

**Happily, Ever After:
An Analysis of Romance Novels**

by

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Abstract

The worldwide pandemic of 2020-2021 saw millions of people around the globe confined to their homes. Social scientists noted reports of depression and domestic violence and an increase in the use of alcohol and marijuana, as people tried to cope with social isolation. A bright spot amid this litany of negative findings was a report indicating more people were reading, an increase of 33% in the United States. American's favorite subject matter included dystopias, social justice, and romance. Sales of romance novels rose 17%. A research question devolved from a thoughtful consideration of what caused this increase in sales. This approach concentrated on a history of the genesis of romances. Statistical data confirmed the hypothesis that readers chose romances because these books gave people a chance to escape from the boredom of sheltering in place. An analysis of thirty-one romances focused on a paratextual analysis, an examination of characters, humor, signals for sex scenes, as well as, problems and excellence in writing. The data gained from these analyses confirms romances are sought-after despite their relegation by literary elites to popular or low culture. Publishers use research data and authors maintain close personal contact with their readers to ensure a profitable business. Finally, readers purchase romances online as a means of escape from the horrors of the pandemic. The 2020-21 coronavirus was an unrelenting global enemy. No one was safe. Some sought solace in prayer, many in hatred. Others threw themselves into action striving to defeat this invisible, vicious adversary that demanded a Herculean effort to endure. Regardless, a few moments of respite reading a romance novel to amuse and calm anxious survivors proved a welcome, legal, and inexpensive distraction.

Key Words: romance novels, popular culture, consumerism, romances, pandemic, statistical analysis, literary analysis, paperbacks, haut ton, penny dreadfuls, Western, English historical, suspense, paranormal, sex signals, humor, profit

A current plaintive cry of, “I need a book!” is not unusual, yet fulfilling that need in the deadly 2020 coronavirus pandemic is often a godsend. Though audiovisual devices inform and entertain, for many there is nothing like a good book. For most, the new normal is unfamiliar territory. Employment is questionable or non-existent and, even where it does exist, it is dramatically altered. Schools are often a peculiar apparatus vying for room on a kitchen table and the teacher is a figure on a flat screen imparting knowledge to a frustrated, distracted group of students, he or she has never met. However, human beings are adaptable, and amazingly creative in crises. This confusion often produces a need for a distraction that provides a few moments of respite. Apparently for many in this difficult time, it is the romance novel.

Romance novels form a cornerstone of popular culture. It is what is left after the literati decree what books belong to the canon, and what books are not worth reading. The marketing of romance novels represents a new level of consumerism. Publishers supply what readers want, a story about loving relationships with a happy ending. While adhering to this framework, publishers observe the changing tastes of their customers. This three-part inter-disciplinary approach seeks to promote understanding of a much maligned category through a history of the genre, an analysis of the statistics prized by publishers, and a literary analysis of thirty-one romances including novels, novellas, and short stories.

I. Romance History

If a customer asks for a romance novel in a book store, provided there are any left after the world-wide 2020 pandemic, the clerk knows the customer is interested in a work of fiction in which the author takes the reader to places of their choosing. The clerk, however, must ask a follow up question because the term romance novel embraces two different types of literature. The clerk will want to know if the customer is interested in a chivalric romance like *Le Morte d'Arthur* or a modern romance like a Harlequin. This confusion between two very different types of literature lies in the meaning of the word romance. Medieval authors started writing in romance languages like French or Spanish instead of Latin, the language of the educated classes. This meant ordinary people could read or listen to stories of knights and ladies in a language they understood. Romance novels of today bear a similar relationship to popular culture. Mainstream literary culture decries its existence, while the general public consumes these novels with relish.

Modern romances have their origin in Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* (1812) and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Women wrote these novels about the problems of females. Heroines overcame social conventions and personal difficulties to achieve happiness. They found the love of their lives and the books ended with an emotional, satisfying, happy ending. These novels brought hope and inspiration to women debased by the norms and conventions of a patriarchal society and established conventions still followed by the romances of today.

The Industrial Revolution saw the development of steam and rotary printing presses which facilitated the production of inexpensive literature for the newly educated population of the United Kingdom. One of the most widely read publications in the 1830's was the “penny dreadful.” This popular culture offering of sixty-four small pages cost a tuppence (Summerscale para 1). It was published weekly on cheap pulp paper, and sold at railway stations and other convenient outlets. Penny dreadfuls featured sensationalistic and daring stories written for boys and working men. Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street, and English highwayman, Dick Turpin, became household names. Social elites condemned these tracts, especially when they found their way into the pockets of almost every schoolboy in Britain. Moral

commentators linked them to violence, robbery, suicide, and social unrest. However, award winning writer Kate Summerscale notes in her article in *The Guardian*, “Penny Dreadfuls, the Victorian Equivalent of Video Games,” (2016) that an investigation by Parliament found no direct connection to such social problems (para 7).

Dime novels replaced penny dreadfuls during the 1860’s in America. Titles such as *Secret Service*, *Pluck and Luck*, *Fame and Fortune* and *Wild West Weekly* were immediately popular among young working class readers. Highbrow critics derided them as cheap sensationalistic fiction. Nonetheless, these exciting stories about the West, railways, the Gold Rush, and other adventures in unknown territories were a phenomenal success.

Rebecca (1938) by Daphne Du Maurier blended horror and romance to create a thrilling dramatic novel. It featured a female heroine, battling through a terrifying ordeal, while struggling to be with her true love (Pagan 1). Margaret Mitchell’s Civil War and Reconstruction epic, *Gone with the Wind* (1936), revitalized readers’ interest in historical romances, especially when the film adaptation of the book turned into an instant box office success. Professor Pamela Regis does not consider either work a true romance novel because neither heroine resolves her love relationship and both stand alone on the last page (50).

Harlequin Publishers, a Canadian firm, started publishing romance novels in 1948. These novels were generally 55,000 to 65,000 words and aimed at youthful female readers. They became known for their stunning covers, usually featuring lovers posed in a tight embrace. Italian-American model Fabio Lanzoni posed for hundreds of Harlequin book covers. These blatant covers had much to do with the low esteem in which critics hold romance novels.

Kathleen Woodiwiss’ *Flame and the Flower* (1972) was the most remembered in the bodice-ripper tradition (Wendell and Tan 11). It was the first romance novel published directly in paperback for mass market distribution (Thurston 37). It introduced a trend during the 70s and 80s toward more explicit sex in romance novels. Authors such as Jackie Collins, Danielle Steel, and Norah Roberts continued in the “bodice ripper” style earning their place on numerous best seller lists. In 1999, 55.9% of the mass market paperbacks sold in North America were romance novels (Regis xi). The advent of e-book romances resulted in lower prices for mass-produced paperbacks, a change in the market that forced Harlequin to accept HarperCollins’ buyout offer of \$415 million (Raphel para. 3). British author, E. L. James’ novel *Shades of Grey* (2011) ushered in a new era of self-publishing. This provenance of romance novels confirms their status as a vibrant part of popular culture.

II. Statistical Analysis

Introduction

People are staying home and reading more during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Statista*, in a survey, “Share of adults reading books more due to the coronavirus outbreak in the United States,” reported a 33% increase in reading (2020). Stephany Merry and Steve Johnson headline their article in the *Washington Post* “What the Country Is Reading During the Pandemic: Dystopias, Social Justice, and Steamy Romance” (1). According to NPD, a research group, sales of romances increased 17% during the 2020 pandemic (Graham 1). Americans crave a sense of hope and seek escape from multiple crises – why not by reading romance novels?

