

Romance Readers: Contemporary Scholarship of Readers of a Controversial Genre

Compiled by: Beth Kamp

Introduction

The process of creating a bibliography about romance readers forces the obvious question: Who are romance readers? On the surface, the answer is equally obvious: those who read romance fiction. But this answer becomes more complicated when you consider the various identities belonging to a romance reader inform who reads romance, how they read romance, and what kinds of romances they read. Gender, geography, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, religion, cultural heritage, and socio-political ideologies are some examples of factors that affect reading habits. The types of romances –genre, format, etc. also are influencing factors of reading habits, as well as factors that are themselves influenced by the identities of romance readers. For example, one author included in this bibliography asserts that the increasing popularity of romances that feature Middle-Eastern heroes and/or are set in the Middle East is a reflection of a national narrative that emerged after September 11th. Another example that appears in this bibliography is the reciprocal relationship between the publication of shojo manga and its readership based on two geographic locations –Japan and the United States.

Related to the question ‘Who is reading romances?’, is the question, ‘Why are they reading romances?’ Featured in this bibliography are sources whose

authors have studied romance readers to achieve various ends, and therefore the approach to studying romance readers varies as well. For example, RWA publishes a yearly report which aims to inform publishers and the public about the reality of romance readers today, and, indeed, various incarnations of this report feature regularly in the citations of other works in this bibliography. Another example is a doctoral student who studied romance readers to identify and subsequently bridge gaps in library services to this particular set of patrons. Sometimes, as in the case of the author studying Middle Eastern romances, the researchers become the romance readers. (Whether they were already readers to begin with is a question that usually goes unanswered.) This tension can be described, albeit somewhat over-simplistically, as “insiders vs. outsiders,” and is a dichotomy that partly shapes the scholarship concerning romance readers.

This is not the only trend that shapes scholarly publishing concerning romance readers. Romance fiction is often lumped together with popular fiction in general, and then often studied within a specific context, like the works of an author, a specific time period, a location, etc. Feminist narratives are a popular paradigm used in studying romance readers, in which the romance reader is portrayed either as being empowered or as an unfortunate victim of popular culture. No matter the aim, researchers often employed the method of consulting readers directly, sometime via formal essays, interviews, or, in one case, the author joined a romance book club for a substantial period of time.

Even as some reader populations benefit from more visibility through scholarly research, some reader populations remain unstudied. For example, I did not find a source that studied male romance readers. My own limitations have also influenced the compilation of this bibliography; I can only access sources available to me through the University of Iowa and are written in English. Despite these limitations, the following bibliography represents a sample of the scholarship of romance readership. If the sources are not publicly available online, they might be accessible through your local public library. For further research, I would recommend searching humanities-oriented databases using the phrases “readership,” AND “popular fiction” AND “romance.”

Annotated Bibliography

Allen, T. (2004). *Mystery and the Romance Reader*. *Collection Management*, Vol. 29. DOI: 10.1300/J105v29n0312

Abstract: “Mystery fiction and romance fiction share many common elements often including the same readership. Romance readers consume vast numbers of books not all of which are romances. Similarly mystery readers often enjoy that most intense form of romance: romantic suspense. In the last decade, authors such as the phenomenally popular Janet Evanovich have pleased large numbers of romance and mystery readers by combining elements of each genre along with a distinct style and voice. The reasons why individual readers, who might classify themselves as primarily romance or mystery fans, find pleasure in other genres comes down to a myriad of appeal factors. Matching readers

with books they will enjoy, no matter what "official" category they occupy, is a very satisfying job. [ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR]"

Anderton, G. (2009). Excitement, adventure, indifference: romance readers' perceptions of how romance reading impacts their sex lives. (3383833).

<http://proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/login?url=http://>

search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview/305139294?

[accountid=14663](http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview/305139294?accountid=14663)

Abstract: "This mixed-methods study examined romance readers' perceptions of how reading romance novels has impacted their sex lives, feelings about their sex partners, knowledge of sexuality and their sexual behavior. Fifty-three women romance readers over the age of 18 completed an online survey composed of multiple choice and open-ended essay questions.

The literature on romance novels and romance readers suggests that romance readers may use romance novels as sexually explicit material to produce sexual arousal. In this study, it was found that participants use romance novels primarily to relax and escape the pressures of everyday life and only secondarily to produce sexual arousal.

Most of the study participants (75.5%) reported that reading romance novels has had an impact on their sex lives. This occurred in several ways, including making participants more likely to engage in sexual activity and by making them more likely to try new sexual activities. Most participants (85%) reported that reading romance novels has not had an impact on their feelings about their

sex partners or has had a positive impact on their feelings about their sex partners. With regard to safer sex practices, participants said that romance novels present incorrect or misleading information about safer sex and that they regard them as unreliable in this area.

