What’s Love Got to Do with It?
—In Romance Novels, Everything!
Jayashree Kamble

The romance novel is getting new respect.

Pay attention. Plato says that lovers are like two parts of an egg that fit together perfectly. Each half is made for the other, the single match to it. We are incomplete alone. Together, we are whole. All men are seeking that other half of themselves. [...] I think you are the other half of me. It was a great mix-up in heaven. A scandal. For you there was meant to be a pretty English schoolgirl in the city of Bath and for me some fine Italian pastry cook in Palermo. But the cradles were switched somehow, and it all ended up like this … of an impossibility beyond words.


When the Fifty Shades of Grey (2011) phenomenon gathered steam (no pun intended), I was constantly being asked if I had read the trilogy. I had not. Fifty Shades, from what I was told, focused on erotic sex of the BDSM variety—this is not exactly the central criteria for romance fiction. So the question seemed like a variation of when people ask me if studying romance novels means that I read Danielle Steele, or Nicholas Sparks, or Dean Koontz. Dean Koontz? Really? But to be fair, there are hundreds of romance novels published each year, so perhaps the confusion is not unreasonable. Worse, romance novels are routinely conflated in the press with pornography, soap operas, melodrama, and women’s diaries. Even scholars who first studied romance fiction in the ’70s and ’80s would select a few books and then extrapolate from those novels to come up with severe judgments condemning the genre as regressive, anti-feminist, and simplistic.
In seeming defiance of all this negative publicity, romance fiction continues to sell—and sell. According to the Romance Writers of America website, romance fiction sales in 2013 totaled $1.08 billion and represent thirteen percent of all adult fiction. Not only do readers take the form seriously, so do a new generation of scholars.

So what is romance fiction exactly? It’s a genre in which every turn of the story is meant to bring about or maintain a romantic connection between its central protagonists. Though romance as a mass-market form came into prominence in the last century, it has deep roots, going back to Greek and Roman myths, to fairytales, and to folklore. Its earliest ancestor in novel form is Samuel Richardson’s Pamela (1740), the story of a virtuous maid who resists the seductions of her employer and eventually wins his love and hand in marriage. It was the first novel bestseller and an absolute media sensation. Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice (1813) and Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre (1847) are also key in romance fiction history as stories of strong women whose intelligence and resolve lead to loving marriages with attractive, wealthy men. In the twentieth century, writers like Georgette Heyer, Barbara Cartland, and Victoria Holt have been a significant influence on the genre’s growth, bestowing on it key traits, such as a focus on British nineteenth-century life and manners, and tropes like the heroine-in-peril and the aristocratic hero.

The current form of romance fiction (as specially structured and marketed books) began at the London publisher Mills & Boon in the pre-World War I decade. These stories were the contemporary courtship tales of young, working- or middle-class British men and women, some in unhappy marriages. The novels spread to the British Commonwealth and North America, the latter through the small Canadian firm Harlequin Books. Harlequin began reprinting Mills & Boon titles in the ‘50s and the two companies merged in 1971. Harlequin Mills & Boon romances included British Regency settings, but were largely contemporary stories with wealthy, worldly European heroes whose advances both seduced and frightened British ingénues before the couple managed to express their true love and marry. Over the ‘60s and ‘70s, Harlequin emerged as a key player in molding the genre, adding new authors, plotlines, and readership (even though each novel was usually limited to about 180 pages and had to address certain plot elements).

Following the success of Kathleen Woodiwiss’s historical romance novel The Flame and the Flower (1972), the ‘70s saw the emergence of U.S. authors and publishers like Avon amidst a paperback boom. The growth of American romance publishing added a new vigor to the existing plots. While Mills & Boon’s romance fiction had begun as the stories of working- or middle-class Britons, and gone on to address themes like domestic and professional conflicts, the shift to the U.S. led to a greater flexibility in the courtship plot, a plethora of backdrops and perspectives, and subtle variations in tone as well as style. As a result, we now have romances that range from spy thrillers to lighthearted comedies of manners, not to mention steampunk and paranormal adventures, and narratives that address issues of religion (Inspirational or Christian Romance) and race (African-American Romance).

