

I think romance novels are both hilarious and fascinating. I suppose I've always had special interest in this subject because it feels like there *must* be some reason behind the fact that the romance novel industry is the most prosperous one in literature, yet it also has the worst reputation. Have you ever heard of a book with a name like Dark Desires After Dusk being closely analyzed in a college classroom? Of course not. Romance novels make billions of dollars in sales each year, yet they are also considered trashy, worthless, and disposable by literary critics and even by the red-faced people who read them. So my question is, why is the book genre that is the most widely dismissed, the most profitable one of all?

I was probably around 7 years old when I first discovered the romance novels. It happened at my grandparent's low-ceilinged bungalow in San Diego, where the longest wall in the living room was shelved with hundreds of books. The legacy of my maternal grandparents, if nothing else, was that they valued reading more than anything, and cherished libraries as our civilization's most important institution. My grandmother was a wise intellectual who read in between everything she did. This never changed, but during the later half of her life, she developed the habit of reading the trashiest of romance novels. Three of the large bookshelves on that wall were lined with these steamy books for most of my childhood. As soon as books came of interest to my newly literate young self, I explored my grandparent's personal library. As I stood in front of the wall, scanning over the collection, I was transfixed by the dozens of little 6" by 4" pocket novels that seemed to also transfix grandma.

Naturally, as a child, my eyes went straight to the books whose spines were embossed with colorful metallic typeface. Their dramatic designs, as they all embraced each other in tight rows, were as enticing as a Barbie doll. And when I took one out of its place, I found a Barbie doll on the cover! A beautiful woman with cascading locks and puffy sleeves! A muscular man stood with a billowing unbuttoned white shirt, bent over her body, which was limp with passion. Their hair was blowing everywhere and the sunset that glowed over a pasture of purple wildflowers in the background was impossibly saturated. But my thrill went as soon as it came, and in its place appeared confusion. There was something absurd about the idea of my rather practical grandmother being committed to collecting and reading such a large number of these oddly dramatic novels. My eyes darted from book to book; Heart of the Hawk, to His Darkest Embrace, and then to The Spanish Billionaire's Pregnant Wife. There was a common theme; while all the authors were different, the books were disturbingly consistent.

"Why does grandma have all those silly books, mom?" I asked.

"She likes to escape"

"By reading Apache Heartbeat?"

But it's true. People *do* like to escape, and apparently for millions of women, romance novels are the answer. Anyone who has walked into a used bookstore or library knows just how immensely available they are. They outnumber us, like cars or shorthair domestic cats. And as sad as they look sitting there in thrift store bins, piled up in unwanted heaps, all of them practically identical, the romance novel industry is hugely successful. Even though you would imagine that people would just pick from the 25-cent book bin at the thrift store when they wanted a fix, people keep buying brand new 15-

dollar books about relationships. The romance industry has a perpetually faithful following because it provides a perpetually uniform product.

This product is classified as literature. Many might believe that literature should be stimulating and increasingly challenging. Romance novels are widely considered simply a shallow and dulling pastime in the form of a paperback novel. It's like watching reality television. People love the chance to turn off their minds and be mesmerized by seemingly lively monotony (for instance, following Kim Kardashian through a tumultuous day of cellulite removal). Maria Bustillos describes this type of activity well in an online article:

“The pleasure of moving through this ritual of set plot points will be familiar to lovers of detective fiction or spy novels. I use ‘ritual’ advisedly because it really is quite like a religious ceremony; comforting, calming. The pleasure involved is almost wholly anticipatory, and if you don't know almost exactly what is going to happen, you can't feel the pleasure of anticipation” (Bustillos, Romance Novels, *The Last Great Bastion of Underground Writing*, The Awl).

