

Chapter 2

The Appeal of Romance Fiction

Romance is the glamour which turns the dust of everyday life into a golden haze.
Amanda Cross (Carolyn Gold Heilbrun)

These books [romances] offer a vast reassurance that the world will come out right.
Gayle Tuchman, Sociologist

There's no denying that Romance fiction is popular. One only has to look at bookstore shelves, check out the collections and circulation statistics of public libraries, or glance over the recent bestsellers lists to get the point: the Romance genre of novels is undeniably popular and its appeal is stronger than ever. To a certain extent, this is nothing new. Persistent, pervasive, and omnipresent, romances and love stories have been around for a long time, charming and entertaining readers with an expanding assortment of romance fantasies, that vary with the current vogue (e.g., seduction, Gothic, sentimental, historical, romantic suspense, paranormal, erotic).

On the other hand, however, the level of this current, ongoing fascination with the Romance is somewhat unprecedented. Never before have so many writers written so many love stories for so many people—and never before have they been marketed so aggressively by publishers, acknowledged so proudly by writers, considered so seriously by scholars, or read so openly by fans. As quoted in chapter 1, “the Romance Has Arrived”¹ and the figures for the genre continue to be staggering. The latest statistics indicate that in 2009 romances generated \$1.36 billion in sales, accounting for 13.2% of total consumer book sales (more than any other category) and 35.6% of fiction sales, when compared with Religion/Inspirational, Mystery, Science Fiction/Fantasy, and Literary Fiction.² The number of readers is also increasing—and diversifying in an interesting direction. According to the 2009 reader survey commissioned by RWA, the number of Americans who read at least one romance during the past year reached 74.8 million, up from the 64.6 million readers reported in the 2005 study; also the percentage of male readers came in at 9.5%, making it clear that Romance is not, and probably never has been, strictly a women's genre.³

Organizations and publications specifically aimed at readers and writers of Romance fiction are varied and thriving; romances continue to find their way into films (*Angels Fall* by Nora Roberts, Lifetime Original Movies, 2007, is only one example);⁴ romance authors

are regularly interviewed in a variety of media outlets; and major mainstream review sources such as *Library Journal* and *Booklist*, as well as several national newspapers, are critically reviewing romances on a regular basis. (See the section on organizations in chapter 19 and periodicals in chapter 17 of this guide.) In addition, the genre is at last receiving serious consideration by a growing number of scholars from within the academic community, something that was highlighted when McDaniel College, Westminster, Maryland, bestowed an honorary doctor of letters degree on romance author Nora Roberts in 2006, and when the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR) was established in 2009 and launched its journal, *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, in February 2010. The association also holds a conference each year. For more information on IASPR, see <http://iaspr.org>.

Obviously, romances are popular, and the lure of the love story is a given. But who are the romance readers, and just what is it that makes the Romance genre so appealing to so many people?

According to an early groundbreaking survey of 600 romance readers conducted by Carol Thurston, romance readers are essentially a cross-section of “the general population in age, education, and marital and socioeconomic status.”⁵ Thurston found that half the readers have attended college, most watch less television than the national average, 40% work full time outside the home, and 40% are firmly in the financial middle-class. Subsequent studies have generally confirmed her findings, and the latest data, as reported by the RWA based on a study it commissioned in 2009,⁶ shows that 24.6% of those surveyed read at least one romance novel in 2008 (up from 21.8% in the 2005 survey); that people of all ages read romances, with 44% of readers being between the ages of thirty-one and forty-nine; and that 21.5 to 28.8% of the U.S. population reads romance—by region, the highest percentage is in the Midwest, the lowest is in the Northeast, and somewhere in-between are the West and South. Although the educational and financial information present in earlier studies was lacking in this latest one (which focused more on buying habits of readers), the 2005 survey found that 58% of all readers were married or widowed and 66% had attended college, with 42% having earned a bachelor's or an advanced degree (an increase over the previous survey); an earlier study put most readers firmly in the middle class economically. In addition, a 2002 study by Borders found that romance readers were older and more affluent than had been expected; something that is not surprising considering the educational levels of the readers.⁷ Obviously, the average romance reader is not the undereducated, uninformed, frustrated housewife of recent mythology. Romances apparently appeal to a broad range of readers; the question is, “Why?”

The appeal of the Romance is straightforward, yet multifaceted, and the current definitive source on the subject is still *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), edited by Jayne Ann Krentz. This wide-ranging anthology is a groundbreaking effort and should be mandatory reading for anyone seriously interested in the topic. It would, of course, be tempting to simply refer everyone to this collection and consider the subject covered; however, that would not serve the purpose of those who want something more succinct. The discussion that follows is intended to be neither theoretical nor complete; it is merely an attempt to meet the needs of the reader who wants a few basic reasons for the appeal of the popular Romance.

