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"You call me a bitch like that's a bad thing": Romance Criticism and Redefining the Word "Bitch"

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Bitch.

No, really.

Bitch!

What — or who — comes to mind upon reading that word? That pushy woman in line at the bank who uses her purse, her breath, and her body weight to assert physically that you've taken her spot in line, and thus you should move your ass immediately? Or the woman who dumped you after a four-month relationship because she decided her happiness was more secure without your involvement? The lady next door who leans out the window and asks you to please keep the noise down during your last party? Or perhaps a blonde, female candidate for the Democratic nomination for the 2008 Presidential election? Is a bitch a woman or a man? Is it someone who annoys you, who demands that you do things her way? Is it a person, usually female, who is uncompromisingly firm, assertive or aggressive, and who takes no crap from anyone? Who, or what, is a bitch?

I, Sarah Wendell, am a Bitch. Specifically, I'm Smart Bitch Sarah[1], co-owner and author of a website that reviews romance novels and discusses feminism, politics, cover art, man-titty, David Hasselhoff, plagiarism, ethics, and orgasms. On a given day, it might feature a heuristic discussion of pubic wigs and socialism. Our site is called *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*. My co-pilot at the site is Smart Bitch Candy. The readers who frequent our site and participate in discussions therein are "the Bitchery." Our discussions are long, often fractious, and can stretch on for hundreds of comments, but since 2005, our site has actively and continually redefined what it is to be a Bitch. To make a broad, sweeping assessment of our own importance, our site has reclaimed, subverted, and redefined the term "Bitch" into a description of confident intelligence that is erudite and fierce, argumentative, and above all affirming of the idea that being a Bitch is a Good Thing, particularly within the context of romance novels and their readers.

Putting the Bitch Back in Romance

Romance novels themselves, and the community of writers and readers that create and promote them, are not necessarily known for Bitchy behavior. Romance novels are among the most purely women-centered genres of literature. They are written mostly by women for women, and yet often appear to reinforce deeply traditional roles for women. There are gender tropes left, right, and center, from the expectations and variations of virginity that plague the average romance heroine regardless of time period, to the alpha male requirements enforced upon heroes. The sexuality in romance novels often and frequently embraces a theme of deflowering, with an inexperienced female being introduced to the wonders of the hero's masterful wang and experiencing the birth of her own autonomy and sexual agency under the sheltering wings of her manly hero.[2] Even as women write and retell with variations the traditional romance plotline which ends with a happy ending for both the male and female protagonists, the plotlines themselves can sometimes read as repeated written reinforcement of patriarchal authority over women: a woman needs a man in order to find fulfillment.

If one examines the romance writing community solely by the titles of the books and the initial marketing of the industry product — judging the genre by its cover, so to speak — it is a facile matter to dismiss romance as merely reinforcement of the virgin/whore mythology that feminist scholars have long argued imprisons women in untenable and powerless roles. However, as romance readers can attest, many romance novels eagerly and deliberately subvert that mythology, even as they appear to embrace it. Recent and detailed examinations of the subversion of the virgin/whore mythology by romance novels and the emerging classifications of hero archetype, particularly Pamela Regis's *A Natural History of the Romance Novel,* reveal that the patterns of self-actualization represented in romance novels contradict any accusations of suppression and discrimination against women, and instead reveal that romance novels tell and retell stories of female empowerment and fulfillment, both within and in spite of traditional expectations of women in society.

Much as the novels are dismissed, so are the women who write them. The individuals writing romance novels are most often women operating their own independent businesses as writers, who work as entrepreneurs within the publishing industry, represented by agents and editors of both genders, within a lucrative industry that sells writing by women to an eager consumer base made up mostly of women. Yet ask any romance author about comments from shoppers during bookstore signings, or from colleagues and extended family, and you'll have a buffet of backhanded compliments and insults from which to choose. Most romance authors have had to defend their careers against accusations of writing pornography for women and field comments about writing "those books." Alas, not much has changed since the late 1800s, when Nathaniel Hawthorne's knickers were in a twist about the "damned mob of scribbling women" whose books sold so well that their works blocked more deserving writers from entering the market. Women who write romance are part of a $1.7 billion annual industry that is looked down upon by many, even as the profit of the romance genre provides financial support to publishing houses reporting losses each quarter. Beneath the surface of the genre that is dismissed and denigrated is a financial powerhouse of female entrepreneurship that is also dismissed and overlooked.

And yet, there is one part of the romance writing community, online and off, wherein

there is precious little subversion, and a sad lack of any feisty challenge to the existing standard of gender roles: romance novel reviewing. Because the genre itself is beneath the notice of mainstream reviewers such as *The New York Times, The New Yorker,* and other magazine and newspaper print reviewers, romance novels have been reviewed almost exclusively within their own community, in print publications such as *Romantic Times* (now *RT Book Reviews*), *Affaire de Coeur*, and independent websites such as "All About Romance" (likesbooks.com) which started operation in 1997. A pattern emerges, however, when one examines the grading, phrasing, and overall conclusions of those reviews: the grading curve is skewed to the positive. While there are negative grades, most books rate higher than average. While *Romantic Times* will give a one-star review, for example, the bulk of their reviews are between three and four-and-a-half stars on a scale of one to four-and-a-half. To put it plainly: there is a deliberate pressure to "be nice" when one is a writer, author, or reviewer in the romance novel genre. Authors rarely criticize other authors publicly, and that conduct applies to reviewers as well, it seems.

The origin of the romance review culture is a mystery — a big, pink mystery — and is likely a combination of factors. First, until recently with the advent of blogs and personal websites, romance was a self-contained community of authors, publishers, media professional devoted to the genre, and readers. But without blogs, the readers didn't have much of a voice outside of direct communication with authors. Because romance is beneath the notice of most literary review establishments, only the publications dedicated to the genre itself were examining the quality thereof, and if those magazines were relentlessly positive, which they were, no exacting criticism had any room to flourish. And of course authors who read within the genre couldn't endanger their own careers by offering their own critical opinion: professional courtesy demanded a "be nice" mentality and fostered an attitude of "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all."

