Romance - Chris Szego

Love For Sale

It is an untruth universally acknowledged that a woman in possession of a romance novel must be in want of A) wits, B) a social life, or C) both.

I read romance, and frankly don't care what other people think that says about me. In fact, I think the bias itself says some pretty interesting things. There's a lot to unpack in the pervasive and persistent stereotype that surrounds the romance section of any given bookstore. I see that stereotype emerging from three directions: lack of knowledge of the genre and its readers; envy; and the belief that romances are badly written. But it could be argued that it stems from one source.

First, some background. A study released by the ABA in 20021 exploded a number of myths about romance readers. For one thing, they were well-educated. Compared to the national average, romance readers were vastly more likely to have finished some form of post-secondary study. They also expressed a substantially higher than average sense of of job satisfaction. Possibly as a corollary, they also indicated comfort with their earning power. And—this one was a bit of a surprise—they had solid romantic relationships. Something like eighty percent self-identified as happy in their marriages/long-term partnerships. So much for the bored and lonely housewife desperately seeking something to fill her empty days.

There are other more accessible, and more startling, statistics that pertain to romance novels: sales numbers. Romance readers buy more books, more often, than any other group. That certainly shows up on the bottom line—across all formats, romance novels account for more than 35% of fiction sales. When considering only mass-market paperbacks, the number jumps to 54% of books. To put it another way, when it comes to paperbacks, romances sell more than all other genres and subjects combined. Such obvious success makes romance an easy target; there's no point in scorning something off the radar. Sales of that magnitude mean that midlist romance novelists can make a living, unsupported by arts council grants, even. That kind of thing always draws envy of the bitterest kind.

As for being badly written… well, yeah, sometimes that's true. Some romances are poorly written indeed. So are some mysteries, some biographies, many business books, and most undergraduate poetry.

Theodore Sturgeon said that ninety percent of everything is crap—romance is no exception. Why should it be?

The lack of awareness, the jealousy, the scorn: these are only symptoms of a deeper disease. Truth is, romances are primarily written by, and for, women. Even today, that automatically relegates them to second-tier status. Detractors claim that romance novels foster unrealistic expectations in readers that can interfere in real-life relationships. Er, pardon? Most of the western world read Harry Potter, and did anyone claim it made readers believe magic was real? (Okay, the lunatic fringe tried, but they could find witchcraft in breakfast cereal, and were rightfully ignored by the wider world) But apparently romance readers—who are, don't forget, well-educated and by-and-large happily involved—can't tell fiction from reality. It's the same old story: women can't be trusted to know what they want.

Bugger that.

As a bookseller, I respect the enormous sales of romance novels. They've kept many a publisher in the black. As a reader, I simply enjoy them. Good stories, well told are always a pleasure. And I'm not alone in my appreciation. Let's face it: if you recognized the mangled quote that opened this essay, you've read a romance, too.

1 These statistics were taken from a study conducted by the RWA and the ABA in 2002. The RWA updates this study periodically. To see their most recent results, see their website at:http://www.rwanational.org/cs/the_romance_genre/romance_literature_stati…

It's Fun to go the R.W.A.

The internet allows writers to do the impossible: write in isolation while in company. A writer might still face off single-handedly against blank screen, but behind the accusing blink of the cursor there are thousands of minds ready to offer information, support and catwaxing options. On the other hand, it's not as if, pre-internet, every writer was locked in a Proustian cork-lined room. Despite the solitary nature of their work—or possibly because of it—writers have always sought one another out. For encouragment, professional development, and sometimes for the sheer relief of being around other people who get it. That's pretty much the unofficial definition of the RWA.

Romantic fiction became popular during the Regency era, when writers like Jane Austen were read by absolutely everyone. The genre slowly began to coalesce through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but in the 1970s, it kicked into high gear. At the end of that decade, several women decided to form a group to pool their knowledge and experience, and to help one another with both the creative and business aspects of writing romance. There were thirty-seven members when the Romance Writers of America was formed in 1980. Today, there are more than ten thousand from all around the world.

The RWA is a major non-profit trade organization, with ten staff, an elected Board of Directors, dedicated committee volunteers, and many mind-numbing pages of bylaws. Its mission statement is: "to advance the professional interests of career-focused romance writers through networking and advocacy". And damn, do they follow through.

Joining the RWA gives a writer access to an amazing amount of information about the genre, about writing, and about the publishing industry as a whole. The Romance Writer's Report, the member magazine, contains interviews, writing tips, market information, sales numbers, and much more. But that's just the beginning. Once a writer joins the national organization, she can also join any of its 145 chapters. Some of the chapters have to do with subject matter, like the Kiss of Death chapter, which focuses on romantic suspense. Others, like the Toronto Romance Writers, are strictly based on location. But the highlight of the year is the annual national conference.

