

Chapter III

DEFENDING THE GENRE

(NO, IT'S NOT CHICK PORN. DAMMIT.)

When we started writing, we called this section a media guide, but it's not the media who question your interest in romance. It's more likely to be friends, family, anyone who sees you reading a romance, or anyone manning the cash register at the bookstore who gives you an arched brow at your eight-book stack of romances. Of course, the thought of your buying eight romances at once fills us with envy, complete with hand-wringing and squeaking, but to most people who don't understand the genre and don't want to, the thought of dropping a cool seventy-five to a hundred dollars on romance induces not envy but indignant, confused spluttering. For some reason, the sight of another person reading a romance gives passersby permission to take complete leave of their manners. Sarah's been approached by total strangers on the New York City subway who snidely comment on her reading material. You'd think people would have more self-preservation than to diss the reading material of an uncaffeinated commuter.

So imagine the opportunity to defend your choice of reading material. You're at a press conference with a dozen microphones, which resemble giant fuzzy electronic phalluses gathered in a bouquet in front of you. You have to field those same old questions

about romance novels, and do so in front of thousands on behalf of the millions who read romance. No pressure or anything.

AREN'T ROMANCES ALL THE SAME?

Short answer: *Yes. Also, no. But in asking, you reveal how little you know about the genre.*

Yes, the plots of romance novels are very similar. There are often similar characters (angst-ridden vampire hero anyone?) and the thematic structure is based on a long-established foundation of literary history. But no, romances are not all "the same."

The accusation of sameness emerges from the concept that romances, much like other forms of popular fiction, are based on a "formula." And, as Pamela Regis says, the "connotations of 'formula' are quite negative. The term implies hack-work, subliterate, and imagination reduced to a mechanism for creating 'product.'" The use of the word "product" is key—denigrating romance by saying it's all the same, written according to a formula, implies that writing—and reading—a romance is like manufacturing an item, one of thousands of identical pieces, for sale to consumers who are all looking for the same exact thing. Nothing could be further from the truth.

And if you're bruising for a frosty discussion? We're always down with that. Our advice is to point out the following: all expressions of creativity have a structure at work within them, most particularly those that adhere to a classical form. All romances are the same in the same way that all choreographed ballets are the same. Each ballet is a written sequence of the same steps, but each performance is remarkably different depending on the dancer in the role, the costumes, the dressing of the stage, and the musicians playing the music. All symphonies are the same piece of music each time they are performed, but the nuanced differences of varying musicians and conductors can make a world of difference. For that matter, most music is composed of octave variations of the same

twenty-two notes, and we've never heard anyone say that there's no difference between Bach and Copland, or Glass and Brahms.

If ballet and music don't make your argument, try cookies. Aside from the underlying insult to the intellect of both the writer and the reader, which is wide and deep and so very irritating, if we examine the concept of a formula and a product, what we're really talking about is a structure and a result. Consider the Toll House chocolate-chip-cookie recipe. A perfectly functional recipe, it combines the basic dry and wet ingredients, with a wee bit of leavening amid the sugar, salt, eggs, butter, and flour, to create a pretty damn serviceable cookie, suitable for eating while you read a romance novel, and no, you do not have to share your cookies with the people who ask you such nebbly, thinly veiled insulting questions.

Now, consider the Toll House recipe in the hands of two different chefs. One, who is Not Sarah, puts nuts in the batter. Sarah thinks nuts in any baked good are a crime against humanity, so instead, she adds nutmeg, some unsweetened cocoa, and a bit of concentrated coffee liquid to her cookies. With three tiny ingredients, she has mocha-chocolate-chip cookies (that are awesome, by the way) while the other chef, who is busy violating the Geneva convention with those walnuts and pecans, has an entirely different cookie coming out of her oven. Both are chocolate chip cookies, but with a marked, and subtle difference.

