

(Re)Reading the Romance

Just ‘trashy novels’? Novelist Dawn Roy ‘99 says it’s time to reconsider romance.

Interview by Karen McCally ‘02 (PhD)

It’s pretty common to hear romance fiction dismissed as trashy novels. Honestly, I believe that reputation stems from the fact that romance is primarily a genre for and by women. Like all genre fiction, romance is, to a degree, formulaic. But you don’t see the same kind of blanket criticism of other genres such as mysteries or thrillers, for example. There are really good books out there, as well as really bad ones. Annual sales of romance fiction total more than a billion dollars a year, a 13 percent share of the adult fiction market. I don’t think that’s something you can write off.

I think you can go as far back as Jane Austen, or even further, to find great examples of romance. At the time, these were referred to as domestic novels, but they were written—usually—by women, for women, and about women. And although Austen is beloved now, her work was not taken

seriously by the literary establishment at the time. I know it’s a complete cliché, but *Pride and Prejudice* remains one of my all-time favorites.


After college, I finished a master’s program in English at SUNY-Buffalo. Writing for class, both in college and in graduate school, I definitely felt pressure to do something legitimate, and traditional romance wasn’t it. I wrote on and off in graduate school, then got a grown-up job and set it on the back burner. When I finally returned to writing in earnest, I gave myself permission to write what I most loved to read—romance.

I read Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* in graduate school. Radway was a literature professor at Duke when she wrote the book in 1984, and it was one of the first times a scholar had given serious attention to romance. I remember being both exhilarated

that romance was even being discussed, and deeply disappointed that it was such a monotone conversation. A delightful counter to Radway’s book is the 2015 documentary *Love Between the Covers*, which highlights just how diverse the genre has become. In fact, one of the featured authors is Radclyffe, a powerhouse of lesbian romance and the founder and president of Bold Strokes Books, which—full disclosure—is my publisher.

The last 10 years has seen an explosion of diversity in the romance genre. Lesbian romance, which I write, is just one example. Whether you’re talking about lesbians, people of color, gay men, straight beta males, alpha women, or BDSM [bondage, discipline, dominance, and submission], it’s about readers and writers wanting to see their lives, their identities and desires, mirrored in stories.

What’s also been interesting is the explosion of M/M fiction, about romance between men, which is written and read predominantly by women. While it seems a little strange on the surface, I think it taps into a growing desire for a much more diverse slate of protagonists—men who are not the stereotypical alpha male you still see portrayed in so many romance novels, for example.

At the end of the day, romance is the genre of hope. Romance novels succeed not when they merely give the happy ending, but when they uplift the reader. I think this happens when the author crafts characters who overcome challenges not unlike what real people face—characters who find love, but also themselves. In a world where cynicism seems to be the force majeure, a genre whose core tenet is hope can be quite radical. 

Dawn Roy ‘99

Home: Ithaca, New York

Author, under the pen name Aurora Rey, of *Winter’s Harbor* (2015), *Built to Last* (2016), and *Crescent City Confidential* (forthcoming), all published by Bold Strokes Books; assistant dean, Ithaca College School of Business; former director of undergraduate academic advising and counseling at Syracuse’s Whitman School of Management; and academic counselor and assistant director at Rochester’s College Center for Advising Services.

On writing at Rochester: “I think I was one of the first students who did a work of fiction as both a Senior Scholars project and an honors thesis for English. Although my proposal strived to be a literary take on romance, the actual project morphed into more of a young adult, queer coming-of-age novel.”

On the relationship between Dawn and Aurora: “I joke sometimes that Aurora gets away with all sorts of fun things Dawn would never try. The longer I’m at it, though, the more I embrace the idea that they inform each other, and both are better for it.”

