editorial decisions and anti-racist guidelines, which made the Women's Press the centre of the storm over question of authenticity in creative writing. (Stasiulis 1993 38)

These feminist growing-pains affected those writers recognized as contributing to high literary culture in Canada, writers such as Margaret Atwood, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Beth Cuthand, Betsy Warland—all potential recipients of Canada Council funding whose work is regularly addressed by academic critics and features on the reading lists of Canadian literature courses. Among those most injured was journalist/activist June Callwood accused in 1989 (in her capacity as incoming president of PEN, a group that supports the freedom of expression of writers) of racism for under-representing minority Canadian writers (CBC archives 1998).10 Perhaps because so little is expected of writers of mass-marketed romantic fiction, changes in the way these novels treat issues of difference and diversity have happened largely under the feminist critical radar.

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10 Callwood was again publicly accused of racism in 1991 for similar reasons by new board members of Nellie’s, one of Canada’s first women’s shelters co-founded by Callwood in 1973.
Because these changes are of central interest to me and of major importance in my research, the final phase of the interviews with my participants dealt with whether or not romance novels were perceived as incorporating discussions of race, class, and gender, or addressing social issues in some way. While my interviews yield valuable information—and certainly my discussions with editors, writers, and academics researching and teaching the romance fiction genre have expanded my knowledge—I find that using various texts from my own reading also offers unique insights that help me to fill in and round out this important section of my thesis.

In writing this chapter I attempted to present my findings in the same way that I had asked these questions of my participants. Topics such as gender representation, inclusion or exclusion of racial/cultural diversity, etcetera, are each significant on their own, but they are also interconnected. It is difficult to have a discussion of race and culture, for example, without discussing other social issues as well. Separation of the issues into manageable categories is somewhat artificial. That said, I will address the topics individually, overlapping some of the themes and specific examples. I examine the intersections of race, culture, gender, and socio-economic class, and also how factors such as age, ability, physical attractiveness, and contemporary social issues play important roles by their inclusion in, or absence from, popular romance fiction.

**The Color of Love: Race and Culture in Romance**

I don’t know if romance readers want to read about someone who’s struggling against . . . things like racism that they [romance readers] maybe have a hand in perpetuating. If I as a white reader discover how truly difficult it is for black women—if I’m reading about that . . . in a romance, which is an escape, where I just want to deal with pleasant feelings, I might feel guilty. . . . So even though I haven’t . . . done something purposely to a black person, my society has—a society that
nurtures me. I’m not sure all romance readers, especially category readers, would want to deal with [that] . . . (Judy)

Judy expresses her ambivalence about the possibility of racially diverse heroines and heroes in romantic fiction. In category/pulp romantic fiction, for example, the readers’ expectations are that reading will be an uncomplicated experience, devoid of thought-provoking concerns. Judy assumes that simply introducing “other than white” characters would impose a too-serious tone on romantic fiction. The stereotype of romantic fiction as ipso facto “not serious” haunts this view.

To follow that line of thinking further, I asked my participants if they had ever read romances in which the hero and/or heroine were of a different race or culture than their own. One of my participants (all are Caucasian and born in Canada) revealed that she reads romance novels in Spanish and set in Central America. She reads them in part to keep up her Spanish and in part because she enjoys the romance that one particular Spanish author writes. She states that even though machismo is rife in Central America, she doesn’t find that element in this author’s writing. Maria claims that her reading experience isn’t disrupted by having to wade through this notable cultural difference.

Another of my participants, Lesley, stated that she hasn’t encountered anything other than white heroes and heroines in the romances she has read, but she is also a fan of mystery and reads a lot of Tony Hillerman’s novels. She was quite emphatic that I needed to read his books, particularly because Hillerman’s protagonists are Native Americans. I asked her if that affected the reading experience for her in any way. Her reply was that she loved it, because for her it was a more enriched reading experience.

Sandra discussed a series of books entitled “The Whitehorn Series,” which features Native Americans as the exotic “noble savage.” Sandra claims that this
treatment of characters is a form of xenophobia: "You fear and you're [also] attracted to the unknown. I remember there were a great deal of unknowns that we were attracted to [in romance fiction]—the Greeks, the Italians, whatever. Now it's Aboriginals. . . . It's still fear of the 'other.'" Hillerman's protagonists, when compared to characters in the White Horn series, are, according to Lesley, described much more realistically and respectfully.

The remainder of my participants stated that they hadn't read romance novels with other than white protagonists. They were even somewhat startled by my question, and after a bit of discussion came to the conclusion that basically—in most parts of Canada, at least—romance is a very "white" genre. The fact that most of my participants were startled by this question is notable in itself. It suggests that the "presumption of whiteness" is very entrenched in those of us who are white, even those of us who feel we have a sense of social and political awareness. I then asked my participants if they thought the reading experience would be changed for them if the characters in romance novels were Aboriginal or Asian or African American. Some expressed concern about the possibility of their reading experience being blocked if they had to work hard at understanding cultural differences. They didn't want the easy narrative flow and the escapist quality to be interrupted, although they wanted the characters to be representative of "real" life.

At a Popular Culture Association conference session (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2002) attended by several African American editors, romance writers, and professors, I discussed my participants' view that romance is a very "white" genre. The conference attendees were surprised by the lack of minority representation in romance novels
marketed in Saskatchewan, and undertook a lively conversation about the prevalence of African American romance novels in the United States and even Canadian cities like Toronto.

Participating in this discussion was editor Vivian Stephens. At the time I was not aware of the major role Stephens has played in the romance publishing industry. Not only did she found the Romance Writers of America (RWA) in 1980, she also co-founded, with writer Rochelle Alers, Women Writers of Color Literary Society, and Romance Readers of Color. Stephens was one of the few black women in the industry in the 1980s when she became senior editor at Harlequin after leaving Dell. While an editor at Dell, she created “Ecstasy Romances,” which “placed the reader firmly in the bedroom and reputedly were the first to offer straightforward sexual consummation without the usual bothersome interruption” (Grescoe 188). Stephens attempted to publish ethnic romance fiction featuring black, Hispanic, and Chinese characters. Unfortunately, poor sales eradicated the endeavor. She then attempted to revive the project when she moved to Harlequin. Grescoe states that Stephens had author Jackie Weger change the characters in one manuscript from Southern whites to blacks. “The bastardized novel sold badly, as did a few later books written originally with black characters, but in recent years, ethnic heroes and heroines by black authors such as Sandra Kitt have reappeared to more success” (189).

I was surprised to read that Stephens had requested an author change the race of her characters. At the conference Stephens stated that she is opposed to white authors writing black characters. Author Rochelle Alers concurred, stating that white authors “don’t get the nuances right,” and often come off as disrespectful. Stephens, however,
cited one exception. She told me about a white woman who could only write well when she wrote about black characters. When this author attempted to write white characters, they were, in Stephens words, “lack-luster and flat.” Regardless of whether or not one views the position of Stephens and Alers as essentialist and therefore “wrong,” Stephens did create a market that acknowledged the desire for romantic fiction among women of color, thus reconstructing the commercial romance industry on their behalf.

During the conference session the women discussed how, in one week in 1992, several black authors made the *New York Times* Best Sellers’ Lists—among them Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Terry McMillan (*Waiting to Exhale*). “Black Sunday,” as they termed it, was the catalyst in propelling the careers of African American publishers, writers, and editors within the romantic fiction industry. Grescoe explains that this success prompted other publishers to wake up to the possibilities of novels for black readers.

