

Trying to Tame the Romance Critics and Correctness

Don't think that there hasn't been a lot of pressure exerted to make romance writers and romance fiction more politically correct. During the past few years, even as romance novels have commanded a spectacular share of the publishing market there has been an unrelenting effort to change them.

Much of this effort was exerted by a wave of young editors fresh out of East Coast colleges who arrived in New York to take up their first positions in publishing. (The editing of romance novels has traditionally been viewed as an entry-level job in the industry.) These young women (and most of them were women) didn't read romances themselves and so didn't understand why they appealed to readers. But they did understand that romance novels are held in contempt or at the very least considered politically incorrect by scholars and intellectuals and even by much of the publishing hierarchy which makes billions of dollars from them. And so they set about trying to make romances respectable. They looked for new authors who shared their views of what a respectable romance should be and they tried to change the books being written by the established, successful authors they inherited.

The first target of these reforming editors was what has come to be known in the trade as the alpha male. These males are the tough, hard-edged, tormented heroes that are at the heart of the vast majority of bestselling romance novels. These are the heroes who made Harlequin famous. These are the heroes who carry off

the heroines in historical romances. These are the heroes feminist critics despise.

What is it with those of us who write romance? We are intelligent women. We're flexible. We learn fast. Surely those who sought to lead us in the paths of politically correct romance writing ought to have succeeded in their goal of straightening us out by now. Why did we dig in our heels and resist the effort to turn our hard-edged, dangerous heroes into sensitive, right-thinking modern males?

We did it for the same reason a mystery writer sticks to the outcast hero, the same reason a western writer clings to the paladin figure. We did it because, in the romance genre, the alpha male is the one that works best in the fantasy.

And the reason he works so well is because in a romance the hero must play two roles. He is not only the hero, he is also the villain.

To understand what the romance novel is, it is important to understand first what it is not. A romance novel plot does not focus on women coping with contemporary social problems and issues. It does not focus on the importance of female bonding. It does not focus on adventure. A romance novel may incorporate any or all of these elements in its plot, but they are never the primary focus of the story. In a romance novel, the relationship between the hero and the heroine *is* the plot. It is the primary focus of the story, just as solving the crime is the primary focus of a mystery.

Given that conflict is a requirement of all good fiction, especially good genre fiction, and given that the conflict must arise out of the primary focus of the story, it is understandable that in a romance novel conflict must exist between the hero and heroine.

The hero in a romance is the most important challenge the heroine must face and conquer. The hero is her real problem in the book, not whatever trendy issue or daring adventure is also going on in the subplot. In some way, shape, or form, in some manner either real or perceived on the heroine's part, the hero must be a source of emotional and, yes, sometimes physical risk. He must present a genuine threat.

The hero must be part villain or else he won't be much of a

challenge for a strong woman. The heroine must put herself at risk with him if the story is to achieve the level of excitement and the particular sense of danger that only a classic romance can provide.

And the flat truth is that you don't get much of a challenge for a heroine from a sensitive, understanding, right-thinking "modern" man who is part therapist, part best friend, and thoroughly tamed from the start. You don't get much of a challenge for her from a neurotic wimp or a good-natured gentleman-saint who never reveals a core of steel.

And it is that core of steel at the center of a good romance hero that makes it all worth while.

Any woman who, as a little girl, indulged herself in books featuring other little girls taming wild stallions knows instinctively what makes a romance novel work. Those much-loved tales of brave young women taming and gentling magnificent, potentially dangerous beasts are the childhood version of the adult romance novel. The thrill and satisfaction of teaching that powerful male creature to respond only to your touch, of linking with him in a bond that transcends the physical, of communicating with him in a manner that goes beyond mere speech—that thrill is deeply satisfying. It is every bit as powerful as the satisfaction readers get from seeing the outcast hero solve the crime and mete out justice in a good mystery. But to get the thrill, you have to take a few risks. The hard-boiled detective must go down a few dark, dangerous alleys and the romance heroine must face a man who is a genuine challenge.

The second target of those who attempted to change romance novels was another familiar convention in the books: the aggressive seduction of the heroine by the hero. Most of the time this seduction is portrayed as intense and unrelentingly sensual; occasionally it is so forceful that it has been mislabeled rape by critics. Either way it is a convention that is universally condemned by those who sit in judgment on the romance novel. It is not politically correct for a woman to fantasize about being aggressively seduced.

It is odd that the romance genre is singled out for this particular criticism, because the aggressive seduction of the protagonist is an extremely common convention in most of the other genres.

Mysteries, a field notable for its plethora of both male writers and male protagonists, routinely use this approach to dealing with sex.¹ Many hard-boiled private-eye heroes get themselves seduced by their female clients or suspects in the course of the story. The seducing client or suspect is frequently portrayed as potentially threatening and as having a strong aura of aggressive sexuality, a description that nicely fits romance heroes. In mysteries the private eye very seldom initiates the seduction and, indeed, often appears surprisingly passive about the whole thing. Some put up a token resistance not unlike that put up by the heroines of some romance novels. This aggressive seduction of hard-boiled private investigators could conceivably be mislabeled as rape, but critics rarely even bother to mention it.

Aggressive seduction of the protagonist occurs in other genres as well. The male heroes of thrillers and men's action-adventure novels² are frequently swept off their feet and into bed by mysterious, exotic, powerful women. It is only when the tables are turned as they are in the romance genre, when the female protagonist is seduced by a mysterious, exotic, powerful male, that critics become alarmed.

It would seem to be more accurate and more honest simply to acknowledge that the fantasy of being aggressively seduced within the safe, controlled environment of a work of fiction is a popular one shared by men and women alike. And why not? It's very pleasant to enter into a fantasy where one is the treasure rather than the treasure hunter.

It is interesting to note that in the romance novel this fantasy often takes on a complex and fascinating twist. Through the use of male viewpoint, a technique often employed either directly or indirectly, the reader is allowed to experience the seduction from the hero's point of view as well as that of the heroine. The reader gets to enjoy the fantasy of being *simultaneously* the one who seduces and the one who is seduced.

This twist on the basic seduction fantasy is not a simple matter of the writer structuring the scene so that the reader switches back and forth between viewpoints. It cannot be summed up or explained by saying that the seduction is witnessed first through the

heroine's eyes and then through those of the hero. In a really good romance, the experience for the reader is that of being in both the heroine's mind and the hero's *at the same time*. The reader knows what each character is feeling, what each is sensing, how each is being affected. She is also profoundly aware of the transcendent quality of the experience, of how it will alter the course of both the hero's and the heroine's life. The whole thing is incredibly complex, exciting, and difficult to describe. I suspect it is almost unique to the romance novel.

Perhaps it is this indefinable richness of the seduction fantasy that makes romance novels so threatening to critics of the genre. But just because one does not have the vocabulary fully to explain the experience does not mean it is a negative one. It does not even make it politically incorrect. The truth is that women who read romance novels never describe themselves as feeling threatened by the fantasy of being seduced, just as men who read hard-boiled detective fiction never appear to feel threatened by the sexually aggressive client or suspect.

The third target of those who sought to make romance novels respectable was the convention of the heroine's virginity. There is no denying that the most popular romances, both contemporary and historical, frequently feature heroines who are virgins. This fact is readily acknowledged by writers such as myself, who have compared royalty statements with other writers. It is also substantiated by an examination of the bestseller lists.

This virginal quality has nothing to do with making the heroine a "trophy" for the hero. Nor is it used as a moral issue. It has everything to do with creating a metaphor for the qualities of female power, honor, generosity, and courage with which the heroine is imbued. Virginity has been the stuff of legends, of stories of kings and queens, bloody wars and patched-up alliances, territorial feuds and historical consequences since the dawn of time. There is an heroic quality about a woman's virginity that is truly powerful when used to its fullest potential in fiction.

There is also the underlying assumption in most romance novels that the heroine is smart enough to choose the right man. It is to this man that she gives the gift of her love and her virginity.

Part of being the hero of such a romance novel means appreciating the gift of the heroine's virginity. *She* is never the same again. Perhaps even more important, *he* is never the same, either.

In a romance novel the heroine allows herself to be seduced not by just any male but by one particular male, a larger-than-life hero. She takes a risk, and at the end of the story it pays off. She has chosen the right man. She has tamed the magnificent wild stallion. She has awed and gentled him with the generous gift of herself. She has also forced him to acknowledge her power as a woman as well as the womanly honor she uses to control and channel that power.

Men represent to women one of the greatest sources of risk they will ever encounter in their lives. Taking risks and winning out against all odds is one of the great pleasures of fantasy. In a romance novel the heroines put everything on the line and they win. Virginity is symbolic of the high stakes involved.³

The fourth target of the reforming editors was the genre's frequent use of certain core stories. It has often been pointed out that there are only a handful of plots available to the mystery genre and only a few basic stories in westerns or science fiction or horror. This limitation on plot devices is not considered a sin in those genres, but for some reason critics view it as such in romance.

At the core of each of the genres lie a group of ancient myths unique to that genre. The most popular writers in those genres continually mine those ancient myths and legends for the elements that make their particular genre work. Westerns and mysteries incorporate the old chivalric tales. The horror genre relies on the gut-wrenching myths of the supernatural that have been around since the days when people lived in caves. Science fiction uses the myths of exploration and the fear of the "other" that have long fascinated an aggressive species bent on conquering new territory. At the heart of the romance novel lie the ancient myths that deal with the subject of male-female bonding.

Stories become myths because they embody values that are crucially important to the survival of the species. There is no subject more imperative to that survival than the creation of a successful pair bond. The romance novel captures the sense of

importance and the sheer excitement of that elemental relationship as no other genre can.

Women, who have traditionally had the primary responsibility for making that bond work, have always responded to the basic myths and legends around which romance is built. I suspect they will continue to do so as long as the current method of reproduction is in use and as long as the family unit is the cornerstone of civilization.

Some of the basic myths and legends that animate the romance genre include the tale of Persephone (echoed in a thousand stories involving a woman being carried off by a mysterious, powerful male who is in turn enthralled and brought to his knees by her). Another popular one is the story of Beauty and the Beast (often portrayed in childhood tales of little girls taming large stallions and in adult stories of women taming dangerous men). Then there is the familiar battle of the sexes, or the Taming of the Shrew story. This one is especially piquant for women because in these tales the man is the one who, for once, is forced to find a way to make the relationship work.

There are other basic stories of romance, all of which have deep roots in ancient myths and legends. In the romance novel the elements of those myths and legends that speak most powerfully to women are preserved and retold.

Romance novels are tales of brave women taming dangerous men. They are stories that capture the excitement of that most mysterious of relationships, the one between a woman and a man. They are legends told to women by other women, and they are as powerful and as endlessly fascinating to women as the legends that lie at the heart of all the other genres.

The effort to make romance novels respectable has been a resounding failure. The books that exemplify the "new breed" of politically correct romances, the ones featuring sensitive, unaggressive heroes and sexually experienced, right-thinking heroines in "modern" stories dealing with trendy issues, have never become the most popular books in the genre.

Across the board, from series romance to single title release, it is the writers who have steadfastly resisted the efforts to reform the

genre whose books consistently outsell all others. And the readers have demonstrated where their hearts are by routinely putting the romances that incorporate the classic elements on the bestseller lists.⁴

NOTES

1. The propensity of the heroes of mystery novels toward getting themselves aggressively seduced is readily seen in many of the books throughout the genre. From the novels of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett to the books written by such popular contemporary authors as Dick Francis, Loren D. Estleman, Scott Turow, and Andrew Vachss, it is almost always the woman who does the seducing.

2. In the quintessential men's action adventure series, *The Executioner*, the hero, Mack Bolan, is a man who is certainly aggressive when it comes to dealing out a violent kind of justice to the bad guys. But when it comes to women he is politely aloof, almost reluctant. It is the women in the stories who pursue and sometimes manage to seduce him, not vice versa.

3. I am indebted to romance writer Suzanne Simmons Guntrum for many of the ideas and much of the language I have used in this discussion of virginity.

4. An examination of any of the romance novels written by the following *New York Times* bestselling authors will prove this point: Judith McNaught, Sandra Brown, Johanna Lindsey, Catherine Coulter, Karen Robards, Julie Garwood, Amanda Quick. For more names, check the latest edition of the *New York Times* bestseller lists.