Known simply as "National", the massive conference brings editors, agents, reviewers, artists, and marketers together with thousands of writers, then hits 'blend'. There are workshops, pitch sessions, lectures, spotlight hours, and more parties than the Toronto International Film

Festival. Sales are made at the conference, deals struck and careers born. It's an exhilarating, exhausting rush.

The RWA is no slouch when it comes to advocacy, either. Its members know how the genre is perceived in popular culture: they also know what it's worth (in 2008, for instance, it was worth $1.37 billion in sales alone). They attend Book Expo and other major trade shows, operate a Speaker's Bureau, provide libraries and booksellers with lists and catalogues, and compile statistics for common use. Several years ago they created a continent-wide poster campaign, similar in function (though not style) to the 'look who's in our library' campaign of the '90s. They maintain a solid website1 at which, among other duties, acts as a platform site for member websites, and provides a monthly list of member-written new releases. They admister awards to industry professionals, and even provide an academic grant to foster the serious study of the romance genre as a whole.

The RWA is also dedicated to furthering literacy. Which may sound self-serving, but they've accomplished a great deal at both the community and federal levels. Since 1991, the RWA has raised over $600K for literacy programs. The main fund-raiser is the big Literacy Autographing session which kicks off National each year. Open to the public in addition as well as attendees, it's like a candy store for the literate. Mmm, just picture it: hundreds of writers lining row upon row of long tables heaped with books (the lineup for Nora Roberts usually circles the auditorium). Publishers donate the books, and all proceeds go to literacy.

Then there are the RITA awards. They're kind of like the OSCARs of the romance world, except there are more rounds of judging. There's a similar contest for unpublished manuscripts, called the Golden Heart. Finalists in that contest end up with their work in front of major editors. It's terrific exposure, and many a Golden Heart winner ceases to be unpublished shortly thereafter.

Of course, no group is without blemish, and the RWA is no exception. Several years ago a surprisingly bigoted Board had a referendum to see whether a romance should be defined as the love story between "the two main characters" or "a man and a woman". After voting for the former, I cancelled my membership, not wanting to belong to a group that even considered the latter acceptable. I was far from alone in that action ("two main characters" passed, by the way).

Another point of contention is that alone amoung professional writers' groups, the RWA does not require publishing credits to join. However to join PAN, the Published Author's Network within the RWA, with its

separate newsgroup, own information stream, and private conference track, one certainly has to produce those credits. And those credits mean something. When Harlequin announced it was going to start steering rejected manuscripts towards its newly formed vanity press, the RWA immediately removed Harlequin from its list of approved publishers. In other words, the world's largest publisher of romance was no longer be deemed an acceptable credit for PAN membership, nor could it use RWA resources at National or elsewhere. David spanked Goliath public, and other writers groups followed suit.

It has its faults—everyone does—but the RWA is truly an extraordinary organization. It is a powerhouse, large enough to be a voice the publishing industry listens to. But true to the nature of its thirty-seven founders, it is also welcoming and co-operative, and provides countless opportunties for personal growth and connection.

1 http://www.rwanational.org

She's the One

Like authors in every genre, romance writers cover a broad spectrum of imaginative ground. They come from a variety of backgrounds, and write to any number of inner aesthetics. Each one has a preferred archetype. From the bewilderingly naive traditional, to the often bloody thriller, and every permutation inbetween, romance authors write to their personal tastes in terms of pace, mood, and degree of modernity. But if you were to get a group of romance writers together and ask them about their formative influences, the vast majority will mention one name: Georgette Heyer.

Born in Wimbleton in 1903, Georgette Heyer was very much a woman of her time, which is to say cultered, educated, and above all, discreet. She was a success with her very first book, Black Moth, published when she was nineteen, and remained so for the rest of her life. In fact, when her husband decided to change careers, from mining engineer to barrister, it was her writing which supported the family: this, in the post WWI era, made her even more unique. When she died in 1974, she had more than fifty books in print, all of the bestsellers. But she never gave a single interview, nor did she ever make a single public appearance. No book-signings, no launches: nothing. After she married at twenty-three, she lived her private life as Mrs. Ronald Rougier. And though she said that anything anyone needed to know about her could be discovered in her books, she had four of her early novels suppressed because she felt they were too autobiographical.

Black Moth is a story full of Georgian highwaymen and derring-do that she originally created to entertain her convalescent brother. Later, Heyer redeveloped some of the characters and featured them in These Old Shades, a marvellous court comedy set largely in pre-Revolution Paris. Later still, the son of the two main characters in These Old Shades got his own book, The Devil's Cub. So in many ways, she was the precursor of that standard of today's publishing indurstry, the spinoff novel. But that's not why Heyer is universally adored. What makes her such a seminal figure in the development of the modern romance was her ability to immerse readers in time and place, and the indefinable something called 'voice'.