Thus, when we began our site, the established communities of romance readers online operated within a strange dichotomy. On the one hand, readers would grumble about how romances are dismissed as plebian dreck, or that they receive neither respect nor adequate attention from the media outlets who are continually distracted by the sex and the appearance of Fabio on the cover. But then, should anyone (read: us, for example) begin to examine individual romance novels critically, pointing out narrative flaws or questioning the sexual authority of a heroine who subsumes her identity completely into the hero's by page 4, these same readers and writers would cry that romance is just silly escapist fun and certainly doesn't need to be subjected to harsh criticism. By reviewing romances critically, we are already at odds with these readers, because romances, in our opinion, *should* be subjected to thorough examination, both from an irreverent and a critical perspective.

However, we also remain at odds with the rest of the population that disdains romance novels, and greets the sight of us reading a romance with the phrase "But you're so smart! How come you read *those* books?" To be completely frank, the only appropriate response we could conjure up was to be bitchy in every sense of the word and refute both the critics of the genre and those who insist that the genre shouldn't be held to critical standards. We are offensive for telling those who insult our reading material that they could kiss off, and we are irritating to those who wring their hands at the idea that anyone would call into serious question why in the name of God's green earth any hero would rape a heroine because her father screwed him over in a business deal twenty-five years ago.

That, in a nutshell,[3] is how our site came to be. We wanted to review romances. We didn't think there were enough realistic examinations of the genre that subjected it to much-needed criticism while also celebrating what made romance novels such satisfying reading material. We wanted to be a community and haven for readers of romance who love the genre and were tired of taking shit for it from both sides. No quarter would be given to snide comments from those who didn't read the genre, nor to any self-righteous outrage from readers who were mad because we said their favorite author's new release sucked donkey wang. Thus we named our site *Smart Bitches Who Love Trashy Books* in an effort to play with both the dismissal of the romance genre as "trashy" and the dismissal of outspoken, cursing, opinionated women as "bitchy."

Initially, there was some outrage because we were unabashedly snarky and a lot more forthcoming than established romance reviewers regarding our opinions on the books we were reading, particularly when those books failed to meet our expectations. We were saying loudly and frequently that some romance novels sucked and should never have been published, which was an outrageously mean and shocking idea to a community that had never really confronted reader opinion stated so frankly and so publicly. At one point, we came up with a drinking game that required a chugging of one's beverage should a commenter state that we've gone too far, or that we should be banned from the internet because of our conduct online.[4]

Conversely, however, we also encountered relieved gratitude from readers who were finally able to discuss what they didn't like about a particular novel. For example, Candy, my partner in Bitching, wrote in February 2005 that Lucy Monroe's *The Real Deal* was "excruciating to read on all levels. The writing style veered from hilariously purple to hilariously wooden, the characters were poorly-recycled archetypes at best, and the plot was completely humdrum when it wasn't busy being implausible."[5] This wasn't exactly revolutionary review writing, except that so many other print and online romance reviews, from *Romantic Times* to All About Romance gave *The Real Deal* very high grades. *Romantic Times* gave the book four stars out of five, and All About Romance gave it "Desert Isle Keeper" status, the highest grade possible at that site.[6] Candy's review, however, brought out comments from those who hadn't liked it and felt alienated in any attempts to discuss why they hadn't liked it. Jac wrote after Candy posted her review, "Thanks for the honest review of this book. Finally. Someone who tells it like it is. It was getting a bit tiresome listening to everyone kiss-ass (can I say that here?!) to the author about her 'oh-so-fantastic' book when it really truly sucks."[7] Other readers echoed that sentiment with comments like "I thought I was the only one who hated this book," and "I thought it was just me!"[8]

While we expected some disgust from readers who disagreed with our decision to name ourselves Bitches or to call the genre "trashy," we didn't expect, but were utterly pleased to find, that due in part to our irreverent and Bitchy title and monikers, our site attracted a community of readers, writers, and publishing professionals whose commentary on our blog entries was unique to the internet. While we do battle the occasional troll, our site has created by fiat an unspoken code of behavior that dictates a style of argument which avoids personal and direct attack of the writer but instead invokes a sophisticated language and manner that invites further discussion. Since our site has been online, several discussions have illustrated that code of behavior, and revealed how, in a relatively short amount of time, being a Bitch on our site has come to serve as a shorthand for conducting an assertive, intelligent, and respectful debate.

Bitch Is the Word

Bitch, let it be said, is a marvelously interesting word. Historically and linguistically speaking, there are few words that can be ascribed only to women when used in the pejorative sense. Words like "whore," "slut," and "cunt" are particularly useful, but few words have the effortless shorthand definition and linguistic explosive-consonant-laden punch of "bitch." First recorded in the year 1000 as referring to female dogs, and in the year 1400 as referencing a woman[9], the word has since become both a noun and a verb.[10] In the Online Etymology Dictionary, the slang definition encompasses both the verb form, which means "to gripe or complain," and the noun form: a "lewd [...] spiteful or overbearing [...] highly objectionable or unpleasant [...] difficult" woman, or conversely, a man who is "sexually contemptuous," a derivation from the female insult.[11] What a delightful pairing: weak men and strong, assertive, perhaps aggressive women are "bitches." The weak male, who is charged by gender expectations to be aggressive, and the aggressive woman, who, according to those same standards, is meant to be subservient, weak, and submissive, are the maligned parties using a word that formally refers to a "female dog."

According to the etymology webzine *Take Our Word for It*, the use of the word "bitch" to refer to a female is "simply a metaphor: comparing lewd women to female dogs, which, if left to their own devices, will bear pups rather frequently, suggesting sexual promiscuity."[12] The more contemporary usage of "bitch" referring to a "malicious or treacherous woman" is traced by Francis Grose's *1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* which defines the word as "the most offensive appellation that can be given to an English woman, even more provoking than that of 'whore.'"[13] But wait, there's more! According to AskOxford.com, an online language repository of questions and answers from the creators of the Oxford English Dictionary, "Bitch" can refer in the informal sense to "a woman whom one considers to be malicious or unpleasant" or, comfortingly, in "black English" as simply, "a woman — used in a non-derogatory sense."[14] Take a look at that one again: it's *non*-derogatory, according to AskOxford, because "bitch" is simply another word for "woman." Either the word has lost some of its negative power due to repeated sustained use, or it's even more dangerous because it's synonymous with "woman," and therefore drags the word "woman" itself into derogatory territory by association.

