Romancing Reality: The Power of Romance Fiction to Reinforce and Re-Vision the Real

It has become popular, even necessary, to note that, whatever the pros and cons of romance fiction may be, it is undeniable that the fiction deals in fantasy. I'd like to deny that, please.

The world that romance fiction has shown me is more real than anything most of the literary canon ever offered me. Most of my academic reading convinced me that fiction reflected male worlds told by male authorities. But once I read romance, I found that even the most abysmal examples of the genre took place in my world, a world of relationships, details, and victories that balanced my defeats. Better than that, the best of the genre often directly contradicted patriarchal common wisdom by re-visioning the male assumptions I'd grown up reading, telling me that my perceptions were valid after all.

Romance fiction was reality fiction.

Let me digress.

In 1991, I had a master's degree in feminist criticism and professional writing, earned while I was a single mother teaching high school full time during the day and holding a teaching assistantship at night. I had sequed immediately into a Ph.D. program because I was woman-hate-me-er-ror, and we didn't brake for sleeplessness, poverty, sexual harassment, or impossible physical standards set by the magazines that assured us on their covers that they were on our side. Most of the time I was well aware that I was not measuring up to the reality that wore me down, but all of the time I was too tired to care. I had to read Madame Bovary, I had to read Anna Karenina, I had to read The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber, I had to read Faulkner and Fitzgerald and Lawrence. I had to see Hester Prynne as the great American heroine who triumphs by remaining celibate for the rest of her endless life.

In the midst of this misery, I began the research for a dissertation on women's narrative strategies. In order to study the most female writing possible, I bought a couple dozen examples of the varied lines of romance fiction, holding my nose as I did so; it was trash, but anything for my dissertation. I read the stuff for a month. In the beginning, I kept careful notes on plot and character dynamics, structure and syntax. A lot of what I read was bad, some of it so abysmal I gave up and skimmed for note-taking purposes. Some of it was pretty good, and I'd have to stop and go back to make notes because I'd got caught up in the story. And some of it was wonderful, so wondrous I didn't care about the notes. For the first time, I was reading fiction about women who had sex and then didn't eat arsenic or throw themselves under trains or swim out to the embrace of the sea, women who won on their own terms (and those terms were pretty varied) and still got the guy in the end without having to apologize or explain that they were still emancipated even though they were forming permanent pair bonds, women who moved through a world of frustration and detail and small pleasures and large friendships, a world I had authority in. By the end of the month, I'd skimmed or read almost a hundred romance novels and two life-changing things happened to me: I felt more powerful, more optimistic, and more in control of my life than ever before, and I decided I wanted to write romance fiction.

Anything that did that much good for me, was something that I, as a feminist, wanted to do for other women.

Now it's 1997, and I'm a successful romance writer and academic, writing a different dissertation. This one is on the power of humor in women's popular fiction, especially the power of humor to reinforce the reality of women's lives' reality, I haven't seen anywhere in the depth and breadth that I've seen in romance fiction. Many critics would refute this, arguing that romance fiction distorts reality, reinforcing patriarchal constructs in all its too gullible readers, but these critics almost universally argue from flawed premises, premises that I once bought into, thereby denying myself access to some of the most empowering reflections of my own experiences available to me.

One of those premises is that reading half a dozen romances constitutes a large enough sample to justify condemning a genre that is so huge that hundreds of new books are published every year because all of those books are just alike. One critic, for example, read seven romances and announced that "Like Prince Charming, the [hero] of mass-produced romance ends up awake--and thereby regaling--the heroine's dormant sense of self" (Nyquist 167). While that may have been true in the seven titles she studied, it's not true of my fiction or that of the writers I read. Certainly the heroine in the romances I enjoy comes to a greater sense of self through the arc of the story, but she does so through both actions and relationships, while the hero follows his own character arc at the same time, maturing in the same way. Another critic, after reading eight romances, felt safe in saying that "Category romances define a text of fixed length, usually 180 pages [category romances run from fifty thousand words to eighty-five thousand], and "the hero is always older, taller, and richer than the heroine" [italics her] ( rubbed). Later she states that "the hero is usually dominant and forceful, the heroine yielding and submissive" (108). I can give examples of any number of romance novels where this just isn't true, in fact of whole lines where this isn't true, but this critic didn't study those because eight novels seemed to her to be a fair representation of the genre. This academic sloppiness is the product of a mindset that refused to see romance novels as only a valuable genre but also as a valuable genre. One of the faculty members at the school where I teach told me, after I'd told her that I wrote romances, that she had assigned specific authors in the genre course she was teaching for all genres except romance because "those books are all alike," evidently expecting me to agree that I was a hack. While no one could expect a critic to have an encyclopedic knowledge of the field, one can expect an intelligent analyst to bring the same fairness and academic scrupulousness to the study of romance that she does to the study of any other literary genre. Kate McCallen's study of romances featuring Native American heroes in captivity plots is an excellent example of fine, fair romance criticism. McCallen's a sampling of these narratives from one publisher (thereby making her study even more valid since any neophyte in the field of romance study knows that romances differ from publisher to publisher) and stated that she intended to refer to these books as "the Savage Series" since all of the books had "Savage" in the title. She then consistently did so, always noting that the books she was discussing were the series books, or were "mass-market captivity books" (46). If all academics were as fair in this criticism of our genre, we might have a fairer discussion of how much romance fiction in its multiplicity reflects myriad realities instead of the scornful blanket condemnation of the genre as mindless patriarchal fantasy, a condemnation that too many critics indulge in.

