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"He seized her in his manly arms and bent his lips to hers...". The surprising impact that romantic novels have on our work

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Background

Just 14 years of age, innocent if not ignorant of the facts of life, I went to stay with my older cousin. She seemed very worldly-wise, so when she offered me a romantic novel by Georgette Heyer with the comment "I think you're old enough", I wondered what debauchery I would find within.

Reader, I devoured every page. The adorably beautiful Regency heroine, the brutally handsome Regency hero, the passionate glances across the Assembly Room floor, the chaste kiss with which the book ended. I worked my way through Heyer's entire canon before my 15th birthday.

Which is why, when tasked to comment on the impact of romantic fiction on female sexual health, I was keener than you might imagine. The genre has been the target of much formal criticism – 1970s feminist academics said it forced women into patriarchal marriage. It still is the target of sneers, sniggers and accusations of 'soft core porn'. But I remember my 14-year-old self and I can see the point.

Romantic fiction as sex education

That said, many Journal readers may not see the point. What relevance can romantic fiction have to the clients who turn up at our family planning clinics, arrive in our surgeries, or present their problems in our therapy rooms?

I believe there's huge relevance. In some Western countries, romance accounts for nearly half of all fiction bought; some fans read up to 30 titles a month, one book every 2 days. So while women's exposure to formal sex and relationships education (SRE) may be as little as a few hours in a lifetime, exposure to the brand of SRE offered in romantic novels may be as much as a day every week. What we see in our consulting rooms is more likely to be informed by Mills and Boon than by the Family Planning Association.

So what is romantic fiction? Writers' associations define it as a genre where the love relationship is the sole important focus, and where there is an emotionally satisfying and clearly optimistic ending. Within that definition, there are a dizzying number of subgenres, including historical, science fiction, medical, Latino, suspense, paranormal, religious – plus, of course, erotic romance ('romantica', which itself divides into subgenres such as bondage, gay and vampire, the current *strand du jour*).

The category follows a strict formula – publishing houses issue extensive author guidelines – because readers demand consistency and familiarity. Books should be a certain length: typically 80 000 words for a stand-alone work, 50 000 for the 'category' novels, which appear monthly and are then withdrawn and pulped to keep demand alive. Books should follow a set structure: classically, Girl meets Boy within the first few pages and becomes irrevocably committed to him by the final chapter, with no intervening diversions from the forward movement of the romance. (Hence, strictly speaking, most 'chick lit' isn't romantic fiction; Bridget Jones and her ilk not only regularly fail to deliver the aforementioned unambiguously happy ending, but they also include diversionary subplots concerning family, friends or work.)

Unsurprisingly, books should keep within the boundaries of 'normal' physical affection – that is, activities accepted as normal by Western society, though the religious subgenre rarely includes physical contact whereas romantica majors on it. Crucially, certain taboos must be observed and certain paraphilias avoided, though as one novelist recently observed about the

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vampire strand, "sex with sentient shape-shifters does not count as bestiality".[1]

Romantic fiction as value transmitter

So far, I have no concerns. Length, structure, storyline may mean boring predictability but their impact on the clients we work with is likely to be minimal. Delve deeper though, and it gets less helpful.

For the values of romantic fiction – particularly at its inception – sometimes run totally counter to those which we Journal readers espouse. The very first example of the genre – Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) – tells the story of a young servant maid abducted and near-raped by her master. The famous Mills and Boon imprint (1931–) from the start majored on stunningly beautiful but passive virgins whose sexual desire was awakened by their perfectly-choreographed seduction at the hands of a highly-skilled alpha male. The post-sexual revolution bodice rippers of the 1970s typically ended with the heroine being rescued from danger by the hero, and then abandoning herself joyfully to a life of intercourse-driven multiple orgasms and endless trouble-free pregnancies in order to cement their marital devotion. And while there is much more real-life awareness nowadays – female characters have jobs, male characters are sensitive and sensible, both face challenges such as addiction, disability, single parenting or domestic violence – still a deep strand of escapism, perfectionism and idealisation runs through the genre.

> ***"Sex may be wonderful and relationships loving, but neither are ever perfect and idealising them is the short way to heartbreak."***

Clearly, these messages run totally counter to those we try to promote. We don't condone non-consensual sex. We want women to be aware of their own desires rather than be 'awakened'. We aim to reassure our female clients that their first time may not be utterly joyful and that they may not gain reliable orgasms through penetration, but that they themselves are none the less existentially valid and that with affection and good humour things can improve immensely. We warn of the stresses of pregnancy and child-rearing, and we discourage relentless baby-making as proof of a relationship's strength. Above all, we teach that sex may be wonderful and relationships loving, but neither are ever perfect and that idealising them is the short way to heartbreak. But are our lessons falling on deaf ears when compared to the values of the Regency heroine gazing adoringly across the Assembly Rooms to catch a glimpse of her man?

There's a final, worrying difference between sexual health professionals and the producers of romantic fiction. To be blunt, we like condoms – for protection and for contraception – and they don't. In one recent survey, only 11.5% of romantic novels studied mentioned condom use, and within these scenarios the heroine typically rejected the idea because she wanted 'no barrier' between her and the hero. Even more worryingly, while the romance readers interviewed said that they knew that such episodes were fiction, and that spontaneous sexual encounters are never risk-free, nevertheless there was a clear correlation between the frequency of romance reading and the level of negative attitude towards condoms and the intention to use them in the future.[2]

Romantic fiction as permission giver

It's not all gloom, though. Browse – as I did for this article – the 'romantic fiction' section of your local book shop, and while the covers may be anodyne (the flimsily clad maidens of yore have largely given way to 'landscape' shots of the novel's setting), the sexual content inside can be very healthily presented.

For more and more nowadays, Girl is already aware of her own desires and preferences when she meets Boy; Boy in turn knows about clitoral stimulation; neither are averse to a little oral sex. Sexual activities are many and varied; some imprints offer ratings guidelines such as 'Sensuous, Erotic, Extreme' or 'Spicy, Hot, Scorching' so readers can choose whether to mark their final page commitment with a chaste kiss or a visit to a sex club.

This liberation of sexuality within the romance genre is such that many of the critical 1970s feminist academics mentioned above have come full circle. They now celebrate romantic fiction as a statement of women's right to have sex, honour it as female-focused erotica, re-categorise it as a collection of 'feminist fairy tales' that allow women to feel good about their desires and develop their erotic power.

And surveys suggest that some romance readers are doing exactly that. Yes, many skip the sex scenes as irrelevant (or badly written) but many use those scenes as fuel for their own feelings of self-worth. Plus, they are also likely to try out described sexual activities with their real-life partner; 75.5% of regular readers in a 2009 survey[3] said that romantic fiction had encouraged them to have more sex, more adventurous sex and more experimental sex. And – reassuringly for Journal subscribers partnered with readers of romantic novels – these women also reported that they did not negatively compare their own real-life partners with their fictional heroes unless the partnership was already rocky. Whew.

In fact, and contrary to many commentators who see romantic fiction as soft-core porn for unfulfilled women of a certain age, studies have shown a correlation between high levels of romance usage and happy monogamous relationships. When desire fades in an otherwise loving partnership, it seems women may turn to bodice rippers, but they do it less to compensate for deep unhappiness than to actively nourish love

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lives that they value, and to kick-start sex lives that they treasure.[4] Given these reports, we should perhaps be giving romantic fiction a round of applause.

Final misgivings

And yet ... and yet. Yes, I can still recall the hormonally-driven excitement of my first entranced reading of Georgette Heyer. But now? Now I read romantic fiction only when the plot is complex, the characters developed, the style well-crafted – and even so, I don't regard it as anything but a fantasy. Because when it comes to romantic fiction, the clue's in the name; the genre is fiction not fact, and while romance may be the wonderful foundation for a novel, it's not in itself a sufficiently strong foundation for running a lifelong relationship. But I do wonder how many of our clients truly realise that. Yes, they say that they can distinguish fact from fantasy,[3] but when it comes to making life decisions, are they not much more tempted to let heart dictate simply because they are romance fans?

> *"Sometimes the kindest and wisest thing we can do for our clients is to encourage them to put down the books – and pick up reality."*

I may be a party-pooper, but I would argue that a huge number of the issues that we see in our clinics and therapy rooms are influenced by romantic fiction. If a woman learns from her 100 novels a year that romantic feeling is the most important thing, then what follows from that might be to suspend her rationality in favour of romanticism. And that might well mean not using protection with a new man because she wants to be swept up by the moment as a heroine would. It might also mean allowing that same man, a few months down the line, to persuade her to give up contraception because "we love each other". It might mean terminating a pregnancy (or continuing with one) against all her moral codes because that same man asks her to. It might mean panicking totally if sexual desire takes a nose dive after pregnancy or because of strain – after all, such failure never happens to a heroine. It might mean – in the wake of such panic – judging that if romance has died then so has love, and that rather than working at her relationship she should be hitching her star to a new romance.

I'm not arguing that all romantic fiction is misguided, wrong or evil – to do so would be to negate my teenage self as well as the many millions of readers who innocently enjoy romances. And taken with a good deal of self-understanding, the resources to keep one's relationship on track, and solid support when the inevitable stresses and strains arise, these books can be enjoyable and fun. (If you were to add in a large dollop of good continuing sex education – cue the aforementioned Family Planning Association – you have the perfect plan.)

But I do think that if readers start to believe the story that romantic fiction offers, then they store up trouble for themselves – and then they bring that trouble into our consulting rooms. Sometimes the kindest and wisest thing we can do for our clients is to encourage them to put down the books – and pick up reality.

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