The lack of variation that this anticipation stems from is wholeheartedly embraced by the romance novel industry. The virtual headquarters is Romance Writers of America, an online organization of information and news updates surrounding the industry. There is a page on RWA.org that lists all the subgenres of the romance genre. There are nine: “Contemporary Series Romance,” “Contemporary Single-Title Romance,” “Historical Romance,” “Inspirational Romance,” “Novels With Strong Romantic Elements,” “Paranormal Romance,” “Regency Romance,” “Romantic Suspense,” and “Young Adult Romance.” The specificity of it all is astounding and so is the openness of how this specificity is admitted. On the website for Harlequin Enterprises, perhaps the most famous (or infamous) publishing house for “women’s fiction,” there is even a page directed towards hopeful Harlequin-employed authors that lists links to the “writing guidelines” for each of their different subgenres. For example, here is an excerpt from instructions on how to write a “Harlequin Intrigue”: “Taut, edge-of-the-seat contemporary romantic suspense tales of intrigue and desire. Kidnappings, stalking, women in jeopardy coupled with bestselling romantic themes are examples of story lines we love most.”

Clearly the method of precise formulation is key to success. These publishing houses know what they’re doing, even if the business is based on feeding women’s hunger for passages like “...his tongue toying with hers, then delving in and out in silken strokes that made her quiver in odd places” (Jeffries, Wed Him Before You Bed Him, 77). There is definite keen strategy in this industry, and I think those in charge are well aware of the common criticisms. Kate Duffy, former editorial director of Kensington Publishing Group, even said once in an interview: “I love romance novels because they’re entertaining, they’re informative, and they make pots of money for my publishing house.”

The industry is like a factory with an assembly line. Start with a basic plot, throw in some regency-period vocabulary, a mysterious time warp to the Viking-era Norse lands, abduction by a surprisingly well-toned Martian, and you have a bestseller. This is

an ironic franchise; it's all about the cold, emotionless process of making big money off of the emotions of women, who crave a passionate escape from their mundane lives.

As a younger kid I was fascinated by the mundane. Things like the Midwest, beige pantsuits, wood paneling, and especially romance novels, enchanted me. I wanted to know why they made so many of them, and who "they" were. The tackiness behind them was charming, and I wanted to somehow be a part of it. So I took inspiration from my grandmother's book collection by creating an alter ego for myself when I was around 9 years old. While other kids played mermaids and princesses and soldiers, I pretended to be a 52-year-old middle-class romance novelist named Barbara Hankens. She was, in a nutshell, how I envisioned all romance authors to be: she lived in Nebraska, struggling to promote her novel Willing to Kill.¹ Barbara always had perfectly blow-dried shoulder-length platinum blonde hair with puffy bangs, and she always wore ill-fitting suits from JC Penny (she, like her books, was disturbingly consistent). Her marriage to her husband, Joshua, was slowly deteriorating, and her two grown children resented her for being passive and anal-retentive.

I created such an expansive story for this woman all because it was something I didn't understand. I decided at 9 that writing romance novels was deliciously lowbrow, and that anyone who claimed that occupation did so *obviously* because they were unhappy in their own personal lives, so I poked fun. While working on this research project, the memory of my alter ego reappeared after a long hiatus, and prompted me to look further into the real lives of romance authors. I felt like it was important to find out *why* they had this job. I emailed approximately 15 best-selling female authors:

Hey, (insert first name of author)!

My name is Lulu White, and I'm a junior in high school at an art boarding school in Napa, California. I am currently doing a research project about the social and cultural status of romance novels. I would love to know your personal thoughts and relations to this subject and how you feel about romance novels being proclaimed as "trashy" or "unnecessary". Please don't feel like you have to be super elaborate, I understand you probably have a busy schedule and I don't mind a brief response. Thanks!!

Your fan,

Lulu

I heard back from eight women. The general response was very defensive and vague, most of them mainly arguing that those who criticize romance novels have never actually read them, and that there is nothing trashy or unnecessary about "two people overcoming obstacles to find true love." Something they all had common was that they each defended themselves as providers of escape. None of them, however, claimed to take their genre seriously: "My best answer for your question is that I write commercial fiction and bring enjoyment and escape to my readers' lives." "Romances are about the fantasy. People are

¹ The novel was about a woman named Marie, who is told by a mysterious psychic that the man she loves will soon leave her. Marie becomes a paranoid maniac by taking drastic action to save her relationship; so drastic, that she is *Willing to Kill*.

terribly stressed out and a little escape from reality is an excellent way to forget about things for while.” “We provide inexpensive stress relief, but more important, we provide a sense of order. Just as a crime will be solved in the mystery novel and the serial killer caught in a thriller, in the romance, the lovers will find their happy ending...The lovers’ path will be treacherous and almost certainly paved with deliciously hot sex!”