A smaller number of participants (24.5%) stated that reading romance novels has not had any impact on their sex lives, sexual behavior or knowledge about sexuality. These participants emphasized the fictional nature of romance novels and stated that they read strictly for pleasure and do not learn anything or make any behavioral changes based on what they read.

The results of this study suggest that some women who read romance novels feel that reading romance novels is strictly a recreational activity, which has or should have no bearing on other aspects of their lives, and that other romance readers are open to potential positive effects that romance reading may have on their sex lives. This finding suggests that it might be useful in further research to focus on this second group of women. Another major finding of this study was that women who read romance novels and who are satisfied with their sexual relationships feel that there is no basis for comparison between their sex partners and the male protagonist or hero in a romance novel, or that their sex partners compare favorably to the male protagonists or heroes in romance novels. In contrast, women who read romance novels and who are not satisfied with their sexual relationships feel that their sex partners compare unfavorably to the male protagonists or heroes in romance novels."

Brackett, K. P. (2000). Facework Strategies among Romance Fiction Readers. Social Science Journal, Vol.29. Retrieved from <http://proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=afh&AN=3685223&site=ehost-live>

Abstract: "Focuses on the face-saving strategies that romance fiction women readers employ in social situations. Criticisms leveled against popular romantic fiction and its readership; Strategies employed by readers in situations where they are discredited or discreditable; Preventative strategies; Corrective strategies; Separation strategies."

Bryson, M. (2004). Public Library Services to the Romance Reader: An Online Survey of Romance Readers. Retrieved from Carolina Digital Repository.

Abstract: "This study describes the results of an online questionnaire survey of romance genre fiction readers. The survey was conducted to determine the behaviors and needs of romance genre fiction readers and how well public libraries are meeting those needs. Research shows that popular public library services to romance genre readers, has not kept pace with trends in the fiction reading patron base. Services to romance readers are, or should be, essentially the same that exist for any fiction genre: pertinent readers' advisory, conscious collection development, and access to collections through cataloging records. North American public libraries are failing to support the reading interests of 51.1 million readers (Romance Writers of America, Inc 2003, 3-6)."

Clawson, Laura. (2005).Cowboys and Schoolteachers: Gender in Romance Novels, Secular and Christian. Sociological Perspectives, Vol. 48. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/sop.2005.48.4.461>

Abstract: "This article uses content analysis of 120 novels to consider romance novels as evidence for a particular culture of gender and the family, and as a means of comparing cultural representations of secular and Christian masculinity, femininity, and families. It finds that, although on the surface the texts are most obviously differentiated by religion, gender differences within the religious categories are greater than overall differences between those categories themselves. The most interesting and significant difference between secular and Christian romances emerges in the male hero. Specifically, this analysis finds that secular men are depicted as overwhelmingly strong, economically and physically, but that this strength is frequently overcome by the emotional strength of the heroine, who tames them. Christian heroes, on the other hand, are less overpowering figures at the beginning of the texts but are more dominant within the relationship, subject instead to the will of God."

Edmondson, B. (2007). The Black Romance. Women's Studies Quarterly, Vol. 35. Retrieved from <http://proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview/61687168?accountid=14663>

Abstract: "Further, over a decade ago African American feminist scholars Claudia Tate and Ann duCille broke new ground when they attempted to

rehabilitate the African American romance by arguing for its political relevance and relationship to the supposedly more 'authentic' fiction that critics focused on as the progenitors of modern African American literature. Building on both these arguments, I am making the claim that, even in its earliest conception, the romance in both African American and Afro-Caribbean writing has never been completely separate from that of other, more explicitly nationalist, genres such as the protest novel.¹ Further, I posit that the black-on-black erotica that now defines the African diaspora romance had its earlier progenitors in a combination of earlier romance plots: in the 'coupling convention,' as duCille puts it, of early African American narrative in which the black hero and heroine couple marry for the good of the community; as well as in the more problematic issue of the black-white interracial romance. Adapted from the source document.”

Erwin, L. (2002). Genre and Authority in Some Popular Nigerian Women's Novels. Research in African Literatures, Vol.33. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3820975>

Annotation: This article compares Western romance readers and their reading habits to those of women in Nigeria.

