

### Soap Opera

Another fiction type falling more within the bounds of Women's Fiction than the Romance genre but appealing to some romance readers is the Soap Opera. With links to the family Saga and closely related to the popular radio and television serials from which the name is derived, it is a complex, relationship-driven, introspective type of romantic fiction that concentrates on the sins and sufferings of an individual, a family, or even a whole community. There are usually multiple plots in these often leisurely paced melodramas, and the action of the story often consists of interactions among the characters discussing their problems and their various reactions to events and situations. There is almost always a central "tent-pole" character (older, powerful), who, while not the protagonist, influences the lives of everyone else and generally provides coherence and stability to the complex plot line. Because of their overwhelming concentration on the vicissitudes of life, Soap Operas do not necessarily have happy endings (at least not for all the characters). Nevertheless, the reader is usually left with some feeling of hope for the future.

In the past several decades, the Soap Opera's appeal as a written form has declined, and while it is still quite popular in its television format and even adding new fans with some of the prime-time series offerings (viewers who often may not actually self-define as part of this subgenre), few pure books of this kind are currently being produced. However, with the genre lines blurring, sudsy elements do show up in other types of Contemporary Romance and fiction, and Danielle Steel and Eileen Goudge are examples of current authors who have written books that occasionally stray across the soapy border. Nevertheless, there is still a readership for these older books and many are still either in print or are available in many library collections. (For more complete coverage of the Soap Opera, including a history and selected bibliography, refer to the earlier edition of this book, *Romance Fiction* [1999].)

### Medical Romance

Essentially a rather upbeat Soap Opera with a medical setting, the Medical Romance, like its parent Soap Opera, is in decline as a discrete type. Once quite popular, especially in England where there is still some interest (Harlequin/Mills & Boon has a Medical Romance series line), these stories derive much of their drama and tension from the highly charged atmosphere of a hospital setting. Focusing primarily on the personal and professional lives of the doctors, nurses, and other medical staff, these stories lead their characters through a series of disasters, critical illnesses, drug overdoses, epidemics, delicate and dangerous surgeries, and a host of everyday emergency situations that provide ample opportunity for a wide variety of plotlines, both simple and complex, complete with conflict, passion, and romance. A more innocent version of this type is the Nurse Romance, which is similar to a Contemporary Category Romance with a hospital setting and quite popular in earlier times. While the popularity of the Medical Romance as a separate type may be waning, this does not mean that medical personnel and hospital settings have actually lost their appeal. Doctors still show up as heroes and medical emergencies still play their parts in romantic crises. But today's heroines are more often doctors than nurses and the medical environment is likely to be tangential to the main plot, rather than the primary arena for the story's action. In other words, the elements of the Medical Romance are migrating to other Romance subtypes and are being incorporated within them. The boundaries are changing and the genres are blending, with interesting and often satisfactory results.

Although a number of these books still can be found in libraries and the subgenre is still popular in the United Kingdom, the Medical Romance as a separate subgenre is not a major influence in the current American romance market and is mentioned here only because of historical interest.

(For more complete coverage and a selected bibliography of prototypical and earlier Medical Romances, refer to an earlier version of this book, *Happily Ever After* [Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1987].)

### Contemporary Americana Romance

Contemporary Americana Romance, featuring rural or small town settings and focusing on the everyday lives of ordinary people and their "ordinary" problems, continues to attract readers. However, in the past decade these Americana elements have become so well-integrated into the broader Contemporary Romance subgenre that it seems unhelpful to separate romances with such settings from the larger groups. Relevant titles will be included in the following bibliographies as appropriate. (For additional coverage, refer to the previous edition of *Romance Fiction* [1999].)

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As might be expected, there is a certain amount of crossover readership among the Contemporary Romance types. Those who enjoy the more sensual Category Contemporaries may also like Traditional Contemporaries or Women's Romantic Fiction, readers of the Innocent or Sweet Categories may find some early Traditional Contemporaries and some of the noncategory sweet titles interesting, and fans of humorous, lively paced Category Romance might also enjoy Chick Lit. In addition to crossover within the Contemporary grouping, there is also some degree of crossover reading among the Contemporary and other Romance subgenres. For example, because they're sweeter and less sexually explicit, some of the Innocent Categories or early Traditional Contemporaries may appeal to readers of Inspirational Romance or Traditional Regencies, and fans of Romantic Suspense may enjoy some of the suspense-oriented Category lines. Also, as might be expected, readers who enjoy longer, complex Contemporary Romances or Women's Romantic Fiction may also enjoy reading Women's Fiction or literary fiction, in general. Interestingly, there is less reader crossover between Contemporary and Historical Romances than one might expect. Readers, it seems, have definite preferences in this regard; they either like the present or the past, but usually not both.

### Appeal

The specific appeal of the Contemporary Romance is twofold. First, the present is where we live; it is familiar, it grounds us, and we can identify with it. Second, and somewhat conversely, Contemporary Romance appeals to our basic desire to see the present as we wish it were or think it could be, not, necessarily, as it is. Just as some readers want to vicariously experience the novelty and excitement of the past without its attendant inconveniences, others want to do the same for the present—experience a new or romantically portrayed present without the mundane details of real, everyday life, and with a positive, hopeful outcome. Most of us occasionally indulge in playing the "What if . . ." game (e.g., What if I were an ad executive in New

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York? What if I owned a coffee shop in a small town? What if I were rich/poor? What if I were on a Mediterranean cruise? What if I suddenly became a guardian for three children?). Contemporary Romances allow us not only to complete the question, but also to experience at least one author's version of the answer. The infinite variety of questions and possible answers accounts for the diversity within the subgenre.