Romance novels are the epitome of commodity literature. Publishing companies provide fantasy and a means of escape from the stresses and strains of everyday life by mass-producing and marketing romance novels. These books generate profits by offering predictable products to the greatest number of consumers at a low price. Within this framework, publishers remain

attuned to the changing values and tastes of their customers. “It’s the most effective way to produce and market a large number of books to a particular audience” (Rodale 53).

Professor John Storey, a British media specialist, explains “there is always a dialog between the process of production and the activities of consumption” (259). It is not so much that romance novels are predictable and formulaic. Women who read them expect familiar and accessible language, and plot elements like a happy ending. If women do not get what they want, they will not buy or read the book. Publishers rely on statistics for several reasons. They want to understand the demographics of their target audience. They wish to know the general types or subgenres preferred by their customers. Lastly, they realize the necessity of understanding what readers of romances like and dislike in their product.

The Readers

A survey by the Romance Writers of America indicates readers of romance novels are 82% women and 18% men (About the Romance Genre 1). Men reading romances increased 9% from 2014 to 2019. Perhaps, more men read romances because they seek to understand the emotional and sexual needs of women. Most romances provide a well-written story with strong characters. Men do appreciate a novel featuring a conversation between a woman and a man. They encounter all the danger and adventure one finds in male oriented fiction in a romance novel, plus an engaging story of intimacy. Mary Rodale, a best-selling romance author, has an excellent slideshow, “Romance Novels Recommended for Guys” (“The Real Men” 1).

Why do people read romance novels? (See Appendix A). Most of these categories have something to do with relieving stress. The idea women read romance novels to “escape the boredom” of everyday life needs parsing. During this pandemic, women do not have a lot of boredom to contend with. Even with modern conveniences that certainly help women cope, “everyday life” isn’t the same either! There are still meals to plan and cook, living quarters to keep clean and maintained, laundry washed, dried and sorted. In addition, women must budget, pay bills, disinfect the home, as well as care for children, homeschool, AND...often contribute as a member of the out-of-home workforce! All while wearing personal protective equipment! Soooo...in describing why women read romance novels let’s use the word “escape” in its real sense, i.e. “breaking free” even for a few minutes! (Sigh!).

Male authors belittled the romance genre for centuries. Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of the *Scarlet Letter* (1850), characterizes romance writers as “a damned mob of scribbling women and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash” (Letter). Critics have long looked askance at romance novels and their readers. One pundit describes the genre as “fluff reading, not for very bright individuals” (Rodale 32). Another detractor pictures readers as “sorority girls or bored housewives” (cited by Rodale 32). Elizabeth Curtis Sittenfeld, a romance novelist herself, writes, “I reached the point where I recognized most romances are badly written” (cited by Flood 1). Crime writer Jane Casey counters “I’d say the vast majority of romance writers are exceptionally good at maintaining suspense & characterization or NO ONE WOULD READ THEM” (Flood 1).

Modern literary critics charge romance novels are unrealistic. Jesse Barron in his *Harper’s* article, “One Genre and a Billion Happy Endings,” argues the characters in romance novels grow and change as they learn more about the people they love. Barron references psychologist Maryanne Fisher who in her article in *Psychology Today*, “How Much Do Romance Novels Reflect Women's Desires?” declares, men are either a “cad or a dad,” and they rarely change (1). Author Patti Armstrong in “What’s So Bad About Romance Novels?” insists

unrealistic expectations about change and sex lead to reader dissatisfaction with their marriages. Armstrong clearly misses the point. Readers of romance novels know the difference between reality and fantasy, even if they choose fantasy for a few moments of respite.

Many people disguise their reading choice with a cloth or paper cover. Romance readers (89%) often experience the scorn of others for their favorite reading material. However, according to a survey by Nielsen 44% attended college, 51% work outside the home, and 68% read the newspaper every day (Krentz 12). Rodale reports even higher educational levels (47). Critics who stereotype romance readers as uneducated are wrong.

Women from age 30-45 buy romances according to writer Jayne Krentz (12). Harlequin novels attract a slightly younger group. The number of readers currently in a relationship with a man is 79%. and 61% consider themselves feminists. (Krentz 12). The sexual orientation of romance readers is: 86% heterosexual, 9% bisexual, and 2% gay or lesbian (About the Romantic Genre 1). Romance writer Maddie Caldwell notes, "What I need is a woman writing a book where she gets what she wants and that is feminism. Hell yes!" (Rodale 135). Women include romance novel purchases on their shopping list. Seventy-one percent buy one at least once a month. The story is the #1 factor in a reader's decision to purchase a romance (Rodale 92). Publishers cannot afford to alienate such discerning and committed consumers.

What characteristics do readers like in principal characters? (Appendix B). Pioneering researcher Janice Radway (82) indicates readers prefer heroes who demonstrate humor (37%), honesty (34%), and kindness (29%). She finds readers like heroines with intelligence (36%), humor ((36%), and Independence (28%). Rodale notes only 6% thought the heroine has to be beautiful (156). Would-be romance writers should appreciate the importance of humor in principal characters. Well-developed secondary characters are essential, especially in bringing out the comedy found in the predicaments of the principals.

Subgenres

Romance readers sample different categories, but generally they have a specific type of book in mind. They'll look first for a book by their favorite author. Book covers help them recognize the type of novel they wish to read. They all expect a happy ending, but authors have many ways to achieve this goal. There were over 9,000 romance novels published in 2013, apparently something for nearly every taste and preference (Rodale 164). The percentages listed in Appendix C indicate what subgenres readers prefer.

Suspense (25%), the most popular subgenre, features a romance coupled with a mysterious plot. Many from this group showcase police or a PI such as found in Kate Martin's works. The hero must solve the mystery and save his love interest from assorted villains. Historical Romance novels employ backgrounds prior to 1950. Not only does this subgenre take place in different centuries, but also in different countries and cultures. Authors of historical romances favor Gothic, Medieval, Viking, or Scottish/Highlander settings. The categories of English historical romances by reigning monarch are Georgian (1714-1830), Regency (1811-1820), Victorian (1837-1901), and Edwardian (1901-1910). In time-travel romances, the heroine somehow travels back in time to meet the hero of her dreams (Ramsdell 117).

Every English historical romance is set within the values and mores of the haut ton or British high society in the 19th century. The ton was a rigid class system determined by social acceptance. Members of the ton attended balls, theatre parties, pantomimes, dances, masquerades, military reviews, horse races and other entertainments. The elite dictated fashion, etiquette, manners, and customs, yet adhered to a sliding scale of morality. The higher up the

social ladder, the more forgiving the attitude for moral transgressions. However, immorality or impropriety on the part of the well-born, but untitled, could destroy an entire family's financial and social aspirations.

The pinnacle of social life lay in London's most exclusive mixed-sex social club, Almack's. This establishment acted as a "marriage mart," a showcase for the most privileged debutantes. Families with marriageable children sought hard to get tickets or vouchers to admit their daughters to Almack's. The club organized a ball and a supper once a week for twelve weeks during "the season," March to early June (Murray 50). Marriageable girls could "come out" for only three seasons. If they failed to find a match, they were labeled "blue stockings" and consigned to spinsterhood. Seven patronesses determined those admitted to Almack's. They set strict standards of what was acceptable social behavior for both sexes. A stolen kiss as in Alexander's *Happily Ever After* (2019) forces a marriage to save the honor of a young lady.

As grim as the consequences of violating social mores, there is still something exhilarating about the galas at Almack's. This stanza from Hattie Howard's poem "Lightning Bugs" (1904) brings out the flavor of these extravaganzas (1).