Among them were Zebra, with its Arabesque series, and belatedly Harlequin. . . . In 1996—on the heels of several New York publishers identifying a Spanish-language fiction market in the United States—Harlequin also began publishing the sensual Desco and the milder Bianca romance series aimed at the nearly 10 million American Hispanic women aged 15 and over. (Grescoe 279)

Arabesque produced two black titles per month, which they claim was a popular fiction explosion for readers and writers. These novels featured middle-class lives, families, and values, and supposedly shattered myths and stereotypes about African-Americans. Black women were finally capitalizing on the romance industry. Alers, in describing her success, used terms like “black love is black wealth” and “black equals green.”

While particular lines of category romance were now catering to African-American and Hispanic women, the characters never ventured outside their own racial
and cultural groups, romantically speaking. Yet other forms of popular culture—film, mainstream fiction, and television programs like *The Jeffersons* (CBC 1975-85) for example, introduced inter-racial couples. One such film is *The Bodyguard* (1992), featuring Whitney Houston as the heroine and Kevin Costner as the hero. This movie caught the attention of both my participant Judy, and American cultural critic, bell hooks. Judy states:

A lot of the critics complained that it didn’t deal with the issue of their different races. In my mind that was good because why does race have to matter. I guess the critics were saying “well it does.” It certainly didn’t interfere with my enjoyment of the movie that they didn’t deal with that issue. I still found it believable ... that they would be attracted to each other and that race wouldn’t matter. I suspect that that’s one area that romance novels could start making a difference.

In Judy’s interpretation of *The Bodyguard*, there is no racial conflict or racist subtext. Hooks has a different interpretation. She states that Rachel (the heroine) is seen as seducing her bodyguard, whom she really doesn’t even know. Hooks believes that Rachel is portrayed as “slutty,” thus romance and true love are not considered a possibility for the couple—just the sex. “Rachel is portrayed as ‘exotic sex,’” hooks explains. “This is a stereotype that has been around since slavery days when decent white men were unable to resist the temptation of licentious black women.” *The Bodyguard*, claims hooks, seduces audiences “with the promises of a fulfilling romance between a white male and a black female only then to gaslight us by telling us that the relationship is doomed.” In hooks’ view, white supremacists are validated and black nationalists who condemn inter-racial relationships are also satisfied, “but the rest of us are left simply wondering why this love cannot be realized” (1994 431).
Why indeed? It is becoming more common for writers of mainstream romance fiction to present racially/culturally diverse romantic couples. I have previously cited examples of Karen Harper’s Amish Leah Kurtz and Italian Dr. Mark Morelli; of Sue Kellerman’s white Jewish Police Officer Cindy Decker and Ethiopian-born nurse Coby. Author Suzanne Brockmann has written “two series of romance novels featuring Navy SEAL teams” which are “widely popular among Navy SEALS (“Writers Insist . . . ,” July 31 2006). According to Nicole Kennedy, quoted in The Star Phoenix, Brockmann is credited for a sharp increase in the number of men who read romance—reportedly 22% of readers in 2004 (July 31 2006). Brockmann’s Gone Too Far (2004) is a further example of how far romantic fiction can successfully incorporate race and culture from many perspectives. We are introduced to a young white boy, Sam, and his black best friend, Noah. Sam is physically punished by his alcoholic, abusive, racist father for his friendship with Noah. By contrast, Sam is embraced by Noah’s grandfather Walt, and Noah’s white step-grandmother, Dot. Walt and Dot, who met while serving in the Air Force during World War Two, married in the 1950s after the death of Walt’s first wife. As an inter-racial couple in the southern United States, Walt and Dot had been victims of many acts of hate. Now grown, Sam is an agent with the FBI, and in love with Alyssa Locke, fellow agent and a woman of color. Sam reports to Max Bhagat, a second generation American whose parents had emigrated from India. Max is a remarkable racial choice to head this FBI counterterrorist unit in a post-September 11 America. As a romantic suspense novelist, Brockmann backs away from nothing when it comes to racial, gender, or social issues. She is one among many authors presenting multi-faceted, racially diverse couples as characters.
Overall, my participants welcome this growth in the romance genre and view it as feminist. They reiterated, each in her own way, that the experience of reading romances should be “real” and characters should reflect real people in our lives whether they be physically challenged, ordinary looking as opposed to beautiful, black, Middle Eastern, or white. They expressed a sense that fiction—even romance fiction—should be inclusive of the diversity that we experience in our everyday lives.

Transcendence of Traditional Gender Roles

“You have no idea how much it means to me to know you’re here to watch out for me, not use me. I guess that’s why I feel safe with you.”

(Dailey, Illusions, 1997 n.p.)

These lines represent every feminists’ rationale for avoiding—or being embarrassed by—romantic fiction. We imagine a starry-eyed heroine gazing at a tall, dark, handsome hero who has saved her from a serial murderer or killed a spider in her bathtub. Taken out of context, we cannot know the exact circumstances. We surmise that the hero, as well as being brave, must also be virtuous: he doesn’t expect sex as a reward; he is there to watch out for her. It is almost impossible to read this scrap of dialogue without assigning “female” to the speaker and “male” to her audience. But what happens if this is a male character speaking to a female? It interrupts expectations—particularly if the reader is unfamiliar with romantic fiction’s transitioning gender roles in recent years. In fact, in this passage from Janet Dailey’s Illusions, the speaker is Luke, who is being stalked by an ex-girlfriend who has just tried to shoot him. Thanks to the heroine Delany, a security expert hired to protect Luke, he has quite literally dodged a bullet. Scenarios like this one are becoming more common in contemporary romantic fiction—those in which heroines are less likely to be rescued and more likely to be in the thick of things.
Contemporary heroines are often in “rescuer” positions, such as law enforcement officers, doctors, or lawyers, where their training and skills allow them a certain amount of power.

Karen Harper’s *Dark Angel* (1997) presents us with a remarkable heroine. Leah Kurtz is Amish. She is direct, unaffected, and has some very practical, if not technological skills. Leah has the inquisitive mind of a researcher and scholar, and the social intelligence to comprehend subtleties in both Amish and English-speaking cultures. She has a keen insight into how “the English” view the Amish as naïve and even backward. In playing to these stereotypes, Leah is privy to a lot more information than she would otherwise be. Leah is not the hyper-feminized romance heroine. Unlike traditional romance heroines, she downplays her attractiveness. Her love interest is an Italian doctor researching genetic disorders that have a high occurrence rate among the Amish. Dr. Morelli is not Amish: his “outsider” status creates problems for Leah, both socially and romantically. But Leah must collaborate with him in order to solve the disappearance of Amish children, one of whom is Leah’s adoptive daughter. Leah’s ethics, inner strength, and intelligence are the main attractions for Dr. Morelli. These qualities are the ones my participants say they admire in a heroine. As Judy states: “I’m not a wimpy woman and I don’t want to read about wimpy women.”

If heroines have evolved to become independent, multi-faceted individuals, heroes have evolved even more radically. A case in point is Coby, the hero of Faye Kellerman’s *Street Dreams* (2004). Coby, who is black, has been in the United States for only eight years after emigrating from Ethiopia. The fact that he is also Jewish had marginalized him and his family in their homeland. Two younger siblings died as a result
of civil war. Coby is a registered nurse specializing in pediatrics, which is where he meets his love interest, Officer Cindy Decker, who has rescued a baby from a dumpster. Coby declares that working with babies is an affirmation of life.