Most, though not all, of Heyer's novels are set in the British Regency. In the strict sense, the British Regency spanned the years between 1811 and 1820, when King George III was declared insane and his eldest son, the Prince of Wales, was made Prince Regent (though the broader

Regency period is often extended to mean 1800-1830). Heyer's novels are sparklig clear windows into that time. Historical accuracy was vital to her, and her research into fashions, mores, and locations was intense. She lived in the cities she wrote about most often: Bath, London, York—and she investigated each from every possible aspect. Clothing, conveyances, street cant: every detail is spot on. In fact, one of her historicals novels set around the battle of Waterloo was used in history classes for many years. Her ability to catapult readers deep into other times is one of her great gifts.

The other, her inimitable voice, is harder to quantify. Certainly it has to do with her ability to create characters worth caring about, people with real feelings and real motiviations. It's also apparent in her brilliant dialogue. Often imitated by her successors though never quite duplicated, Heyer created a standard for witty banter that has rarely been equalled, and she did it consistently. But above all, her work is infused with charm. Not the facile sort that is easily forgotten, but the real thing: an allure that fascinates and delights, to a level that could almost be considered magic.

For those who just can't quite bring themselves to try one of her romances, Heyer also wrote a dozen mystery novels. They too are historically accurate, though in their case the time period was Heyer's own. Set in what was to Heyer the modern day, her mysteries have the tightly woven feel of detective novels written before the age of DNA evidence, when character-reading and clue-following reigned supreme. Her husband, a QC, vetted her plots for accuracy. Reading them now offers a remarkable glimpse into English life between and following two World Wars, and the changing nature of societal interactions.

Whether writing hard-bitten mystery, piercingly accurate history or frothy romance, Georgette Heyer occupies a plane of her own. In particular, when it comes to romance, she was a trail-blazer. Hundred of writers have followed in her footsteps. And if none have quite measured up, they have still managed to create a particularly strong and popular subgenre in her honour, called simply 'Regency'.

All That Fairy Tale Nonsense

One of the many criticisms levelled at romance novels is that they're a poor model for women when it comes to real-life relationships. All that fairy tale nonsense, detractors say, will make women want the wrong things from their partners. I could list a dozen things wrong with that assumption, but I'll limit myself to three.

First, the blanket belief that alone among the literate romance readers believe everything they read is seriously insulting. Second, it demonstrates that said detractors don't read much modern romance, or they'd know the kind of realism one can find therein. That's annoying. Is divorce realistic, or abuse, or loss? Don't worry: they're covered. (Also, please consider what that means about the nature of 'realism'). Third: fairy tales, yes, but nonsense? Please. Bruno Bettleheim would open a can of Jungian whoopass on such ignorance, and rightfully so.

Fairy tales are a subset of folk tales, and folktales are the backbone of literature. They are powerful. These are the stories that outlive nations. Religions may try to bury them, and political regimes to repress them, but folktalkes just don new clothes, get new haircuts, and keep going. As a kid I read hundreds, devouring one textbook-sized collection of international stories after another. So by the time I hit junior high I'd recognized that the same patterns appeared in stories from every part of the globe. This story might have a fairy godmother where that one had a talking fox; this beast might be a lion where that one was a snake. But the basic patterns, the archtypes, were the same, whether the story came from France or Russia, from India or China. That's not nonsense, it's nuclear.

So, yes, romance novels often play off patterns found in fairy and folk tales. Which is another way of saying they're tied into the beating heart of the narrative impulse. They're the stories that chronicle women's lives and their hopes, which are at least as realistic as their miseries. Fairy tales can encompass just about any setting, problem or character. In some ways, they're the ultimate in fan fiction: since the pattern is already established, writers need only to allude to it to establish emotional resonance. I can't list all the archtypes here, so for the sake of symmetry, here are the three I think are most common in modern romances.

Beauty and the Beast

This is one of my personal favourites. From Persephone onward, in this story the underlying archetype is that sacrifice is rewarded… and that men are capable of change. Though the beastly character isn't always the

hero: Taming of the Shrew is a Beauty and Beast story too. Of course nowadays beastliness isn't a matter of looks but of behavior. So the beast in question might go from withdrawn to engaged; from rapaciously ambitious to sharing; or from reckless hedonism to committed monogamy. Don't be fooled, it's not an easy trip for anyone involved. But it's worth it.

If you like historical romance try: Lord of Scoundrels by Loretta Chase; The Grand Sophy by Georgette Heyer; It Happened One Autumn by Lisa Kleypas.

If you prefer contemporary: Shoot to Thrill by Nina Bruhns; Dream Man by Linda Howard; Cold as Ice by Anne Stuart.