The most interesting thing I read was from the woman who had the briefest response. In that response, she said, “If you’ll remember, Shakespeare and Dickens weren’t trying to write ‘fine literature’. They were trying to put food on their tables. So I believe I’m in very good company.” Her response seemed like the most direct and honest one, or at least the one that gave me the most perspective. I drew some parallels to Barbara Hankens. Like my alter ego, this author doesn’t write to put her passion on paper, but to put food on the table. However, she doesn’t seem as miserable as Barbara. She’s *aware* of what she’s doing, and aware that she’s doing it well. This particular author was the only one who let me know *why* she was a provider of escape: money.

Romance authors know well that the business is profitable and worth a trying-out. In an NPR *This American Life* podcast about the RWA’s annual conference, Robin Epstein states that “Romance novelists don’t give a rat’s ass,” that they are not ashamed, but rather recognize that they are “a part of the business empire.” And an entertainment empire *is* what it *is*. Many crave the satisfaction of consistently unvarying plot lines with indulgent sexy scenes and happy endings. Some enjoy it in movies or TV shows, but others might opt for reading, because it at least keeps your mind somewhat active...right? For me, I don’t really see the difference between watching *Melrose Place* and reading *Silver Caress*, because what one gets out of them both is similar. They both exist solely to satisfy the demand for an effective escape, one that may not be realistic or beneficial to the subscriber. Bodice-rippers are just as much of a franchise as, say, *Titanic*. It’s a commercial, well-formulated gimmick backed by brilliant business-minded people who know what older women want. But I don’t disapprove. My grandmother was an intelligent woman who, towards the end of her life, happened to find comfort in simplistic plots that she could rely on to end well, always. Having an understanding of how romance novels are modeled and who models them has allowed me to appreciate how the stigma of reading them is handled. The readers don’t mind buying into it because they know how it makes them feel. If a book has the capacity to make you feel as if you’re lounging in a wheat field under the weight of a young bodybuilding medicine man, then I’d say that’s a pretty powerful thing.

Annotated Bibliography

Bustillos, Maria. "Romance Novels, The Last Great Bastion Of Underground Writing". *The Awl*. February 14, 2012. <http://www.theawl.com/2012/02/romance-novels>

This article is an extensive report on the success of the romance industry that cites the opinions and perspectives of many different professional writers on the subject of this genre. Above all sources, this one was the most helpful to me because it was very close to what I was exploring, but went much further into feminist stances on romance novels, which is not something I chose to go into detail about in my own writing. I took most inspiration from what Bustillos had to say about how people find comfort in these books and how she closely analyzes the stigma of reading them by considering all sides of the argument.

Epstein, Robin. "What Is This Thing?: Act One. Inside The Romance Industry" *This American Life*. Podcast. September 19, 2003. <<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/247/what-is-this-thing>>

In this podcast, Epstein talks about attending the annual convention of the Romance Writers of America. This was one of my most useful sources because it explores the process of employment of romance novelists, which like the process of crafting the books themselves, is formulaic. Aspiring writers stand in long lines to quickly pitch their story ideas to head editorial directors of different publishing houses, and when they finally get to pitch it, the editors briskly categorize the story (under one of RWA's subgenres), tell the writer if its worth publishing or not, and send them on their way. Epstein's commentary reaction to the process is comical yet accepting, and changed the way I saw it all too. Even though the industry is all about money, the podcast helped me see how many people benefit from its existence, as it provides *many* jobs.