In other words, Coby is not the stereotypical macho hero. He works at a career traditionally coded “female,” whereas his girlfriend works in a traditionally male-dominated profession. Coby and Cindy are each comfortable with that. Coby occupies various positions in terms of geography, ethnicity, religion, and gender, and this allows him a more insightful worldview: “it is good to move in many worlds,” he claims. This hero is intelligent, wise, thoughtful, and spiritual. Although he lives on the margins, he is self-assured and at peace with himself, and this makes him a very attractive and appealing hero. In keeping with his caretaking profession perhaps, conflict is created by Coby’s desire to “protect” Cindy when the couple is being shot at. He momentarily sees Cindy as the woman he cares about, not the trained police officer.

Characters like Coby are quickly becoming typical. Heroes in romance novels—and all areas of popular culture—are evolving to become sensitive, caring, thoughtful men. Therefore, in this era of patriarchal revival, backlash is inevitable. Actor Johnny Messner, star of the movie Anaconda (1997), is (self) described as the “quintessential macho male.” He states that he hopes to fill the void left by the disappearing macho leading man. Orlando Bloom, who portrayed the beautiful elf Legolass in The Lord of the Rings (2001), is “a hermaphrodite,” claims Messner: “Right now, what I feel in Hollywood is that they’re so pretty and dainty and so metro that it’s repulsive to me!” This may only be posturing for the purpose of promoting his preferred style. But what is his definition of a “real man”? He claims to want people to look at
him and say, “Now, there’s a guy that can go to her car and fix her transmission and ride a horse and take a motorcycle apart” (Portman, Star Phoenix 2004). We’re not sure who the “her” is, but Messner’s language is redolent with sexual innuendo. “Fixing” her transmission connotes taking her (car?) from first gear to fourth very quickly—in other words, sexually arousing her very quickly. Messner suggests that riding horses is masculine sport. In fact, riding classes and equestrian events are overwhelmingly attended by girls and young women. However, controlling an unpredictable animal much larger than himself may be seen as masculine. For the Messners of our culture, when the signifiers of masculinity are co-opted by women, or have lost their macho significance and thus disappear, so does the macho man’s identity.

**Fat Heroines and Short Heroes: Imperfect Attraction**

During my time as a member of the Saskatchewan Romance Writers group, I became impressed by Lesley’s style of writing and by her subject matter. Lesley was continually challenging the boundaries of traditional romance plots with her darker subject matter and imperfect characters. One of her most memorable stories featured a blonde, chubby heroine—not the traditional blonde beauty. Some people in the writing group found that unacceptable. They insisted that a heroine, particularly in a romance-based story, could not be overweight. Yet the heroine and the story got my attention. I wanted to know more about this character—who she was as a person and how she functioned being less than perfect in her romantic fictional world.

Why did Lesley choose a less than physically “perfect” heroine? She states that when she reads a heroine or hero with a notable physical flaw—a contrast to traditional flawless romantic characters—she is drawn in to the story. Lesley anticipates a narrative
that will offer her a more challenging read. Her favorite author is Lois McMaster Bougould, who writes hard science fiction, fascinating stuff. She really goes into values. Her books have a strong romance subplot. . . . Science fiction allows one to explore world views and values in a way that you can’t in other fiction. One of the things that I particularly like is that her primary hero is a dwarf. This guy has got nothing going for him physically . . . but he’s got incredible character and drive. I found the dwarf very attractive.

Lesley finds these unusual characters especially appealing. On first glance he or she may not be the most alluring, but the reader comes to find them—with all their little quirks and physical differences—fascinating, even sexually attractive. “You’re drawn to their personality and their soul in a sense. . . . I find the dwarf incredibly attractive because it’s his mind and his drive and his intelligence that makes him so attractive.” We deconstructed the idea that sexual attraction—both in fiction and “real” life—is based largely on physicality, one’s physical attractiveness. Lesley explained that when a few “chinks” and “quirks” are thrown into the crafting of a character, one can “really discover who the person is.” For Lesley, that is the hallmark of excellent writing.

Judy explains that some of the most attractive men she has read are in Dick Frances thrillers. She states emphatically that these are not romances. “Even if the man does get together with a woman at the end there is very little romance in the book. But Frances’ characters are incredibly attractive.” I asked if they were physically attractive.

Not always, at least not for me because I tend to like big men and his men are often jockeys, so they’re small. But they’re very attractive because they are very noble. . . . They see a wrong and they realize they cannot live without trying to right it. They often put themselves in physical danger and have to sacrifice something in their lives but they are moral and just and loyal men and I think that’s extremely attractive to women readers.
As with Lesley and the dwarf in Bougould's book, Judy finds Dick Frances' heroes attractive because of their positive personality characteristics. These men seek justice, are loyal, are sometimes intellectual, and always honorable.

Characters with physical challenges are becoming more visible in all forms of popular culture, including television. Two programs in particular come to mind. *Sue Thomas, F.B. Eye* (PAX TV 2002) is based on the true story of Sue Thomas, who became deaf at eighteen months of age and worked for the FBI for three and a half years. The actor playing Sue (Deanne Bray) is herself deaf. The show portrays Thomas as a young woman working for the FBI. Similarly, *Blind Justice* (ABC 2005) features Jim Dunbar, a New York detective who has been blinded in a shootout. Rather than retire on a full pension, Jim has fought to stay on the job—and carry a loaded gun! While the "tone" of the shows is different—*Blind Justice* is more drama—there are several similarities. Both protagonists are in law enforcement. Sue and Jim both have guide dogs—one seeing-eye dog, the other a "hearing assist" dog. Both experience discrimination. Sometimes they make mistakes because of their disabilities but they each have their creative ways of compensating. While each episode presents new challenges, these characters prove themselves more than capable of flexibility and ingenuity. These television programs are different than textual popular fiction in that they don't have to solve larger issues such as discrimination and harassment by the end of an episode. In fact, these issues drive the plot for the entire season. By contrast, novels must, by the end of the book, resolve whatever issues have developed.

My participants have been finding physically imperfect, non-traditional characters in science fiction and mystery. But how does romance fiction compare? Imperfect
characters are still fairly rare, but they do exist. The tall, dark, handsome, strong, able-bodied male protagonist is getting some competition. Suzanne Kelman explains that author Margaret Moore has a hero in one of her books who has lost both an eye and a testicle but still manages to be “fairly chirpy” most of the time (Kelman 102). Clearly this hero has a lot going for him. Jenny discussed a book written a few years ago by Justine Davis: “The hero was paraplegic and had to find a way to come to terms with that—with his own worth. That was interesting. It showed the potential of human beings where they have a lot to offer other human beings in a romantic relationship.” Davis is requiring the reader to reflect on the meaning of “masculinity” in terms other than physical ability. The heroine must re-imagine what she finds desirable in a social, romantic, sexual partner. As with the heroine, Jenny was challenged to know the character—the person beyond the disability.

Davis is not alone in her re-construction of masculinity. Author Sandra Brown writes both romance fiction and romantic suspense. One of her most compelling heroes is Parker Evans in Envy. Parker is an anti-hero who, by traditional romance genre standards, is flawed both physically and emotionally. He is a vengeful man whose single purpose is to “bring down” his former best friend, Noah, the villain responsible for putting Parker in a wheelchair. Parker uses Noah’s wife Maris to lure Noah into exposing his many crimes. In a twist on the “two suitor convention” Maris is drawn to Parker, whom she finds simultaneously morally reprehensible and compellingly appealing, but not because of his physical appearance. When Maris examines Parker’s
scars for the first time, the reader does not get the description of the man as a Greek god.

In fact, it seems that Brown is attempting to repel the heroine, and thus the reader.