Within the Contemporary subgenre, each type of format or story has its own particular appeal. The Category Romance offers consistency; the readers basically know what they are going to get before they open the book. On the other hand the Traditional Contemporary Romance provides more variety and, occasionally, the unexpected. Women's Romantic Fiction attracts those who enjoy a romance painted on a broader canvas with a slightly different brush. However, the overall appeal of the Contemporary Romance is to readers who prefer to venture briefly into a romantic version of a world they understand and perceive as a little closer to reality than those of some of the other subgenres—the world of the present.

### Advising the Reader

While general readers' advisory information is provided in chapter 3, several points to consider specifically when advising Contemporary Romance readers are given below.

- Consider suggesting Contemporary subtypes in addition to the one the reader is currently reading. Innocent Categories might appeal to readers of some of the less racy Traditional Contemporaries and those who like Women's Romantic Fiction might also enjoy the more complex Traditional Romance subgenre; if the reader likes books by a writer who does this, consider suggesting the author's titles from the other subgenres.
- Readers who enjoy older, classic Contemporary Romances, such as those by Grace Livingston Hill and others, may also like Inspirational Romances, and vice versa.
- Readers who like Soap Operas or multigenerational romances may find Sagas and Linked Books attractive, and Women's Fiction may appeal to readers of Women's Romantic Fiction. In addition, some readers of Innocent Category Romances may also enjoy Traditional Regencies or some of the less sexually explicit Historicals.
- Determine what particular kind of Contemporary Romance the reader prefers—sweet, sensual, erotic, complex, short, predictable, funny, dark, family-centered, filled with problem social issues, and so on. Keep in mind that lines and writers vary greatly—the sweet Harlequin Romances are quite different from the steamy Harlequin Blazes, and Susan Elizabeth Phillips is not Debbie Macomber. If the reader prefers sweet Innocent Categories, don't recommend *Peyton Place* or the Bad Boys anthologies. Likewise, don't suggest a short Category Romance to someone who wants a complex, intricately plotted story; try Women's Romantic Fiction or Traditional Contemporaries, instead. As always, common sense and a good knowledge of authors and types are your best allies in making successful recommendations.
- Readers who like upbeat Contemporary Romances with sassy humor and trendy urban settings might also enjoy Chick Lit. Although not necessarily romantically focused, Chick Lit does have some crossover appeal, and well-known titles such as Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* or Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* would be solid recommendations for readers new to the type. Likewise, Chick Lit fans might enjoy funny, witty, fast-paced Contemporary Romances by writers such as Elizabeth Bevarly, Rachel Gibson, and Millie Criswell, to name only a few. Note: Imprints such as Red

Dress Ink, Strapless, and 5 Spot routinely publish chick lit titles. However, chick lit is published by more general imprints, as well.

- For the reader who is new to the Contemporary subgenre, recommend standard works by major authors in the field (e.g., Nora Roberts, Susan Elizabeth Phillips, Susan Wiggs, Stephanie Bond, Barbara Samuel, Kristin Hannah, Jennifer Greene, and Jennifer Crusie) and then branch out to others. That way, if the reader doesn't care for the book, it will be a judgment of the subgenre itself rather than the quality of the writing.

### Brief History

When Samuel Richardson's epistolary tale *Pamela: Or Virtue Rewarded* was published in England in 1740, it helped launch what was generally considered to be a new form of literature—the novel. It is interesting that what is considered by many to be one of the earliest, if not the first, novel written in English was also a Contemporary Romance. To be sure, *Pamela*, as well as Richardson's other sentimental romances, had its roots in the past, especially in some of the long, fantastically exaggerated romances by earlier women writers such as Delarivière Manley, Aphra Behn, Madeleine de Scudéry, and Eliza Haywood, as well as in the introspective religious works of the previous century. However, it was the combination of the outward dramatic action with the inner emotional turmoil and reflection that made the novel something new and appealing (Martin C. Battestin, ed., *British Novelists, 1660–1800*, Dictionary of Literary Biography no. 39 [Detroit: Gale, 1985], 379). In addition, the fact that the story's situation (young, impoverished girl goes to work in wealthy home, only to be pursued with dishonorable intent by the son of the family) was a familiar one to many members of the working class and the heroine was spunky, determined, and nonaristocratic gave it an intense appeal for the newly rising, newly literate middle class. The book achieved tremendous popularity on both sides of the Atlantic, and although imported copies were available, Benjamin Franklin published it in the United States in 1744, only four years after it had first appeared in England (James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* [Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1950], 52).

The success of *Pamela* gave rise to a number of imitations, many of them copying not only the basic plot but also the letter/diary format. Until the end of the century, when the sentimental Gothics of Ann Radcliffe began to find favor with the reading public, the contemporary sentimental novel, or romance, reigned supreme. Among the most popular in the United States were *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth* (1791) by Susanna Haswell Rowson and *The Coquette* (1797) by Mrs. Hannah Foster. Often considered the first American popular romantic novel (even though it was first published in England by a woman who moved to America soon after), *Charlotte Temple* (published in America in 1794) is a classic novel of seduction in which the heroine is seduced, impregnated, abandoned, and then left to die. Given the cautionary nature of the story and social mores of the time, Charlotte naturally had to pay for the sin of allowing herself to be seduced! Set in the United States and reputed to be based on fact (there is even a gravestone in New York with the name Charlotte Temple on it), this novel had immediate appeal for American readers; in all, more than two hundred editions of *Charlotte* have been produced. Popular through the first few years of the nineteenth century, seduction stories shared the spotlight with the sentimental