The second faulty premise is that the only reality worth writing about is the politically correct version of what a woman should want. Jeanne Dubino, for example, says that "Romances help to condition women for subservience by reproducing, structurally, the real relations between men and women" (116). Evidently in Ms. Dubino's view of reality, heterosexual relationships lead inevitably to subservience; in my view of reality, they don't. Neither one of us has the right to insist that our views are the only reality, yet many feminist critics have joined Dubino in just that. Tania Modleski indulges in the same bias when she concludes that "romances provide women with a common fantasy structure to ensure their continued psychic investment in their oppression" (43). In other words, romance readers are just too damn dumb to see that in reality they're being co-opted by patriarchy when they read. Similarly, Janice Radway has argued that the romance readers in her study were not demanding enough because they read for story instead of for language, ignoring the fact that outside of academia, most people read for story. Radway notes that her readers believed that "success in writing... is a function of the uniqueness of the characters and events intended by the most familiar of linguistic signs." That familiarity (which includes the use of mostly Anglo-Saxon language, the language of everyday living, rather than the Latinate language of academe) appears limiting to Radway, but it's what makes the fiction resonate as real with the readers. She indict's her subjects for not inhabiting her reality, even while she's studying them because they don't inhabit her reality. Dubino makes an even more troubling assertion when she argues that "Not finding what they want in 'real' life, millions of women turn to romances in a vicarious attempt to compensate for the lack of attention and validation they get in their own lives" (207). Setting aside the fact that Dubino has evidently missed the well-known and often quoted statistical studies on romance readers that show they are on the average happier and love more often than non-romance readers, what is particularly troubling about this statement is the qualifying quotation marks that Dubino puts around the word "real," as if to say that the view of reality these women are basing their needs on is somehow invalid. If these women don't know what their "real" lives are, then who does? Certainly not Dubino, who lumps "millions" of them into the same assumptive category. Only when critics like the ones cited above and others like them can move past the idea that the construct they feel should be reality is not only superior to that of ordinary women but actually irrelevant, will we have fair romance criticism, such as that written by Suzanne Juhasz and Kate McCaffery.

Once these faulty premises are stripped from the arguments, it becomes clear that romance fiction, while sometimes committing the patriarchy-reinforcing crimes the critics accuse it of, much more often reinforces the power of romance fiction to reinforce and re-vision the real. That's because, when this work is done correctly, romance fiction is not only a valid genre, but a varied one. One of the faculty members at the school where I teach told me, after I'd told her that I wrote romances, that she had assigned specific authors in the genre course she was teaching for all genres except romance because "those books are all alike," evidently expecting me to agree that I was a hack. While no one could expect a critic to have an encyclopedic knowledge of the field, one can expect an intelligent analyst to bring the same fairness and academic scrupulousness to the study of romance that she does to the study of any other literary genre. Kate McCallen's study of romances featuring Native American heroes in captivity plots is an excellent example of fine, fair romance criticism. McCallen's a sampling of these narratives from one publisher (thereby making her study even more valid since any neophyte in the field of romance study knows that romances differ from publisher to publisher) and stated that she intended to refer to these books as "the Savage Series" since all of the books had "Savage" in the title. She then consistently did so, always noting that the books she was discussing were the series books, or were "mass-market captivity books" (46). If all academics were as fair in this criticism of our genre, we might have a fairer discussion of how much romance fiction in its multiplicity reflects myriad realities instead of the scornful blanket condemnation of the genre as mindless patriarchal fantasy, a condemnation that too many critics indulge in.
that the power of the romance novel is sited precisely in its ability to invoke reality rather than fantasy.