That's how romance works. There's a structure, a foundation of common elements to each novel, but the variation in how those elements are woven together into a delicious narrative is the art, not the product, of each author. Eighty cooks crafting chocolate-chip cookies are going to produce chocolate-chip cookies, but each and every cookie from each chef is going to be different. And thus romance novels, which share a structure but diverge wildly based on subgenre and the innovation and creativity of each author, are not at all the same. The variations in the space between the narrative elements are the romance.

Those variations create something new in each novel. Nora Roberts, who is called by the actual press time and again to dis-

cuss and defend the genre, has said repeatedly (and still they call with the same question): Yes, there is a happy ending. But the book isn't about the happy ending. It's about the journey *to* that happy ending.

Smart Bitch Law 1

Note: Avoid the easy pitfall of violating Smart Bitch Law 1: Thou shalt not diss the reading material of another person merely to elevate one's own. By slapping at someone else's love of true crime novels, thou art not defending romance. Thou art passing the buck, and by doing so, verily thou art being a douche bag.

For example, with a mystery you know that the crime will be solved, the perp brought to justice, and maybe there's some sexy sexxoring for the protagonists, though often it's behind closed doors, or obliquely referred to with a fade-to-black kissing scene. But in the end, Bad will lose to Good, and the mystery will be solved. Otherwise, it's not really a mystery novel.

Just like romance, there are plenty of mystery novels to choose from, with all manner of settings, protagonists, themes, and deeper significance hidden within. And just like romance, there are plenty of mystery writers. Moreover, just like romance, there are plenty of mystery writers who scare the ever-loving crap out of us, and there are some whom we stopped reading because in our opinion they were too much structure, not enough creative pizzazz.

Of course, mystery novels are socially and culturally acceptable reading material; they are not victim of the "scribbling for silly women" reputation that romances endure. Moreover, because mysteries are often about violence, crime, murder, and bloodshed, they're acceptable. Romances, which feature and focus on sex, emotions, happiness, and love, are not as acceptable, and truly, there's enough wrong with that imbalance of value that it under-scores itself. Violence, murder, and crime: okay. Sex, emotions,

happiness and relationships: not okay. What, we ask in all seriousness, the fuck?

But it's not just readers who confront that bizarre imbalance. Authors hear it, too. Nora Roberts told us in an interview, "Once, years back, I did a mass signing with authors from various genres. One of the mystery authors came up to me at some point, patted my hand. I can't remember the entire conversation, but she ended it by saying: 'But you're writing mystery now, dear.' It still amuses me. It was said in the tone you'd use to someone who'd recovered from a long illness, or had recently been paroled. She meant well, but in her mind I was now legitimate."

Lisa Kleypas says, regarding the idea that those pesky romances, they're all the same, that "everyone knows the basic plot or formula, and then a lot of writers, including me, have discussed how to write 'outside the box.' But after twenty-two years of being published, I've come to realize that what makes a romance novel successful, not only in financial terms but also in a creative sense, is to think inside the box. The constraints, the limits, the structure of the romance novel is what allows a good writer to soar creatively."

It's not the structure that counts. It's the structure in the hands of a talented, creative, and enthusiastic author. What's more, some authors have had considerable success creating for themselves an additional narrative structure within the existing romance.

Some readers love the series of a specific author, partially because a specific series may take place in a world with very clear and identified rules. There are several authors who have developed a structure of their own so unique it becomes their trademark of sorts within the structure of the genre. Usually at that moment, the marketing department of their publishing house gets down and does a booty-shakin' happy dance because authors with strong series can sell to a thirsty, eager audience.

And that can be when "formula" becomes the best word to describe the structure-within-a-structure, because that repeated structure can become boring, trite, repetitive, and banal. And

*TIME FOR SWEEPING GENERALIZATIONS WITH YOUR HOSTS,
THE SMART BITCHES*

Match the author to their "formula," in convenient haiku style:

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|---|---|
| 1. Femme M.E. cooks stuff.
Enter: third-party villain
in last third of book. | A. Janet Evanovich
B. Jude Deveraux
C. James Patterson |
| 2. You see in color?
Dude. You're toast, in the
luurrrrrve™ sense.
Bring it doggy-style! | D. Mary Higgins Clark
E. J. R. Ward
F. Patricia Cornwall
G. Christine Feehan |
| 3. Victimized female
Fumbles into danger. Then,
Surprise! Finds the perp. | |
| 4. She tells you apart?
From your identical twin?
Lather. Rinse. Repeat. | |
| 5. I have so much ahnghst.
The cure. Wuss Woman. Her name?
Carve it in my back. | |
| 6. Two-to-three-page chapters.
Shitloads of white space. Plus some
Real sick violence. | |
| 7. Torn between two men
Between sexing, I wreck cars.
And somehow solve crime. | |

1. F 2. G 3. D 4. B 5. E 6. C 7. A

that's when we, as readers, get really pissed off, because there is no journey between the narrative elements. There's just more repetition of the same from the last book, from the book before, and the book before that. Those, unfortunately, are the books that can easily give romance—and any other genre that operates

on a solid, historically grounded narrative structure—a tawdry reputation.

Well, that and the man titty.

So Why Is Romance So Often and So Frequently Denigrated?

Good question. Why do mysteries, thrillers, spy novels, military-intrigue stories, and the rest hold a slightly more elevated position in the social ranking of “Other People’s Opinions of Your Reading Material” than romance?

Are you a woman? Look in your pants. That could be why.

As Nora Roberts says, “Romance is the hat trick of easy targets: emotions, relationships, and sex.” Add to that hat trick the instant handicap of being a genre written mostly by women, mostly for women, and the stereotypical images that surround both the readers *and* the writers, and it’s a one-stop express to Highly Denigrated Genre land.

It’s not easy being green any more than it is easy being a romance reader, or a romance writer. Consider the plight of the writer: for example, come Valentine’s Day, reporters appear out of nowhere asking for quotes on sex tips, bedroom decor, love advice, and romantic date ideas—merely because, as the author of a romance novel, clearly the writer knows more about this stuff than the rest of us mere mortals. We won’t even discuss the number of times romance writers have been asked by leering reporters how they research their sex scenes.

But romance readers, let’s go back to our press conference. We are on the receiving end of snide comments for reading it, and we suffer under the presumption that we’re undersexed housewives in puffy-paint sweatshirts who are eager for any and all escapist fantasy drivel, and we’re too dim to notice that it’s “all the same.”

Ultimately, your choice to defend romance will likely lead to the ultimate in condescending question, “*But you’re so smart! Why do you read those books?*”

We sighed deeply with discouragement just typing that.



“I read these books because I *am* so smart.”

That’s the bottom-line frustration that we have, and it’s why we founded our Web site and named it Smart Bitches Who Love Trashy Books. We love romance novels. We’re smart women with sharp intellects and a love of discussion and debate. And one does not cancel out the other. Romance novels do not make you stupid, we promise.

Many smart women love romance. We can personally verify by our own marvelous existence and the community on our site. Romance novels attract an erudite, intelligent, and unspeakably educated readership. That same readership is also a lucrative audience, as romance novels sell in the billions. And yet, romance is about the only thing marketed to us as romance readers. The only tie-in product that links romance fans and advertising is Fabio shilling for I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter, and that seems more a play on his celebrity than an attempt to reach the limitless pot of money that is the romance-buying public.

But bottom line? We’re smart, and we have money.

The RWA commissions two studies to examine the industry and the readership of romance. The readership survey is always a bucket

full of fun when it comes to the results. Why? Because there's so damn many of us romance readers, it's amazing we put up with any of this crap. Let's throw around some statistical numbers with gleeful abandon, shall we?

According to the RWA, 64.6 million Americans read at least one romance in the past year. That's a lot of fucking people. You know what happens with 64.6 million people do the same thing? Taylor Hicks wins *American Idol*. Wait, that may not really strengthen our argument.

Anyway, of those readers, 42 percent of us have bachelor's degrees, with an additional 15 percent having acquired postgraduate education as well. And how much are we educated romance readers spending?

\$1.37 billion dollars on romance.

Seriously. Educated people with financial buying power are spending a freaking shit ton of money. So you're not alone. And if someone hands you the "Why do you read *those* books" question, a handy short answer may be, "Because I enjoy them. And so do 64 million other really smart women who, incidentally, won't like that question, either."

So Why Do Smart Women Love Romance?

We know that:

- Romance is better than folks believe it is.
- Anything written for an audience of mostly women by a community of mostly women is subversive, reflective of the current sexual, emotional, and political status, and actively embraces and undermines that status simultaneously.
- Happiness is good. Emo may be chic. Angst is undoubtedly chic. Happiness is definitely not chic. But happiness is *good*.

And therein lies the crux of the matter: We smart readers of romance know that romance is Not All Bad.

The problem?

It's Not All Good either. It's like any other genre, with vacillations in quality, but because it gets dismissed as universally and unilaterally bad by those who don't read it, there is a remarkable tendency to defend romance as if it were infallible.

So what's the best defense against anyone who sneers at your reading material, who asks why a smart person could read romance, wasting brain cells with wanton, thoughtless abandon? Ignoring them works for us much of the time, and really, is there a ruder thing to do than put someone down based on what she reads? It's a classist, obnoxious, and utterly grotesque use of energy. Feel free to go ahead and tell the person he or she is being a classist jackwad, but that doesn't always work, either.

If you're really, really hoping to slam-dunk someone for dissing your books, we've got your back. So do romance authors—so we asked some for their best defenses of the genre. Of all the types of romance, category probably takes the most heat because there are so many assumptions made about readers of category romance. Among the top assumptions made about category lines: "The lines are marketed by how much sex is in them, and therefore the women who read them are in for a low-reading-level, titillating minibreak of porntastic cheese."

Or, how about, "They're about the same size as a Sweet Valley High novel, so they don't require much stamina in the reading, plus they reinforce the idea that women are stupid and can deal with sexuality only in the most lush and nonthreatening of packages."

Let's be real—titles like *The Sheikh's Virgin Mistress* do not help anyone who wants to defend romance, but neither do any of the clinch-laden historical covers, or the high-heeled cartoon legs of impossible thinness that so often adorn contemporary romances, either. But the posse of people inside the genre—the ones who write it and the ones who know how much you love it—they know how good it is.

What's Your Best Tip for a Romance Reader Who Is Consistently Given the Snarky, Derisive Treatment for Her Love of Romance?

RUTH RYAN LANGAN: "I'm always surprised that a reader would feel the need to defend what she reads. . . . I guess I'd have no defense for it. I simply love romance. And have always been drawn to it, from *Romeo and Juliet* to *Pride and Prejudice*. I do believe we've moved beyond the need to mount a defense of our love for romance. Both readers and writers have contributed to the public's acceptance that this genre has become the backbone of the industry. Without romance, many of our major publishers would be facing even more economic chaos than they currently claim during these challenging economic times. I say Long Live Romance. I read it, I write it, and I love it."

JULIE LETO: "Stop it. Stop defending it. Cut. It. Out. Learn a few key phrases to repeat to yourself that include naughty expletives. Seriously, embrace your love for romance and take it to the next level. If people laugh, laugh with them and read what you want anyway. Life's too short to have people influence what you read . . . or anything else for that matter . . . For every jerk who makes a stupid comment, there are hundreds if not thousands of readers who love what we do. Concentrate on them!"

KATHLEEN O'REILLY: "I think it's a miserable commentary on our society that people cannot discern between romance and sex. Yes, they are linked, but they are not the same, and I worry about my daughter growing up in a world where people don't know what true romance is."

"Honestly, there are no witty comebacks that can grow the size of a small mind. My best advice to . . . romance readers is be smug and superior in your own self-knowledge, and to pity the unenlightened reader who doesn't understand the myriad choices available to them. I know there are people who rag on the quality of category, but look at the people who started in category: Linda Howard, Nora Roberts, Suzanne Brockmann, J. R. Ward, Jenny Crusie. My favorite Nora Roberts book is *The Heart of Devin*

Mackade (a category novel). My favorite Jenny Crusie is *Manhunting* (another category). The classic Linda Howard is *Mackenzie's Mountain* (a category). 'Nuff said."

Romance = Subversive

Suppose, however, that you're in the midst of a very intellectual crowd, one that cannot reconcile your intelligence and your love of romance. Hit 'em with a few choice examples of how romance is subversive, powerful, political, and lucrative when your goal is to save lives. This, to be sure, is not a genre written by, or written for, wussy, wimpy, wallflower women.

Example the first: repeat after us. "Littattafan Soyayya." What now? That would be Hausa, a northern Nigerian language spoken by the religious Islamic community, and it means "Books of Love." Soyayya novels are little paper booklets sold in high-foot-traffic areas in northern Nigeria, and according to an AP article published May 1, 2008, they are sought by women readers and set on fire by male religious leaders.

Why? Because the books, written in the local Hausa language, "extoll the values of true love based on feelings, rather than family or other social pressures." In a conservative community in which most marriages are arranged and may involve multiple wives and forced obedience or seclusion, Soyayya novels explore themes of marital choice and female education through tiny paper-bound romance narratives. They're part fiction and part instructional assistance for uneducated women on navigating conservative culture.

And did you know that romance novels helped liberate Jewish victims of the Holocaust? No, seriously.

Mary Burchell published over 130 novels for Harlequin/Mills & Boon in a career spanning more than fifty years. Burchell was the pen name of Ida Cook, one half of an opera-mad pair of sisters who made it their life's purpose to scrimp and save every farthing so that they could travel Europe to see their favorite sopranos. When the Cook sisters learned of the effect of Hitler's rule in Germany from

a Jewish friend, Ida Cook began devoting the profits of her novels, which were considerable, toward their travel, which, under the guise of opera tourism, was in reality a mission to interview families hoping for passage to England, and to smuggle the possessions of Jewish families in portable form. In Ida Cook's obituary after her death in 1986, Francesca Segal wrote, "The mild-mannered spinsters became expert smugglers, regaling border guards with tales of the previous night's performance, switching labels in fur coats, and wearing real diamonds with outfits so dowdy that customs officers would presume the jewels were paste." Ida and her sister Louise saved the lives of at least 29 people, and were named Righteous Among the Gentiles by Yad Veshem in Israel.

And let us not forget the increasing numbers of fully licensed Ph.D.-carrying badass intellectuals who are turning the power of their brains on to the romance genre. From Pamela Regis's *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* to the Professors Brilliant at Teach Me Tonight, a blog devoted to scholarly examination of the genre, there are some big, big brains examining the power of the romance, and the power hidden within it. The political, social, and, yes, feminist implications of the genre are examined with full brain powers on. The continual play of female-centered and male-dominated characterization is part of what makes romance so fascinating for those who love to pick apart narratives with scholarly scalpels. That play is also why it's not so easy to dismiss romance as patriarchal pap, reinforcement of the dominant male paradigm, or merely rape and adverbs.

And speaking of rape, let's turn to another common question asked of romance readers that reveals the insult and the assumption: *It's all pornography for women, isn't it?*

Option 1: Utter silence. A few seconds of shocked awe may make the person asking rethink, or rephrase, the question.

Option 2: Sarcasm. "Oh, my goodness. Women? Having sexual pleasure?! Ought to be avoided at all costs."

Option 3: Full-frontal assault. "What's wrong with sex?" Or, flash him and see if he looks, while saying, "I got your porn *right here*."

The problem with the "chick porn" assumption, and the question, is that ultimately you argue about what pornography *is*, and whether romance novels fit into that definition. One person may say no, while the other says yes, Yes, *YES*, oooh yessssss, it is. Porn lies in the eyes of the beholder and the hands of the masturbator. And for some people, anything containing descriptions of sexual acts qualifies as porn. As Candy says, "I know that when I was a kid and burningly curious about sex, I'd systematically flip through my sister's romance-novel collection, looking for all the naughty bits, prurient curiosity redlining all the way."

But are romances porn? Sorry to give you the cagey answer, but there it is: maybe, or maybe not. With a self-important blowhard, or anyone who tosses the romance = porn accusation without looking both ways first, you can try to debate what is and isn't pornography, and whether romances really ought to be classified in that category. If he says yes, and you say no, you're both right, because we sure as shit don't think it's up to one single person to define what is and what isn't pornography since just about anything can be used pornographically. Name an act, *any* act, no matter how disgusting or odd or innocuous, and we can guarantee you somebody, somewhere, is jacking off while thinking of somebody doing that very thing. There are fetishes centered around people sneezing, and bald men in hats, and people brushing their teeth in their pajamas. (Why, yes, we do spend an awful lot of time on the Internet. Why do you ask?)

So in that context, written explorations of sexual autonomy and self-actualization for women and establishment of equal sexual status with a willing and satisfying partner within the confines of mutual commitment seem really fucking tame. Yet, because it's descriptions of sexual intercourse, that's porn. And because some readers get off on it, it's porn.

And therein lies the other spear hidden in that ignorant ques-

tion: regardless of whether you agree or disagree with the idea that romance is pornography for women, Bonehead McAsshat is still implying by asking in the first place that women ought to feel ashamed about sexual pleasure, especially self-pleasure. Such a castigation doesn't exist for men. Sarah regularly gave subscriptions to *Playboy* to two of her husband's friends as a holiday gift, and they kept multiple back issues on their coffee table for guests to read. No shame, there. Cue the standard jovial humor about reading it "for the articles." And, hell yeah, there's some great writing in *Playboy*, but c'mon. There's also a good portion of the readership who look at *Playboy* for the models who aren't wearing much in the way of "articles" of clothing.

But vehicles for women's sexual pleasure, on the other hand, are not so eagerly displayed on the coffee table, or tolerated by visitors. Women's sexual pleasure and the education of women on the means to that end are simply not accepted or even celebrated. Then here come romance novels, potentially including sex scenes of various levels of explicitness.

Do we think romance novels are porn? Nope. Do they turn us on? Sometimes. It depends. Candy won't pick up the phone after finishing an Emma Holly erotic romance, if that answers your question.

We recently had a lovely discussion to break down the question of "Romance = chick porn" and came up with short, one-line defenses to the "chick porn" question. Test drive at your leisure:

SARAH: "Mmm. Porn."

"There's nothing wrong with porn."

"Monogamy and a plot—so common to porn, yes?"

"You know a lot about porn, don't you, dear?"

CANDY: "If romance novels are chick porn, then Tom Clancy and Stephen King are dude porn."

"Have you ever read actual porn?"

"If romance novels are porn, where's my twincest anal sex scene, goddammit?"

SARAH: *Twincest?! HA!*

"If they're chick porn, the sound track must be very throbby. What music do you like?" (Minefield of music taste question, ahoy! Commence debate!)

"Romance is not at all chick porn. There is not nearly enough anal to qualify."

So what's the very best way in our opinion to fend off the "Aren't they just chick porn?" question? Even if you disagree that romance is pornography, the person asking the question isn't going to sit still long enough to listen to an informed monologue about the variations within the genre such that some books contain no sex at all while others focus on sex as the primary driving point (har har) of the relationship. Your best defense is an offense that takes offense at the question:

"I don't think they are, though some people obviously do. And even if they were, what's wrong with that?"

The sad truth is that anyone who presumes that romances are all dumb, and that the readers thereof are as well, will never appreciate the genre unless they read one. They most likely will never do so, or won't recognize the romance for what it is because it's not wrapped up in a more attractive and socially acceptable cover. If a romance is marketed outside the romance bookshelf, then that book "transcends the genre" and doesn't count anyway. So those people will go on putting down your reading material because smart women don't read romance in their worldview.

So you know what? Fuck 'em. Fuck 'em hard. They can read whatever they want, and so can you. We lovers of the romance genre can celebrate the good parts and the parts that make the baby Ganesh weep with the badness. Because only real fans of romance can appreciate the best—and the worst—of the genre.