Even as classic romance plots and settings continue to thrive (contemporary novels published by Harlequin and historical romance set in nineteenth-century Britain), a click on Amazon’s Romance link reveals half a dozen more subsets, all of which have one element in common—sexual and emotional love as the key to happiness. In other words, no matter what else the protagonists may get up to (saving lives in hospitals and war zones, signing corporate deals, working in independent small businesses, solving murders, fighting for or against vampires/gods/werewolves/terrorists, and so on), their stories are fundamentally about their love for a romantic partner. All conflict and resolution is in service of this love and the life it deserves.

Another significant development has been the flourishing of academic scholarship on romance narratives. Starting in the ‘70s, academics like Tania Modleski and Janice Radway began to see the genre as worthy of serious study because it distilled women’s desires and fantasies as an oblique critique of the contemporary moment. These scholars’ critique, however, contained an undercurrent (or overt accusation) about the brain-candy nature of the novels or the genre’s seeming acceptance of patriarchal oppression: women were clearly unhappy with gender relations in our society (as was visible in the struggle between heroes and heroines), they argued, but the happy endings plastered over the problems and avoided a real questioning of the system.

The second wave of academics has turned away from this outsider approach (which seemed to pass judgment on the genre and its subculture) and toward an analysis of the possibilities
A second wave gathered strength with the publication of Pamela Regis's 2003 work *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, which examines the genre’s “essential elements” (e.g., the first encounter between the hero and heroine, the barrier to their love, the moment of extreme crisis that might prevent a happy ending, etc.) and has continued with scholars like Hsu-Ming Teo, whose recent book *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels* examines representations of the Middle East in sheikh-hero romance novels. Other scholars are studying the genre’s structure (and the possible variations it can have), its readers, its racial politics, and its marketing. These studies are demonstrating new ways to critique and appreciate the genre instead of treating it like soft-core pornography with no literary merit or socio-political themes.

Studying romance narratives is a serious academic endeavor to a new generation of scholars whose expertise ranges from literary theory to cultural and media studies, and from business to social sciences. In recent years, scholars have won research funding to examine the genre. For instance, scholar and romance writer Catherine Roach’s forthcoming work, *Happily Ever After: The Romance Narrative in Popular Culture*, has received Fulbright funding to explore what she calls “the most powerful and omnipresent narrative in modern Western culture,” a genre that functions “as an imperative for how to live a good life: Find your one true love and live happily ever after.” The ambitious *Popular Romance Project* (popularromanceproject.org), which documents the experiences of romance writers, readers, and scholars, has received support from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Grant funding has supported my own work on the genre’s ideological complexity, such as its economic, sexual, religious, and race politics. In my book *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology*, I explore themes like the problematic effect of capitalism on contemporary society as reflected in romance, the most widely read of all genres; to study romance is therefore to understand modern sensibilities, be they social, economic, or political. When I include romance novels in my courses, students engage in these issues with alacrity. Readers, authors, scholars, and grant-bestowing bodies all seem to agree that romance fiction (and the romance narrative in all media) is worth reading, writing, and scrutinizing analytically.

As a romance reader, my taste is wide-ranging, with novels taking me from Napoleonic Europe to present-day Manhattan and from the yachts of Italian billionaires to the battles of American vampire hunters. My delight in some authors lies in their delicate command of figures of speech in conveying emotions. Here, for example, is Lisa Kleypas’s heroine Anastasia Kaptereva in *Midnight Angel* (a governess romance), explaining her solitude to the hero:

Did you know the ancient Russians used to build their fortresses on top of hills? When the Tartar invaders attacked, the Russians would pour water over the hill, on all sides. In a very short time it would turn to ice, and no one could climb up. The siege would last as long as the ice and the supplies held out […] For a long time I’ve been alone in my fortress. No one can join me, and I can’t leave. And sometimes … my provisions fail me.