To be a "princess in disguise,"
And wear a robe of fireflies
All strung and wove together,
And be the cynosure of all
At Madame Haut-ton's carnival,
In fashion's gayest feather.

The glitter of such events continues to influence the plot lines of English romance novels.

Paranormal romances (11%) is a broad subgenre consisting of categories like fantasy worlds and alien lovers, vampires and shape-shifters. Shifters are paranormal creatures who can change from human to supernatural creatures or an animal such as a bear, wolf, or dragon. Erotic Romance novels (9%) embrace strong, explicit, sexual interaction as an inherent part of the love story. Smaller sub-categories include bad boys, taboo romance, BDSM, and fetish stories. If one removes the relationship development, it is not a romance novel, it is erotica. Young adult life, 12 to 18 years, is the fundamental context of teen Romance novels (7%). These novels have only hints of sex. New Adult novels have sex scenes appropriate for the 18-21 age group.

Contemporary romance novels (21%) have settings from 1950 to the present. This broad definition provides a plethora of sub-categories and cross-overs, as today's trend solidifies into its own category. Religious beliefs are an essential part of the relationships explored in spiritual romance novels (7%). Generally, they only imply sexual activity. Christian, Catholic, Amish, and Latter-Day-Saint romances are part of this subgenre. Sports romances also fit into the contemporary category. They focus on the relationships of players of the popular sports milieu, such as football, baseball, basketball or race car driving. Multicultural contemporary romances introduce main characters of various races or cultures. Other sub-categories of contemporary romances involve, cowboys, nurses, doctors, urban fantasy, and LGBT (Rodale 66).

Contemporary romances often highlight popular themes: including PTSD, physical impairment, adaptation to handicaps, nightmares, separation anxiety, single parenting, financial difficulty, and employment. This pandemic will undoubtedly produce novels explaining coping mechanisms for current problems i.e. eviction, grief, unemployment, and quarantining.

Romance novels have favorable endings, but they may also provide examples of how to cope with real-world situations.

The Novels

Publishers sell romances in several different formats. Hardcover books have a protective cover, large size, good paper, and are purchased in book stores. Trade books feature a thin cardboard cover, larger size, and are also sold in book stores. Mass produced books are fairly small in size, printed on lower quality paper, and sold in mass market outlets. E-books are available in digital form, readable on computers or other electronic devices. Supermarkets and pharmacies pioneered the sale of affordable romance novels in the 50s and 60s. Today, consumers purchase 60% of this genre in electronic or print versions through the internet (Graham para 1). Romances tend to decrease in quality of material and size according to price.

Romance novels highlight profit and popularity. They are big business – \$1.6 billion in 2019, and this genre, according to Markinblog, comprises 29% of all fiction (1). They are a perfect example of consumerism in popular culture. Publishers know they will profit as long as their product stays within the parameters of what avid consumers want and can afford. They learn what discerning consumers want through statistics conducted by the Nielsen Company, the Romance Writers of America, and authors.

The current trend for romances is self-publishing. E. L. James used a local on-demand publisher for her controversial novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011). She sold 150 million copies and made 95 million dollars in its first year of publication. The author subsequently published a trilogy of Grey novels and saw her creation made into film. Her commercial success led to a revolution in the publishing industry. Authors can publish a romance novel in print form for around \$2000 (Bingham para 27). Amazon-Kindle will put it on line. Many writers negotiate the right to republish their former works. Authors gain control of the profits from their work, but they must become small business owners assuming the burden of selling their work (Holt 29). They often write a paragraph touting other or upcoming works at the end of the current offering and create a website and link it to the book's blurb on Amazon.com. This website can also feature a newsletter. It is not uncommon for romance writers to send their newsletter to 16,000 people or more. Those who buy romances are voracious readers who delight in an appetizer for a tasty narrative.

Forty-seven percent of readers think one can judge a book by its cover (Rodale 67). Romance novels are randomly displayed in supermarkets, unlike book stores where they are alphabetized by author. According to Rodale, 28% of shoppers buy romance novels on impulse (67). Covers offer powerful evocative codes, replete with symbols, images, and allusions helping busy shoppers gravitate to their favorite authors and sub-genre. The back cover and spine of the book include additional information. A recent innovation provides the reader with a genre designating cover, plus a more enticing image on the following page. Visual cover art is equally important for readers shopping for E-books.

Radway's survey indicates several things readers dislike in romance novels: 89% of readers abhor rape scenes, 80% explicit sex scenes, and 70% sad endings (74). She presents evidence that when readers discover offensive scenes, 55% toss the offending book into the trash can. Twenty-one percent read the ending to see, if the book is worth finishing (Radway 70). A well-written sex scene flows from the emotions of the characters. It is not the minute description of a sexual encounter, it is the tension within a relationship of two people as they struggle with desire, deny it, and then surrender to it (Rodale 115).

Doctoral candidate Dana Menard surveys twenty contemporary romance novels from the most recent winners of the RITA award for excellence in her study “Insert Tab A Into Slot B” (2011). Her findings indicate males initiate sex 54% of the time, females 33%, and simultaneous initiation 13% (Menard 4). Her survey shows 86% of heroines and 77% of heroes are consistently attractive, Caucasian, heterosexual, single and young. Ten years later, publishers actively seek writers who portray the ethnic, racial, and sexual diversity of a modern audience. Few of the sex scenes (17%) include “romantic” scene-setting elements, such as music, flowers, and candles. Sixty-five percent take place in a private location or bedroom. Seventy-two percent occur in the evening or at night (Menard 4).

An analysis of the survey sample in this paper confirms Menard’s findings. However, in Tes LeSue’s *Bound for Sin* (2018), the friends of Matt and Georgiana arrange a “honeymoon” for them, after their wedding, away from the wagon train. They erect a tent garlanded with flowers in the forest by a river and provide food and blackberry wine. The couple settles in to watch the stars come out and consummate their marriage (329).

Menard discovers no significant difference between books published between 1989 and 1999 and those published between 2000 and 2009 in terms of protagonist or relationship characterization. The only finding of statistical significance during this period was an increased use of contraception from 18% of the scenes in the first group to 58% in the second (Menard 5). Her results, taken as a whole, confirm Radway’s assertion that romances conform to the expectations of their readers.

The pandemic brought out the best and the worst in people. Humans discovered their strengths and weaknesses as never before. Worldwide problems far exceed solutions. Everyone craved a few minutes of distraction, humor, and caring. For some, a fairly inexpensive and available novel helps. It may provide a distraction and relieve some of the tension long enough for many to cope. This, in itself, is amazing in the current focus on the modern audiovisual age. Some seeking to escape physical, mental, emotional, and economic pain, actually find respite and relief in the art of reading the written word once again.

III. Literary Analysis

Introduction

The data cited in the first section of this paper led to the development of the factors needed for an inclusive and esoteric literary analysis of romances. The works in this study were in the form of novels, novellas, an anthology of three short stories, and an octavo pamphlet. These romances include works published in 1928, 1972, 2011, 2019, and 2020. The researchers sought a quantitative overview of several romance sub-genres. Their hypothesis was that unlocking the codes, puzzles and allusions of romantic novels would promote understanding of this much maligned genre. The researchers strove for a balance between historical and contemporary romances, as well as, pivotal works that influenced the writing and publishing of romances.