Fox, Margalit. "Kate Duffy, Book Editor, Is Dead at 56". *The New York Times*. October 5, 2009. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/06/books/06duffy.html>>

This is an obituary for the former editorial director of Kensington Publishing Group, a leading romance novel publisher. Kate Duffy was well known for her shrewd approach to working in romance novels, so I used this article as source of information on an exemplary person who worked in the industry mainly for the money, and wasn't ashamed. It was like a miniature biography that provided insight on the emotionless side of the monstrous emotion empire.

Unknown author. "Writing Guidelines". *Harlequin*. Unknown publishing date. <<http://www.harlequin.com/articlepage.html?articleId=538&chapter=0>>

This page on the website for the most well known romance publishing house was perfect fuel for my essay. I wanted a large part of the conclusion of my analysis to be about how the formulation of romance novels was the reason for its success, and this allowed me to do so. The page lists 30 links, each for specific writing guidelines that instruct aspiring Harlequin-employed authors on how to “craft” books of different subgenres. For me, this was the jackpot, because it served as proof that the king of all romance novel publishing houses, and perhaps the most influential, uses a blueprint, almost factory-like method of producing literature.

Unknown Author. “The Romance Genre: Romance Literature Subgenres”. *Romance Writers of America*. 2012. <http://www.rwa.org/cs/romance_literature_subgenres>

Like the “Writing Guidelines” page from *Harlequin*, this page was proof of the romance industry’s formulation method. It’s a page on the website for a national and official organization for romance authors that gives a short list of subgenres, which I deemed as permission to call the industry gimmicky. That permission which I granted to myself gave my paper a lot of meat.

Smart Bitches, Trashy Books. 2005-2012. <<http://smartbitchestrashybooks.com/>>

I didn’t cite anything from this website, but it seemed to really be the online headquarters for the kinds of women who I mentioned in my thesis statement. It’s a website dedicated to sharing romance novel reviews written by women who are ashamed yet proud of devoting themselves the admittedly “trashy” genre. I wanted to know why people love romance novels so much yet don’t take them seriously, and smartbitchestrashybooks.com was my first step of exploring that inquiry. Although there is not quite an article or even explanation to the website’s attitude towards romance novels, it was assurance that this witty demographic existed.

Emails From Romance Novelists

Carr, Robyn. *Personal communication*. April 18 2012

Jordan, Nicole. *Personal communication*. April 17, 2012

Kelley, Christie. *Personal communication*. April 18, 2012

Marvelle, Delilah. *Personal communication*. April 21, 2012

Milan, Courtney. *Personal communication*. April 16, 2012

Neggars, Carla. *Personal communication*. April 18, 2012

Ranney, Karen. *Personal communication*. April 16, 2012

Almost every single one of these women had no problem defending their genre when I asked them about their opinions on the less-than-respected nature of romance novels' reputation. Some were thoroughly unashamed of being a part of the business empire because it was supposedly their passion to write about passion, and others were thoroughly unashamed because they admitted that the business is a real money pot. Both stances gave me a lot to work with in figuring out what goes on behind the scenes of romance novels. And once I could figure that out, analyzing the act of reading them became less complicated.

Romance Novels

Hill, Sandra. Dark Viking. USA. Berkley Sensation. 2010. Paperback.

Jeffries, Sabrina. Wed Him Before You Bed Him. USA. Pocket Books. 2009. Paperback.

Long, Julie Anne. Since the Surrender: Pennyroyal Green Series. USA. Harper Collins. 2009. Paperback.

McCabe, Amanda. Spiritual Brides. USA. Penguin Group. 2009. Paperback.

Whiteside, Diana. Kisses Like A Devil. USA. Kensington Books. 2009. Paperback.

These are actual romance novels. I found it extremely necessary for me to look firsthand at the material that I was referencing so often. I checked out five romance novels from the Napa library and read as much as I could (before I felt too much emotion to go on) so that I knew what the people I was talking about were reading. These were perhaps the most technically important pieces of writing for my research, because reading them was like the observation portion of my project. From reading excerpts from each, I gained some understanding in how people get so attached to their content. I saw firsthand the consistency that I always hear about, and the way the books were assembled to draw you in further and further. Seeing this allowed me to analyze the books without making assumptions.