Shark attack was the first thing that came to mind. . . . Parker’s scars could be compared only to something that vicious. The worst of them was a hollow as large as her fist where a section of his quadriceps had been gouged out. From there a scar cut a gully half an inch wide down the entire length of his right thigh and curved around toward the back of his knee. On his lower legs was a network of crisscrossing scars, some raised and bumpy, while others looked like flat, shiny ribbons of plastic that had been stretched between puckered skin. His calves were disproportionately small and flaccid. He was missing the smallest two toes on his right foot. (401)

This description of Parker’s legs is in striking contrast to physical descriptions of able-bodied heroes who are generally depicted as well-toned and muscular. Physical scars, however, are not the most abhorrent aspect of Parker. He purposefully uses explicit and crude sexual slang when speaking to Maris. Despite this, she finds Parker attractive. In a conversation with her father, Maris explains:

“He’s wheelchair-bound. I didn’t learn that until I got there. At first I was shocked because when talking to him over the telephone, I got no indication that he was in anyway impaired, except when it came to manners. . . . I suppose it’s the potency of his personality that makes his disability seem not just inconsequential, but invisible. He’s got an extraordinary command of the language. Even his bawdy—make that crude—vocabulary is impressive. . . . People, especially women, would find him attractive no matter what his legs look like. He’s not handsome exactly, but he’s got an animal magnetism.” (160-61)

Parker appeals on a visceral level with his “potency of personality” and “animal magnetism.” His physical imperfections are balanced by his astuteness and robust sexual prowess (despite his physical disability). Parker is definitely the bad boy. To Maris—as a married woman—Parker is forbidden. But it is doubtful whether an able-bodied hero would have been able to get away with Parker’s vulgar behavior. While Parker’s
power—his sexuality and volatility—appears to be muted somewhat by his dependency on his wheelchair, his immobility in fact allows him to be more dangerous.

Television and film present imperfect characters more frequently and boldly than popular romance fiction. However, as demonstrated in the previous examples—works by Justine Davis, Margaret Moore, Sandra Brown—romance fiction has certainly been broadening the genre by presenting these kinds of heroines and heroes in the past ten years. Novelists have more to work with in terms of plot and characterization, and readers have a more exciting reading experience by exploring differences that make these characters both distinctive and attractive. Imperfect characters, whether they be chubby, short, deaf, or lacking the use of their legs, send a message that one has to be neither beautiful nor perfect—nor have a partner who is—in order to have a satisfying romantic and sexual relationship. These evolved characters reflect changing values in Western culture—values of inclusion—and certainly feminism has heavily influenced those values.

**Romance in (Postmodern) Middle-Age(s)**

Feminism has also made an impact on Western society’s changing perceptions of middle-aged women. Whereas they were once relegated to the very margins of society as drab and a-sexual non-entities, menopausal and post-menopausal women are now represented as being in an especially influential stage of life. *The Golden Girls*, a television series that ran from 1985–1992, contributed greatly to that trend. Based on the lives and interactions of four older women who have all been divorced/widowed, and are now roommates, the episodes have the women engaging in all aspects of contemporary urban life. Particularly highlighted are experiences of dating, romance, and sexuality. A more current example
emphasizing the influence of older women is the movie *Calendar Girls* (2003). The film is based on a true story about twelve members of the Women's Institute, a prim and proper local ladies' club, who want to raise money for a new charity. “They turn to their traditional annual calendar and give it a very untraditional twist. Behind the usual baked goods, the apple pressing, and the flower arrangements are the women—completely nude!”

My participants, all between the ages of thirty-five and fifty, while not yet as chronologically mature as Blanche, Sophia, Dorothy, or Rose, each expressed a preference for reading about heroines who were closer in age to themselves. Paul Grescoe states that in 1982, Dell Publishing had launched a new line of romance entitled “Second Chance at Love,” which sold 200,000 titles a month. Second Chance portrayed more heroines in their forties and fifties. Guidelines for handling sex scenes were much more liberal: “The hero and heroine make love even when unmarried, and with plenty of sensuous detail” (163). My participant Judy’s perception of the line was different: “it was about people who had broken up or had lost partners and were starting another relationship but they were often older women and men. And the line didn’t do all that well.” Judy’s experience is that heroines over thirty-five are not common. Others disagree.

Marsha Zinberg, an editor with Harlequin Enterprises, states that when she first started reading romance novels the age of the older heroine was twenty-six. “Now heroines in their mid-thirties and early forties are the norm” (Kelman 102). Sandra agrees that older heroines in romance fiction are more common.

You can see it creeping into the romance—the older woman. I’m not talking about sixty, but the fact that she can be forty and be romantic is
‘older woman’ compared to twenty-five years ago. But you can even see
the fifty-year-olds now. Their children are grown and either their
husbands have died . . . or they’ve been separated but now their kids have
grown.

Sandra explained that a woman in her forties doesn’t want to read about the romantic and
sexual adventures of couples in their late teens or early twenties. “Those are your kids.
You don’t want to read about your kids having sex!”

The issue of ages of heroines and heroes takes on another dimension when
thinking about what has been absent in romantic fiction—and also absent from
conversations with my participants. Conversations regarding age focus primarily on
the ages of heroines. As stated, we are now occasionally reading older heroines. In
discussing older heroines, however, we did not discuss the ages of the heroes with whom
they were romantically involved. The unquestioned assumption is that the heroes would
be close in age to, or older than, the heroines. Rarely are readers presented with
relationships in which the heroine is five or more years older than the hero. As
mentioned, my participants and I didn’t even broach this rather glaring absence during
our interviews. Even as feminist readers we have internalized romantic fiction’s social
mores about traditional heterosexual relationships in regard to age, which is understood
as younger woman/older man. While the older woman/younger man scenario is fairly
common in real life—I can think of at least a dozen such couples—this arrangement is
rarely represented in romantic fiction. In fact I only began thinking about the hero as
“younger man” while writing this section.

Only once have I come across “older woman / younger man” pairing, and that
was in Karen Robards’ *One Summer*. Robards creates a relationship between a female
teacher, Rachel, and Johnny, her former high school student. Johnny Harris (now almost
thirty) is home again “after a ten-year stretch in a federal prison for murder. Rachel has always believed in her former student’s innocence. But one thing has changed. The sullenly handsome boy she remembered is still sullen, still handsome, but no longer a boy” (3). The author uses the (former) relationship of teacher/student to connect her characters romantically.

Not only does Robards create a non-traditional age difference, she underlines it by introducing two contemporary social taboos. In widely publicized media stories we are aware of female teachers who have engaged in sexual relationships with under-aged male students—the Mary Kay Laterno case being one among several. Second, Robards is alluding to the contemporary phenomenon of women who befriend convicts (particularly murderers) and eventually marry them. A recent example would be that of the Menendez brothers, Lyle and Erik, who are incarcerated for killing their parents. In the last year one of the Menendez brothers was married in prison to a woman who began a correspondence with him while still married to someone else. The danger, or potential danger, in both fiction and real life heightens the sexual tension between the couple involved. Robards is an author who will integrate social taboos and challenge her readers. In the general context of age as an issue in romantic fiction, she has created a rare and bold coupling with Rachel and Johnny.