During the conceptual phase, the authors determined seven factors derived from the statistical survey. The first consisted of a paratextual interpretation of how publishers surround the author’s story with a framework designed to inform readers and entice customers to buy the book. Subsequent factors included: the personality traits of main and secondary characters, the role of humor in romances, who and how authors signaled the reader an intimate scene was imminent, how romance novelists vary the tempo of the narrative, as well as, problems and

excellence in writing. The researchers documented their judgments, but fully admit their subjective nature.

Study Sample Size

Critics of love stories usually peruse eight or nine books before making their pronouncements. Radway sampled 20 novels for her doctoral dissertation. Menard examined 46 sex scenes in 20 novels for her dissertation. In defense of the small size of her study sample, Menard noted that a review of the literature indicated the size of survey samples varied from 20 to 120 (5). The researchers of this paper read, coded, and analyzed 31 romances. These works were mass market paperbacks purchased or read on line. The number of romance sub-genres continues to expand as trends develop into sub-genres and categories. Analyzing them all represented an almost impossible task. However, a smaller set of data based on factors of analysis of romances provided insights applicable to the entire population.

Study Sample Selection

The researchers started their analysis with four amusing Western historical novels by Tess LeSue. In all, they savored ten works in the romance humor category. They subsequently read English historical novels, five in the Georgian period (1714-1830), and nine in the Victorian period (1837-1901). Like most romance readers, once they found a writer they enjoyed, they read more of her works. The six novels by Victoria Alexander included witty tales of the Lady Travelers Society. Stephanie Laurens' sparkling Christmas Chronicle series encouraged the reading of six of her romances. Nicco and Jim McGoldrick's tersely written *Highland Crown* (2019) rounded out this sub-genre.

The study sample contained three transitional works that reflected the development of modern romances. It also highlights one of the first modern romance novels, a small pamphlet or "octavo" published by a Hearst tabloid, the *New York Daily Mirror*, entitled *Driven, The Exciting Romance of a Night Club Dancer* (1929) by Alberta Stedman Egan. This pamphlet popularized the serialization of romances. *The Flame and the Flower* (1972), by Kathleen Woodiwiss changed the nature of the genre with its explicit sex scenes (Radway 33). E. L. James' *Shades of Grey* (2011) ushered in a new era of self-publishing. Both of the last two novels leave the status of the heroine somewhat undefined at their conclusions. This lack of a positive outcome means they do not meet the strict definition of a romance novel. However, their influence on the romance industry merited their inclusion in the sample.

The examination of these novels demonstrates how much romance narratives have changed over the years. The longitudinal aspect of this analysis reveals new insights on the development of romance narratives. Before Woodiwiss, the stories centered around virginal, pliant heroines who fell in love with overbearing Alpha males. After *The Flame and the Flower* (1972), romance novels featured strong-willed heroines. These women transformed men, who initially threatened them, into caring and compassionate husbands. The latest plot twist surfaces in the contemporary works of modern authors like McKenna. Troubled heroines and conflicted heroes find healing and love through an open and mutually respectful relationship.

The researchers analyzed twelve contemporary novels (38%) in an effort to broaden the scope of the survey sample. The contemporary subgenre included suspense romances and those dealing with modern problems. The three novels in Lindsay McKenna's Wind River series and Sandra Hill's *A Hero Comes Home* (2020) deserve recognition for helping readers understand the psychological effects and treatment options for those suffering from PTSD. Dailey's *Hart's*

Hollow Farm (2019) explores the brain disorder of dementia. Brown's *Cowboy Courage* provides a humorous respite. The development of the factors of analysis proved a most difficult process. The solution came from close examination of the results of the statistical analysis.

Covers

An integrated advertising package sells books. This includes the front cover, perhaps a second cover, the spine, back cover, and sometimes an enticing preview from the author. The front cover contains the title, the author, a tagline, and an engaging image. One book designer observed, "Anything hot and sexy, does well, as long as it is tastefully done" (Rodale 139). Supermarkets are family places and do have standards. Rodale notes one can still find covers in which "a busty young woman clings" to a "hulking muscle-bound man," as "her breasts spill out of her bodice" (11). However, things are changing. Current covers confirm Rodale's assertion that modern romances are more sedate.

Surprisingly, only ten of the romances analyzed in this paper featured women on the front cover. The cover of Alberta Egan's *Driven* (1929) presents a line drawing of a Jazz Age dancer. The cover of Woodiwiss' *Flame and the Flower* (1972) is modest compared to the violent sex described in her novel. It portrays a seated woman in a ruby dress and dark cloak. The image on the front cover for Alexander's *Happily Ever After* (2019) depicts a red-haired woman wearing a rose colored ball gown. An insert shows the woman in a turquoise gown. Images in the background of Alexander's covers give clues to the location of the story: a pyramid, the Eiffel tower, or a wintry English country scene.

Laurens, a best-selling Australian novelist, prefers covers that let her readers know unequivocally, explicit sex scenes await them. Her novel, *What Price Love* (2006) entices buyers with a close up of a gorgeous woman wearing a crimson dress. The same image appears on the spine. A second cover depicts a scantily clad woman and a man, legs entangled, lying on scarlet satin sheets. Laurens uses the same promotional techniques in *Temptation and Surrender* (2009). The cover exposes the naked back of a seated woman with a golden satin gown barely clinging to her.

A historical Western romance, Tes LeSue's *Bound for Glory* (2019) uses evocative images to signal readers this book was a historical western (See Appendix D). Heroine Ava Archer, an attractive redhead, sports a Western hat, riding boots, fringed blouse, and skirt. She sits by a campfire, writing in a notebook. Teepees and a Conestoga wagon complete the background.

Contemporary Western romance covers show cowboys with Stetsons, chambray shirts and boots. Background images include horses, hay bales, and pick-up trucks. Lariats and chaps, signs of a working wrangler, often appear as accessories. An image of a black and tan Belgian Malinois graces the front cover of McKenna's novel, *High Country Rebel* (2013). The dog, named Zeke, saves the heroine from a Grizzly bear, catches the villain, and merits the last line in the book. The cover of her subsequent novel, *Wind River Protector* (2019), showcases a white dog, which, alas, did not appear in the story. The front of McKenna's *Silver Creek Fire* (2020) also includes a phantom dog. Obviously, the artist did not read the book. The external artwork portrays a cowboy riding through a fire. There is a house-fire in the novel, but the main characters ride in vehicles.

Five covers present couples, mostly sedate, sometimes modestly hugging. In the dark, brooding cover of Kat Martin's, *The Conspiracy* (2019), two indistinct individuals walk on a beach. Lauren's *Lady Osbaldestone's Christmas Intrigue* (2020) presents a snow scene on the

cover. Two limited hypotheses result from this analysis. First, readers respond to the hidden messages in the covers and select books they want to read. Second, present day covers are more conservative and sophisticated than in the 50s.

Back Covers

While the images on the front cover attract, prose on the back cover prompts readers to buy the book. LeSue on the back cover of *Bound for Eden* (2018), playfully declares, “Alexandra Barratt has found the perfect man – It’s a shame he thinks she is a boy.” Victoria Alexander invites readers to “embark on the breathtaking romantic adventures of the Lady Travelers Society,” in *The Proper Way to Stop a Wedding* (2017). The back cover of her work *Deception with an Unlikely Earl* (2018) quotes *Publishers Weekly*, “Alexander’s madcap social plotting continues to delight...A wonderful continuation of a highly enjoyable series.” Laurens promised “fiery passion, soaring love, and spellbinding intrigue” on the back cover of *The Beguilement of Lady Eustacia Cavanaugh* (2019). Linda Miller in *Big Sky Secrets* (2019), sums up their entire storyline in a sentence. “He’s traded his suit for cowboy boots – and she’s walked away with his heart...” (Back Cover). Consumers find some of the best writing on the back cover of romances. If they like the writer’s style and the gist of the story, they purchase the book and enjoy a few hours of relaxation immersed in the personal lives of people with whom they can relate.