The Romance genre novel appeals both generally and specifically. Its general appeal is that of all genre fiction—an escape fantasy that is predictable, enjoyable, and

safe. Romance's specific appeal is more complex, attracting readers for diverse reasons that include, among others, emotional involvement, female empowerment, promotion of moral values, celebration of life, ultimate triumph of love, and a sense of unflinching optimism.

The General Appeal of the Romance

The fundamental general appeal of the Romance novel, like that of all genre fiction, is to our basic human desire and need for escape—from the routine and anxiety of everyday life into a fantasy where things are new, different, or exciting, and where everything will usually turn out "right." (Rarely do romances end with the protagonists separating, but when this does happen, it usually is the "right" ending.) The term *escape*, of course, can be defined in various ways, but whether identified as relaxation, time for myself, wish-fulfillment, enjoyment, refreshment, or fun, it all comes down to the same thing—the need to leave reality, however pleasant, behind and experience an alternative, if only for a brief time. A study done by Janice Radway confirms the interest in escape; she reports that a full 75% of the readers in her sample stated that they read romances primarily for the various escape qualities of the stories.⁸ Note: The glow on this study has dimmed in recent years, but it is a seminal work and its conclusions still have value.

Escape is not used here as a negative concept. Escape is a part of everyday life and comes in forms that are acceptable (e.g., vacations, sports, reading, games, crafts, hobbies) and forms that are not (e.g., drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, certain types of mental illness). As Constance Casey satirically comments in her review of Radway's book, "Better . . . curled up by the hearth with *The Flame and the Flower* than popping Librium or downing vodka at midday."⁹ Incidentally, reading as a means of escape is not limited to the female, romance-reading population. Adventure stories serve the same purpose for many male readers, and both sexes enjoy the escape attributes of mysteries, science fiction, fantasy, and, as noted above, romance, as well.

Romances are also generally appealing because they are predictable. Although the popular fiction genres, especially the Romance genre, are often criticized because they follow a type of pattern and adhere to certain genre conventions, it is this very predictability that is so attractive to most genre readers, including romance readers. They *know* that everything is going to work out right in the end. They may not know how, why, when, where, or, in some cases, even who, but the readers do know that by the time the last page is turned, all mysteries will be solved, all criminals brought to justice, all desperadoes dealt with, all new or alien worlds tamed or come to terms with, and all couples appropriately aligned. This predictable, satisfactory resolution to the story, or happy ending, if you will, is the promise of the genre writer to his or her reader, and the writer who breaks that promise ends up with a confused and disappointed audience.

Finally, romances appeal simply because they are enjoyable. As John Cawelti said about all the genres in general, "people choose to read certain stories because they enjoy them," and Sandra Brown said about the Romance in particular, "Romances are fun!" people read them because they like them and because they are fun. No better reason is needed.

The Specific Appeal of the Romance

Although romances are read and enjoyed for all of the generic reasons mentioned above, they are also read for elements that are specific to the Romance genre, itself.

One of the primary attractions of the Romance is that it is emotionally engaging. Romances are books about relationships, and they appeal directly to readers' feelings and emotions. They are compelling, and they make the reader care about the characters and what happens to them. Interestingly, this emotional appeal is also one of the reasons that Romance is so highly criticized. One can only wonder why it is assumed by some that if a book makes you feel, it cannot also make you think—or that thinking and logic are inherently preferable to intuition and feeling.

Another important, and perhaps the most controversial, of the attractions of Romance is the theme of female empowerment. Contrary to popular misconceptions, romances are not books about submissive heroines who give up everything for the hero. In fact, they are not stories about women giving up at all. They are stories of women who win, who get what they want, and who tame the hero in the process. As Krentz says, "With courage, intelligence, and gentleness she brings the most dangerous creature on earth, the human male, to his knees. More than that, she forces him to acknowledge her power as a woman."¹⁰ This aspect of the Romance makes it one of the most subversive of all literature genres, because in affirming the empowerment of women, these novels invert the traditional patriarchal, male-dominated order and allow women to be heroes in their own right. (See various essays in Krentz, *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* for a more complete discussion of this idea.)

Although it is not always acknowledged openly, romances also appeal because they are sensual, sexual fantasies. Written primarily by women for women, the Romance describes relationships, romance, and sex in ways women can identify with; while this is not usually the primary reason for reading a romance or enjoying a particular author, it is a factor that is important and needs to be recognized. In fact, the rapid rise in the sizzle factor in romances of all types and the growing popularity of Erotic Romances and erotica leaves no doubt that this is an area of appeal for a number of readers.

Romances are also appealing because they promote the importance of moral values. Strong interpersonal relationships, family, fidelity, honor, caring, courage, compassion, dependability, tolerance, selflessness, and similar themes are all well-represented within the genre; and in a time when much literature rarely advocates such ideas and often dismisses or denigrates them, romances have an obvious appeal.