The further one delves in to the etymology of the word "bitch," the more twisted, confusing, and ultimately powerless and powerful the word itself becomes, not because it is pejorative, but because it is acceptable usage in many social and professional situations. From a foundation based in metaphoric slurs alluding to promiscuity and aggressive behavior, the word has since become somewhat tame: one can say the word "bitch" in some television broadcasts and during live radio broadcasts on the air. While each individual network has a set of Standards and Practices guidelines that determine what words can be used during which time of day on a television program, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission allows the use of the word "bitch" and does not issue fines to networks if the word is used. When I was asked to participate in a sports-talk radio show based in Houston, Texas, in May 2008, I asked the producers if I could use the full name of our website, and refer to myself as "Smart Bitch Sarah." "Absolutely," they said: "You can say 'bitch' on the air. It's a female dog."[15] But when I was interviewed by *The Today Show* in late July 2008, I was not permitted to use the word at all, nor mention the full name of our website as some of their affiliate stations would be outraged.

Thus, in a lexical and political sense, the word "bitch" is more than merely outrageous. It's exceedingly powerful precisely because its layered meaning combines with a persistent social acceptance. It is a derogatory term for women that ties up in five letters and one syllable all the negative stereotypes and limitations placed upon women. It's a metaphor for promiscuous canines with unguarded and accessible vaginas and a propensity toward frequent procreation, and a term for sexually unacceptable men. "Bitch" is a truly amazing, terrible, offensive, and creative word. Its history and depth are taken for granted by those who use it. We love it, each and every letter.

Taking Back the Bitch

Third Wave feminism, the activities and examinations of feminists beginning in the early 1990s, often focused on the power of specific words, and sought to reclaim them from derogatory to self-affirming and celebratory use. In efforts to inspire activism among young women who grew up with the rewards of earlier feminist activism, and to a large extent take them for granted, Third Wave feminism advocates for reclaiming words because "it's better to change the meaning of a sexist word than to censor it from everyday speech."[16] As Inga Muscio notes in her memoir *Cunt*, English is already a language of power, "because it represents the victors of history's present telling."[17] Therefore, undermining that power by grabbing a word and twisting it to suit a purpose is an action filled with ballsy courage: "seizing this language and manipulating it to serve your community is a very powerful thing to do"[18] because, as a language of international commerce, English has some considerable social, political, and economic power.

Reclaiming as an activist process has succeeding in undermining and reforming the definitions of many words that have been used by the dominant hegemony to oppress and marginalize minorities. Words like "queer" have been co-opted by gay men and women to celebrate their homosexuality, and today several universities in the United States, including Smith College, have courses of study formally called "Queer Studies."[19] Words that range in power from "geek" and "nerd" to "gaijin" and "nigger"[20] have been reclaimed by the communities they refer to and re-appropriated in ways that diminish their negative power, even though the context in which those terms can be used without incident and by whom some words can be said is still up for debate.[21] "Bitch" is also subject to debate as to who should use the word, and in what context. Kathleen King in an article titled "Do You Use the B-Word?" concluded, after encountering an entire display of books with the word "bitch" in the title, that "[t]he B-word implies a strong woman who speaks her mind. But as long as women (read: not men) are writing these books, many of us believe we can — and should — reclaim the term 'bitch' for ourselves."[22]

Reforming the word "bitch" into an expression of affirmation instead of a sexual pejorative begins with the usage of the word among communities of women. Reclaiming the word "bitch," however, or even using it to suit one's own purposes is not akin to trying to convince someone that they embody the negative stereotypes used against them, and that they should be pleased and grateful to be so insulted. Reclaiming and using the word "bitch" for affirmative use demands recognition for the idea that the stereotype itself is wrong and that there is nothing at all wrong or unnatural with a woman being any of the meanings of

the word: so what if a woman has a great deal of sex? More power to her (and more orgasms). So what if a woman is assertive, aggressive, powerful, or even scary? More power to her (no mention of orgasms). So what if a woman decides to reject the established paradigm of female behavior and chooses to act in opposition to those dictates? Literally: more power to her! Refusing to be offended by the word itself, and using the word as often as possible in a context that redefines its meaning demonstrates a self confidence and self assurance that, coincidentally[23] works against those same established paradigms of female behavior.

Therefore, we proclaimed ourselves "Bitches" with a capital "b." Why? Many reasons. First: ego. As the hosts of the site, we use the title as a proper name. Secondly, since we're seizing the word, the capitalization serves as a visual method of claiming and reinforcing ownership. We lend the capital "B" to the community that frequents our site by calling them the "Bitchery." And third: because being a "Bitch" in the context of our site's community has a specific and distinctive meaning, one that, dare we say, capitalizes on the idea of rejecting the standard of being nice for politeness's sake and instead saying what we think for the betterment of our future reading material. Because being a Bitch in the romance community online means entering a battle on the two distinct fronts mentioned earlier: we're fighting the dismissal of romance as a genre read by stupid, undersexed women, and we're fighting against the pressure within the romance community itself to limit disagreement and self-assertion. Being a Bitch is necessary in the context of romance reviewing because we're acting against two sets of gender roles, and in turn creating a new one for ourselves. We're not being mean out of hand simply because the genre on the whole is trashy[24] and not worth the effort of working the powers of lit crit against it, but we're also not being nice to every single book that crosses our path, because some books are indeed of dubious quality and it's about time we discussed that, too. We're not heartlessly mean, we're not unilaterally nice, and we invite and revel in disagreement.

The Rules of Being a Smart Bitch

Anatomically and succinctly speaking, being a Bitch means not being an asshole. Our review style is one example: when we review a book, even if we truly, completely, and utterly *hated* the book, one underlying rule is that our response is to the book itself. I, for example, picture the author staying up until 4:30 in the morning working on that book, and know that that much effort deserves at least a thorough answer as to why I didn't like the book itself. The line between book and author, or, more broadly, between a subject under discussion and the people arguing that subject, is a very crucial boundary, and marks the border between "bitch" and "asshole."[25] When I write a review, I may shriek with rage and adverbs about the stilted dialogue, the plot that had more holes than antique socks, or the hero who wouldn't know compassion if he tripped and fell into a bucket of it, but I try deliberately to focus on the book and the flaws with the book itself. While some negative reviews, particularly those written by angry consumers on Amazon.com, accuse the author of all manner of chicanery, including not having actually written the book at hand, such comments in my opinion cross the boundary between issue and person. I'm sure no author likes to hear that a reviewer didn't enjoy the book, but in the long run, critical evaluations of the genre help the genre improve, if constructive feedback is given proper attention.[26] Our focus is the romance novel itself, not the person who wrote it.

That line we try deliberately not to cross, that boundary between the issue and the person on the other side of the argument, carries over into most of the more heated discussions on our site. Generally speaking, we as a Bitchery argue the issue and don't denigrate the person who argues the opposition so long as they keep to the code of respectful argument. This behavior code isn't earth shattering in and of itself, except in that it occurs on the internet, which isn't known as a place of calm and thoughtful communication. Because of the distance and impersonal nature of internet communication, it's all too easy for users to turn off their monitors after saying something particularly hurtful or inflammatory without personally experiencing the fallout of their comments. On our site, however, even the more heated conversations tend to toe the line of demarcation between issue-oriented discussion and personal attack. To put it simply: our users prefer to debate an issue,[27] and adhere to simple rules of fair argument. Most users will not attack the person who voices a dissenting opinion, but instead reply by explaining their own perspective. For example: new visitors to our site will find comments that read "I disagree, and here's why," rather than "You're a moron."[28]

There are exceptions to the code of fair argument. When a comment thread gets too long, it reaches what I call "critical mass," and there's no way to adequately address any comment that steps over that line between discussion and attack. In smaller comment threads, visitors whose comments edge into territory that is too personal, and too, shall we say, "asshole," are generally rebuked by other members of the community. Many, many times I've read a comment in my email that I found offensive,[29] but by the time I reached a computer to respond, three or four other people had already done so.[30]

One thread that demonstrated our argument style — and the limits of our community's ability to self-police — was what was called "the Swan Hat thread." After the 2007 RWA National Convention in Dallas, Texas, Candy wrote an entry wherein she discussed the controversy over costumes as self-promotion at the RWA Literacy Signing,[31] a charitable event that brings in local romance fans who buy books which authors personalize and sign before purchase. It's a big event, both in size, scope, and fundraising power, and in 2007, author Sherrilyn Kenyon wore a three-foot-tall feathered swan hat. This was, apparently, a controversial choice because some authors and attendees, among them Nora Roberts, felt that it was unprofessional and detracted from the professional development of the conference and the charity signing itself. Additionally, the presence of two new authors, Liz Maverick and Marianne Mancusi, for a debut line from Dorchester called "Shomi," which merged romance and manga, was also debated. Maverick and Mancusi called themselves "The Rebels of Romance" and dressed for the public and casual parts of the conference in the style of their novels' setting, which took place in an urban future. Their costumes consisted of short skirts, thigh-high stockings, corsets, bustiers, and brightly colored accessories, most of which didn't look completely abnormal as fashion choices, except that they were meant to promote the authors and the books, as well as the publisher and the new imprint. Between the costume play (or "cos play") and the swan hat, the use of personal appearance and costume to market books and author careers was a hot topic of discussion at and after the conference.

Candy's entry on 17 July 2007 defending the use of costumes[32] at the conference as promotional tools received over six hundred comments by the time we closed the thread. In the beginning, the discussion was civil, and despite the strong emotions on both sides of the debate, people explained their positions and kept their comments about their own opinions, or their responses to someone else's comments. For example, Nora Roberts said:

As for costumes, I stand by my previous statements. The young girls were very, very pretty. And very inappropriately attired — imo — as writers in a public, media-attended event. But it was the big-ass black swan that really got me.

Sherrilyn Kenyon will hate me forever for picking on this. But, I calls 'em as I sees 'em.

Lighten up. Easy to say when you're not CONSTANTLY called on to defend the genre and its readers and writers to the media, then have the media focus on the costumes so the image projected is silly women rather than interesting professionals who write Romance.[33]

Candy responded to Roberts:

I was thinking some more about the Mancusi/Maverick costumes, when I realized that if they'd pulled this at an SF/F con, I wouldn't feel any particular way about it, good or bad, but because they did it at RWA, I'm all "Woo hoo, awesome." It is, in essence, a dorky thing to do — mind you, I love me some dorkiness — but I think my positive reaction had to do with the way they subverted the romance author/reader stereotypes. They were being dorks, yes, but they weren't being dorks in a way that people typically expect romance authors to be dorks. There was, in short, dork cross-pollination, and I'm all for that, because I want people to realize that more people than they realize, with interests wider than they could ever imagine, read romance novels. I love subverting people's expectations that way.[34]

Roberts replied:

Must we feel we have to push ourselves into some out-of-the-box image — and let's be honest — must we feel we must do that to get attention? What does that say about the work?

I don't want to harp on these girls. They're young, awfully cute, and they weren't that outrageous.

But I do feel that dressing up like your characters is silly, and it smudges the lines. Why not be who you are — because that's exactly what it'll come down to anyway.[35]

Despite the presence of a major author in romance in the discussion, the issue at hand was costumes and professional appearance, and the image of romance readers and writers therein. Roberts' point was that she found the costumes to be silly, but then said specifically that her issue was not with the persons who dressed up but the idea that dressing up would be viable option for promotion: "it smudges the lines [...] why not be who you are?" Her point, and that of other commenters, was not who was wearing the costumes and what they looked like, but the decision to dress up and what it means.