As many protagonists in contemporary romantic fiction are aging with many of their readers, the infotainment trend within the mass media has also contributed to the idea that romance is not just for the young. (Younger readers and lines targeting them are discussed in Chapter 2.) Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles are at odds with the fairy tale ideals of age, physical attractiveness, and social status for a romantic royal
couple. For baby boomers unhappy with their love lives, these two may well signify the hope that romance can happen in middle-age. Charles and Camilla offer an alternative to the traditional Cinderella plot for those boomers who feel that “true” romance has eluded them. Once portrayed by the media as adulterers and home-wreckers, Charles and Camilla are now represented as star-crossed lovers who, in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles—such as spouses, children, the Queen, and public opinion—are living proof that love conquers all. Describing Charles and Camilla as “Grumpy” and “Frumpy,” Elizabeth Payne states:

It was two surprisingly awkward, greying people doing something touching and refreshing in an embarrassing sort of way—publicly declaring their love for each other, warts and all. And years after the Charles and Diana fairy tale turned out to be make believe, Charles and Camilla seem to be on to the real thing—a post-modern fairy-tale. (*The Star Phoenix* 2005)

Romantically dissatisfied middle-aged boomers may look to Charles and Camilla as evidence that one’s soul mate can still be found in middle age. I have no doubt that authors of romantic fiction are presently working on variations of just such a plot. Perhaps *Second Chance at Love* will get a second chance.

**Reading Romance: A (Social) Class Issue**

Not all fictional romance couples are members of royal families. The vestiges of extreme class-defined characters (either very wealthy or very poor) are by and large found only in the romance subgenres of historical or Regency. In past decades the convention of the heroine “marrying up” cut across all subgenres of romance. That is rare in current romantic fiction, as the protagonists are most often of similar social class and financial means—often working class. Several of my participants noted that changes in the
significance of high/wealthy social status began in the mid-seventies, with those changes continuing through the 1980s and 1990s.

While fewer heroines and heroes are wealthy and privileged, fewer are poor. The poor are not romantic figures. Bell hooks, in discussing social attitudes about the poor as a social class, states:

the [black] poor were represented as predatory by the government, as wanting handouts rather than jobs. The poor were seen as using the resources of the more affluent to sustain their laziness and unproductive lifestyles. Negative stereotypes about the poor were deliberately evoked by politicians to diminish commitments to social welfare . . . . Hence it was deemed crucial for the survival of privileged classes to turn their backs on the poor. (Where We Stand: Class Matters 123)

Representations of poor people, regardless of race, are disturbing and uncomfortable, perhaps for the very reasons stated by hooks. In a documentary entitled People Like Us: Social Class in America (2001), a poverty-stricken (white) woman raising four sons in a trailer home in a rural community walks miles daily to her job cleaning toilets at the Burger King. She is assailed by shouts of “white trash” and “trailer trash” by contemptuous motorists. This haunting image is “voiced-over” by the commentator who explains that despite her difficulties, this woman and others like her “cling to the bottom rung of the social ladder.”

Undoubtedly, writers of romantic fiction bring their personal critiques and biases of social class into their stories. Author Kathleen Seidel states:

I have my moments of dissatisfaction, of course, but I have power and meaning. I do not lack self-esteem or identity. Granted not all women have living room window treatments that they like as much as mine. (Krentz 219)
Each time I read Seidel’s statement I am startled. The declaration about enviable draperies is a coded way (and ironically a not-so-subtle way) of flaunting her social status. Terms such as “power and meaning,” “self-esteem” and “identity” clash with the leap to her valuing of material goods. There is a sense that she is at once “snubbing her nose” and declaring her “value” by way of her (presumed) excellent taste and her financial status. That said, it is hard to imagine that Seidel’s class biases would not be imposed in her fiction.

Writers like Nora Roberts and Charlotte Vale Allen, on the other hand, offer multifaceted critiques of social class regarding protagonists. In *Dance Upon the Air* (2001), Roberts’ heroine, Nell, experiences shifting positions of social class.

Nell wore a simple cotton shirt over faded jeans. Her feet were comfortable in cheap white sneakers. Her only jewelry was an antique locket that had been her mother’s. . . . Once she had been considered a beauty, and had groomed herself accordingly. She dressed as she’d been told to dress, wearing sleek, sexy, sophisticated clothes selected by a man who claimed to love her above all things. She’d known the feel of silk against her skin, what it was to casually clasp diamonds around her throat. Helen Remington had known all the privileges of great wealth. And for three years had lived in fear and misery. (7-8)

Roberts takes the position that social class can be non-static. It can be navigated in terms of education and financial resources, even (for better or for worse) marriage and/or divorce. One can grow up working class yet have admittance to exclusive social networks through higher education, or “marrying money.” She acknowledges, however, that for women like Nell, privileged lifestyles can be only temporary when that link—the husband—is no longer in the picture.

The working class way of life that Nell has now assumed is presented as considerably more desirable and authentic. This is a trend that has been growing in the
romantic fiction genre, and more so since September 11th. Media heroes are firefighters, paramedics, soldiers (see Writers Insist . . . 2006) amongst others who “serve and protect.” Popular romance fiction romanticizes working class protagonists of both genders portraying them as genuine, trustworthy, and the “backbone of society” (Alvarez and Kolker, 2001).

Charlotte Vale Allen, in Dreaming in Color (1993) challenges her readers to consider assumptions and biases in regard to social class. Heroine Bobby, having run from an abusive husband, is employed as a home care aid for the aged Alma. Eva, Alma’s daughter, is critical of the identifiers of Bobby’s lower social status—bleached blonde hair, colloquial speech, even Bobby’s name.

“Do you suppose her real name is Roberta? Bobby is so… I don’t know. It’s so rural. . . . Bobby’s a name from the Appalachians or the Okefenokee Swamp.”

“Bitchy and elitist,” Alma accused.

“Both,” Eva agreed. “And I’m longing to do something about that hair.”

“Her hair has nothing to do with her capabilities,” Alma insisted.

Thinking aloud, Eva said, “It’s almost like a self-imposed class barrier: women defining themselves by their hair.” (62-63)

Eva articulates the ways in which North American culture assesses one’s social class. The formal “Roberta” suggests a higher social ranking than the informal “Bobby.” Additionally, the fact that Bobby is a victim of violence also defines her as less socially acceptable by Eva. Every class-encoded feature about Bobby is an irritation to Eva who has, until now, taken the security of her upper middle-class social status for granted. Bobby has fewer of the necessary material resources that would enable her to have
choices about the direction of her life. Allen, however, allows Bobby’s inner strength to take her to a place of safety in her life, indirectly stating that working class ethics are more valuable than elevated social status.

Unlike race/ethnicity, and (usually) gender, social class is somewhat alterable. Modern romances, however, are hailing the virtues of working-class protagonists living blue-collar lifestyles.

Social Issues in Romance Novels

Writers, editors, and publishers of romance fiction are united in their assertion that the responsibility of romantic fiction first and foremost is to entertain. Indeed, not one of my participants claimed that they read romance novels in order to be more informed about societal, religious, or political issues. Regardless, many authors incorporate discussions of contemporary social issues into their plots.

Suzanne Brockmann’s Gone Too Far (2003) addresses child abuse and neglect, alcoholism, racism, and terrorism. Nora Roberts’ Dance Upon the Air (2001) and Charlotte Vale Allen’s Dreaming in Color (1993) feature heroines who have been victims of domestic violence. Karen Harper’s Dark Harvest (2004) and Dark Angel (2005) enlighten readers about religious persecution, genetic disorders specific to the Amish, and Amish lives. Gwen Osborne, an American scholar, states that black romance sometimes discusses the effect of the foster care system on black children. These are just a very few examples. As a consumer of romantic fiction I have read plots that included subjects such as illness (mental and physical), sexual harassment, an assortment of illegal activities, unplanned pregnancies and so on. I, however, read a particular form of romance—romantic suspense—which may lend itself better to integrating social issues.
What were my participants finding? Jenny states that she doesn’t specifically seek out stories with social issues, but “they sometimes deal with social issues and I find that very satisfying.” She believes that mainstream fiction is more accommodating of the complex plots than the category fiction of Harlequin or Silhouette.