Principal Characters

Literary first impressions are important in predicting how people will respond. This is essential in romance novels where determining the compatibility of individuals in a love relationship is imperative. Romance writers describe heroes in exquisite detail because they are writing for a predominately female audience. Blue and grey are preferred male eye colors. Heroes generally are at least six feet tall and have athletic bodies. Clothing choices indicate status and apparently enhance men’s masculinity (Fisher 1). Laurens describes heroes and heroines in detail early in *The Obsessions of Lord Godfrey Cavanaugh* (2020). The hero, suffering from exhaustion and hypothermia falls asleep.

With his dark hair and pale skin, dark slanting brows, patrician nose, sharp cheek bones, the long rather austere lines of his cheeks, his squarish chin, and thin but firmly drawn lips, his face called to mind that of the classic fallen angel, but was saved from such cold perfection by the shallow lines bracketing his mouth. She was willing to wager that when he smiled, he would sport distracting dimples (Laurens *Obsessions* 17).

LeSue’s opening line in *Bound for Sin* states, “Now *that* was how a man should look” (1). Modern male principals are not only handsome, but also exhibit intelligence, wit, and kindness (Radway 82). Miller, in *Big Sky Secrets* (2019), lauds hero Landry Sutton as, “smart as hell, a self-made man” (11). Sandra Hill in *A Hero Comes Home* (2020) characterizes Jake Dawson as a tortured hero with a dark sense of humor that “might be all right for a romance novel hero, but not for a real-life hero” (150). He is tall, handsome, muscular, in addition to being wealthy and community minded. Widower Logan Anderson, hero of McKenna’s *Silver Creek Fire* (2020), is a “dream cowboy” (222). Yet his most attractive features are his inherited sensibility to his community and his employees. His gaze always shows his emotions (75). He

builds his relationship with his fragile love, Lea Ryan, slowly, tenderly, with openness and honesty. He is the prototype for the male lead in romance novels of the 21st century.

With the notable exception of Laurens, most romance writers generally describe their heroines in less detail than the heroes. In *The Obsessions of Lord Godfrey Cavanaugh* (2020), the delirious hero opens his eyes and realizes he is dreaming.

A golden-haired angel – a glorious figment of his imagination – hovered over him, concern, curiosity, and interest lighting her woodland eyes, as they slowly traced his features. Her heart-shaped face had been sculpted by a master, with a wide forehead, high cheekbones, straight nose, and tapered chin, and her coloring – porcelain complexion blush-tinted lips, delicately arched brows, and long brown lashes – accentuated the divine vision (Laurens *Obsessions* 14).

Eye color is also important in descriptions of heroines. In her 1929 pamphlet, *Driven*, Egan describes Cecilia as possessing “saucy eyes that changed from blue to violet in a twinkling” (3). In *Bound for Sin* (2018), LeSue’s heroine, Georgianna, is beautiful, with “Eyes the color of a June sky, the color of prairie flax in summer” (53). Kristen Daniels in Dailey’s, *Hart’s Hollow Farm* (2019) arrived at the farm looking for work. She is tall and slim with wavy blond hair “framing deep green eyes and a small smile” (Dailey 19).

Red hair is another common feature of heroines. Perhaps, it is an indication of feistiness. McKenna’s heroine, Andy Whitcomb, in *Wind River Protector* (2019) has “red, gold, and light brown hair” (38). Kat Martin in *Wait Until Dark* (2019), depicts April Vale as a “tall leggy red head” (416) and a few pages later observes, “all that fiery red hair just ramped up the warning signs flashing in her big blue eyes” (418). Brown’s heroine in *Cowboy Courage* (2020), Cactus Rose, has “light red hair that took his breath away” (50). Lea, heroine of McKenna’s *Silver Creek Fire*, “has short red hair that gleamed with copper, gold, and sienna highlights” (45).

Female principal heroines do not have to be incredibly beautiful, but as Radway indicates, readers prefer women who are intelligent, humorous, and independent (125). Alexander’s Fiona Fairchild in *Let It Be Love* (2005) is “far too intelligent for her own good” (17). She portrays Violet in *Happily Ever After* (2019) as shy and retiring, “kind and generous, smart, and funny.” (Alexander *Happily* 320). Ava Archer, Le Sue’s heroine in *Bound for Sin* (2018) is “stubborn as all hell” (53). Ava reappears in another of her series, *Bound for Glory* (2019). LeSue describes her as a professional in a man’s world, a writer of dime novels. She is stubborn, impulsive, determined, tall, strong, and a terrible cook (LeSue *Bound for Glory* 29). The humor she evokes in her banter with Deathrider involves the reader. Her ability to laugh is a sign of her strength and placed her squarely at the center of the story (Cruise).

Secondary characters

The seven Harlequin novels included in this literary survey were generally too short, around 50,000 words, to invest much space in secondary characters. The longer English romances which can reach 100,000 words featured a host of interesting people. Laurens wrote several series based on the members of extended families, a clever way to introduce characters who will appear in other works. Resident staff members often add humor and contribute to manipulation of the romantic plot in her English historical romances. Butlers, maids, and cooks, occasionally advise and even influence the principals. The simple choice of appropriate clothing, food, drinks, cordiality, relaying messages, and spreading gossip is a powerful tool.

Miller's *Big Sky Secrets* (2019), contains a number of engaging secondary characters. Highbridge, Landry Sutton's butler, plays the role of matchmaker, prodding and encouraging the relationship between the principals. The incongruity of a British butler on a Montana ranch is humorous in itself.

Secondary characters manage the tempo. In *A Hero Comes Home* (2020), Author Sandra Hill explores a scenario fraught with difficulties. The military hero, Jake, returns home to his wife and family from an Afghan prison. He must deal with renewing intimacy with his wife, as well as how and when his PTSD symptoms will subside, and the fear of jeopardizing the safety of his family with his unpredictability. At this point, Hill introduces Izzy in a sidekick role. This long-time, civilian and military friend serves as a confidant and sounding board. When Jake tells Izzy he is thinking of leaving his family, Izzy reassures him and suggests a psychiatrist (296). Unfortunately, this situation is all too common in reality at this time. Hopefully, the coping mechanisms and patience in this story are helpful to many readers.

The members of the Ladies Travelers Society provide young women with the tools necessary to travel abroad by themselves, something unheard of in the early 1800s. More importantly, they help heroes and heroines to grow, change, and find love. In fact, they meddle! Several of Alexander's books and a novella feature the trio of elderly women: Lady Guinevere Blodgett, Persephone Fitzhew-Wellmore and Ophelia Higginbotham. In *Deception with an Unlikely Earl* (2018), the Ladies set out to defend their protegee from the negative reviews of her book by Lord Harry Armstrong. When they first meet the mean-spirited Earl, they do a wonderful job of puncturing his ego. Lady Blodgett announces to all, they knew him "simply by the air of arrogance and impatience about him" (Alexander 47).