MaudeClare, another commenter, wrote, "I agree with Ms Roberts on the costumes. I thought they were a bit much, and sometimes, we need to remember *tone* when we discuss issues. We don't have to be tarts or frumpy."[36] MaudeClare's decision to parallel tone within an argument about costumes as self-promotion is clever: one must consider the manner in which a message is conveyed, verbally or physically, to assure that the message itself isn't contradicted or polluted by the method in which it is communicated. To extrapolate her comment into the discussion of Bitchy behavior demonstrated in the early part of this thread, the content of the comments, and the fact that up to this point the commenters have addressed the issue itself and not the women who dressed up is important: the question is the decision, not the people themselves. So far, the debate had not crossed into personal attack.

The women themselves who wore the costumes, Liz Maverick and Marianne Mancusi, left a long comment explaining that they were in no way coerced by a marketing person or by their publisher to wear their costumes, and their decision to promote their books using costume play was a deliberate one:

On the issue of professionalism: Dressing up as manga-inspired characters was a fun way to promote our manga-inspired books. Obviously, it's not for everybody. (It is, however, completely normal at SF/F events and SF/F readers are also a target readership for these books.) But it happens to suit our personalities, our image as "rebels" and the kind of out-of-the-box books we write.

Meaning, we don't feel forced to do something "unnatural." Dressing up and having fun is part of who we are. And we certainly don't believe short skirts and thigh highs equate to being unprofessional. We just understand how to market ourselves and our books, we've taken a strong approach to branding, and we're working it.[37]

The debate continued for a few more hours as commenters debated the line between "cute outfits to get attention" and "holy crap, that hat is crazy."[38] The focus of the discussion centered more on Mancusi and Maverick as "the Rebels of Romance" and their usage of costumes to distinguish themselves as authors and their books as manga-romance hybrids, than on Kenyon's swan chapeau, and that focus made sense as the discussion was also, on a separate level, examining how and why authors market themselves along with their books — a relatively new phenomenon in the romance industry. Fellow blogger Jane Litte from Dear Author.com wrote, "Authors dressed up in short skirts and ponytails are nothing compared to the imagery that is inundating the public on an hourly basis at the grocery store and the bookstore. These women aren't selling themselves. They are selling an idea. A concept. A package. It was done for the public signing to attract readers to their table, to stand out in the masses."[39] Promotion that gains attention is successful promotion, said some, but at the same time, those detractors of romance who denigrate the genre from the position of never having read a single romance novel pick out the swan hat and the costumes as yet another reason romance is silly. One commenter, Jonquil, compared the costumes to the "naked guy at the Pride parade":

There will always be one naked guy at the Gay Pride parade. The reporters will *always* interview and photograph (discreetly) that guy. And all the gay people pushing strollers, or doing drill-team routines in their business suits, or flaunting their respectable professional status, will be mentioned, if at all, as a sidebar. Because the frame for that story is "weird people," not "normal people having fun." And until the frame changes, it really doesn't matter what you do.[40]

What originally began as a discussion of costumes and place became a discussion of professionalism, marketing, the target audience of the convention itself, and a heuristic approach to locating romance on the spectrum of respect from within and from outside of the genre community. All that in one swan hat and two pairs of thigh-highs. The discussion maintained its level tone, even from participants on far opposite sides. The discussion was certainly polarized and heated, but it remained entirely civil.

Early on in the discussion, one published author commented, "For every perky little author who dresses like a pedophile-luring schoolgirl or wears a swan hat or shows her rack or whatever in the vague hope of becoming a bestselling author that way, there are a hundred who a) don't wear costumes, b) are fat, middle-aged and flat-chested c) don't even go to conferences, in costume or not, and d) are hugely successful."[41] That marked the first moment the line was crossed between individual and issue. Suddenly the authors in question were "perky authors dressed as pedophile-luring schoolgirls" — a personal attack and interpretation of the motive behind their apparel. But the comment was quickly rebutted. Author Alesia Holliday responded, "This is flatly offensive. Also the premise of your post is unsupported — writing good books is not a bar to being an effective marketer, as Liz's starred review in PW attests."[42] The original comment was mostly ignored in the hours following, or referred to by others as the lone example of egregious argument.

Then that commenter returned and called Mancusi and Maverick "self promoting cheesecake" and reiterated the idea that their dressing in a sexualized fashion was "about promoting sex with underage girls."[43] Despite the incendiary nature of the post, responses were civil but firm. Author Lani Diane Rich replied:

> I couldn't disagree more. First of all, whether Marianne and Liz were actually dressed like schoolgirls is up for debate. They were dressed in the style of manga, which is promotional for what they write, and accusing them of supporting pedophilia is galactically out of line. It's like saying Playboy bunnies support bestiality — that's one hell of a slippery slope you're employing there.[44]

A few people took issue with the fact that the discussion was about what two women wore, and felt that we were personally attacking them — which is ironic since the original entry that started the discussion was in favor of wearing costumes in the first place. One commenter, desertwillow, wrote, "This debate has been going on since Tuesday and it has been matured, balanced, and intelligent — for the most part. The few inappropriate comments were squelched quickly, loudly. I've gotten a lot out of most of the postings and my admiration for several members of this blog has grown. You all were so mature and wise."[45] But another commenter wrote, "Would any of you (and sheeeww there are some huge names on these comments) like to be publicly reprimanded like this in a room of ten thousand or more people? And be so embarrassed and humiliated that you can't even defend yourself? Some of the points made are rather brilliant, but I still can't help but see this as two people being paraded around the town square and then flogged."[46] The idea that the costume wearers in question couldn't defend themselves is ludicrous — they already had, and had entered the discussion several times explaining their perspective. But the idea that individuals disagreeing and discussing the marketing decisions of three authors amounts to "public humiliation" merely because they were being talked about is quite a jump, and indicative of the "Be Nice" mentality that aligns itself so closely to Being an Asshole, despite residing on the supposed opposite end of the behavioral spectrum. Whether one advocates for Being Nice and never disagreeing, or Being an Asshole and attacking personally those who disagree, the end result is the same: discussions cannot occur, and education cannot be experienced.