Kleypas is equally deft at comedy, as in this scene in *It Happened One Autumn*, when the staid British aristocrat finds his American romantic nemesis inebriated in his library:

If he had required additional proof that Lillian Bowman was utterly wrong for him, this was it. The wife of a Marsden would never sneak into the library and drink until she was, as his mother would put it, “a trifle disguised.” Staring into her drowsy dark eyes and flushed face, Marcus amended the phrase. Lillian was not disguised. She was foxed, staggering, tap-hackled, top-heavy, shot-in-the-neck, staggering drunk.

Some writers delight us in their takes on “the classics,” such as Mary Balogh (whose *Slightly Dangerous* is a retelling of *Pride and Prejudice*) or Judith Ivory (whose *The Proposition* reverses the genders of Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*—i.e., *My Fair Lady*). Some writers are intriguing for their use of new literary devices, such as Teresa Medeiros, who wrote dialog almost entirely in tweets for her social-media setting of *Goodnight Tweetheart*. Dialog is a special

For this genre, love is the potent mix of desire and trust that is foundational to the human narrative.

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pleasure in the fierce banter of Linda Howard’s protagonists, often strong-willed heroes and heroines.

And one cannot speak of romance fiction without mentioning Nora Roberts, whose prolific output of contemporary, historical, futuristic, suspense, and paranormal romance novels constantly occupies bestseller lists, making her the most successful of romance authors. While her MacGregor novels (about an East Coast family headed by Irish immigrant patriarch Daniel MacGregor and Boston blue-blood surgeon Anna Whitfield MacGregor) have been in print for decades, she has just as many fans for her futuristic police procedurals starring protagonist Eve Dallas and her husband Roarke (written under the pseudonym J.D. Robb). Her staccato prose lends her work a spartan charm, an unromantic style of romantic storytelling.

Amidst these big-name authors, it is easy to overlook the writers of Harlequin and “category” romances and lump them together. Such sideling perpetuates the belief that romance novels are assembly-line products that cannot be told apart from each other. For many readers like me, however, there is just as much (if not more) to commend in the sweetness of Susan Napier’s scrappy ingénues, Lynne Graham’s Heathcliff-and-Cathy-style protagonists (who find happiness), Ann Charlton’s wounded lovers, and Maisey Yates’s fiery heroines. To create such variety and depth of both character and plot (all while working within the publisher’s constraints), shows these writers to be superior craftspeople. With such writers testing mass-market romance fiction’s limits, Harlequin has adopted plots with more equitable relationships, female sexual agency, and racial diversity.

Outside of Harlequin, writers like Roberts and Kleypas, as well as Suzanne Brockmann, Joanna Bourne, Sherry Thomas, and Nalini Singh keep pushing the boundaries, both in terms of style and in terms of who may fall in love and expect social recognition of that bond. While Singh’s protagonists can cross species boundaries and also include martial angels, Thomas’s lyrical, stirring prose is building a reader base that will follow her heroes and heroines from British landscapes to India and China, settings that were once impossible to sell in the Euro-American-centric romance market. Brockmann has explored same-sex relationships against the backdrop of war and terrorism and Bourne has infused the Regency romance with an enchanting freshness. Her breakout work, The Spymaster’s Lady (which I initially avoided because I disliked the title and the cover), contains some of the most startling plot twists and sharply-drawn characters ever to grace a romance novel. The epigraph at the beginning of this article is a brief glimpse into the sweetness and poignancy that writers like Bourne have brought to romance fiction.

What then, to revisit the question with which I started, is romance fiction? On a recent trip to France, I visited Leonardo da Vinci’s last home, Clos Lucé in the Loire valley, and happened upon this framed quotation attributed to him that can help answer that question: Qui peut arrêter la haine sauf l’amour? (Who can stop hate but love?) Like the Renaissance genius, romance novels have an unshakeable faith in love. For this genre, love is the potent mix of desire and trust that is foundational to the human narrative. Romance novels believe in the triumph of the human heart and the fulfillment of hopeful possibilities via courtship and lasting companionship. Read one and you just might believe in love, too.

JAYASHREE KAMBLE is Assistant Professor of English at the City University of New York’s LaGuardia Community College. She is the author of Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology (Palgrave, 2014) and the only two-time winner of the Romance Writers of America Academic Research grant. She studies popular fiction and film.