The best romances have good villains. This character type confronts the hero and heroine at every turn. They force them to overcome their weaknesses and prove they are worthy of each other. Antagonists like drug traffickers, corrupt politicians, destroyers of the environment, and disorders like PTSD create conflict, but a nasty villain threatens violence. The miserable scoundrels in the survey sample include ex-boyfriends, abusive husbands, and M-16 gang members. Perhaps the most perfidious are those known and trusted by the principals i.e. fathers, cousins, and family friends. Laurens describes a particularly malevolent malefactor in *What Price Love?* (2006). The hero and the heroine expose Wallace, the mastermind of a criminal horse racing scam. He seeks revenge by kidnapping the heroine, taking her to a bordello, and installing her in a room where she is to serve the pleasure of four young aristocrats (Laurens *What Price* 443). Providently, the hero crashes through the door and saves her just before this occurs.

Humor

Received wisdom considers comedy inferior to tragedy. Nevertheless, anyone can make an audience cry, but only a talented writer can make them laugh. Romances are comedies in the broadest sense of term. Comedic heroines gain freedom through a happy ending. Their autonomy, however provisional, is a victory of love over life (Regis 16). Eleven of the romances in our literary survey feature humor. Their authors rely on plot, characters, and incidents, to create a comic synergy allowing readers to rise above the miasma of the pandemic on peals of laughter.

LeSue offered four historic westerns with plots that facilitate humor. These plots are exaggerated, but are believable and internally consistent with LeSue's fast-paced narrative. In the first, the hero thinks the heroine is a boy. In the second, the heroine advertises for a husband

in the newspaper. In the third, a naïve man falls in love with a prostitute. In the fourth, the hero begins a relationship with a writer who, unknown to him, writes the very stories that make his life miserable. What makes these plots amusing is the constant bombardment with unexpected outcomes, especially a romance.

A most hilarious plot occurs in Loretta Chase's Victorian short story, "Lord Lovedon's Duel," in the anthology *Royal Bridesmaids* (2012). Chloe, a bridesmaid, drinks too much champagne at her sister's wedding and challenges Lord Lovedon to a duel after she overhears him making insulting remarks about her future brother-in-law. Unfortunately, to her surprise, he accepts and offers to provide the weapons. Not only is such prearranged formal combat illegal, but it is totally incongruous between a man and a woman! They secure seconds and appear on the dueling grounds. On the command, they raise their pistols, fire, and out pops a blue and green mechanical bird, tweeting merrily. They both burst into gales of laughter, and with this momentous introduction, start dating, fall in love, and eventually marry. The author reminds readers such a pair of ancient pistols still exist and are for sale for \$2.8 million at Christie's art auction house. As evidence, she offered the following URL,

www.youtube.com/watch?v=vd8SaNzeZqk

The two main characters in Brown's *Cowboy Courage* (2020), blunder around a glass shop like slapstick panto actors. "Hud Baker felt like a rodeo bull in a lingerie shop" (Brown 1). Readers expect the unexpected as their romance heats up amidst many starts and stops. Aunt Luna, an octogenarian, sums up the whole plot with her statement, "God is great, beer is good, and people are crazy" (Brown 70).

Humor is difficult to write because much of what people think is comical is parochial and topical. However, children, dogs, and cross-dressing are always amusing. LeSue's novels are replete with witty repartee, men wearing women's clothes, and a mongrel dog, named "dog." Pointed or poignant, humor helps people through difficult times. One of the women interviewed by Radway declares what she wanted was "a little humor" and something light, "because we want to get away from our problems" (159).

Sex Signal

It is helpful to know when an intimate scene is about to happen, who initiates it, and what words portend it. A comparison of a 2011 survey by Menard of a sample composed of 20 Rita award winners and a 2021 survey by the researchers of this analysis indicates that sex signals by men declined from 54% in the 2011 survey to 10% in the 2021 survey. Radway thought the violent explicit sex scenes in Kathleen Woodiwiss' *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) and James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) changed the nature of romance publishing (33). They portrayed the only examples of non-consensual sex in the 2021 sample.

The brutal hero in the *Flame and the Flower* (1972), Brandon, is a "punisher," supposedly he hurts the heroine, Heather, only because he loves her so much (Wendell and Tan 13). In actuality, he rapes the heroine three times in the first forty-one pages and justifies his actions based on his belief she is a prostitute (Woodiwiss 29, 35, 41). Radway condones these rapes on the grounds they were "a product of his passion and her (the heroine's) irresistibility." Incredibly, they fall in love, a completely improbable outcome then and now. What dramatically attracted attention in 1972 is no longer acceptable in the present day #MeToo era.

E. L. James' *Shades of Grey* (2011), famous for the amount of money it generated and its influence on self-publishing, bears further literary analysis even though technically it is not a romance novel. This book tells a story of domination and BDSM between Christian Grey, a 28-

year-old multimillionaire and Anastasia Steele, a 22-year-old recent graduate from Washington State University. Christian reacts with anger on learning Ana is a virgin. He announces their first sexual encounter by informing her, “We’re going to rectify the situation right now” (110).

The Amazon.com reviews are sharply divided, ranging from liking it to “fifty shades of awful” (Customer Reviews). James uses the term “provocative romance” to describe her novel, but it is not a romance. The first book does not have a positive ending, or any ending actually, perhaps because the author wishes readers to continue reading her trilogy. Ana states unequivocally in the last chapter of the first book that Christian is not capable of love or a relationship (472, 519). A review of the last book in the series reveals there is still nothing close to a positive resolution or closure to their relationship, such as required in a romance novel. This novel does not even qualify for the descriptor, “erotic”. It is actually more about sexual abuse.

Sex signals say something very important about consent. Non-consensual sex is rape as portrayed in Woodiwiss’ novel. What about permission granted without full knowledge of the consequences? The imbalance of power between the two main characters in *Shades of Grey* (2011) makes informed consent impossible. Ana is young, naïve, and vulnerable. Christian is rich, egocentric, and domineering. He grooms Ana to be his sexual slave and BDMS partner. He uses techniques like intimidation, anger, withholding food, and expensive gifts to disempower and entrap her. Amy E. Bonomi, Lauren E. Altenburger and Nicole L. Walton in their article, “Double Crap!: Abuse and Harmed Identity in *Fifty Shades of Grey*,” in *The Journal of Woman’s Health*, concludes Ana’s inability to give informed consent harmed her by leading to intimate personal violence, a condition affecting 25% of women in the US. These co-authors condemn popular culture literature perpetrating such violent and debasing standards.

The closest modern example of male initiated consensual sex in the 2021 survey occurs in Laurens, *Temptation and Surrender* (2009). Laurens, renowned for plentiful and robust sex scenes, describes the hero thusly, “Lips curving, he shrugged out of his coat, and carefully set it over the back of a chair. ‘It’s time for bed’” (253). The taste for this type of prose is also changing, and Laurens is a good enough writer and smart enough business person to realize it. She is more discrete in her latest novels.

Women still ask for what they want, even though they have more to lose. Sex signals by women dropped slightly from 33% in the 2011 survey to 32% in the 2021 survey. In her work *Bound for Temptation* (2018), LeSue has the heroine, Emma, before asking for sex, say to herself, “I choose good, she thought with a groan, giving up the battle” (305). In Sandra Hills, *A Hero Comes Home* (2020), Sally tells Jake “I want to be in your bed with you.” (262). The direct approach seemed to work well for the heroines in our survey. Partners mutually agreeing to have sex increased from 13% in 2011 to 45% in 2021. In Alexander’s *The Legend of Nimway Hall* (2020), the heroine states, “She’d bet the new roof Robert was about to have his way with her. Or perhaps she’d have her way with him. Good!” (172). The difference between the woman initiating sex and mutual agreement often hinges on small differences in semantics.