Romance novels demonstrate women's abilities and strengths by showing their heroines taking active, intelligent control of their lives.

I'm not the only romance reader who found strength in the portrayals of women in romance novels and went on to write them. Barbara Keiler, who writes as Judith Arnold, switched from a career as a playwright and an academic to that of a successful romance writer when she investigated the genre and found out that in romance fiction, as in her life, "women did." Keiler had been prepared to reject the romance genre for something that "would be more compatible with my feminist views," but found that romance fiction is the best vehicle available for writing about emancipated, apprensive women. Keiler writes that "What the heroine does, not what she is, lies at the heart of the novels I write," and every one of her books has been fiercely feminist while remaining true to everything that is important in the romance genre (Arnold 14).

Keiler is not alone. Valerie Taylor's heroine Janet in her contemporary novel, The Mommy School, must balance the demands of her entrepreneurial business with the unexpected burden of raising her deceased sister's three children. Janet does not wait to be rescued nor does she make cute "womanly" mistakes; she calls on professionals for help, she re-prioritizes her life through trial and error, and she achieves success through realistic compromise, not part-tatism, self-abnegation or sacrifice. In Patricia Gaffney's historical Crooked Hearts, the heroine Grace out cons the con man hero at the beginning of the novel because she's just as smart, slippery, and fast on her feet as he is. And in Georgette Heyer's Regency The Grand Sophy, the eponymous heroine competently stage manages the lives of those around her to bring triumphantly to success at the end of her story, drawing on her knowledge of human nature bolstered by her overwhelming confidence in herself. These are only three of the many smart, savvy, strong women that populate many of the romances today. As Keiler said, these women all do, and they do very well.

In addition, many of today's romance novels go beyond examining the trials of every day life. Far from ducking reality, romance novels have dealt with date rape, widowhood, loss of children, alcoholism, ADHS, birth defects, imprisonment, child abuse, breast cancer, racism, and every other major problem women face today. Jennifer Greene's Broken Blossoms is an excellent representative of issue-oriented romance. Her heroine has lost her child because of her alcoholism. Isolated and guilt-ridden, she nevertheless struggles to recover, and the fact that she is aided (but not rescued) by a man who also offers her the mutual relationship she craves simply makes her recovery more believable. She backslides, she gets angry, she Saunders, in short, she reacts in a realistic manner to her serious illness, but she does not quit, and her victory at the end is deserved because she's struggled for it.

There is no fantasy here; only a realistic depiction of one woman's fight to recover. It's also a great romance novel, deservedly a classic in category romance. Writers like Greene, Emilie Richards, and other issue-oriented writers are not constructing fantasies, they are reinforcing what women already know: when things get bad, women are often the ones who have the strength to endure and prevail.

The actions these heroines take are realistic, and because of that they have an empowering effect on their readers. Susan Elizabeth Phillips, one of the biggest names in romance today, experienced that empowerment after she was already successful. She writes that, as a best-selling novelist and happily married wife and mother, she sat down after a tense time in her life to relax with a stack of category novels. She ties on to say that "I didn't have to read for long before something magical happened. I felt better. Calmer. In control." She writes that the novels did not offer the fantasy she thought romance novels would, "that of a wonderful man or a glamorous, fulfilling career. I already had those things." Instead, she writes that "the fantasy" they gave her was "one of command and control over the harum scarum events of my life-a fantasy of female empowerment." This is a beauty of a fantasy, especially since it's not fantasy at all. Phillips already had command and control, and to this day she remains one of the most empowered women I know. The romance fiction she read simple reminded her of her own capabilities, thereby reinforcing her own experience of reality.

Romance fiction reinforces the validity of women's preoccupations.

Some critics complain that romance fiction dwells on essentials and not the reality of women's experiences, but as discussed above, this complaint is based more on a desire for politically correct depictions of women's lives than it is on a desire for a truly realistic depiction. These critics seem to feel that real women should be preoccupied with large issues such as government, world affairs, the space program and the industrial-military complex, and therefore should also be much too busy to notice the small real details of everyday life that seem insignificant in comparison.

For example, Janice Radway criticizes the romance novel's preoccupation with clothing: "The clothes... almost never figure in the developing action. Instead the plot is momentarily, often awkwardly, delayed as the narrator accidentally notices seemingly superfluous details for the reader." Radway goes on to point out that these details are part of "an essential shorthand that establishes that, like ordinary readers, fictional heroines are 'naturally' preoccupied with fashion. Romantic authors draw unconsciously on cultural conventions and stereotypes that stipulate that women can always be characterized by their universal interest in clothes." Radway also makes the same assumption about women's preoccupation with houses and furnishings, ending with the patronizing summation that these details may be "a celebration of the reader's world of housewifery, shopping trips, homemade wardrobes, and reliance on magazines like Family Circle and Good Housekeeping for tips about replicating Vogue couture on a tight budget" (193-94).

Pardon me while I put aside my home-sewing and delay my shopping trip so I can slap this argument up side the head with my Family Circle. Far from undermining a sense of the reality of a woman's life, these details actually inform it. Women are preoccupied with details like clothing and environment because most of us are mistresses of unspoken communication. Women can usually tell more about someone from looking at her or him than from listening because, as everybody as far back as Aristotle has known, character is not speech but action. And the way people present themselves and their environments is action. In particular, the details of the way people present themselves are heavy with meaning. Women (and observant men) know that God truly is in the details, and so is a lot of truth.

The use of detail takes on even more importance in writing women's experiences through both socialization and biology, women are junkies for minutiae. Women were the gathers when men were the hunters because women had good eyes for detail. As anthropologist Helen Fisher notes, "Women of all ages have better 'fine' motor coordination, manipulating tiny objects with ease." Fisher speculates that "as ancestral women picked up more seeds and berries and more regularly picked the grass and dirt and twigs off their young, those with superior fine motor dexterity may have survived disproportionately-selecting for this trait in modern women" (196). Or to parallel this with Radway's observation, those who paid attention to what their kids were wearing and to the decor of their environment survived and passed on their genes. Later when patriarchy became a threat, women learned to watch for subtle cues of what those more powerful were going to do next. Again, Fisher notes that "Tests show that, on average, women read emotions, context, and all sorts of peripheral non-verbal information more effectively than men" (195). Fisher suggests that women watched to see if those around them were comfortable, part of the nurturing that is also an aspect of our anthropological inheritance, but it could have been equally true that women knew where the next spot of trouble was coming from. For a lot of women, not only God but survival was in the details, and this is realistically reflected in romance fiction.

In Patricia Gaffney's Crooked Hearts, for example, the sharp eye of con woman Grace detects the flaw in her fellow con's facade because she has just that eye for detail: "His black broadcloth suit was very fine, his gray silk necktie sedate and expansive. That was all to the good, but a man's shoes were the surest clue to the health of his finances, and in this case they gave [Grace] cause for concern [as they were run] down the heels and cracked across the insteps..." (10). Grace's sharp eyes give her an edge in a world where she desperately needs one. In more subtle ways, other romance heroines observe the details of the world around them, not only gathering important information for themselves, but also for their readers.

Radway's other criticism is that the use of detail doesn't move the text may be the most unkindest cut of all because it's meta-criticism. Studies of male and female storytelling have shown that men will naturally tell stories in linear sequence, sparing detail to get to the goal of the story, the climax, but women left to their own rhetorical devices will speak in patterns of detail, recreating the sensory story rather than the linear story. For them, the story is the details. Folklorist Karen Baldwin's study of women's storytelling found that when a family gathered to tell a story, it became collaborative: "a narrative balance is struck between descriptive detail and dialogue action by the... telling of the women and the men." Baldwin goes on to observe that "men are less concerned with accuracy of details of texture, aroma, social relationship, color, and chronology," but that these things form the fabric of women's storytelling. She also notes that men's stories have a stated beginning and end, but that women's narratives have a different structure because there is usually "no point in women's telling" (155). This means that when Radway says that the details don't move the story, she's essentially criticizing the romance writer because she's not telling the story like a man, but is instead telling the story like a woman, replicating women's perceptions of reality.

Another frivolous preoccupation romance novelists are indicted for is emphasizing marriage. And it's true, romance does indeed insist on privileging relationships in women's lives, emphasizing that privilege even more by usually (although not always) insisting on the ritual of marriage. But the idea that marriage is intrinsically peripheral is based more in feminist wishful thinking than it is in most women's experience of reality. When Tania Modleski says, "Feminist criticism has, of course, rejected the ideology--pervaded in romances... that holds marital commitments to be women's chief goal and greatest desire", she is not only sucking feminist-critic me into a rejection I'm not sure I want any part of, she's also basing her rejection on two mistaken assumptions (47).