Cinderella

The hardworking heroine of any of this wide group of stories epitomizes successful transformation. But the trappings are the least important part of her elevation. It's not about the slipper, it's about the change in state. There might be a literal move from rags to riches, but more often Cinderella stories feature characters who move from emotional paucity to abundance. Not surprisingly, this is one of the most popular archetypes. After all, if there's one thing women know how to do, it's work. In Cinderella stories, readers get to see drudgery and discomfort turn into acceptance and love. Also under this rubric are the stories of disguise and secret identity.

Historical: The Runaway Princess by Christina Dodd; Scandal by Amanda Quick; Reader and Raelynx by Sharon Shinn (which is a fantasy novel, but also a romance: that the transforming character is male doesn't mean it doesn't belong in this category).

Contemporary: First Lady by Susan Elizabeth Phillips; The Winning Hand by Nora Roberts; Nine Coaches Waiting by Mary Stewart.

Sleeping Beauty I have a sneaking fondness for stories of awakening. Not from sleep, of course, but those in which a character comes into her own, ie: 'wakes up' to a sense of her own potential and abilities. These characters discover and revel in new skills, or redevelop old ones. They try new experiences, make new friends, and change their own lives for the better. Change isn't alwasy easy. Sometimes it's a detonation in their existence. And sometimes they simply learn to let go of weight and pain carried too long. However it happens, these are the stories of lives refreshed and made wonderful.

Historical: A Summer to Remember by Mary Balogh; Paladin of Souls by Lois McMaster Bujold; Guilty Pleasures by Laura Lee Gurhke.

Contemporary: Fast Women by Jennifer Crusie; Marianna by Susannah Kearsley; Lazarus Rising by Anne Stuart.

Mary, Queen of Hearts

Despite being a rapacious reader of just about everything, during my formative years I managed to miss any number of writers who are the bedrock of their particular genres. For instance, I read Terry Brooks long before Tolkien (and yes, I'm aware of the gravity of that mistake). I didn't discover Diana Wynne Jones until my mid-twenties, around the same time I found Georgette Heyer. Another standard bearer I missed during my younger years, one who had a huge impact on many romance writers who followed her, is Mary Stewart.

Born in 1916, Mary Florence Elinor Rainbow was a trendsetter in many ways. In time when highter education was possible for women, though not extremely common, she received her BA in 1938, and her MA in 1941. She was an Observer during WWII, and for many years taught at the high school and university level. She married Frederick Stewart in 1945, and shortly after that, began to pursue writing as a serious career. She wrote more than twenty novels, more than two-thirds of which were huge international best-sellers. Not all were romance, or romantic suspense, as they would be called today (ie: romances that are also mysteries). In fact, Stewart is almost even more famous for her Arthurian saga, which consists of The Crystal Cave, The Hollow Hills, The Last Enchantment, and The Wicked Day. She followed those four up much later with The Prince and the Pilgrim. Oddly enough, though I love Stewart's work, I've never read any of those. I run a fantasy and science-fiction specialty bookstore, and had to ban all things Arthur years ago for the sake of my sanity. But if I ever come out from behind that barricade, Stewart's take on the Matter of Britain will be what I turn to first.

The books I love best are the ones Stewart wrote in the '50s and '60s. They tend to be about young(ish) educated women, who are out making their ways in the world. Her heroines all have real lives: they have bills to pay, they're interested in travel, education and opportunity. But one of Stewart's strongest skills is her ability to capture atmosphere. She herself was one of those women, and it's evident. A thorough understanding and acceptance of the daily privations of life in post-war England runs through her early works, and with it, the sense of gleeful joy when those privations are eased.

Several of Stewart's books are set in the UK, but others are set across the wider European stage. A few take place in the Greek islands, and though some of her ruminations on the nature of the immutable 'Greek character' would cause fits in students of post-colonial post-modernism,

she has a near perfect touch with description. When I discovered Stewart, I was not long returned from an extended stay in the Greek Islands, and reading This Rough Magic, My Brother Michael, and Moonspinners instantly transported me back. Moonspinners, by the way, was made into a movie. Sadly, the studio was Disney, and the film stars Hayley Mills, so I haven't quite worked up the nerve to watch it.

I find it very difficult to choose a favourite among Stewart's novels, but Airs Above the Ground is a perennial front-runner. Drugs, spies, a travelling circus, and the fabulous Lipizzan horses of the famed Spanish Riding School all come together in a delightful road-trip of a tale through rural Austria. It's also an unusal book in that the heroine has sex. Okay, yes, with her husband, and it happens off the page, but still! It marks a distinct departure from the strictures of the times. Stewart certainly wasn't the first person to put sex in her books, but she normalized it. Even more importantly, without graphic of explicit language, she made sex mutually enjoyable.

Mary Stewart epitomizes the voice of her generation: educated, thoughtful and forthright, with the sense of being both forward-looked and aware of the past that is particular of those who lived through WWII. The fantastically pulp nature of her cove art is a brilliant contrast to the deliciously crisp nature of her prose. For millions of readers, many of whom went on to become writers, she opened up the world.