Sex scenes allow authors to alter the timing of the narrative. The hero and heroine may have an intimate relationship anywhere from the first page to the epilogue, or not at all. This may come as a surprise to many. There were no sex scenes and therefore no sex signals in 13% of the works in the 2021 survey. Notably, there was not a comparable category in 2011. The three novels and one short story in this new category show just how far romances, and perhaps society, have come in the last nine years.

Narrative Structure

A romance novel must involve a love relationship and have an uplifting ending. All the works in this sample follow the standard romance narrative consisting of three acts: the set-up, the confrontation, and the resolution (Gilbo 1). The first act accounts for 25% of the story. The second act represents 50% of the narrative, and the third act embodies 25% of the story. Would be novelists can find detailed models of how to write a romance. Alexander's *Happily Ever After* (2019) reverses the usual order of the romance narrative. The hero and heroine marry at the beginning of the book. Due to a misunderstanding they immediately separate. However, a dilemma of inheritance requires a reunion allowing them to recognize their marriage as one of true love. In an amusing concluding moment in Alexander's novel, Violet and James agree "We've wasted a lot of time" before going to bed after 6 years apart (337).

Act I – the author introduces the two main characters and brings them together with a narrative hook that gains the readers' attention. Often this provides the opportunity for a detailed description of both. An example of such a line occurs in Alexander's "*Let it Be Love*" (2005). Fiona declares "I'm talking about a proposal of marriage between you and me" (Alexander *Let It Be Love* 41). There is often conflict and attraction at the beginning of a relationship. However, something intervenes forcing the main characters to work together.

Act II – the author binds the principals together in a situation and they begin to fall in love. LeSue's historical Western novels provide excellent examples. Her four novels, set within the context of a journey, give the hero and heroine time to get to know each other, build relationships, consider their destinies, and confront obstacles to their relationships. Whatever is the worst thing that can ruin the relationship, happens. According to Radway, "the hero and the heroine are physically and or emotionally separated" (134). This is the high point of the story, where the hero and heroine are seriously challenged. As an example, in Gaelen Foley's short story "Imposter Bride" in *Royal Bridesmaids* (2012), Prince Tor commands, Minerva, the woman who married him under false pretenses, "I want you gone from here, and don't come back" (206). All the romances surveyed followed this pattern, but the intensity of the antagonism ranges from loathing, to irritation, to not ready for a relationship.

Act III - Tor reconsiders his actions after a three-month separation. He arrives at Minerva's home, declares his undying love and performs "the grand gesture." He drops to one knee, asks her to marry him, and slips a diamond ring on her finger. In the *Beguilement of Lady Eustacia Cavanaugh* (2019), the hero surprises his intended with an original musical creation on the piano, "Anthem to My Muse" as a gift for his bride. This act confirms the growth necessary to achieve a lasting relationship. Act III shows how wonderful life is when the two lovers are finally together. In the epilogue to Alexander's *Happily After* (2019), the members of the Ladies Travelers Society muse on what fun they had in reuniting the main characters. Effie notes, "happily ever after is never the end...It's only, always, just the beginning" (Alexander *Happily* 378). A skillful writer knows that attention to structure, especially the resolution, results in a good solid romance.

Problem Writing

Radway divides romances into two groups, ideal and failed. Ideal romances impart a certain amount of emotional nurturance and reassurance to their readers. Failed romances do not adequately expiate the reader's anger at the actions of the hero, an activity essential to the final rapprochement between the hero and the heroine (Radway157). None of the works in the 2021 survey sample merit the label failed. However, a few have major or minor flaws in their structure or style that diminish the enjoyment of romance readers.

Radway indicates women react negatively to rape, violence, and gratuitous sex. The two leads in Laurens' *What Price Love?* (2006), are beautiful, narcissistic, and selfish. Even so, the plot drives them toward intimacy. He wishes to gain her trust. She seeks information about her brother who has disappeared. They achieve intimacy in ten elaborately scripted scenes. Laurens uses words, like "brazen, flagrant, primitive and demanding" to create an aura of sensuality for these encounters (*What Price* 137). The hero and heroine decide to marry, not so much out of love, but the realization they are like one another. This lessens the approval of her audience and strains the credulity of the most steadfast reader.

Sexist language is a type of bias implying ownership of women, once common in patriarchal societies. In Martin's *The Conspiracy* (2019), the protagonist consistently uses sexist nicknames to refer to the principal female like "Angel" (333), "honey" (336) or "baby" (349). The same sexist language occurs in her novella *Wait Until Dark* (2019) wherein the hero addresses his love interest as "baby" three times in the last six pages (501, 506, 507). Many would find this extremely irritating.

Competent authors often complicate their narrative with unnecessary details and plot twists. In *The Conspiracy* (2019), Martin carefully describes the weaponry beloved by male mystery writers: automatic weapons, tactical shot guns, sniper rifles, and combat knives (106). She details two brawls from which the outnumbered hero emerges victorious. The author vividly portrays two kidnappings and two violent gun battles. She recounts a repelling voyeuristic sex scene to let readers know something they already know: the kidnappers are bad men. For no apparent reason, the author reveals the heroine's brother is the hero's step-brother. As a result, Martin must include two statements to clarify the appearance that the main characters have different mothers and fathers (285, 338). This is distracting and confusing, forcing the reader to reread the previous text.

Minor errors detract from the reader's experience. Laurens always uses the phrase "curving lips" to describe her characters. Janet Dailey in *Hart's Hollow Farm* (2019), reminds readers too many times Georgia dirt is red. Nicco and Jim McGoldrick in *Highland Crown* portray their heroine as entering a room covered with dust, not what one would expect in a village on the wet English coast. Tes LeSue makes the mistake of calling the Golden City by the Bay, "Frisco," risking a stern rebuke from San Franciscans. Certainly, a genre as vast as romance includes some flawed works. However, on the whole, the romances in this sample included turns of phrase that uplifted the readers' spirits, eliciting hearty chuckles, and providing solace.

Excellence in Writing

The writing of this paper provided much divertissement, and more than a few "Oh No" exclamations in the course of examining the romances in the survey sample. Romance author Kathleen Giles' exhortation, "Judge Me by the Joy I Bring," summarizes this positive experience (quoted in Krentz 159). Even works exhibiting problems exhibit glimpses of promise. LeSue's willingness to share copyright material made this paper more appealing. She demonstrates great use of humor in her sharp snappy repartee throughout her four novels in the *Frontiers of the Heart* series. In one case, acrimony occurs after Tom Slater reads Ava Archer's dime novel, *The Notorious Widow Smith and Her Mail Order Husband*.

By the time Deathrider returned, Tom had finished the scurrilous rag and was in filthy temper.

His friend paused in the doorway. “I’d hoped some food and rest might have improved your outlook.”

“It did,” Tom snapped. “Without it I might have belted you. Do you have any idea what that woman has said about us?” And he waved the book.

“Us?”

“*Me. All mixed up with you. Us.*” (LeSue *Bound for Temptation* 33).

The readings in the English historical sub-genre provide stories of the appalling social mores of the aristocratic ton. Alexander gives us six wonderful novels, a novella, and the welcome gift of the Lady Travelers Society. Laurens proves why she is a best-selling writer in four novels and a short story. Readers learn much from her meticulously researched works featuring English social life. Her charming and endlessly amusing stocking-stuffer Christmas novels offer more proof of her writing and marketing prowess. Laurens, Foley, and Chase in their sparkling work, *Royal Bridesmaid, An Anthology* (2012) provide entrancing stories of royal weddings, chicanery in a magical kingdom, and an astonishing duel. Nicco and Jim McGoldrick render a historical background impeccably and the Sir Walter Scott quotes at the beginning of each chapter make a fine literary touch.