The first is that romance fiction promotes marriage of any kind to be all women's greatest desire. In fact, romance fiction is full of women who do not marry, women who have married and left the institution, and women who postpone marriage in the face of greater desires. Marriage at any cost was never an aspect of romance fiction in any of its forms including the earliest and most conservative category fiction. What is privileged at all costs is love, and any feminist critic who sneers at that should be ashamed of her cynical self. The fact that love is often coded at the end of romance fiction as marriage is not a patriarchal construct but a recognition of an agreement as ancient as human civilization, a ritual in which two people announce their mutual commitment to each other before their community. The key words here are "mutual commitment" and "community," two things that have kept the species going for the good of women and men alike. Romance fiction does not make the mistake of assuming all marriage is good, nor does is assume that all marriage is bad. It says that strong committed relationships formalized in the rituals of the group are something that most women desire.
defined by their own terms

woman like herself who struggles to attain any and all of these and wins, not because she's beautiful or young or lucky, but because she works for them. It says that a lot of the "truths" that the different societal

especially to strong, courageous women, especially when they work for it, at the centers of their own lives and stories.

endings and resolutely cheery world views are appropriate to television commercials but insulting elsewhere. It is not only wicked to pretend otherwise, it is futile" (qtd. in Di Yanni 791). Oates misses a serious point:

women's victories is not unrealistic, nor is tragedy inherently superior or more realistic than comedy. This bias stems from an idea rife in literary fiction, best voiced by Joyce Carol Oates when she said, "Uplifting

reinforces the healthy human perception that the world is not a vicious tragic place, especially for women. This has been often cited as evidence that romance fiction does indeed dwell in a fantasy land, but showing

Finally, romance fiction places the woman at the center of the story by refusing to pay lip service to the post-modernist view that life is hopeless and we're all victims. Instead, romance fiction almost universally

the effects of testosterone that force men to explore new territory–"open the West"– and, in a related endeavor, also explore other women. When my heroine, narrowly keeping her temper, responds, "And women

deliberately chosen givens from traditional culture and held them up to my heroine's (and thus my reader's) ridicule. In

Sex is not a mystery, Krentz says, nor is it a weapon, nor is it something that hems women in. It's something that can be funny or satisfying or ecstatic, but in the end it's

shoulder begins to shake, and the hero tries to comfort her, sure she's overcome by her horror of the lewd situation. But when she lifts her head, she's been laughing, and she tells the hero that he cannot imagine how

They are also perfectly capable of pointing out to men how inflated their ideas of their own power to awe really are. Jayne Ann Krentz in her novel

Finally, many romance novels also refute the idea that women are fearful of sex and are in awe of or dominated by a man's sexual power. Romance heroines may be appreciative of a hero's expertise, but they never

establishing their autonomy in a hostile patriarchal world that they forgot to forge relationships. Waking up to her plight as her biological clock begins to tick, my heroine Kate moves through her narrative, acting as an independent woman at all times, only to get blindsided as so many of us have by the irrationality and inconvenience of love. When Kate chooses compromise in order to preserve a warm, mutual relationship with her lover, I did not see this is a move back to patriarchy for her and neither did my readers. Kate maintains her feminism and her autonomy while

This, above all, may be why women tell stories: so we can get our reality on the page for a change. Contrary to charges by critics like Dubino who argues that "Romances bolster patriarchal ideology, continuing to reaffirm the centrality of men in women's lives," romance novels consistently place women at the center of their narratives, dealing with things that engage their hearts and minds as they struggle to achieve the power to protect what they value, and always, always with that power achieved and stability gained (109). Most stories feature a struggle between the heroine and the hero to achieve a balance of power

They do this first by making it clear that, far from being helpless, sexual beings who must be seduced to respond, many women like sex. A lot. Romance novels spend pages describing women's sexual pleasure

recognizing a basic human truth that women have recognized for centuries and that we are in danger of forgetting: people need relationships.

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they've established your autonomy and signed a pre-nup."
ideologies have foisted on her are lies and that she has the right to point and laugh when those ideologies try to limit her And it says that life is not the evening news or the latest true crime movie about crazed women or victimized women or incredibly noble, suffering women, but that reality is success after a lot of work and an appreciation of the details that get her through the day.

All of these things are true, and they fuel one of the chief reasons that women read romance: to recognize the truth and the validity of their own lives. If the novels weren’t telling the truth, they wouldn’t command half the paperback market and be read by housewives, university deans, high school students, retirees, liberals, conservatives, northerners, southerners, and every other descriptor of women possible. They couldn’t because contrary to everything some feminist critics say about romance readers, women are not stupid nor are they out of touch with reality.

And neither is the romance fiction they read.

Works Cited:

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