I don’t think you would see it in category to be honest. I’m not saying “no” for sure. But you would not see it in short category because there simply is not enough room to explore those issues. There is just enough room to explore the issues between the two individuals growing together and realizing their potential as partners.

Most of my participants agreed with Jenny. Lesley, however, has discovered authors who publish category romance fiction and always incorporate more complex subject matter.

Let me talk about Judith Bowen (Duncan) and her stuff. She deliberately takes on difficult social issues and so her books are dark, they’re realistic and they take on immense challenges. Imagine trying to have a heroine who is a prostitute!

Lesley states that she appreciates novelists who are willing to take on difficult issues. She also enjoys Regency fiction written by Kipling, Saskatchewan, author Mary Balogh. Regency has a rigid set of guidelines for their authors, forbidding sex for example, and the couple may only kiss on the last page. Lesley describes Balogh as a writer “who takes on every sacred cow and turns it on its head.”

[Balogh] has a book with an adulterous relationship. She has a book with a woman who has an affair with another man when her husband is still alive. She has a woman with an illegitimate child.

One of the books that she wrote started out with a virgin hero. Where do you ever find that in romance? She has had cases where the sex is lousy. Where do you ever find that?

Lesley explains that Balogh has a very large and loyal readership and thus has more latitude in terms of subject matter. While “lousy sex” may not be a social issue, it
certainly is a departure from the usual (often unrealistic) sexual encounters of traditional heroines and heroes.

Birth control and safe sex have become subjects of debate among writers and editors in the past decade. Writer Kathleen Seidel complains that editors insist it is irresponsible not to mention birth control.

No, many of us answered, it may be irresponsible not to practice birth control, but mentioning it in a work of fantasy read by adults is not a necessary duty. My readers know where babies come from. (Krentz 218–219)

Despite Seidel's resistance, the growing prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, particularly AIDS, has garnered further insistence on fictional couples at least thinking about safe sex. More often than not, when a couple is about to have sexual intercourse they will pause and grab a condom. Spontaneous, unplanned, and unprotected sexual encounters are much less frequent. The following excerpt is from Susan Sloan's *An Isolated Incident*. (1998) Ruban is about to have a second date with a new woman.

Ruban's fifteen-year-old daughter is making sure that her father understands his resulting responsibilities:

(Ruban states:) “Ginger's, uh, invited me to her place.”

. . . . The fifteen-year-old digested that bit of information for a moment.

“In that case,” she said, “be sure and take a condom with you.” Had Ruben's skin been a shade or two lighter, the hot flush that suddenly flooded his face and spread down his neck would have been a lot more visible. His discomfort was in part because this was not exactly the kind of conversation he thought appropriate to be having with his teenage daughter, but mostly because the same thought had already occurred to him. (pp.198-99)

Safe sex, particularly using condoms, is portrayed as a personally and socially responsible action. Implicit within this scene is the message that parents and teens should be openly discussing such topics, but in the context of relevance to the teen. The issue of
safe sex being practiced in contemporary romantic fiction follows the social norms of western culture.

Occasionally, however, a socially aware author will take the lead in exposing less-widely “talked about” topics. In my reading of romantic suspense, I have found that it is common for the authors to place characters in situations that are a topic of media attention in the “real” world. In the past year or two the media spotlight has been on polygamous communities. Adolescent girls’ being coerced and even forced into “plural” marriages with much older men is just one problem. Women who have escaped polygamous communities are making allegations of incest and sexual abuse. There is also “the Lost Boys” phenomenon—male teens who have been “run out of town” to ensure that the older males have uncontested access to the young women.

“Celestial love,” as polygamous marriage is termed by its proponents, has been the subject of newspaper reports, documentaries, and even television’s Dr. Phil, who sent his son Jay into a polygamous community in order to get interviews. (Jay, incidentally, is fast becoming the new Geraldo Rivera11 positioning himself in potentially dangerous situations and squarely in front of the camera.) Reports in Canadian news media state that Bountiful, a polygamous community in British Columbia, has a teen pregnancy rate up to seven times higher than the rest of the province.

HBO has aired a series entitled Big Love, which presents a satirical view of a suburban polygamous family. According to the program’s co-creators Olsen and Sheffer, the show is “the perfect template through which to survey modern marriage and the

11 Rivera is a journalist, war correspondent, and former talk show host known for exploiting daring / dangerous media opportunities. http://www.geraldo.com/
family" (*Macleans* 2006). Journalist Wendy Dennis discusses her take on “deeply disturbing” elements of the program’s message:

Aside from the sheer lunacy of suggesting that you can treat polygamy neutrally . . . you’d have to have a chip missing to think that the ideal hook to discuss the modern family is an illegal, regressive practice associated with rampant spousal and sexual abuse, where the grey beards get first dibs on the hotties by running the young men out of town . . . . Poor sexy Bill (the protagonist)—so many vaginas, so little time. (*Macleans* 2006)

In 2002, two years prior to the growing media attention, Jasmine Cresswell published *The Third Wife*. Protagonist (and heroine) Anna Langtry is forced to marry her stepfather’s brother on the day of her seventeenth birthday. Cresswell draws attention to the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness of this girl, whose own mother is complicit in the arrangements:

For a moment Anna considered giving up her pretense and just appealing flat out for her mom’s help, but she quickly gave up on that idea. Relying on her mom would be dangerous. Real dangerous. If Betty Jean let her down—and she almost certainly would—then all the careful playacting Anna had done for the past six weeks would be wasted. Six weeks of pretending that she was looking forward to marrying Caleb Welks. . . . Six weeks of pretending that she was ready to submit, humbly and dutifully, to God’s will. Anna never doubted that her mom loved her, but love wasn’t enough to ensure that Betty Jean would be on her side, much less stand up for her. Ray had her mom so much under his thumb that she mostly didn’t have a mind of her own anymore . . . . Anna wished her mom could be stronger. The fragile person Betty Jean had become couldn’t function without Ray to tell her what she must do and how she must think. And, of course, Ray always told Betty Jean it was her God-given duty to think just like him. (7-9)

Anna has created an elaborate plan to run away on the night of her wedding, but its success is dependant on others believing she wants to marry. She steals Caleb’s car and flees to Denver, unknowingly pregnant after being forced to have sex.
The Third Wife contends with the psychological and physical control used by some patriarchal religious leaders to manipulate and influence the members of their religious communities—in this case, isolated polygamous communities. While the fictional novel may not change the reality of the lives of these people, the heroine Anna signifies hope and agency, as she returns years later to exact justice. Writer Jasmine Cresswell exposed the horrors of polygamy before mainstream media brought it to the public.

Cresswell is the perfect example of how present-day romantic fiction authors incorporate contemporary social issues. She is in good company, with writers such as Allen, Brockmann, Harper, McKinney, and Roberts—to name just a few—who are reconstructing romance with attention to race, gender, social class, and certainly in terms of the inclusion of contemporary social issues. As my participant Lesley states, “Writing is a fabulous tool in terms of expressing and exploring your world view and your values. And why not? Why aren’t more feminists writing and expressing their point of view to women [in romantic fiction]? . . . I see romance writing as a real opportunity for feminism and I think it’s really a shame that [some] feminists have rejected it.”
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION:
AFFIRMATIONS, SURPRISES, AND HAPPY ENDINGS

“My name is Marie and I have been reading romance novels for approximately thirty-five years.” The serious looking group, mostly women reply “Hi Marie.” I have taken the first step in this twelve-step program—admitting my “problem.” But the audience, usually supportive and non-judgmental, is not prepared for the next admission. “I’m also a feminist.” The crowd gasps.