I Want My Mummy

I'm a total chicken. This means I don't watch anything that smacks of horror: in fact, I tend to close my eyes when the music gets even a little bit ominous. It's not the gore I mind so much (though really, intestines belong on the inside), but the terror. The supposed cathartic release of the horror movie escapes me: I scare really easily, and unfortunately, I stay scared long after the movie ends. Which means I've missed any number of important genre movies: The Thing, The Exorcist, most of Alien. So imagine my joy when awkward first date manners had me agreeing to watch The Mummy remake.

Yeah. The date went about as well as you'd expect, but it did leave me with one consolation. Much to my surprise, I loved the movie. Some of that might have been relief: here was a remade horror movie that wasn't horror at all. Instead, it was action and comedy. But later, I realized that much of what I liked about The Mummy was in fact what I like about romance novels. I'm not alone in this, romance writers and readers tend to adore the movie. Here are a few reasons why, beyond the inevitable pairing of Rick and Evie.

1. It has a happy ending. And not a horror-movie happy ending, where a single character survives the devastation. In this case, Rick, Evie and Jonathan don't just survive, they emerge triumphant: alive, having soundly defeated the bad guys, and heading off to Cairo with saddlebags full of treasure. Even Ardeth, the Magi, survives. Apparently he wasn't originally supposed to, but the director liked actor Oded Fehr so much his part was rewritten to keep him onscreen. On behalf of myself and the rest of the film's fans, I can only say: thank goodness.

2. Happy endings require sacrifice. In the final action sequence, everyone has to sacrifice something he or she holds dear. Evie sacrifices knowledge and education when she abandons the golden book that has been her life's pursuit. Jonathan sacrifices his longed-for material wealth when he passes up on his chance to loot the treasure chamber. Rick… well, Rick has to give up the notion that he can save everyone. In order to save those who are most important, he has to stop trying to save Benny. And Benny, who is both bad guy minion and comic relief, gets Evie's long promised comeuppance.

3. It's replete with male heroic archetypes. First there's Rick. Played by Brendan Fraser, he's amusing, brawny, loyal and capable. The classic Adventurer Hero: not overly complicated, perhaps, but when the situation calls for dynamite, simple is usually the best choice. Then there's

Ardeth Bey, played by Oded Fehr. He's a great example of the Mystical Hero: he shows up unexpectedly, he gives cryptic warnings, and has dark connections to an ancient magic. And of course, there's Imhotep himself. Arnold Vosloo plays the titular character as a Tortured Hero: desperate to make amends for the damage his past mistakes cost the woman he loves. He's also the villian, which makes things interesting, but more about that in a moment.

4. It features a functioning family. Which consists of only a brother and sister, but from the moment the inimitable John Hannah pops out of a sarcophagus to startle Rachel Weisz, they seem like real siblings. When in consequence she smacks his face as she helps climb out, I thought, 'Yeah, I'd do that.' Jonathan may disappoint Evie with his drinking and his gambling, but she listens to what he has to say. Evie may irritate Jonathan with her primness and erudition, but he feels for her when her job application is rejected yet again. They bicker constantly, and they enjoy needling one another, but they always, always have each other's backs.

5. The driving force of the plot is a love story. And no, that doesn't mean Evie and Rick. In this case, the primary love story is Imhotep's own. Think about it. The movie opens with the doomed and desperate romance between Imhotep and Anuk-su-namun. She's willing to give everything for the chance that they can be together: she even takes her own life. And despite being tortured and cursed—and dead for almost three thousand years—Imhotep struggles to be worthy of her belief in him. Everything that follows happens because he's desperate to revive her. He doesn't take over the world for his own sake, but for hers. All of his horrific actions: the murders, the plagues, the mind-enslavement; these are mere by-products of his ultimate goal, which is to bring his dead girlfriend back to life. Now that's romantic dedication. Sick and twisted and wrong? Definitely. But it gives emotional oomph to a popcorn spectacular.

Everybody's Hero

The Harry Potter books are an oddity in the book world. Not just because they sell so well, but because of how they sell, or rather, when. Each book has a strangely limited shelf life. Rowling's newest title might sell three-quarters of a million copies in twenty-four hours, but then, well, it's pretty much over. Sales rapidly fall off the map. Each of her books is the Best-Selling! Book! Evar!, but only for about a week. Every other week, every other day, the best-selling author in the world is Nora Roberts.1

Some of that is sheer logistics. Backlist is what truly powers an author's career. Rowling has seven novels and a couple of chapbook style reference works. As I write this, Nora has more than 175 titles in print, and the gods alone know how many reprint. The real estate she occupies in terms of shelf space is truly extraordinary. There are so many reissues, repackages and omnibus editions of her work that her publishers brand each previously unpublished title with a stylized 'NR' so her legions of readers will know what's actually new.