Jarmakani, A. (2010). “The Sheik Who Loved Me”: Romancing the War on Terror. Signs: Vol.35. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/651044>

Abstract: "Since 2001, sheikh-themed romance novels have burgeoned in popularity to such an extent that they compose a standard subseries for major distributors such as Harlequin and its subsidiaries, Silhouette and Mills & Boon. If romance novels have long been the subject of vibrant feminist inquiry, the increased popularity of the sheikh character in mass-market romances in recent years suggests their further relevance to contemporary U.S. political and military involvement in the Middle East. While the character of the sheikh is certainly not new in U.S. popular culture, I understand his recent resurgence as a complex signifier of the productive fantasies of transnational capitalism and global sisterhood, both of which imagine global unity while disavowing differential relations of power. I also read the sheikh romance novel as an allegory for the triumph of modern disciplinary forms of power, whereby the sheikh-hero's transformation comes through the form of a companionate, bourgeois ideal of marriage with a white heroine."

Kamble, J. (2008). Uncovering and Recovering the Popular Romance.

Retrieved from ProQuest Digital Dissertations. (3338954) [http://](http://proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview/275620976?accountid=14663)

[proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/login?url=http://](http://proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview/275620976?accountid=14663)

[search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview/275620976?](http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview/275620976?accountid=14663)

[accountid=14663](http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/docview/275620976?accountid=14663)

Abstract: "Popular romance novels are a twentieth- and twenty-first century literary form defined by a material association with pulp publishing, a conceptual one with courtship narrative, and a brand association with particular

author–publisher combinations. The theme of romantic love in romance novels forms the basis of a drama involving the extra–private worlds of the protagonists (financial, civic, and familial). The framework of the romantic relationship allows the genre to study the challenges these spheres face over the twentieth and twenty–first centuries. A comprehensive look at the genre's history and diversity, as well as its reception in different readership communities, undergirds this analysis of three tropes involving the romance hero—capitalist, soldier, and heterosexual. The analysis proves the genre's struggle with an economic, political, and social ideology that has gathered force over the last hundred years. Though popular as well as academic critiques of the genre disparage its formulaic sexual content or its attachment to the ideology of middle class morality, its very nature as "commodity literature" helps challenge conservative thought on capitalism, national defense strategies, and sexual orientation.

The dissertation also considers the impact of the dust jackets and paperback covers of romance novels on non–romance readers. A survey of this material history suggests that it has contributed to derogatory opinions on the genre; in particular, the genre has been indicted because of the "bodice–ripper" covers that adorn many romance novels rather than the actual content. A look at reader and author discussions on the genre, alongside textual analysis of selected works, proves that romance fiction is not fixated on a clichéd plot and descriptions of sexual intercourse; it involves complex themes that are

disguised as stereotypical genre elements. Readers' online debates demonstrate how this romance "formula," albeit a function of its commodification, engages them in addressing quandaries related to societal preoccupations. The concluding study of romance reading in India further supports the possibility of multiple, even liberating, readings that can empower romance readers."

Mitchell, K. (1996). Ever After: Reading the Women Who Read (and Re-Write) Romance. Theatre Topics, Vol. 6. Retrieved from http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/journals/theatre_topics/v006/6.1mitchell.html

Annotation: This article chronicles the author's journey to turn a romance novel, as well as romance readership, into a play. Not a romance reader herself, she joins a romance reading club and enlists the members as her advisory board, where she learns about demographics, reading habits, and expectations of romance readers.

Moudileno, L. (2008). The Troubling Popularity of West African Romance Novels. Research in African Literatures, Vol. 39. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30135307>

Abstract: "This essay acknowledges the success, in West Africa, of a collection of romance novels written in French. Launched in the 1990s by the Nouvelles Editions Africaines as the Adoras collection, the series has grown to become one of the most spectacular success stories in African (francophone) editorial history. This essay argues that the popularity of the Adoras novels not only as a

popular genre but also as fiction in French can be perceived as troubling in a context where France is still perceived as the sole foyer of francophone creativity, where "higher" written genres are still struggling with legitimacy issues, and where critics typically declare the absence of a francophone African readership."

Neal, Lynn S. (2006). *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction*. Chapel Hill, NC. University of North Carolina Press.

Annotation: "Although often disparaged by scholars and pastors alike, Christian romance novels play a unique and important role in the religious lives of many evangelical women. In an ethnographic study of how and why women read evangelical romance novels, Neal interviews and surveys writers and readers and explores the texts themselves. She finds a complex religious piety among ordinary people."

Rehberg Sedo, DeNel. (2011). *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace*. New York, NY. Palgrave MacMillan.

Annotation: This book is a collection of essays that features a few essays concerning female readership and popular culture. The essays are arranged chronologically, which provides the reader with a broad historical overview of the history of reading communities.