The terms “feminist woman” and “romance reader” do not easily occupy the same space, particularly in an academic setting. Indeed, mention of my research to others on campus garnered the assumption that my take (as a feminist) on contemporary romance fiction would be a negative one. Feminist readers of romance are caught between negative stereotypes—about feminists and about romance readers. As feminists we are perceived as strident, critical, anti-“man.” As romance readers we are unintellectual dupes of patriarchy. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore that uneasy space by examining the experiences of women who identify as feminists and who read romantic fiction, with the hope that an analytical challenge to the un-nuanced and stereotypical understanding of romance can be made.

Significance of Study

This research project is significant in its investigation of whether or not there are feminist elements in contemporary romantic fiction. While Janice Radway and Lynda Crane interviewed readers of romance, my study specifically sought out feminists who are romantic fiction readers. I am examining how the text discusses gender issues—how it represents heroines and heroes, and changes these protagonists have undergone over the
decades. I integrate experiences as feminist, researcher, and romance reader resulting in a project unique from others undertaken on this topic. Additionally, this topic is being researched from the perspective of a feminist reader doing a feminist reading of romance fiction.

I have made many discoveries during this project, not the least of which is: Feminists do read romance fiction. These are feminists who defy stereotypes of romance readers and these are feminists who can be found when the right approach is taken. They may remain closeted in certain academic and public contexts, but they obviously engage in meaningful ways with a meaningful genre. Further, the validation of popular culture as an “academically worthy” area of study has produced current studies of the romance genre. These studies are undertaken by academics who are engaged with the genre at an intimate level. This intellectual engagement is marked by the personal. They read romance, research romance, and teach romance. Dr. Sally Goade, whom I met at a popular culture conference in 2004, is a prominent example. Goade teaches a course entitled Understanding the Pleasure: Women’s Romance Fiction and Its Readers at Russell Sage College in Roslyn Heights, New York State. Her pleasure in reading romance and her work as an academic intersect at varying points. She is one of many such academics whose interest and research in the genre of contemporary romantic fiction is shared not only with her students, but also with other researchers and professionals who write, publish, and market romance fiction.

My study of the contemporary romance fiction genre is more broad and inclusive than most studies which base findings on “category” romance—generally Harlequin and Silhouette. My approach was important for practical as well as theoretical purposes. First,
had I focused solely on category romance, I would have been simply replicating much of the research that has already been conducted. Second, I would have had a meager participant base of perhaps three. Third, it is the more mainstream fiction that best exemplifies how the second wave of the women’s movement has effected positive (feminist) change within the genre. This work contributes to the broader understanding and analysis of contemporary romance fiction—and the notion of romance in general—how it is constructed and how it is consumed. The analysis of romance now moves beyond the anti / post-Cinderella critiques and is now engaging with the daily realities of women for whom intimacy and personal connection are important.

**Resolving Personal Constraints of the Closet**

This project was conceived from the vulnerability I felt at being a romance reader. Exposure / disclosure about my pleasure practically guaranteed that my authority and credibility in many aspects of my professional and personal life would be questioned, particularly by those who know me as a feminist. I wanted to deconstruct the criticisms and expose the flaws, intending to face my insecurities in the process. As a reader I was aware of what I considered to be feminist changes in some of the fiction. I was less consciously articulate, however, about the ways in which feminist critique has contributed overwhelmingly to the closeting of many readers.

In the 1950s and 1960s, readers of romance didn’t consider disclosure an issue. In fact a sense of community seemed to exist among *Chatelaine* magazine readers regarding fiction. In her book *Roughing It in the Suburbs* (2000), Dr. Valerie Korinek uses a quotation from Mrs. M.A.E. McLeod who states “we housewives like a story as a pick-me-up while resting the arches and getting ready to tackle the next job. A laugh over a
cartoon or cry over a piece of fiction is to my mind what I hope to find when I pick up a
magazine” (221). Korinek notes that these stories provided relaxation and permitted the
readers “to interpret stories differently and to identify with the heroine’s problems but
they seldom provided resolutions in which the heroine opted out of the status quo” (221).
It is the onset of the second wave of feminism, as noted by participant Sandra (page 20,
Chapter 4), which formed the awareness of the status quo as being undesirable and
oppressive to women.

My research establishes that plot lines and characters in the genre of
contemporary romantic fiction have been rewritten over the decades to both challenge
and redefine a status quo that was marked by gender, racial, and class inequality.
Ironically, despite these changes, feminist readers of romance fiction are more closeted
than ever. A member of my thesis committee, Dr. Louise Forsyth, suggested at the
beginning of this project that organizing a focus group of feminist romance readers would
be very useful. Ideas flourish when a group of people with different perspectives and life
experiences share thoughts on an issue that is important to them. I suggested this idea to
each of my participants; not one was interested in exposing herself even to other
accomplished, intelligent, feminist romance readers. The stigma of reading romance is so
entrenched that feminist readers routinely dismiss this genre as trash and their activity as
pure escapism despite the fact that many romance fiction novels address issues that are
important to women, and despite the fact that the genre has been greatly influenced by
feminism.
The discomfort readers experience reflects the mixed messages we experience in our culture about romantic love in general. Everyone wants it, pretends to have it, or feels disillusioned because they don’t. Bell hooks states:

This despair about love is coupled with a callous cynicism that frowns upon any suggestion that love is as important as work, as crucial to our survival as a nation as our drive to succeed. Awesomely, our nation, like no other in the world, is a culture driven by the quest to love (it’s the theme of our movies, music, literature) even as it offers so little opportunity for us to understand love’s meaning or to know how to realize love in word and deed. (2000 xxvii)

Reading romance should no longer be a closeted issue. The genre is about relationships of intimacy and love that, for many women (and men), are central to a sense of well being. This study responds by asking what strategies we can promote to eliminate the stigma of the romance genre. Answers to this question are offered by all participants but in tentative ways, much the way feminists have had to explain their own feminism at various times in history. My participants and I have demonstrated that the genre has become more diverse and complex over the past ten to fifteen years incorporating many elements considered feminist and defined as “politically correct” (I do not suggest, however, that feminism and political correctness are the same thing.)

**Future Research**

Future research in the area of feminism and its impact on the romance genre may include looking more closely at the concept of romantic love—how it is being marketed and how it is being consumed. One might ask about the role men play in both the marketing and consumption—not just in romance fiction but in the production of romantic love in all forms of popular culture. Men are often power brokers in many of the media (including film, music) that promote and define romance. Recent well-publicized romantic / love-
themed novels by men include: Nicolas Sparks, *The Notebook* (1996); Robert James Waller, *The Bridges of Madison County* (1992); Arthur Golden, *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997); Paulo Coelho, *Eleven Minutes* (2003). Greg Behrendt’s, *He’s Just not that into you* (2004), and *It’s Called a Breakup Because it’s Broken* (2005) are relationship / dating advice books for women that Oprah Winfrey states should be on every single woman’s nightstand. Bell hooks states “… when men appropriate the romance genre their work is far more rewarded than is the writing of women. . . . Male fantasy is seen as something that can create reality, whereas female fantasy is regarded as pure escape” (xxiii). Clearly men have a vested interest in the production, distribution, and consumption of romance in its many forms.

**Conclusion**

The genre of contemporary romantic fiction transcends traditional notions about romance, romantic love, and self-love. Rather than emphasizing limitations to women in romantic relationships, they redefine relationships, romance, love expectations, and desires on a multitude of levels. They reconstruct romance and the many ways relationships play out in women’s lives, certainly with romantic partners, but more notably with one’s self. Feminism has been key in addressing issues of race, class, gender, age, ability, and a multitude of social concerns in romance fiction and in many other forms of popular culture. This study takes us one step towards a fuller reckoning of feminism and romance.
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FICTION WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

As intimated in the body of this proposal, I do not want to over-structure these interviews but, rather, allow for as much flexibility as possible. Experience convinces me that this is the best way to avoid formulaic answers and, perhaps more significantly, to allow for the emergence of new questions that may redirect the thesis in unanticipated and important ways. There is, however, basic information about each participant that I will need to establish. This includes age, racial and cultural background, family and marital status, sexual orientation, level of education, employment in and outside the home.

Although I may not have to ask many of the following questions directly, in the course of the interview virtually all of them will be addressed.

Preliminary information:

1. You have stated that you are a feminist. How do you define feminism in the context of your own life?
2. How do you define "romantic love"?
3. How do you define the romance novel?
4. What types of romance novels do you read, and why do you choose these type over others?
5. How often do you read romance novels? (i.e., how many per week/month/year?)
6. Are you comfortable revealing to others that you enjoy reading romance novels? (If uncomfortable, why?)

Participant's reading experience:

1. What elements in romance novels do you find appealing? Are there elements that you find offensive? If so, what are they and why?
2. Have you noticed any changes in romance novels since you began reading them?
3. Would you consider these changes "feminist"? Could you provide some examples?
4. How closely do the characters’ lives reflect your own experiences? Would you like romantic fiction to resemble your life experience? Why or why not?
5. Do you find that reading romance novels influences what you look for in a partner?
Reading experience in the context of larger social issues:

1. Do you think that romance novels address social issues and, if so, which ones and how effectively?

2. Have you read romance novels whose heroines and heroes are not white? If so, how has this affected the reading experience for you? If not, does your feminist analysis make you find the absence or infrequent appearance of racialized characters in romance novels a problem?

3. Would you choose romance novels knowing the heroine and/or hero are of a culture or race not your own? If so, how do you think these cultural and racial differences would change the reading experience for you? How would you react to the description of romance novels as a white genre?
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM
CONSENT FORM

TO THE PARTICIPANT: Before signing page 3 of this consent form, please read the following carefully. It contains information with which I am required by the Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research, University of Saskatchewan, to provide you. This information forms the basis of our agreement. MARIE GREEN, Researcher.

1. **Title of Study:** Fantasy, Fiction, and Feminism: A Study of Feminists Reading Romance

2. **Researcher:** Marie Green, Master’s Student Department of Women’s and Gender Studies University of Saskatchewan Telephone: 653-7933

3. **The purpose and objectives of study:** The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between feminism and romance novels, paying special attention to the impact that the women’s movement has had on the genre since the mid-1980s. I intend to discover how romance readers who identify as feminist engage with the text. By studying the transformation of the genre that became apparent in the 1980s, and through interviewing feminists who read romance, I am seeking to understand not only the influence of the women’s movement on the genre, but also the value that feminists place on the reading of romance fiction.

4. **Possible benefits of the study:** Readers of romance fiction are generally stigmatized in our culture, and unflattering stereotypes of romance readers are legion. As a result, feminist readers of romances are often reluctant to admit their preference for the genre. My investigation into the transformation of the genre, together with data from interviews with feminist readers, may well lead to a re-evaluation of romance fiction, a deconstruction of the traditional stereotype of romance fiction readers, and a positive assessment of the value that feminists place on the genre.

5. **Procedures:** My research will involve interviews with eight feminist readers of romance fiction of which you are one. These interviews will be of approximately two hours and will take place in either your home or mine—whichever venue is most convenient to you. The interview will be semi-structured and open-ended in order to give you the widest latitude possible in expressing your view of romance fiction and why you read it. I will tape the interview and produce a typewritten transcription, which I will then return to you for your approval. In order to ensure accuracy, you will have the opportunity to delete or amend any of the information in the transcript. If the interview raises new questions, I will request a follow-up interview with you. In the unlikely event that your anonymity is compromised (i.e., when you have provided direct words that would make you
I will request that you sign a transcript release form wherein you acknowledge by your signature that the transcript accurately reflects what you said or intended to say. You will have the right to withdraw any or all of your responses.

6. I anticipate no risks, side effects, or discomfort to you. I urge you to communicate to me any discomfort you may experience as a result of your participation in this research project.

7. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. If you do withdraw, any information or other material I have obtained from you, including any extant interview tapes and transcripts, will be deleted from my study and destroyed.

8. **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** In any written reports on my research results, you will be referred to under a pseudonym, and I will take care to avoid revealing any information that might identify you. All tapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office at the University. The University requires that these materials be retained for five years, after which they will be destroyed. In reporting my results, I will take particular care not to quote you out of context.

9. As intimated above, I intend to use the data from the interviews as the basis for my Master’s thesis. I may also prepare and deliver a conference paper on my research results.

10. I am the only researcher involved in this project. However, my thesis advisor, Prof. Diana Relke, will also have access to my research materials. We can be contacted as follows:

    **Marie Green**  
    Women’s Studies Research Unit  
    Kirk Hall 200  
    University of Saskatchewan, S7N 5A5

    **Prof. Diana M.A. Relke**  
    Department of Women’s and Gender Studies  
    1024 Arts, University of Saskatchewan, S7N 5A5

If you have any questions with regard to the study or to your rights as a participant in the research, you may contact the Office of Research Services, University of Saskatchewan (306) 966-4053.
11. Should any new information arise during the research process that would have a bearing on your decision to continue in the study, I will advise you of it.

12. Upon completion of the interview(s) and the tabulation of research results, I will contact you, either by telephone or in writing. A hard copy of the results will be available to you upon request. Upon receipt of these materials, you will sign and return to me a form stating that you have received them.

13. Upon completion of the form below, I will provide you with a photocopy for your records.

* * * * *

This research project was reviewed and approved on ethical grounds by the University Saskatchewan Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research on ____________________.

I, __________________________, willingly participate in this research project about feminism and romance novels conducted by Marie Green for her Master's theses through the University of Saskatchewan. I realize that information I submit in the form of interviews will be included in the project. I have been informed that my anonymity will be protected and that I may withdraw my participation at any time during the process.

_________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of participant                      Date

_________________________________________  __________________________
Marie Green, researcher                       Date

I would like to receive a hard copy of the results of the research. Yes ___ No ___

The participant may contact the researcher, supervisor, department (phone numbers listed above), or the Office of Research Services (966-4053) for any questions she has with regard to the study or her rights as a participant in the research study.

Consent Form page 3
APPENDIX C

DATA TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM
DATA/TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM

Title of study: Fantasy, Fiction, and Feminism:
A Study of Feminists Reading Romance

Researcher: Marie Green, Master’s Student
Department of Women’s and Gender Studies
University of Saskatchewan
Telephone: 653-7933

I, ________________________________, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Marie Green. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Marie Green to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Participant Date

Marie Green, researcher Date
APPENDIX D

ETHICS PERMISSION
NAME: D. Relke (M. Green)  
Department of Women's and Gender Studies

DATE: June 7, 2001

The University Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research has reviewed the Application for Ethics Approval for your study "Fantasy, Fiction, and Feminism: A Study of Feminists Reading Romance" (01-110).

1. Your study has been APPROVED.

2. Any significant changes to your proposed study should be reported to the Chair for Committee consideration in advance of its implementation.

3. The term of this approval is for 5 years.

I wish you a successful and informative study.

Valerie Thompson, Chair  
University Advisory Committee  
on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research

VT/bk