And those readers still have a lot to choose from. Roberts usually has five or six new titles each year. That number used to be higher, seven, eight, even nine, but in the late nineties, Nora stopped writing category romances ('category' is an industry term for line novels, like those of Mills & Boon, Harlequin and Silhouette). Nora was, in fact, one of the primary reasons for the success of Silhouette Books, which began as a category imprint of Simon & Schuster. After the bloody publishing house wars of the mid-eighties, Harlequin emerged triumphant as the owner of all three, but kept the Silhouette lines as a separate imprint within their romance empire. Roberts continued to write for Silhouette throughout those years, even as she branched off into writing longer, more mainstream titles for Bantam. Eventually, she moved to Putnam where, in the words of my Putnam rep, she finally found an editor who could keep up with her.

The story of Nora's start is well known in romance circles, and loved with fairy-tale familiarity. It's also vintage Nora. At the time, Roberts was a young single mother with two small and energetic sons. Trapped indoors by a blizzard that kept school cancelled for days, her only respite was the writing break she allowed herself in the afternoons. The boys were told not to interrupt unless there was fire or blood… spurting arterial blood, to be specific. Practicality, humour and hard work: these are some of the reasons Roberts was an is such a huge success. It took a few

tries and several manuscripts, but in 1981, Irish Thoroughbred was published by Silhouette, and and a publishing legend was born.

Sounds melodramatic, eh? 'Legend'. But it's true. In the publishing world, Nora Roberts is Babe Ruth and Wayne Gretzky combined. She has won every award in the field multiple times. She's had more books on the New York Times list than any other author, in the number one spot, no less. She was a founding member of the Romance Writers of America, and the first person inducted into the Romance Writers Hall of Fame. Last year alone, four of her books were made into movies for the Lifetime Channel, and earlier this year, on Time Magazine's list of the top 100 Artists and Entertainers, Nora was #7.

Her stratospheric career has not been entirely free from strife. Janet Dailey, herself a successful romance novelist, inexplicably plagiarized one of Roberts' novels. When the plagiarism was discovered, Nora sued and won. But she didn't dwell, and she wasn't vindictive. She donatd the settlement to a literacy foundation, and moved on.

The wellspring of Nora's creativity is grounded by a work ethic of pure steel. Her book tour schedules read like a Spartan death march: TV spot at 6am, radio at 7am, warehouse by 8am to sign a thousand copies of the new hardcover, then off to the bookstore for noon… and it goes on like that for weeks. But tours aside, she doesn't live the jet-set lifestyle. Her family is her centre, and besides, she always has more stories to tell. Well-grounded, well-liked by her collegues, and well-loved by her fans: that's Nora Roberts.

1 http://www.noraroberts.com

I Got 99 Problems but a Bitch Ain't One

Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan occupy some interesting real estate in the romance world; a previously untenanted corner of Innernet and Romancelandia. Smart Bitches, Trashy Books1 is a different sort of headspace: frank, forthright, and not above fart jokes. They not only review romance novels, but also subject them to analysis, and praise or pan as the situation requires. They demonstrate an unquenchable and exuberant love for the entire genre, while acknowledging—and even celebrating—its most ridiculous excesses. They've also popularized the ever-useful phrase 'man-titty' as a descriptive aid in the discussion of cover art. And now the original Smart Bitches have written a book of their own: Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels.

Jenny Crusie sums it up perfectly in her back cover quote: "I love the Smart Bitches. They look at romance with clear but loving eyes, and they do it with wit, style, intelligence, and snark". Yes, to all of that. Beyond Heaving Bosoms isn't a defense: the genre doesn't need one. Nor is it a textbook filled with critical application, or a list of good reads. Instead it's a cheerful guide to the best—and worst—the genre has to offer.

The Table of Contents is fully indicative of the Smart Bitches style and approach. The chapters aren't numbered, they're named. Chapter Cleavage, for instance, is the introduction. Chapter Corset focuses on heroines, and Chapter Codpiece on the heroes. Tan and Wendell mix their historical examination with healthy (even heaping) doses of humour. They track the overall change in the genre from Old Skool (1972 to the mid-'80s) to New Skool (early '80s to today). And they do it not from a distant academic perspective, but as passionately invested readers. The kind of fan who will pay outrageous prices for floor seats… but who will also boo and throw popcorn if the team (or in this case writer) doesn't bring it.

I can't quite tell how Beyond Heaving Bosoms would work for those unfamiliar with the genre. It's full of references and allusions that resonate more strongely if you have the kind of familiarity that comes from decades of reading. For me, that added a warm sense of collegiality. Though despite being an insider, I disagree with some of their conclusions about the nature of characters, and of stories themselves. But I enjoyed following the path they took to get there. And as Wendell and Tan make very clear, it doesn't matter. There is room for as many kinds of interpretation as there is overexposed vampire angst.