Contemporary novels dealing with real life challenges offer more than fantasy. They give guidance to overcome problems touching human lives. Dailey’s treatment of present-day difficulties, like dementia, is laudable. Similarly, Brown, Hill, McKenna, and Miller, provide remarkable insight into post-traumatic stress syndrome, especially in former service people. Nineteen percent of the romances in the sample deal with PTSD. Miller’s *Big Sky Secrets* (2019) and Brown’s *Cowboy Courage* (2020) are just plain fun to read. Martin’s contemporary detective novel and novella, include thrilling adventures with evil kidnapers, desperate criminals, vicious gangs, and steadfast private investigators. They present strong engaging heroines and well-written love scenes, not found in the male counterpart of this sub-genre. Their story lines are complicated, compelling, and hard to put down.

Conclusion

This paper investigates the reasons behind the 17% increase in the sales of romances during the pandemic. In addition, the authors wished to research a topic featuring women writing for women within the purview of popular culture. John Storey accurately describes romances as “hopelessly commercial. Mass produced for mass production” (8). However, consumers of romances are anything but passive and non-discriminating. They are active, demanding participants. They inform publishers what they want through statistics, blogs, associations, conventions, and most of all, by purchasing power. The history of romances indicates the parameters for this lucrative publishing industry developed as early as the 19th century. The statistical data reveals what readers want. The literary analysis confirms some of the hypotheses set forth in a review of the statistics.

Romances appear in all different sizes and shapes, from mass-produced paperbacks to e-books. The trend toward self-publishing and on-line sales reduced the price of romances and put economic pressure on publishers and bookstores. Women and a growing minority of men read romances. Romance readers are educated, informed, and know what they like. These confirmed customers read to escape, learn, and find some “me” time. They recognize society does not entirely approve of reading romance novels. The self-conscious may even use a book cover to disguise their choice of genre. There are categories sufficient to cater to almost every interest.

The most popular sub-genres are suspense and contemporary. Readers want main characters who are strong, intelligent, independent and have a sense of humor.

This paper presents an inclusive and esoteric literary analysis of romances novels, novellas, short stories, and a pamphlet. The evidence shows publishers develop a sales package made up of cover, back cover, and spine to catch the eye of prospective readers and influence them to buy the book. Analysis determined the type of primary and secondary characters that readers want. Significant in the findings is the importance of humor. Likewise, research shows the type of sex scenes readers dislike. Authors usually alert readers such a scene is upcoming so they can take appropriate action. A few writing problems arose, especially with sexist prose, but all in all, these negatives are minor.

The depth and breadth of the romance genre is amazing. There is something for everyone and, in some cases, something offensive to most. It's foolish to judge all buildings by comparing three or four edifices. Scholars should be wary of overgeneralization even from larger samples such as found in this paper. At a minimum, the statistical and literary hypotheses are valid across the major sub-genres of romance literature. However, the most important thing, according to Heroine Sidney Honeywell in Alexander's *Deception with an Unlikely Earl* (2018) is, "All that matters is that people who read my stories forget the tedium of everyday life and lose themselves for an hour or an afternoon in another world" (72). The time spent reading and analyzing romances provides a number of useful hypotheses, but most of all, offers a welcome respite from the grim realities of the 2020-2021 pandemic.

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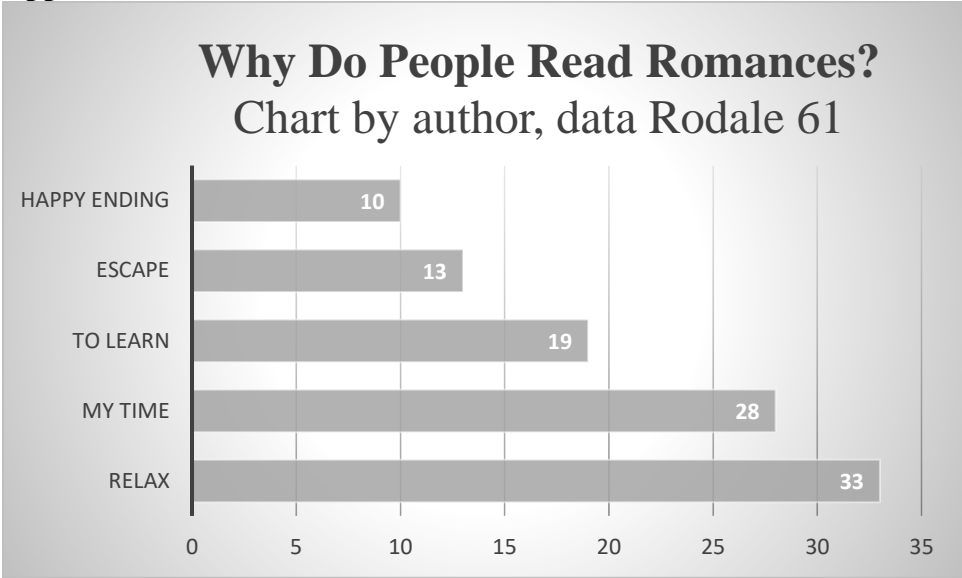
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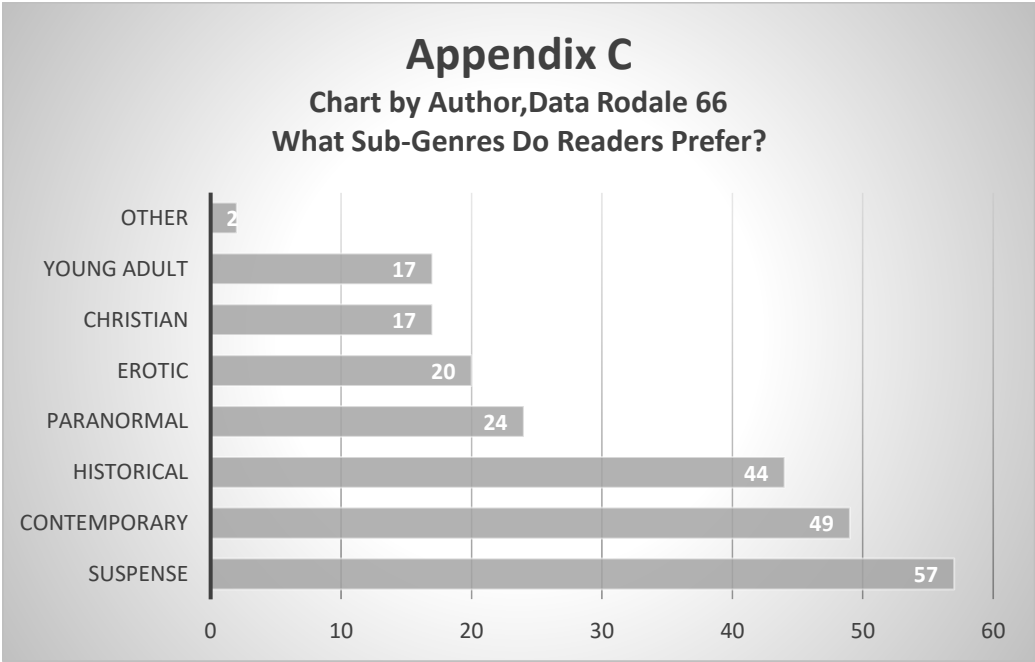
Appendix A



Appendix B

What characteristics do readers like in principal characters?

Hero	Humor 37%	Honesty 34%	Kindness 29%
Heroine	Intelligent 36%	Humor 36%	Independence 28% Radway 43



Appendix D