Because the discussion became so complex and was about clothing worn by authors promoting their books, it was alarmingly easy for some to cross the line into personal attack, and when one comment does so, readers attempting to catch up on a long thread may see one incendiary comment and read many of the other analyses of costume in that same light. It's also easy to extrapolate comments out of context and toss the entire thread under the heading of bullying, when it was in reality an analysis of marketing technique in context, plus a bonus discussion of where one buys stripy thigh-highs. But when other sites highlighted fragments of comments and used those to defend a hypothesis that we were bashing authors and promoting online bullying, the comments strayed away from the issue to defending the discussion of the issue itself. Roberts wrote, "I kinda wished I'd never clicked on those links. Bullying is brought up several times. I'm horribly sorry and not a little sick at the idea that speaking my mind, expressing my opinion that I dislike — strongly dislike — costumes at a particular event, and how I feel that reflects on the genre could be construed as bullying."[47] Robin L. replied, "I'd like to think this community's strength and value is measured by the way it handles difference and disagreement — ideally in engaged, honest, sometimes passionately raucous debate and not in mocking others for shits and giggles."[48] Robin's comments underscore the line between the issue and the person, even when the issue is what the person is wearing at the time as a method of self-promotion.

However, the amazing thing to me, as an administrator and author of the site, is that the crazy didn't start blossoming until there were over 375 comments in the discussion, and more importantly, that the really off-color comments, minus those referencing pedophiles and cheesecake, took place at other sites, not ours. Our community adhered to the rules of fair argument for the bulk of the discussion, and individuals responded quickly and firmly to comments that broke those rules. Not only did the members of the Bitchery embrace the concept of fair argument, but they immediately defended their right to do so, pointing out when outrageous accusations had no support behind them, and deliberately making room for the dissenting arguments based on facts and personal opinion.

Most discussions within the romance novel community, unfortunately, are plagued by the relentless "Be Nice" compulsion, and are unable to disagree without qualifiers ("Well, this is just my opinion, but ...") or without excusing themselves first ("I don't want to cause bad feelings but ..."). There is no room for disagreement without the automatic assumption of dismissal, distrust, and derision. The subtext of the discussions on our site for the most part remain simply but exceptionally different: "I disagree with you. This does not mean that I despise you."

The Bitches' Rules

The participation and the depth of the debate in involved threads demonstrate the creation of what I loosely term The Bitch Rules of Argument, which apply mostly in our community but can be wielded in any situation involving debate, discussion, or general dialogue. The rules are simple and few, but powerful.

Bitch Rule #1: Agree to disagree, and disagree to agree

One way in which our community is unique is that the underlying drive to convert the opposition to one's own way of thinking is almost entirely absent. Arguments begin with the assumption that anyone who argues will agree to disagree, and that a resolution may not be reached. In fact, the underlying purpose of any dialogue on our site is not about persuading the opposite party to one's way of thinking, but maintaining and sustaining the dialogue that is the foundation of the Bitchery community.

For example, in a discussion about *The Jewel of Medina*, a fictionalized account of the Prophet Mohammed and his bride Aisha, there were many individuals who identified themselves as Muslim and described how deeply offensive the book's content was, as it is forbidden to depict Mohammed and his wives as fictional characters. In the discussion on our site, no one said that the Muslim individuals shouldn't feel offended, or that they were overreacting by explaining how much of an affront they considered the author's work. There wasn't an attempt to convert their thinking to the other side. Most of the individuals who participated were not arguing to persuade; they were stating or defending their point of view.

Parties also disagree to agree, by which I mean that their disagreement is also founded on a larger agreement. It could be that both parties adore the same author, or have the same sense of humor, or find David Hasselhoff to be among the sexiest creatures to walk the land.[49] The agreement beneath the disagreement plays out in what often seems to be a

meta-discussion that exists concurrently with the argument itself. It is often humorous, as well as conciliatory, suggesting that through the disagreement there is a baseline of respect so long as both parties keep to the established rules of argument. For example, in the midst of the discussion about *The Jewel of Medina*, one of the first to explain why the book was potentially offensive was a young Muslim woman who posted under the name "shewhohashope." More than a few commenters challenged her explanation as to why the book was potentially offensive and chastised her for using sarcasm. But the underlying foundation of agreement allowed for a good dose of humor. When one commenter joked that there ought to be an extension of Godwin's law[50] to include references to the terrorists seizing freedom of speech, shewhohashope responded, "Screw the Iranian government. Let's get married!"[51] Certainly proposals of gay marriage among Muslims and non–Muslims should be a prime feature of any discussion of free speech and defining the boundaries of cultural overreaction. Even though the thread was fractious and involved several very personal subjects, this commenter and others maintained their sense of humor and a sense that, despite widely polarized viewpoints, the participants weren't enemies. It's more than mere respect: it's an agreement to participate in each discussion with the understanding that we're part of the community for a reason (a common love of romance novels) and that in the next debate, we might be on the same side.

Rule #2: Apologize sincerely, but not condescendingly. Admit when you're wrong.

Apologizing is something women are accused of doing far too much — and yet online, apologies and admissions of incorrect assumption are few and far between. People on other sites frequently begin comments with a condescending, "I'm sorry, but ..." which is not at all the same thing.

At our site, apologizing and saying the other three magic words, "You were right," is a powerful demonstration of confidence. We apologize when we are wrong, but we do not ever apologize for having opinions. We can have a balls-to-the-wall, knock-down, drag-out, no-holds-barred discussion of the most minute of minutiae, but when one party crosses the line and begins personally attacking the other party, more often than not, the site regulars who realize they've crossed the line apologize for doing so. Sometimes, even the guests to a new discussion do as well. Ziggy, who joined the *Jewel of Medina* discussion after it was brought to her attention on a Muslim community site, also argued that the book was offensive. When another person took issue with her temperament in a comment, Ziggy replied, "I may be mistaken, in which case I totally apologize for losing my temper."[52] Likewise, when two longtime visitors to the site began arguing back and forth about international perceptions of American cultural attitude, one of them edited her own comment to redact a few lines of sarcasm she later regretted[53] and apologized[54] for having been sarcastic in the first place. Rather than deleting what she had said, she used HTML coding that rendered the redacted portion as if it were crossed out, allowing it to be read, along with the apology that followed: a visual statement of "I was wrong, and I amend my statement accordingly."