My favourite part of the book was also the most serious. It's a subsection of Chapter Phallus, titled "Controversies, Scandals, and Not Being Nice". It's the section in which Wendell and Tan expose some of the ugly arguments that happen offstage, between readers, writers, and the Romance world in general. Frankly, I think it should be required reading for writers, publishers, booksellers, and readers too, because the questions they raise are important. Should Black Romances be shelved with Romance or in the Black Authors section?* Many readers want to see the Black Authors section grow; many writers want access to the immense selling power of the Romance section. The question of gays in Romance is even more fraught: several years ago a particularly fearful RWA Board tried to pass a motion that would declare all Romances to be "between a man and a woman". So what does it mean that most of the people writing—and reading—gay e-romances are straight women?

The section on plagiarism didn't raise questions for me, except of the "What's wrong with you?" variety. In December 2007, a friend of Tan's discovered that novelist Cassie Edwards had been lifting passages from other works for years. Tan posted those findings, along with the response of Edwards' then-publisher Signet Books, and ignited a firestorm of truly epic proportions. What surprised, and disappointed, the Bitches most was how many responders attacked them for 'picking on' Edwards. Yes, they had often made fun of Edwards' books on the site. But plagiarism is wrong, no matter how long you've been doing it; how old you were when you started, and how Not Nice it is for a person to point out that you've been stealing someone else's words. Plagiarism is wrong. Period.

As I said, it was the most serious part of the book. I could have read twice as much. But Wendell and Tan play to their strengths, and one of those is a bawdy and irrepressable sense of humour. Sometimes that grated a little. The first mention of the hero's Wang of Mighty Loving is funny. The tenth? Not so much. But one of their more outrageous exclaimations made me laugh so hard on the subway that someone asked if I was okay. And isn't that what you want from your non-fiction? Fearless, insightful, and passionately devoted to the genre, Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan are very Smart Bitches indeed.

*This may be of those issues in which you realize things really are different in Canada (or at least in Toronto, where I checked several bookstores). In each store Romances were shelved in the Romance section, no matter the colour of the cover model's skin. Though four bookstore don't

exactly constitute a scientific survey: your mileage may vary.

1 http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com

Love, Pain, and the Whole Damn Thing

Oprah's Book Club had a massive impact on the literary landscape, and I mean that in a good , non-dinosaur-killing way. The huge surge in the trade paperback market owes much to Oprah. I was working for Chapters when the whole thing got started, and the number of times every day we were asked for "that book Oprah was talking about" was mind-boggling. The only question asked nearly as often was "Why does she always choose such #&!% depressing books?"

Oprah does like tales of misery, of tragedy and despair: I won't presume to guess why. I do know that she was asked once why she never chose something positive for her book club, like a romance novel. She responded, somewhat scornfully, that no one read them. Her audience immediately corrected her. Surprised, she put the question up on her website, asking readers to name the genres of books they read most. Romance outnumbered every other category combined. Which wasn't surprise to anyone who works in the publishing industry, but after that, some other kinds of books began to make their way into Oprah's club. Of course since that brought Dr. Phil to prominence, maybe that wasn't such a good thing.

But Dr. Phil, smarm-master that he is, isn't the point. The point is that Oprah never felt that there was enough misery in romance novels. She could not equate them in her mind with the stories of desperate struggle that spoke to her most profoundly. She didn't believe they could encompass tragedy and a happy ending.

Which leads me to believe she hasn't read Barbara Samuel.1

Barbara Samuel is one of those rare people who wanted to be a writer all her life, and who actually succeeded at that aim. She put herself through university on writing scholarships, and afterwards wrote nonfiction to support herself as she made a name for herself in fiction. Although at least to start, it wasn't her own name. When she first began to work with Harlequin, the publisher kept the rights to the author's name. So she wrote her complex and engaging category novels under the pseudonym Ruth Wind. Later, as she branched out in to longer works, first historicals, then contemporaries, she used her own name, Barbara Samuel.

Under those names, and her newest, Barbara O'Neal, she has published almost 30 books. Those books have collected between them a remarkable number of awards, including five RITAs. Her success is due largely to the nuanced richness of her characters, but also to the

complexity of the worlds they inhabit. When she writes historical fiction set in England, the religious bigotry of the time is not glossed over. If she writes a contemporary set in the United States, racial tensions are acknowledged—as is the realization that 'black' and 'white' are not the only races. In fact, her books often featured inter-racial relationships before those became a subcategory of their own.

If there's once thing Samuel understands, it's that no real life is free from catastrophe. And sometimes, they are of our own making. Her 2003 title, A Piece of Heaven, is an excellent illustration. It is the story of Luna McGraw and Thomas Coyote, who meet when she helps his grandmother out of a burning house (it's less melodramatic than it sounds). Both of them have been through some terrible times. Luna began to drink when her marriage collapsed, and ended by wrecking several cars, her career, and losing custody of her eight year old daughter. That daughter, now sixteen, is coming to stay for a year, and Luna, who has done the very hard work of putting herself back together, doesn't have room in her life for any distractions. Enter Thomas, whose desire for a family was doubly blighted when he found out he was sterile, and his wife left him for his brother. He is man whose door is open to strays, human and otherwise, but whose heart is heavily guarded. Neither of them is looking to get involved. But once they meet, all their earlier plans are thrown into colourful disarray.

There are other characters of course, all of whom are reeling under some kind of damage. There's a teenage neighbor trying to cope with the death of her father, a woman dealing with the loss of a husband who abandoned her years ago, a man trying to end a toxic relationship with his wife. As a former social worker, I usually have zero patience for addictions or abuse in my fiction, often because they bear no resemblance to the reality. A Piece of Heaven has both, and I couldn't put it down. Because Samuel not only did it right, she made it matter.

Samuel knows that tragedy doesn't have to be enormous. It can be devastatingly personal. Which makes sense: while we empathize with grand scale disasters, we connect best with personal tragedies. The kind that make you catch your breath because they're so immediate and comprehensible. Her characters are all of them survivors, of loss, of pain, of heartbreak. And they manage to move past those hurts. Not forget, or 'get over': move past. They earn the grace of their happy ending.

Which, more than anything else, is what Samuel wants to do. She is interested in survivors, in how people make it through terrible events

and yet still manage to go on to lead full, powerful, joyful lives. The trauma is always going to be there: the joy can be there too.

Maybe someone should tell Oprah.

1 http://www.barbarasamuel.com

We Need to Talk

I've put it off long enough. Thought, 'We can get into that later', and 'I should wait till the fuss dies down a little'. But truth is, we're overdue. It's time we talked.

About Twilight.

(Don't groan. At least, not till we're done).

The talk has two parts. The first, about Twilight-the-novel, is fairly straightforward. I'm in the book business, and had seen the pre-publicity buzz turn into a roar. I read the book because I wanted to know what kind of tidal wave was headed my way. Afterwards, I thought it was: A) nothing new or exciting on the romance front; B) nothing new or exciting on the vampire front; and C) probably going to sell in huge quantities, though not necessarily out of my store.

I still stand by those conclusions. When it comes to romance (and vampires, for that matter), I don't care for melodrama, and have little patience for angst. Twilight is stuffed impossibly full of both. I found it readable, but far too self-absorbed to want to pick up the rest of the books in the series.

However…

That I didn't care for the interaction between Bella and Edward doesn't mean I think Twilight-the-phenomenon lacks an important and valuable love story. It's just that I think that love story that matters is the one between the readers and the books.

That's the second part, and it's big. Around the world, readers are truly connecting to the Twilight series. They're passionately attached to the story. I'm not talking about shrieking fangirls here, or anyone in a 'Team Jacob' T-shirt: I'm talking about readers. Millions upon millions upon millions of people loving books.

Everybody should have the chance to love a book that much. Because that kind of love really does bridge time and space. When you love a book with everything that is in you, that love lasts. If you pick it up again years later, decades, whatever, you may find the words no longer have the same music, or the story the same grandeur. But the love… that will still exist.

The immediacy of that tie is astonishing and powerful. There are books I only have to touch to be transported into a different era of my life: one in which I'm under foreign sky, perhaps; or in the company of someone I've since lost. I'm not the person I was when I first read those

books—which is probably a good thing—but for a moment, I can remember how that person felt.

Did I say powerful? That's primordial.

Twilight also has the added bonus of being set in adolescence, that period in which so many of us first experience the fiery, dizzying rush of infatuation. When I saw the movie with a group of friends, we laughed aloud when Edward first swaggered into frame. That garnered us some vicious glares, but we weren't making fun. At least, not of the movie. If we'd been fourteen when these books came out, we likely would have thought Edward absolutely wonderful. Really, we were looking back in time, and laughing at our fourteen year old selves. Not unkindly, either.

Though it's not just teenagers reading the books. Nor is it just women. Though my bookstore isn't a representative example, the ratio of female Twilight buyers to male is about 80:20. Which is pretty good when you consider that women buy almost 80% of all books. Just before Eclipse (the third book in the series) arrived in paperback, I had a customer rush in looking for it. When told that the paperback release was just a few weeks away, he confessed that he was going to break his never-buy-hardcover policy. He needed the book. Now. He simply could not wait to find out what happened next.

When I asked, he couldn't quite pinpoint exactly what drew him so deeply to the story, only that he was drawn. I wondered if the vampire angle made it possible for him to move the book mentally out of the 'romance' category into the 'fantasy' category, but he went on to say that he loved the love story. He loved all of it. He just didn't know why.

Maybe his younger self knows. Maybe yours does too.