Romance Writers of America. (2011). *Romance Literature Statistics: Readership Statistics*. Retrieved from: http://www.rwa.org/cs/readership_stats

Annotation: The RWA's compilation of statistics is the most comprehensive and representative report on romance readers in America, and many sources in this bibliography identify the RWA as an authority on romance readership, as is evidenced by their citations. The "Romance Literature Statistics: Readership Statistics" gauge readership by geographic location, acquisition behavior, format, subgenre readership, and other activities.

Shibamoto Smith, Janet S. (2008). Changing Lovestyles: Fictional Representations of Contemporary Japanese Men in Love. Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique, Vol. 16. Retrieved from <http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/journals/positions/v016/16.2.shibamoto-smith.html>

Introduction: "This essay is a study of one emotion, romantic love, in a single literary genre, the romance novel. More specifically, it is a study of changes in late-twentieth-century cultural understandings of romantic love as inscribed in the fictional romance. Transformations in representations of romantic heroes in popular romantic fiction over the course of the late twentieth century, arguably in response to the demands of a largely female readership, provide important clues to shifts in how women relate — or fail to relate — to potential and real romantic partners in their everyday lives, and why. The changing grammar, as it were, of a man's love for a woman discernible in the series of texts analyzed below allows glimpses into the figured worlds of Japanese romantic love.¹

These figured worlds link in complex ways to [End Page 359] women's

understandings of their everyday lives in the dynamically shifting field of gender relations in Japan, and to how those understandings affect their decisions not just about romance but also about marriage and reproduction, these last matters of central concern in the context of Japan's contemporary demographic crisis. Although a textual analysis cannot provide direct insight into women's and men's real lives, it does provide one aspect of the backdrop — in media-hypersaturated Japan — against which those lives are lived.”

Smith, Caroline. (2008). *Cosmopolitan Culture and Chick-Lit*. New York, NY. Routledge.

Annotation: This book attempts to reconcile the real reader with the fictional female characters portrayed within the pages of popular books like *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex in the City*.

Wang, Shaoguang & Davis, Deborah & Bian Yanjie. (Jul 2006). *The Uneven Distribution of Cultural Capital: Book Reading in Urban China*. *Modern China*, vol 36. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20062642>

Abstract: “Drawing on interviews with 400 couples in four cities in 1998, this exploratory study focuses on variation in reading habits to integrate the concept of cultural capital into the theoretical and empirical analysis of inequality and social stratification in contemporary urban China. Overall, we find that volume and composition of cultural capital varies across social classes independent of education. Thus, to the extent that cultural capital in the form

of diversified knowledge and appreciation for the certain genres or specific authors is unevenly distributed across social classes, we hypothesize that the possession of cultural capital may be a valuable resource in defining and crystallizing class boundaries in this hybrid, fast-changing society.”

Whitsitt, N. (2003). Hausa Women Writers Confronting the Traditional Status of Women in Modern Islamic Society: Feminist Thought in Nigerian Popular Fiction. Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature, Vol. 22. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20059159>

Annotation: The author examines the effect of Hausa society on popular romance fiction and the effect of popular romance fiction on Hausa society. In her research, the author interviewed over 200 readers.

Wood, A. (2006). “Straight” Women, Queer Texts: Boy-Love Manga and the Rise of a Global Counterpublic. Women’s Studies Quarterly, Vol. 34. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40004766>

Annotation: This article focuses on Japanese manga in the United States, particularly shojo manga, its romantic themes, its portrayal of sexuality, and its reader communities.

Zubair, S. (2010). ‘Not Easily Put-Downable’: Magazine Representations and Muslim Women’s Identities in Southern Punjab, Pakistan. Feminist Formations, Vol. 22. DOI: 10.1353/ff.2010.0024

Abstract: "This research is an attempt to provide useful insights regarding Muslim women's identities through a study conducted on the readership and reception processes of popular women's magazines in Southern Punjab, Pakistan. One of the objectives of this research is to challenge the oriental 'othering' of Muslim women as a monolith. The research showcases diversity across the board within a Muslim country like Pakistan by highlighting the cultural conflicts and ambivalence inherent in the ideologies discursively constructed through the genre of women's magazines. The research draws upon Lazar's (2005) model of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of social semiotic to highlight the ambivalence inherent within the juxtaposition of images of women's bodies and accompanying religious codes. Read in conjunction, they articulate a certain ideology regarding the construction of Pakistani women's socioreligious identity (ies) that serve the interests of patriarchy and the Muslim clergy. More importantly, the research presents a detailed analytical study of the relationship between magazine representations and how these affect women's multiple and complex identities. The findings suggest that the magazine representations are a powerful resource Muslim women draw upon in constructing their identities, as women read these magazines not only as a source of pleasure, but also in quest of their identity(ies)."