That's it, really: there are only two main rules of Bitch conduct. Agree to disagree, and apologize when you're an asshole.[55] Simplistic, yes, but revolutionary. In our perspective, being a Bitch means that you have the confidence to disagree but can do so respectfully, with the acknowledgement that the other party is a member of the same community and

therefore worthy of consideration. Being a Bitch is also an entirely new gender role for women, because it doesn't fit on the nice/mean continuum, nor does it resemble the traditional definition of the word "bitch." Because the word "bitch" is used by men to denigrate women and used by women to limit disagreement and self-assertion, our reacquisition of the term is particularly crucial and deliberate. Having an opinion and disagreeing with someone directly and respectfully isn't "mean," and keeping your opinion to yourself isn't "nice" in our world. In fact, it's the opposite: disagreement is nice, and refusing to participate is mean.

If We Bitches Have Offended

This analysis likely would have had more authority and certainly less arrogance had it come from a third party instead of from one of the site's creators. However, in this account I've had the opportunity to examine the results of the past few years of running a website stemming from our decision to declare ourselves Bitches. We had no business plan when we started, no plot or nefarious agenda except to crack each other up and write about romance novels and man titty. We declared ourselves Bitches because we give a hearty finger[56] to anyone who dismisses or demeans our reading material, and we're awful in the opinion of others because we don't pull punches when we discuss in great detail what we didn't like about a plot, a particular novel, a romance trope, or the continual habit of cover models to have slack-jawed expressions of passion[57] and four-foot mullets.

Even now many of the posts on the site which I write are from the seat of my pants, so to speak, in that I don't plan ahead except to exercise the only two real authorities a blogger has: consistency and continuity. I remain humbly and deeply impressed by the manner and style in which our community chooses to argue, and find that I try to adapt that standard to my live interpersonal daily interactions. Perhaps the internet and our dependence on technology has caused us to become more distant from other individuals, or perhaps we collectively fear conflict, but disagreement can too easily be read as "I don't like you," rather than "I don't agree with you." The Bitch style combines both: "I like you, but I don't agree with you." Our Bitching standards are about the same as they were when we started the site and said, "Hey! Let's be Smart Bitches!" So far, the fallout from that decision has been, if you'll forgive me, bitchin'. Until recently, most criticism about the romance genre from inside and outside that community was dismissive and derisive. We Bitches refuse to be cowed by anyone who looks down on the romance genre and our enjoyment of it, and we self-confidently celebrate the genre, to the shock of those who deride it, even as we mock and skewer the more horrific elements of it, much to the dismay of those who celebrate it without limit.

This book of literary examination and criticism itself represents what might be the Third Wave feminist approach to the romance genre. The genre deserves to be examined with the same respect that we bring to arguments and discussions on our site, and it's about time that the critical evaluations began. That which was dismissed as plebian enforcement of traditional gender roles, the humble romance novel, has been overturned to reveal a fracture of those same roles and a casting of new characters: the romance scholar, the proud author, the fearless reader, and, of course, the Smart Bitch.

Notes

1. I'm also *Her Grace, the Duchess of Cuntington*, but that's a different academic analysis, sort of.
2. Further examinations of these elements are in our book *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels* (New York: Fireside, 2009). Shameless self promotion ends here.
3. A rather large nutshell.
4. Candy Tan, "Blog Drama Drinking Game," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, May 18, 2007, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/the_blog_drama_drinking_game_special_sb_edition/.
5. Candy Tan, "*The Real Deal*," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, February 7, 2005, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/monroe_therealdeal/.
6. "The Real Deal," Lucy Monroe, http://www.lucymonroe.com/AbouttheBooksTRD.htm.
7. Jac, comment on Tan, "*The Real Deal*," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, June 15, 2005, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/monroe_therealdeal/#2806.
8. Ah, yes, the internet. Never doubt its fearsome power to unite any two people with any one tiny thing in common. From hating a book to finding sink traps erotic.
9. pinkolaeses, posting to "Word Etymology," on SurLaLune Fairy Tales Discussion Board, September 28, 2002, http://surlalunefairytales.com/boardarchives/2002/oct2002/wordetymology.html.
10. Which prompts me to add: "Bitch is the word, it's the word that you heard. We're the noun and the action."
11. "Bitch," Online Etymology Dictionary, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=bitch.
12. Michael and Melanie Crowley, "Words to the Wise," Take Our Word for It 195:2, http://www.takeourword.com/TOW195/page2.html.
13. Francis Grose, "Bitch," *1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue: A Dictionary of Buckish Slang, University Wit, and Pickpocket Eloquence*, Gutenberg Project, http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5402/pg5402.html.
14. "Bitch," AskOxford.com, http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/bitch?view=uk.
15. I doubt any individual who hears the word on the radio or elsewhere thinks of dog breeding, though.
16. "Third Wave Feminism: Reclaiming Derogatory Terms," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_wave_feminism#Reclaiming_derogatory_terms.
17. Inga Muscio, *Cunt* (Seattle: Seal Press, 2002), xxv.
18. *Ibid.*
19. "Queer Studies," Smith College, http://www.smith.edu/swg/queerstudies.html.
20. "Reclaiming," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reclaiming.
21. One must often be a member of the minority doing the reclaiming to use the words in an appropriate context; Jackie Chan famously mocked this exclusion in the film *Rush Hour*, when he, a Chinese man, walked up to a black bartender, and said, mimicking his black colleague Chris Tucker, "What's up, my nigger?" Chan's character promptly found himself the target of a bar-fight. The scene's comedy was based entirely on the idea that a Chinese man should not and could not use the word "nigger" to refer colloquially to a black man. Some reformations of lexicon are, to say the least, not entirely complete, or, more accurately, not entirely accessible to all individuals who use that language. Fluency in a language does not equal admission to its communities. (*Rush Hour*, directed by Brett Ratner [1999; Burbank: New Line Cinema, 2009], DVD).
22. Kathleen J. King, "Do You Use the B-Word?" DivineCaroline.com http://www.divinecaroline.com/article/22362/27498.
23. Not really.
24. Hence our other reclaimed word, "Trashy," in "trashy books." The title of our website is a double dismissal of those two groups mentioned. We're bitches because we're mean to those poor authors whose books we didn't like, and we're reclaiming the dismissal that our chosen genre is "trash" by examining it as a subject of critical worth.
25. That border also exists between "Bitch" and "Nice Girl," as being the latter means there is no boundary between the subject and the person disagreeing with you. If you disagree, it's not nice, so better to agree with everything, says the Nice Girl. That doesn't help the genre either, as we've said.
26. Proper attention to our reviews is located somewhere between "taken with grain of salt" and "hang on every one of our pearls of brilliant wisdom."
27. Perhaps "debate" is too mild a word. More like "pick the issue apart into tiny twitching pieces."
28. Or, "U R a m0ron! *LOLOLOL*"
29. As I am a Super Admin for the site, all comments on entries I write are emailed to me.
30. A few critics of our site take issue with the idea that we don't moderate, and that is simply untrue. Candy and I do not delete comments, merely because if you want to look like a douchebag, that's your right. The comments I delete are most often spammers, or people who have linked to technologically dangerous webpages. I do read every comment, but I do not moderate in the sense that if someone disagrees with me, or disagrees with the community, I remove their comment from the thread.

I will, however, close a comment thread to additional comments once that discussion has reached, as I said, "critical mass." When the thread just simply has too much mass to balance the criticism, it's time to close the thread itself and move on to other discussions.

31. In 2010, the Literacy Signing, so named because it raises money for a local literacy charity, featured over 500 authors and raised over $62,000.
32. As well as the presence of bloggers at the convention, which was also an issue for some authors who felt that the convention was in danger of becoming a fan event.
33. Nora Roberts, comment on Candy Tan "On the Presence of Bloggers and Costumes at the RWA Nationals," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#32099.
34. Candy, comment on Tan, "On the Presence," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#32107.
35. Nora Roberts, comment on Tan, "On the Presence," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#32112.
36. MaudeClare, comment on Tan, "On the Presence of Bloggers and Costumes at the RWA Nationals," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#32118.
37. Liz Maverick and Marianne Mancusi, comment on Tan, "On the Presence," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#32157.
38. Yes, I'm fully aware that this is a scholarly paper and my evidence so far is about swan hats and thigh highs. Isn't scholarship awesome!?
39. Jane, comment on Tan, "On the Presence" http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#32222.
40. Jonquil, comment on Tan, "On the Presence," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#32214.
41. Deb Smith, comment on Tan, "On the Presence," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#32211.
42. Alesia Holliday, comment on Tan, "On the Presence," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#32218.
43. Deb Smith, comment on Tan, "On the Presence," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#32318.
44. Lani, comment on Tan, "on the Presence," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#32329.
45. desertwillow, comment on Tan, "On the Presence," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#32966.
46. Eva Gale, comment on Tan, "On the Presence," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#32967.
47. Nora Roberts, comment on Tan, "On the Presence," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#33235.
48. Robin L, comment on Tan,"On the Presence," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/on_the_presence_of_bloggers_and_costumes_at_the_rwa_nationals/#33236.
49. Who doesn't?
50. "As a discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one." ("Godwin's Law," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Godwin%27s_law).

51. shewhohashope, comment on Sarah Wendell "*The Jewel of Medina* is Now on Sale — No, Wait. Nevermind," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/the-jewel-of-medina-is-now-on-sale-no-wait-nevermind/#66020.
52. Ziggy, comment on "*The Jewel of Medina* is Now on Sale — No, Wait. Nevermind," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/the-jewel-of-medina-the-prologue/#66652.
53. Users of the site who register and login have the ability to edit their own comments.
54. snarkhunter, comment on "*The Jewel of Medina* is Now on Sale — No, Wait. Nevermind," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/the-jewel-of-medina-the-prologue/#66687.
55. I'm working on trademarking these concepts and enforcing them in all venues, but it seems doing so makes me more of an asshole.
56. Guess which one!
57. Or gastrointestinal distress — we're never sure which.

14

The Interactive Romance Community: The Case of "Covers Gone Wild"

Miriam Greenfeld-Benovitz

Just as it is often difficult to classify novels as romance or as particular types of romance, the romance community lacks clear boundaries. Authors, editors, publishers, and readers can be identified as one community with subgroups or treated as separate communities. The romance reader is also difficult to define. One must decide whether to look at quantity and frequency of reading, or analyze those who self-define themselves as romance readers regardless of how much or how often they read. Further complicating the problem is the notion of community. Lee Komito shares this view, describing community as a social construct that may be constructed differently in different societies: "A community is not fixed in form or function, but is a mixed bag of possible options whose meanings and concreteness are always being negotiated by individuals, in the context of changing external constraints."[1] This creates a context through which to understand the romance community and the communication among its constituents, while acknowledging the impact of external forces.

Given this definition of community, it would be impossible to study the entire romance community because the constant negotiation by individuals necessitates an understanding of all individuals who constitute the romance community. Even with a workable definition of what it means to be a member of the romance community, it does not mean that it is possible to access the entire constituency. As such, learning about the romance community means understanding a piece of the whole, fixed in a particular historical context. This does not mean that it should not be attempted. Each undertaking to understand the romance community provides another piece of the puzzle. Compiling a number of studies related to the romance community provides patterns of issues and meanings that apply to multiple segments and provide a broader understanding of what it means to be a member of the romance community. This chapter explores one sub-community of the romance community: those who post on the Smart Bitches Who Love Trashy Books (SBTB) website. By analyzing the interaction in "Covers Gone Wild" entries and the role it plays in creating and sustaining the SBTB subculture, we can learn more about the way one segment of the romance community works. What do visitors to SBTB accomplish through their participation and interaction in "Covers Gone Wild"? How do these accomplishments reflect SBTB's subculture? What implications does this have for our understanding of the larger romance community?

My own experiences as a member of the romance community led me to SBTB, and