Closely linked to this moral advocacy aspect is the fact that romances also deal with important life changes and social issues, both inevitable and unexpected, such as aging, pregnancy, abandonment, spousal and child abuse, divorce, death, grief, alcoholism, racism, prejudice of all kinds, and mental and physical illness. While this might not seem to be appealing on the surface, it speaks to the needs of a great many readers; it allows them not only to confront real life problems through fiction, but also to envision healthy, hopeful, and successful solutions and outcomes.

Finally, one of the most basic reasons for the enduring appeal of the Romance genre is simply that it is the most optimistic and hopeful of all the fiction genres. It celebrates life and love with abandon and reaffirms one of the most basic of all fantasies—the triumph of true love against all odds. Of course, women know that all real-life endings are not happy, but that doesn't stop them from wanting everyone to live "happily ever after." The Romance genre allows readers to temporarily suspend reality and enjoy the fantasy without jeopardizing their lives in the real world. After all, most romance readers are firmly rooted in reality; and while they do enjoy building their dream fantasies, they are generally wise enough not to try, or even want to try, to live in them.

Obviously, romances attract readers for a variety of reasons, but whatever the reason, romance readers know exactly what they are reading and why. They are readers first and foremost, and although they may read both Faulkner and Mitchell, Shakespeare and Plaidy, or Eliot and Putney, few would confuse the two or think they serve the same purpose or accomplish the same goals.

Predictable, empowering, optimistic, and just plain fun, romances have something for everyone. Perhaps this is the greatest reason of all for the genre's broad popularity and enduring appeal.

NOTES

1. Jayne Ann Krentz, speech, Public Library Association Conference, March 27–30, 1996.
2. Romance Writers of America, "2009 ROMStat Report." http://www.rwanational.org/cs/the_romance_genre/romance_literature_statistics/industry_statistics.
3. InfoTrends, Inc. "2009 RWA Reader Survey," http://www.rwanational.org/cs/readership_stats.
4. PR Newswire, "Heather Locklear and Johnathon Schaech to Star in 'Angels Fall,' Third of Four Nora Roberts Best-Selling Novels Adapted Into Lifetime Original Movies Airing in February 2007," <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/heather-locklear-and-johnathon-schaech-to-star-in-angels-fall-third-of-four-nora-roberts-best-selling-novels-adapted-into-lifetime-original-movies-airing-in-february-2007-55961582.html>.
5. Carol Thurston, "The Liberation of Pulp Romances," *Psychology Today*, April 1983, 14.
6. InfoTrends, "2009 RWA Reader Survey," http://www.rwanational.org/cs/readership_stats.
7. "Research Reveals Romance Readers Are Richer Than Expected," *Book Publishing Report* 27, no. 4 (2002): 1.
8. Janice Radway. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 60–61.
9. Constance Casey, "The Great Escape: Better A Romance Novel than A Swig of Vodka," *San Jose Mercury News*, February 10, 1985, Arts and Books Section.
10. Jayne Ann Krentz, ed., *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 5.

Chapter 3

Advising the Reader

Lady Peabury was in the morning room reading a novel; early training gave a guilty spice to this recreation, for she had been brought up to believe that to read a novel before luncheon was one of the gravest sins it was possible for a gentlewoman to commit.

Evelyn Waugh

Rosenberg's First Law of Reading: Never apologize for your reading tastes.

Betty Rosenberg

Readers' advisory service is essentially the process of putting the reader in touch with a book that he or she will enjoy reading. Romance readers' advisory service connects the romance reader with the proper romantic story. Unfortunately, this reference service for fiction is not always as simple to accomplish as it might seem, especially when it comes to romances. In the first place, reading tastes in fiction, particularly in the area of romances, are highly subjective, and a good deal of discussion is necessary to determine what the reader actually wants. Second, the variation in romances, both in subgenre and in the handling of such particulars such as sex, is extremely wide. Therefore, a good working knowledge of the literature is necessary—something that not all librarians have, or won't admit they have, particularly in the area of Romance fiction. Third, effective advisory service takes time, an almost nonexistent commodity in most libraries today.

Despite of these difficulties, it is still possible to give good readers' advisory service for romance readers. The ideal situation is to have a staff librarian who is an avid reader and connoisseur of all types of romances, who has annotated all romances he or she has read, maintains an extensive, easily searchable computerized database on them, and who has enough time to spend talking about romances in-depth with readers who need advice. Since this is all rather unlikely, alternative measures are necessary.

First, the two cardinal rules of reader's advisory service, know your literature and know your reader, cannot be ignored. Without them there is no service. Some suggestions for achieving both and putting them together in a practical way, specifically for the Romance genre, is the subject of the rest of this section.

Several books that will be of particular interest to romance readers' advisors include the following: