

Faith, Love, Hope and Popular Romance  
Fiction

Laura Vivanco

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## About the cover image

The image comes from an eighteenth-century edition of Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, which I haven't read, so I don't know how the image related to its content.

In this new context, however, I'd translate "una via est, latrat dum pateat" as "there is one path; it shouts out as it stands open." That seems to describe romance novels pretty well: they're not exactly quiet about their belief in love being the way to happiness. There's a heart at the foot of the design and the labyrinth is held aloft by Cupid. The symbolism of the heart and Cupid are obvious. For my purposes, the labyrinth reflects that fact that, in romance novels at least, the path to true love is not without its complications. It's also the case that labyrinths have been used to spur spiritual growth. The serpent eating its own tail is Ouroboros and represents an eternal cycle of renewal. In this context I find that apt with respect to both love (as depicted in romance novels) and the genre itself, which constantly repeats and renews itself. According to Lucy Hooper's *The Lady's Book of Flowers and Poetry; to which are added, a Botanical Introduction, a Complete Floral Dictionary, and a Chapter on Plants in Rooms* (1845), a tulip is a "declaration of love" (231). In my mind the bees (on the right, flying around a tulip) represent the hard work that many would argue is needed before relationships can truly flower and, looking towards the grapes on the left, bear fruit. Since the pair of birds seem to be resting on olive branches I've decided they can represent the belief (expressed in a novella by Mary Kirk), that "only when we are guided by love do we find true happiness and peace" (223).





# Introduction from a Time of Pandemic

The plot of a romance novel is guaranteed to end happily and according to Dr. Jodi McAlister,

in times like this, when everything is really uncertain and we're not quite sure what's going to happen, we love that sense of closure.

“We like knowing that the arc of the universe will bend towards emotional justice, where two people who love each other will end up together.” (Nobel and Johnson)

In the past in times of crisis, some people certainly have turned to romance. The romance publisher Mills & Boon, for example,

Like most publishers [...] thrived during the [Second World] war, as restrictions on many leisure activities promoted reading, even though paper rationing confined new editions to 4,000 copies and reprints were impossible. ‘Undoubtedly the war encouraged readership,’ Boon said. ‘If we had had paper we would have sold probably ten times as many.’ (McAleer 268)

However, as a pessimist, my immediate response was not the same as Jodi McAlister's: the fear of losing loved ones highlighted for me the emotional risks inherent in loving and made me question the pleasure, in such

a context, of reading about “the development of a relationship (a central love story)” (Wherry 53). Yet, on reflection, I remembered that questions of risk and the possibility of loss are addressed in some romance novels: romance’s response, it seems to me, is that love gives meaning to life, that the experience of love improves us, and that in some way love itself is eternal and can never be lost.

The romance novel’s roots extend down into myth and fairytale but its more recent ancestors can be found in the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Robert M. Polhemus argues that in the nineteenth century novels became

the ways, means, and sites for the propagation of faith. Nineteenth-century novelists assumed pastoral roles and took them seriously. Think of some of the main purposes and functions of religion: to honor creation and the mystery of being; to make people feel the worth of their own souls; to reconcile them to their lives and offer an alternative to the pain of daily existence; to justify, rationalize, or sublimate power relations; to exalt by holding out the promise of salvation; to lift people out of themselves, free the spirit, and move them to ecstasy; to transmute and control aggression and violent drives; to sublimate sexuality and idealize gender identity. (4–5)

Some of these purposes and functions are, of course, controversial: historically, faith has had a range of positive and negative impacts. While my opening chapters are descriptive, I do not forget that romances are open to critique, and I hope to address some of these in later chapters. Moreover, when studying romances, it is vital to bear in mind their variety. Religions are not monolithic, and neither is popular romance fiction. However, while recognising that there are both many different types of romance and “many kinds of reader, using romance fiction in different ways, in various contexts, and with specific purposes” (Taylor 1989, 73), I would like to suggest that romance novels have held firm to the tradition outlined by Polhemus: romance authors have assumed pastoral roles, of-

fering hope to their readers through novels which propagate faith in the goodness and durability of love.

Faith, love and hope have long been referred to as the theological virtues, and I will be drawing extensively on theology. This is not because I wish to suggest that all romance readers believe either that love is godlike or that there is a God who is love, though many readers do indeed believe in a loving God and others express the view that love is a powerful force for good in the world. Rather, as a scholar shaped by the study of the Middle Ages, I perhaps turn to theology in much the same way that early romance critics such as Janice Radway and Tania Modleski had recourse to psychology. However, in addition to having an almost instinctive impulse to turn to theology, I do believe that it is a valuable resource in the context of a form of literature with romance's history and nature.

Helen Taylor has suggested that "romance can speak as perhaps nothing else does to our desire, fantasies and longings for a better world and for states of individual and collective transcendence" (63). The word "transcendence" perhaps suggests a connection with a religious or spiritual experience. That is certainly a key aspect of romance reading for the evangelical Christian readers of evangelical romance novels studied by Lynn S. Neal (2006). However, since Neal's research focused on a very specific group of US readers and texts, its findings could not be considered more widely applicable. In 2010, however, Catherine M. Roach began publishing work which touched on the theological concepts underpinning romance fiction as a whole, drawing on

Robert Polhemus's powerful study of nineteenth-century British novels of love and romance, *Erotic Faith: Being in Love from Jane Austen to D.H. Lawrence* (1990). In his analysis of these novels that stand as high literary precursors to twentieth-century popular romance fiction, his key concept of "erotic faith" provides a reading of the emotional dynamic that the romance narrative then turns into story. Erotic faith, he writes, is "an emotional conviction, ultimately religious in nature, that meaning,

value, hope, and even transcendence can be found through love—erotically focused love.”

Polhemus and Roach are not the only critics to have observed the close connections between religion and romantic fiction. Bridget Fowler, for instance, was critical of both religion and romance when she commented that, “Like religion, the romance distorts the structures of social reality [...], however [...] the romance is also the ‘heart of a heartless world’, comforting in its familiar reassurance” (175). As Eric Murphy Selinger and I wrote in a chapter on “Romance and/as Religion,”

religion, especially Christianity, can be read as a romance; [...] Christianity and other religions have shaped the history of, and been represented in, the romance genre; and [...] the vision of love promulgated by the romance genre, even in ostensibly secular texts, can often be read as a religious or divine phenomenon: something *unconditional*, *omnipotent*, and *eternal*. (486)

The romance in its current modern, popular, English-language form, emerged out of the broader category of “romantic fiction” but once individual authors (such as Berta Ruck, who in 1933 declared herself to be “a Happy-ENDER”), publishers (such as Mills & Boon) and finally entire segments of the popular fiction market (as is the case for “romance” publishing in the USA), came to guarantee that their love stories would always have “a positive resolution (happy ending)” (Wherry 53), by definition the works encouraged their readers to have faith that love would bring happiness to the protagonists. Admittedly readers and authors of secular romances may use the word “faith” relatively rarely, but I have observed that “love” and “hope” are words which recur when they explain why they choose romance. For example, on just one day in 2017, in a small section of Twitter, I saw Sally Kilpatrick stating that “a good romance reminds me that I believe in love, good triumphing over evil & HOPE” while romance author Ann Aguirre’s request for people to tweet about “why you love the genre” led to responses which repeatedly referred to love and hope.

Drawing on theology, in this book I want to suggest a new definition of the romance novel to complement other definitions which focus on structural elements: **modern popular romances are novels whose authors have assumed pastoral roles, offering hope to their readers through works which propagate faith in the goodness and durability of love.**

Laura Vivanco

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## **Part I**

# **Faith, Love, Hope and Pastoral Care**





# Chapter 1

## Faith

I begin with faith because it is a much more obviously theological virtue than either love or hope, and thus indications of its presence both in texts and in the process of romance writing provide the clearest indication that a theological approach to romance criticism is justified and likely to prove fruitful. It is, of course, easy to find evidence of faith in romance novels which include explicitly religious content. An author of “inspirational” (Christian) romances, Ruth Scofield Schmidt, was once asked by

a beginning writer [...], “Do you have to believe all that stuff to sell it?”

[...]

“It sure helps,” I told her. “If you don’t believe in what you’re writing, that will come through. Readers will know it.”

And they will. (Vinyard 201)

In the case of an “inspirational” romance author such as Schmidt, “that stuff” presumably refers primarily to the Christian faith permeating her works. However, many romance authors and editors, writing about romance more broadly, have issued similar warnings about the need for authors to possess a personal faith in love. Claire Ritchie, for example, in *Writing the Romantic Novel* (1962), told aspiring authors that

You must yourself believe that good ultimately triumphs over evil, that happiness comes when we try to make others

happy, and that Love, or ‘sweet charity’, as someone has described it, is the greatest power in the world—stronger than trouble, disaster, separation and death. (qtd. in Anderson 1974, 267)

Frances Whitehead, who began working at Mills & Boon in 1976, was the company’s Editorial Director in 1992 when she stated that romance authors need both “a talent for story-telling and, above all, sincerity. Phoni-ness is quickly spotted and condemned by readers” (64). This statement is less explicit than Richie’s, but is nonetheless consistent with the claim that without faith (or, in less theological language, “belief” or “sincerity”), a romance author will not be successful, regardless of the quality of other aspects of their writing.

We can see similar statements throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As early as 1960 Anne Britton and Marion Collin stated in their guide to new writers of romantic fiction that

The love story [...] must be warm and sincere, for any story written with ‘tongue in cheek’ is doomed from the first paragraph. If the writer cannot convince himself he will certainly not convince his readers. (11)

A similar warning appears more than three decades later, in Donna Baker’s guide to writing a romance novel: Sheila Walsh, a former chairman of the UK’s Romantic Novelists’ Association, is quoted as advising that “The first and most important ingredient of a good romantic novel must be sincerity” (34). If you do not believe in “enduring love,” Donna Baker herself tells aspiring romance authors,

if you [...] dismiss marriage or the committed relationship as something that has had its day, you will not be able to write a romance. You will not have the belief or the passion that will put this message across; instead there will be a distasteful cynicism that will leave an unpleasant flavour and create an uneasiness in the reader’s mind. Even if you follow the ‘formula’, [...] you will still fail if you don’t have that [...] deep belief and longing in your own heart. (37)

In Rebecca Vinyard's handbook for romance writers, published in 2004, Leslie Wainger, an Executive Senior Editor at Harlequin, notes that one of the "most common mistakes new authors make" is "Thinking her heart doesn't have to be in it. Trust me, the readers always know when an author's faking it" (266). Thus, one of the "Secrets of Successful Romance Writing" is that readers respond to the author's "individual voice" which, according to author Emma Darcy, "comes from what you really feel, your deep-down attitudes and beliefs and feelings" (149).

Regardless of whether readers can indeed detect an author's belief from their "individual voice," many authors have made their "deep-down attitudes and beliefs and feelings" about love quite explicit. Mary Balogh, who writes novels which are not marketed as Christian or "inspirational," though she is "involved in her local Catholic Church as an organist and cantor" (Mussell and Tuñón 19), makes

great claims for love. Occasionally, a reader will accuse me of putting too much faith in its power. I believe one cannot put too much faith in the power of love. The belief that love in all its manifestations (and I speak of love, not of lust or obsession) is the single strongest force on this earth is central to my very being. The universe, life, eternity would have no meaning to me if anyone could prove that something else—evil, for example—was more powerful. [...] And romantic love between a man and a woman (or between two people of the same gender) can be the most intense, the most passionate, the most powerful form of love given to humankind. (Balogh 27)

Susan Elizabeth Phillips, though "not conventionally religious now," similarly believes "that love is the most powerful force" (Selinger 2015). Jennifer Crusie's faith, despite having been sorely tested, also remained strong:

even though I have seen the relationships of famous people crash and burn, even though I have seen the relationships of my friends crash and burn, even though I have seen my

own relationships crash and burn (oh, Lord, let me count the ways), I truly do still believe in the existence of unconditional love, I still believe that it's what holds humanity together, and I absolutely believe it's the best of all possible things to write about. (Crusie Smith 1999a, 226)

Love is central to all romance plots and thus they affirm, as stated explicitly in Mary Kirk's novella "Legend" (1998), that "love is the most important thing of all. Even if everything else we have is lost, as long as we are able to love, we can survive. [...] 'tis not greed nor revenge, not anger nor fear, that should guide us, but love. For only when we are guided by love do we find true happiness and peace" (223). Or, as Jeanne Tiedge, then Executive Editor of Popular Library/Warner Books, once claimed, "the most important quality of romance novels [and one which] will always remain constant" is "the belief and expression of love's ability to conquer all" (Pianka 11).

Many romance authors link their faith in love to their own lived experience. Virginia Kantra, for example, states on her website biography page that she is "Married to her college sweetheart and the mother of three (mostly adult) children [...]. She is a firm believer in the strength of family, the importance of storytelling, and the power of love." The juxtaposition of the details of her own 'happy ending' and the affirmation of her faith in love is perhaps not accidental. In an interview Ivy Preston (who wrote for Robert Hale from the 1960s to 1990s) similarly moved from recounting the story of her courtship and marriage to declaring that: "I think the reason I write romances is I believe in love: you've got to be sincere" (McAlpine 143). Further juxtapositions of a personal story and a declaration of faith can be found in *Fall in Love Like a Romance Writer* (Grey 2010), a book containing "true love stories by 67 authors." In it Robin Lee Hatcher, an author of Christian romance novels, exclaims "Ah, love. Writers of romance believe in it with all their hearts" (232); her affirmation of faith in love is accompanied by a quotation from 1 Corinthians 13 about the nature of love. Hatcher's explicitly Christian understanding of love, placed as it is in the context of a series of authors relating their personal love stories, raises the possibility that seemingly secular accounts of authors' lives may resemble religious testimonies.

A testimony, in religious terms, can be defined as an account of “what God has done for you”; “The concept of ‘testifying’ is closely aligned with the notion of ‘witnessing.’ Through ‘witnessing,’ members encourage outsiders to come to church or seek the Holy Ghost by telling them stories about their own conversion and the miraculous things God has done for them since” (Lawless 441). Believers who are staff members in “faith-based social service agencies” (Unruh 318), for example, might share stories drawn from their “personal experience, often highlighting the role [...] faith has played in helping with needs similar to those of beneficiaries” (324). Such testimonies “speak of faith in the subjective, stopping short of directing to listeners what *they* should believe, though that message may be implied” (325).

There may be similar implications in the testimonies given by romance authors. Certainly Nattie Golubov has argued that romance authors

carefully navigate and reveal aspects of their own lives [...]: the distinction between their private and public selves is itself deliberately blurred since their private lives (as mothers, daughters, friends, spouses, carers, pet lovers, grandmothers, gardeners) are performed in ways that authenticate their knowledge of the issues they write about because experience translates into authority. (132)

Accounts of personal experiences of love are important, therefore, because they demonstrate that an author is sincere and truly believes in the love and happy endings they depict in their novels. As Susan Napier explains:

My parents are still married after 45 years, Tony and I have been married for 20 years, and both my brothers and most of our friends are in marriages and have raised children. That naturally influences the type of story that I can write with sincerity. That happily-ever-after ending is not pie in the sky for me. Most of the romance writers I know are in the same position. So they genuinely believe that’s an achievable state, to be happy in marriage. (McAlpine 131)

## 1.1 The Ecstatic and Legalistic Modes of Faith

If romance novels are expressions of faith, it would seem logical that they should share features of other belief systems. In particular,

It has long been recognized that “religion” encompasses two very different sets of dynamics: Max Weber (1930, 1947) distinguished routinized and charismatic religious forms; Ruth Benedict (1935) contrasted Apollonian and Dionysian practices [...]. And these are just a few of the many attempts to characterize a fundamental divergence in modalities of religious experience and practice [...]. At the root of all such dichotomous models is a recognition that some religious practices are very intense emotionally; they may be rarely performed and highly stimulating (e.g., involving altered states of consciousness or terrible ordeals and tortures) [...]. Whereas, by contrast, certain other forms of religious activity tend to be much less stimulating; they [...] are often accompanied by the transmission of complex theology and doctrine. (Whitehouse 293–294)

Harvey Whitehouse’s own theory “distinguishes doctrinal and imagistic modes of religiosity” (294) but since all kinds of romance use imagery, his terminology might be confusing if used in this context. For the purposes of distinguishing the two modes as they appear in popular romance fiction, I have therefore settled on a dichotomy between “ecstatic” and “legalistic,” drawing on the terminology used by Martin P. Nilsson who, while writing about Greek folk religion, made the broader observation that there are

two main streams of contrasting ideas which appear in all religion [...]. Man may seek union with God in mystic and ecstatic forms of religion, or he may seek to make peace with God and win His favor by fulfilling His commandments to the last item. The latter is legalism. (103)

The “legalistic” corresponds with the half of the binary which others have labeled routinized, Apollonian and doctrinal, whereas the “ecstatic”

refers to that labelled charismatic or Dionysian. These two modes can, as Whitehouse clarifies,

occur quite separately, as the organizing principles of religious experience, belief, practice, and organization. But often the two modes of religiosity occur together, in a single tradition, and interact with each other. (294)

In the context of popular romance novels, the two modes do indeed occur together: there is frequently mixing of the two modes within individual works and, indeed, aspects of the reading and production of romances can also be ascribed to one or other mode.

With respect to the legalistic mode Whitehouse suggests that:

In order for people to believe in a set of doctrines, they have to be cast in a highly persuasive fashion. This is commonly achieved, at least in part, by special techniques of oratory established over time through processes of selection. Routinized religions tend to be associated with highly developed forms of rhetoric and logically integrated theology. (298)

Publishers and associations of romance writers have played a role in developing such “processes of selection.” Over time, especially as romance has developed in the US market, the broad category of romantic fiction has been transformed into “the popular romance novel,” defined as having a “central love story” and “optimistic ending” (RWA 2020). At writers’ conferences, through competitions, and in workshops, authors learn to hone their techniques and make their writing more effective. Moreover, in the legalistic mode, doctrines are “commonly illustrated by poignant narratives, that can easily be related to personal experience” (Whitehouse 298) and, as we have seen, this is true of romance, since romance authors’ own romantic relationships are often adduced as evidence of the truth of the doctrines expressed via fictional “poignant narratives” in their novels.

One “of the most conspicuous features” of the legalistic mode, however, is the way in which “the transmission of religious teachings is highly

routinized (i.e., frequently repeated)” (297). Janice Radway, author of one of the foundational scholarly works on romance, was probably not the first, and was certainly not the last, to observe that there is a “repetitious or formulaic quality” (63) to romance novels. Whereas Radway considered this a flaw, a theological reading of the texts suggests instead that it should be considered a deliberate strategy for strengthening and spreading the faith. As Angela Toscano has argued, repetition in the language and plots of romance novels is

a liturgical act, a ritual speech. [...] In the repetition of the gestures, of the actions, of the words, romance attempts to summon into the present mythos – to manifest myth into reality. And in the retelling and re-performance of this form, the invocation alters the world of the real, infecting it and invading it with the impossible.

This is a liturgical language, a ritual narrative. Like liturgy, it suspends linear time, opening up a space for the divine to enter the realm of the human. (2019)

The liturgy is, moreover, “highly routinized (i.e., frequently repeated)” not just within texts, but also in the way in which they are used by many readers. Radway herself described romances as novels which

are consumed repetitively by the same readers [...]. If this phenomenon of repetitive reading is accorded the importance it deserves, it becomes clear that romantic novels function for their reader, on one level at least, as the *ritualistic* repetition of a single, immutable cultural myth. (198, emphasis added)

There are, then, many reasons to consider romance novels legalistic. However, there has also been a strong perception that romance novels are ecstatic. Romance has been one of the forms of fiction most likely to be identified as having the potential to transform readers into the modern-day equivalent of frenzied maenads, the ancient Greek women who, as a result of worshipping the god Dionysus, “go creeping off / This way



and that to lonely places and give themselves / To lecherous men” (Euripides 198). Nancy Leigh DeMoss, for example, in her *Holiness: The Heart God Purifies* (2005), states that “A woman whose diet includes mostly romance novels or popular women’s magazines is setting herself up for moral temptation, if not failure” (107–108) while Neil T. Anderson warns that he has heard “accounts from women about being sucked into fantasy and unfaithfulness through their involvement with romance novels and dramas” (42).

These condemnations of women’s reading form part of a long tradition. In the sixteenth century, for example, moralists raised concern about women readers of popular chivalric romances:

Such pronouncements are based on three premises: that romances exercise undue freedom concerning erotic matters; that women are especially susceptible to the charms of such erotic entertainments; and that the consequent effect of romance upon women will be to make them sexually unruly. (Hackett 10–11)

Critics with this attitude towards romances have, however, often been inclined to go yet further and question the morality of fiction as a whole. From the mid-eighteenth century through to the early decades of the nineteenth, “It seems there was hardly any crime, sin or personal catastrophe that injudicious reading was not held to cause directly or indirectly—from murder, suicide, rape, and violent revolution, through prostitution, adultery and divorce, to pride, vanity, and slapdash housewifery” (Pearson 8). W. F. Gallaway, writing about “The Conservative Attitude Toward Fiction, 1770–1830” finds that in this period it was thought novels were able to “tear down the standards of a conservative Christian morality, to unfit the reader for the humdrum monotony of common life” (1048).

Such attitudes have persisted and according to Ursula K. Le Guin “traditional Puritan values” have caused Americans,

as a people, to look upon all works of the imagination either as suspect, or as contemptible. [...] Such a rejection

of the entire art of fiction is related to several American characteristics: our Puritanism, our work ethic, our profit-mindedness, and even our sexual mores. (40)

Suspicion of fiction is so strong that even evangelical Christian authors of “inspirational” (Christian) romances, who offer their readers novels which “embody, at least ideally, a perfect combination of romantic elements and religious themes” (Neal 2006, 82),

have expressed their frustration with how other conservative Protestants view their literary endeavors. [...] Janette Oke relates, “I think there are a number who still feel that what we should be spending our time reading is nonfiction, self-help, and devotional study books.” (Neal 34)

According to Le Guin, all that “cannot be justified as ‘educational’ or [...] ‘self-improvement,’ [...] in the Puritan value system [...] can only be self-indulgence or escapism” (40). Fiction’s escapist nature, the way it appears to transport readers to other locations and enables some to imagine themselves in the place of one or more of the protagonists, may perhaps cause unease because it parallels some elements of the most unruly ecstatic religious experience. The very word “ecstasy,” after all, “is derived from a Greek word, with the original meaning of removing oneself from a given place” (Holm 7).

### 1.1.1 Rules and Emotion

Within romance fiction the fundamental difference between the ecstatic and legalistic modes is not that one transports the reader and the other does not, but in the relative emphasis they place on rules (legal, social, moral) and the emotions generated by love. Two contrasting statements from characters in Hannah More’s *Coelebs in search of a wife* (1808) encapsulate the difference, with the first speaker espousing an ecstatic approach, and the second a legalistic one:

“All the exhortations to duties,” returned Mr. Tyrrel, “with which so many sermons abound, are only an infringement

on the liberty of a Christian. A true believer knows of no duty but faith, no rule but love.”

“Love is indeed,” said Mr. Stanley, “the fountain and principle of all practical virtue. But love itself requires some regulations to direct its exertion; some law to guide its motions; some rule to prevent its aberrations; some guard to hinder that which is vigorous from becoming eccentric. [...]” (332)

Of ecstatic romances it may be said, as Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752) does with respect to the romances of her time, that if a reader approached them “supposing Romances were real Pictures of Life,” over time they will be “taught to believe, that Love was the ruling Principle of the World; that every other Passion was subordinate to this; and that it caused all the Happiness and Miseries of Life” (7). In them, love is the sole or primary guide to the protagonists’ actions and a clergyman in Lennox’s novel therefore condemns them on the grounds that “The immediate Tendency of these Books [...] is to give new Fire to the Passions of Revenge and Love; two Passions which [...] it is one of the severest Labours of Reason and Piety to suppress” (380).

In legalistic romances the impulses arising from romantic passion are likely to be curbed (by “Reason,” “Piety” or some other principle) if they come into conflict with, for example, family obligations, duty to country, or the law. This may, however, lay them open to the types of critique Charlotte Brontë, creator of the brooding Mr. Rochester and sister to the creator of the tormented Heathcliff, made with regards to Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1815) in 1850:

She does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well [...]: she ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound: the Passions are perfectly unknown to her; she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy Sisterhood; even to the Feelings she vouchsafes no more than an occasional graceful but distant recognition [...] but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes

through, what is the unseen seat of Life and the sentient target of Death—this Miss Austen ignores. (383)

The charge levelled at those of the legalistic tendency is that by guarding against the leadings of emotion, and instead favouring the demands of propriety and conventional virtues, a barrier is placed in the way of discovering fundamental truths.

Brontë portrays the legalistic mode as somewhat bland and superficial emotionally but in certain circumstances the legalistic mode invokes not simply beliefs, but alternative loves, albeit ones which may not cause “fast and full” throbbing in quite the same way as ecstatic romantic love. The so-called “inspirational” evangelical Christian romance, for instance, takes

the dyad of the hero/heroine relationship and makes it a triad. In this triad, God resides at the top while the hero and heroine each occupy a bottom corner [...]. In this way, the novels make one’s relationship with God preeminent, and this spiritual foundation becomes the basis for a successful romantic relationship. (Neal 2013, 4)

Other alternative loves are those felt towards family, friends, country, or a generalised feeling of love and responsibility towards other members of humanity. In Linnea Sinclair’s *Games of Command* (2007), for example, the heroine leaves the hero because “she couldn’t risk [...] the lives of every empath and telepath in the Alliance, just because her heart was breaking” (509): her compassion for others and the imperative to save their lives overrides her desire to remain with her beloved.

Some moral dilemmas may bring romantic love into conflict with a character’s love for themselves (inasmuch as the dilemma pertains to their self-esteem). Romance author Jo Beverley has argued that

moral dilemmas [...] spring from the deepest beliefs of the characters, from their cherished sense of self. Moreover, they can only become the basis of a story if the character has the courage to at least try to uphold his or her beliefs. (33)

The heroine of Amanda Quick's *Rendezvous* (1991) is not put to the test but she nonetheless makes clear some of the values which contribute to her "cherished sense of self." Since the protagonists' marriage is not initially "a love match" the heroine informs the hero that he "may, nevertheless, depend upon me to fulfill my responsibilities as your wife. My sense of honor and duty is as strong as your own and I would have you know that you can rely on it" (173). Given that this is a romance, the pair fall in love with each other and her honour is never tested but the hero does believe that even had she found someone else "to whom she could truly give her heart" she "would honor her wedding vows, come what may. She was a woman of honor" (266). Quick returns to the issue of honour overriding romantic love in a later novel, *Mistress* (1994). Here the heroine insists that, had she married a "good [...] kind man" of her acquaintance, she "would have been true to him" even if, after the ceremony, she had met the hero, who inspires true passion in her. This, she states, is due to the fact that she has "a sense of honor" (242).

Both these novels are historical romances, set in a period and location in which divorce was possible but rare. However, moral codes vary from place to place and also change over time and this will inevitably affect the constraints which the legalistic mode will attempt to place on romantic love. Such a period of change is depicted in A. J. Demas's *Something Human* (set in an alternative version of ancient Greece), in which Rus, a Luth priest, and Adares, the leader of the Phemian city of Tios, fall in love despite being on opposing sides in a war and from very different cultures. Rus "compromised himself [...], knowingly being [...] with the leader of the Phemians and making no effort to take him prisoner, as honour and loyalty to his own people demanded." This might appear to be a moment of triumph for the ecstatic mode were it not for the fact that Rus's religious leader had "already spoken against the [military] campaign, called it needless" and, as Rus says to Adares, if he helps to end the war this will "spare the lives of some of my people as well as many of yours." Similarly, Rus's same-sex love for Adares would be deemed "unnatural" by the "Karhan tribes," to one of which Rus belongs, because "every tribe [...] hated it about equally," and the novel's happy ending in which Rus abandons his tribe might thus appear to be a clear rejec-

tion of the legalistic mode. However, sex with a man is not explicitly forbidden to Rus by his priestly status: this only sets him “apart from [...] marriage and getting children.” Therefore while, as Rus states, “For me to do what is forbidden to us would be to make myself a lie” he does not, according to his own moral judgments, make himself “a lie.” His actions would seem to expand the boundaries of, rather than break entirely with, the laws governing conduct in his society. Remaining true to himself ensures that he fulfills his role in “the Great Pattern of the world, Heva, which is so large that we can’t see all of it”:

To be happy is to fulfil your place in the Great Pattern. It didn’t mean that you kept the world moving properly just by doing whatever gave you the greatest pleasure. It meant that you should do what was right, that happiness lay in being just and in knowing yourself.

There is thus a fundamental difference in how the ecstatic and legalistic modes evaluate emotions. Mr. Tyrrel and Mr. Stanley might agree with the statement made by an angel in another romance: “Love is divine, and it’s the pattern in which we’re supposed to live our lives” (Spangler 152). The divergence between them arises from the fact that humans tend to have difficulty in discerning the Great Pattern. Those who favour the ecstatic mode will, like Mr. Tyrrel, argue that it is best to be led by the impulses and emotions arising from love, since it is divine (or quasi-divine), and they therefore trust that these will be the truest guide to correct behaviour. For example, in Jennifer Ashley’s paranormal romance *Wild Things* (2016), the first physical joining of the protagonists is described from the point of view of Mason, a shape-shifter, who experiences an

astonishing joy that flooded him erasing everything he’d previously understood and filling him with new knowledge.

Then he was just Mason, kissing and laughing with the beautiful Jasmine, touching her in the moonlight, the Goddess silently blessing them.

The moment of ecstatic union with the beloved, by virtue of its connection with the divine, permits Mason temporary access to a deeper spiritual knowledge.

Followers of the legalistic mode, however, will urge caution; human beings are not paranormal creatures such as Mason. For them, powerful emotions can be misleading: what gives “the greatest pleasure” to a lover may not ultimately make them happy. Tried and tested rules therefore exist as a necessary safeguard. Even in Ashley’s series, the ecstatic love bestowed by the Goddess is not an unalloyed blessing to all: it creates an almost tangible “mate bond” which can “form from nothing, [...] sink its claws in and not let go. At that point a Shifter had to follow the mate bond, no matter who he had to hurt to do it.” The legalistic mode warns that ecstatic experiences can hurt not just those who surround the lovers, but the lovers themselves, particularly in a context in which there is no certainty that an ecstatic experience is in truth sanctioned by the divine and a conduit to it.





## Chapter 2

# Love

The existence of the two modes of faith, legalistic and ecstatic, shapes the conceptualisation of ideal love and its depiction. It is the intensity of ecstatic experiences which give the ecstatic mode its power: its

practices are very intense emotionally; they may be rarely performed and highly stimulating (e.g., involving altered states of consciousness or terrible ordeals and tortures); they tend to trigger a lasting sense of revelation, and to produce powerful bonds between small groups of ritual participants. (Whitehouse 294)

This perfectly describes the bonding which George Paizis has labelled “passion-love” (109) and which he linked to the immediacy of love at first sight. Paizis notes that “‘passion-love’ implies forces outside human control, be it ‘destiny’ or even ‘nature’, which essentially connotes the primacy of external or unknown forces and a corresponding diminution of human responsibility and control over what takes place” (109). The impact of the beginning of this kind of love can be considered akin to that of a religious experience, in which the believer is suddenly and unexpectedly brought into the presence of the divine. “Passion-love” is love in the ecstatic mode and, as a concept, it draws on

the pagan idea of spiritual Eros: that immense desire, described by Plato and his followers, to rise above the transient, imperfect world into which we are born, the earthly flesh of which we are made, and, through increasing levels

of spiritual attainment, to gain intimacy with the highest goodness, beauty and truth. (May 96)

Such a connection between love and spirituality is evident in the novels of the extremely prolific Barbara Cartland, who had more than 700 novels published before her death in 2000 (Ramsdell 2018, 37). Cartland wrote

with mystical and transcendental accents of romance as a means to spiritual enlightenment [...]. In *Towards the Stars* [...], love is described as “an ecstasy so wonderful, so glorious and so spiritual that it was not of this world.” Another such example is *Love in the Clouds*. On the very last page of this novel, the heroine has discovered a love that is “both human and divine”; it is “the celestial love that both men and the gods themselves sought” [...]. Cartland’s novels consistently represent love as transcending historical selfhood and acting as a catalyst for the emergence into a state of pure consciousness. We find the lovers’ raptures described as transcendent states of being. At the end of one novel, they are described as having “touched the divine”. (Rix)

Another, more recent, example is Sierra Simone’s novella *Red & White* (2019). The language used to describe the protagonists’ polyamorous threesome is at times explicitly spiritual, pointing to the underlying ecstatic nature of a sexual “hunger beyond all reason” which ensures that there is “no hiding behind routine or assumed roles.” Snowdrop is the least sexually experienced of the three, and thus it seems appropriate that she should think Liam is “like some kind of pagan god claiming his due, and next to me, Scarlett is like Aphrodite herself.” Read theologically, the scene recalls the way in which, in the grip of an ecstatic experience, the believer’s

whole being seems to fuse in a glorious communion with the divinity. Transcendental experiences of this kind, typically conceived of as states of ‘possession’, have given the mystic a unique claim to direct experiential knowledge of the divine. (Lewis 2003, 15)

Scarlett does indeed make such a claim: she has both “a sudden, nearly spiritual moment of gratitude for Liam and whatever cosmic power brought him to our cabin” (Simone) and, the next morning, what

feels like the most important moment of my life. It feels like coming home, like destiny, like some part of me was constructed at birth to be in love with these two people—and I’m so, so aware that I know fuck all about Liam, but that doesn’t seem to matter.

There is, then, a clear expression of awareness of an external force, bringing the lovers together with its power; their emotion is not based on a detailed, legalistic assessment of each other’s characters. In such a context, when a protagonist exclaims “Holy fuck” this may literally be the case, and through it he has found a love for which he would “give [...] everything.”

It is precisely because ecstatic love’s intensity demands “everything” that those who are legalistically-inclined caution that it is not necessarily a safe type of love which brings lovers to a secure “home.” They would argue that ecstatic love can demand sacrifice, even martyrdom and that it is also possible for the “external or unknown forces” controlling it to be something other than the benevolent ones explicitly acknowledged in Cartland’s work or suspected in Simone’s.

Romance author Anne Stuart has described the risks which are involved when one protagonist is a person

whose sense of honor and decency is almost non-existent. A man with a dark midnight of the soul. The heroine can either bring light into the darkness or risk suffocating in the blackness of his all-encompassing despair.

The heroine’s attraction to the hero is never in doubt [...], she is willing to relinquish family, friends, career, life itself in giving herself to the vampire hero. She is willing to give up everything, to become an outcast. The fire of his appeal is worth the risk of conflagration. [...] It is a bond

that surpasses death and honor and the laws of man and nature. (86)

There is a clear acknowledgement here of the risk that ecstatic love may lead to destruction. Clearly, the core plot of the romance ensures that this will not occur to its protagonists, but the genre can and does acknowledge it as a possible outcome of ecstatic love.

By contrast, the rituals of the legalistic mode's "forms of religious activity tend to be much less stimulating: they may be highly repetitive or 'routinized', conducted in a relatively calm and sober atmosphere; such practices are often accompanied by the transmission of complex theology and doctrine" (Whitehouse 294). This description applies to what Paizis refers to as "marriage-love" (109), but which I shall call legalistic love. Its calm derives from the fact that the lovers share aims and values, as in many friends-to-lovers romances: broadly speaking it is a "love that is derived from socio-religious principles and has as its aim to serve religion, society, etc" (117). Synithia Williams expresses the ideal of the legalistic mode in her *Making it Real* (2015): this is love as "a partnership. Mutual trust, mutual love, mutual understanding. Give and take." This is a view of love which takes into account the strains and stresses of daily life, and argues that, as a secondary character states in K. M. Shea's *Beauty and the Beast* (2017),

Real love is looking at someone and knowing that you wouldn't mind waking up to their bad breath for the next century, and you are fine with them seeing you before you brush your hair and fix your face for the day. [...] Loving a person isn't a magical, sparkly passion. It's hard work. It's putting the other person before yourself. It's companionship and being able to trust and depend on each other. That theatrical true love everyone spouts about is really finding a partner who will go through the heartbreaks and joys of life with you.

Whereas ecstatic love creates bonds which may surpass "death and honor and the laws of man and nature," works about love which are in the legalistic mode insist that

though we might ‘fall’ in love with inappropriate people – for Aristotle, those who lack virtue, or don’t share similar ideals, or fail to wish and do each other well – it won’t work. Such an urge will go against the laws of (human) nature: and so, with such people, no lasting intimacy will be possible. (May 67)

In Mary Burchell’s *To Journey Together* (1956), Elinor Shearn recognises in time that Rudi is not someone she should marry. Rudi had come into a substantial inheritance from an unrelated elderly lady who, after a disagreement, had cut a relative, Anton, out of her will. Rudi is aware that, “if she had lived, she would probably have forgiven him [Anton] and changed round again” (174). He nonetheless sees no reason to share any of the money with Anton, and tells Elinor so shortly before proposing to her:

His attraction was indescribably strong upon her. She knew she had only to turn her head and his lips would be on hers. Already she savoured the moment with a delicious thrill of anticipation. But, even while the feel of his nearness excited and fascinated her, his words blew a strange, chill breath upon her eager enthusiasm. (176)

Her grounds for rejecting him are distinctly Aristotelian: “I am not the wife for you, my dear, and you are not the husband for me. We think and feel too differently ever to *be one*. That’s all there is to it” (177). The importance of shared values is also stressed in E. Davies’ *Swish* (2016). Alex, one of the heroes, is a private investigator but since “He never got hired to spy on *great* marriages or relationships between couples who finished one another’s sentences,” he turns to his parents, who have been happily “married for almost three decades” for advice:

“[...] there was a lot of work that went in behind the scenes to making it work. Compromises, learning to live with differences. And if those differences had been *too great*...”

“We would never have made it this long,” Mom agreed.

[...] “What do you mean? Life values?”

“Yes, and plans. We both wanted a kid, and to raise him a certain way. We wanted to live in the same kind of place and share the same kind of values.”

Legalistic love in fact resembles Aristotle’s ideal of friendship:

that of virtuous people who share their lives through conversation and common pursuits. Such sharing is possible only because they are roughly equal in virtue and intellect, and have common interests. Their equality and openness with one another also enable each to help the other improve in intellect and virtue (a state that comprehends practical wisdom, and thus sound deliberation and judgment). Aristotle regards such virtue friendships as vital ingredients of the happy or flourishing life. [...] Austen’s *Emma* illustrates this conception of friendship and happiness through its depiction of Emma’s friendship with Mr. Knightley. (Badhwar and Dadlez 25–26)

While some romances tend strongly towards either the legalistic or the ecstatic modes many, perhaps most, romances are neither purely ecstatic nor wholly legalistic. A conversation between Pamela Morsi’s protagonists in *Wild Oats* (1993) summarises why this so, in a way which links the issue very explicitly to theological beliefs:

“[...] love is more important than the rules, isn’t it, Cora?”

She was silent for a moment considering the words as if for the first time.

“Isn’t it?”

“Yes!” she said, then, “No!” She shook her head. “I don’t know!”

[...] “You can’t know. It was a trick question.” [...]

There was no amusement in his eyes, only sincerity. “The rules *can* be more important than love,” he said. “And *love* can be more important than the rules.”

Pulling her against him once more, he tried to make her understand. “You are right about needing the rules,” he said. “We need the Ten Commandments. We need the laws of the land. [...] And the customs of our society are all very important, too. [...] But sometimes, rules don’t help to uplift us, they only restrain us.”

“That doesn’t mean we can ignore them,” she said [...].

“No,” he agreed. “We can’t ignore them. There has to be a balance.” (238)

Romance will, no doubt, continue to explore the “trick question,” or mystery, of how to contain and combine the intense emotional appeal of the ecstatic with the moral and intellectual counterweight of the legalistic mode. One clear area of agreement between them, however, is the shared conviction that love is both good and durable.

## 2.1 Good

Theologian Natalia Marandiu has claimed that “an inherent component of any compelling vision of the good needed for human well-being is the experience of belonging, or being attached through love” (24). Her argument draws on Søren Kierkegaard’s declaration

that “[l]ove is the source of everything” and that it builds people up. In fact, “to build up is exclusively characteristic of love.” But what does it mean to build up? For Kierkegaard, [...] it refers to the *other* person’s journey of becoming. The receiver of love is the one who is being built up, developing and growing into a fuller subjectivity by the very experience of being loved, even as the giver also becomes a more capacious person by and through loving. (132)

The belief that love is good, and therefore improves those who experience it, is widespread. Author Elizabeth Lowell has claimed that

romance readers seek out romances to have “their belief in love’s constructive power affirmed” (91) because, out of all the genres, in romance alone is romantic love “affirmed as an immensely powerful *constructive* force in human life” (90). Another romance author, Melissa Storm, has written that “I’m a true believer in how love can come along at the perfect time and change our lives for the better—after all, it happened for me” and many romance novels can be read as illustrations that this belief is correct. True love, romance novels teach, brings happiness and improves lives: “Love doesn’t destroy” (Biggs 78).

In many romances the characterisation is such that the protagonists complement each other, so that each brings out the best in the other, and they support each other to be the best they can be. Since individuals vary, the positive, personality-enhancing effects of love will also vary, and therefore so too will the metaphors used to indicate recognition of the ways in which love improves people. As one of the heroes of Heather Long’s *Wolves of Willow Bend* series explains: “Mating is different for everyone. For some, it completes them. For others, it enhances who they are. For others, it opens a door to who they’ve always been.” His own mate tells him that “You make me whole [...] Like the piece I was always missing, but didn’t realize wasn’t there” and he responds that “You open doors in me. The world isn’t a simple place, not really, but with you ... I can handle anything, I know it.” None of these metaphors involve a wholesale rejection of the person as they were. As one heroine reports, over the course of the process, “I haven’t changed. I don’t think I ever will. But I’ve grown. I’m growing” (Hibbert 2018). Thus while it may be “against romance novel law or something to pin your hopes on someone changing into the right person” (Tenino 199), it is quite commonplace to witness a protagonist “transforming into what he’s meant to be. Like a butterfly” (199) and receiving support to do so. In a relationship of mutual love, a secondary character in another novel declares, “You make each other better. If that isn’t love, I don’t know what is” (Nash).

At its simplest, this can be about increasing self-belief, as in Rebecca Taylor’s *Affective Needs* (2016), in which the hero tells the heroine that

“[...] Everything ... that’s what I owe you.”

I gave him my look of disbelief. “What? That’s not true.



Everything you've done you've done on your own."

"But I never would have believed I could, if I hadn't seen that belief through your eyes first. When you said I could make my life better ... that was it. That was the moment I knew it too."

"You just never saw yourself the way I did."

"You're right. I never did."

The dynamics of personal improvement described here are very similar to those in a romance published over 100 years earlier: *Attraction* (1913) by Louise Mack, in which the hero at the end offers up a toast "To Her whose belief in me made all things possible" (336). Knowing that they are loved can give people the necessary self-belief to improve.

One final point which should be mentioned is that love's benefits are often shown to flow outwards from the central relationship. This aspect of love is implicit in Pamela Regis's description of an "accidental element" (38) in romance whereby a society which is "flawed" (31) is "reconstituted" (38). Romance reader Jennifer Porter has argued that, far from being an optional element, for many readers it is as necessary as the happy ending for the protagonists: "We romance readers don't just want the HEA/FN [Happy Ever After/For Now] we want an HEA/FN in a righted universe. If the universe isn't right, many of use [sic] reject the HEA/FN even if it exists." The extent to which a society or "universe" is, or can be, "reconstituted" and "righted" will vary from novel to novel, but it is likely that love will be powerfully good enough to produce at least some net benefit for the protagonists' community. As a ghost says in Kaje Harper's *Nor Iron Bars a Cage* (2013), "Each moment of love in the world lifts us all up. Any kind of love."

## 2.2 Durable

Romance novels, as author Linda Lee asserted in her guide to writing them, depict romantic love in a manner that "is idealistic, in that it is the perfect, true, and lasting love" (2). Of course there are romances in

which the lovers have divorced each other or parted in some other way, but since they are then reunited such plots still suggest that

Love *does* last. It's...it's like the creek that flows from Devil Lake. Sometimes it's fast, sometimes slow. Some years it thunders over the spires at the edge of the mesa, and then later it seeps out through the layers of rock. But it's always *here*, bringing life to the desert. Even in the darkest part of winter, when the snow covers everything, the creek runs underneath. (Jade)

True love, then, lasts at least as long as life; Marilyn Lowery, however, goes further, claiming in *How to Write Romance Novels that Sell* (1983) that romance novels tell their readers “that true love lasts forever” (18). This is certainly true of some romances. Jeffery Farnol's *Sir John Dering* (1923), for example, includes the following poetic declaration from one lover to his beloved:

though death  
must needs come  
to us soon or late,  
yet do I know we can  
never die since Love  
is immortal. So by  
thy love shall I live  
on beyond death  
with thee for  
ever. (364)

Almost seventy years later, we can find a heroine expressing much the same conviction to her hero: “having found you, I know I shall never truly die, because our love is too strong ever to end” (Dolan 225).

Belief in love's existence beyond death seems to express a

Desire for transcendence, not just of the self but of the self's mortality, [which] has motivated the will to faith since the first syllable of recorded time; and, if love is a faith,

we ought to find that some of its devotees see it as a hope in confronting—or avoiding—the problem of personal death and annihilated consciousness. (Polhemus 81)

Even Nathaniel Roy “an atheist” member of the National Secular Society who is certain “there is no life after death” and is one of the heroes in K. J. Charles’ *An Unnatural Vice* (2017) finds that after his first visit to Justin Lazarus, whom he knows to be “a disgraceful fraud” of a spiritualist, he “wanted to believe” and

had lain awake all night imagining *what if*. What if he could speak to Tony once more? What if there was a way? What if there *was* an afterward?

There wasn’t, and he knew there wasn’t, but the longing was sharp and painful.

Tony was Nathaniel’s lover and it seems significant that it should be the desire for love to be eternal and persist after death which pushes Nathaniel to query his convictions regarding the spiritual.

Although some paranormal romances ensure the durability of love by granting their protagonists extended, interdependent lifespans, most romances implicitly accept that, as the protagonists of L. A. Witt’s *The Walls Between Hearts* (2019) state quite explicitly, “No one lived forever. To fall in love, to find a happily ever after, meant knowing that one day, someone was going to have to let go.” Like Chris, the hero of Alice Wootson’s *Aloha Love* (2005), who has just survived a helicopter accident with his heroine, romance readers and authors are aware that

“[...] anything can happen at any time. We could have been killed. Just a few weeks ago a chopper went down and members of several families died.”

“I know. I also know that today, somewhere, many more people were killed in car accidents. And others in robberies, and still others for various reasons. Whoever said that tomorrow isn’t promised was speaking the truth. We can’t focus on what might happen. That could drive us crazy.” (118)

Rather than dwelling on “what might happen” in a way which “could drive us crazy,” many romances choose to emphasise possibilities which are more pleasant. As Charles Garvice, a best-selling author of romance novels at the start of the 20th century explained: “why choose only nasty experience? ... I [...] have drawn from life. Only I have tried to see the sweeter side of life; it’s just as real and a great deal more pleasant” (Waller 690).

However, some romances do explore the possibility of the death of a beloved and acknowledge that the pain of bereavement raises questions about both love’s durability and its goodness. Witt’s novel, for instance, charts the development of Terry’s third true-love relationship (the previous two having ended in the deaths of his partners). The plot acknowledges and answers doubts about love’s durability and goodness through Terry’s epiphany that he “would give literally anything to have been spared the pain of losing them. Literally anything *except* the time I had with them. I can’t imagine giving that up.” That time was too good to give up, and since he has the opportunity for more such goodness with Gene, “the fear of the end shouldn’t make me avoid all the good things in between.” Indeed, Terry even entertains the possibility that “Maybe the grief I’ve had in my life isn’t all bad because it means I had someone worth grieving.” Like one of K. M. Jackson’s protagonists, he reaches out for love because while “Nothing is promised and we can’t control what life throws at us [...] what we can do is take the time we have now and not waste it, use it while we can and enjoy it loving each other” (Jackson).

Although Lynne Pearce, in an exploration of “Romance and Repetition” (2011), found that in the “canon of classic romance,” the preservation of love’s durability was achieved by either “focusing on only *one* relationship for the duration of the story and then bring[ing] the romance in question to a clean and definitive ending in marriage (‘the white wedding’) or “If previous relationships did feature for one or both of the parties, they are very manifestly not ‘the real thing’ and explained away” by discrediting the emotions (as not-true-love) and perhaps also the beloved (as not worthy of true love), this is not the case in Witt’s novel. Rather than discrediting the previous relationships, this romance stresses dura-

bility of true love to endure till death parts lovers and, even so, it is clear that in some ways the love Terry feels for the men he loved and lost did not end with their deaths. It lives on in his memories. This form of durability is made explicit in Radclyffe's *Fated Love* (2004), in which it is made clear that Honor moves on towards a new relationship while still loving her deceased wife "Forever and always" (203) and it discredits neither relationship because, as Honor explains to her young daughter, "Everybody we care about is very special to us [...] But we care about each person a little bit differently, too. [...] So I can care about *both* of them a lot" (207).

Moreover, given that, as discussed in the previous section, love's goodness flows outwards from the central relationship, the consequences of this flow can persist even after death, as it does in the loving relationships Terry continues to have with his deceased husband's biological child, Aaron (who is also Terry's adoptive son), with Aaron's wife, and with their daughter.



## Chapter 3

# Hope

Faith in love, which is both good and durable, produces hope. Nora Roberts has stated that “Romance novels are books about hope, the hope that love will find a way, whatever the odds, whatever the obstacles. That core of hope is the foundation for a rich and exciting genre” (1996, 6). Hope is the popular romance novel’s “foundation” and, arguably, “the one word that defines the romance genre” (Charles 2018), because although the love expressed in the “central love story” (RWA 2020) is a requirement,

You get love in all kinds of books [...]. What romance novels specifically offer us is *hope*. Hope that two people can come together and be better happier humans as a result. Hope that marginalised or disregarded or unhappy people can find love and joy in a hard world; hope that however flawed you are, however scared, however much you feel like a piece of the jigsaw that doesn’t fit, there is a place and a person for whom you are just right; hope for the future. (Charles 2018)

Critics of the romance have cast scorn on its hopeful promises, much as Karl Marx notoriously deemed religion “the opium of the people” on the grounds that it promised only an “illusory happiness” (131). David Margolies, for example, has stated that, “As in Marx’s description of religion [...], the romance offers escape from an oppressive reality, or justifies it as a vale of tears that women pass through to salvation” (12). According to Janice Radway romance, like opium, offers a promise of escape

and salvation which is only illusory since “despite the utopian force of the romance’s projection, that projection actually leaves unchallenged the very system of social relations whose faults and imperfections gave rise to the romance” (215). In other words, romance novels, as Marx said of religion, are “an expression of and a protest against real wretchedness” (131) which nonetheless, Teresa L. Ebert argues, “leave intact the objective social conditions in which she [the reader] lives. They do this by supplanting social justice and economic equality with love, intimacy, and caring” (10).

In *On-Air Passion*, a Harlequin romance published in 2018, Lindsay Evans engages with such assessments of romance fiction by creating a hero, Ahmed, who argues that the promises of romance hinder political change. Ahmed is a committed “activist” (57) who discusses political issues on his mid-morning radio talk-show, spends a significant portion of his leisure time “meeting with politicians and donating money” (57) and, as a recently-retired basketball star, has tried “to use his celebrity to draw attention to the things he cared about” (35), in particular “the kids in Georgia who’d lost their schools and been consistently denied equal educational opportunities” (35). He believes that love and romance are “delusions” (20) and “lies” (78) and therefore argues that political activism “is what’s important, not setting people up to have unrealistic expectations of each other” (37). Much like the critics of romance fiction, he suggests that belief in romance is incompatible with “paying attention to the reality of this world” (19).

If the hope offered by romance was “nothing else than the expectation of those things which faith has believed to have been truly promised” (Calvin qtd. in Moltmann 20), then one might indeed expect those who believe in love to sit patiently, waiting and hoping for the day on which their prince or princess will arrive. However, it is perhaps more accurate to consider the hope in romance novels to be an eschatological hope for the triumph of love (the “happy ending”) which, to borrow theologian Jürgen Moltmann’s words, “sets about criticizing and transforming the present because it is open towards the universal future” (335).

As we have seen, love’s goodness is made evident partly through the transformations it effects and although, as Kate Cuthbert, managing ed-



itor of Escape Publishing, acknowledged in a keynote speech to the Romance Writers of Australia in 2018

At the beginning, hope in romance was tied to finding the right husband [...] it didn't stop there. Romance hoped new hopes for women: personhood, careers, ambition, self-acceptance, self-love, sex, [...] lively and nourishing friendships, and passionate and enduring love affairs. But mostly romance hoped for women's lives to be well-lived.

Along the way, romance also hoped [...] that men would be able to cry, dance, feel joy and unshakeable love, and express those things out loud. It hoped that everyone would be able to find a happy ever after with whomever they loved. Romance hoped a lot of hopes for many different people, but mostly it hoped for a world better than the one that currently exists.

Romance authors have long used their writing to raise awareness of a wide range of social and political issues. Barbara Cartland's " 'welfare' or 'radical' Toryism [...] was the kind of Conservatism that is opposed to *laissez-faire*, places a high premium on justice and fair play" (Brunt 132), and led her to campaign

for improved conditions for nurses, midwives and the elderly and [...] winning government legislation for the provision of local council sites for gypsies. She opened the first such camp, Barbaraville, and ensured that Romany children were baptised and educated. (134)

Her "platform of views" also "constitutes a bedrock set of opinions which are then expressed and elaborated [...] in the fiction-writing which she insists must have some moral purpose beyond being 'merely fiction'" (133). One can find more examples among less high profile authors (see Vivanco 2011, 54–60) and in response to more recent events: the year 2020 saw romance activists hitting the headlines after Alyssa Cole, Courtney Milan, and Kit Rocha organised an online auction,

which eventually raised almost half a million dollars (Romancing the Runoff 2020a), “to help dismantle the legacy of voter suppression in Georgia” (Romancing the Runoff 2020). Cole, Milan and Rocha argued that there was a close connection between their activism and the genre in which they write:

at their core, romance novels are about figuring out how to work through a dark moment to find that Happily Ever After. “We read these books about the world falling apart and people coming together to put it back together to get their happy ending,” [Bree] Bridges [half of the duo who write as “Kit Rocha”] explains. “It’s almost like a training.” (Herman)

The genre can therefore be considered to call for works as well as for faith, for a hope which is not passive but which engages with the world, not just a beloved, in order to achieve happiness.

Lindsay Evans’s heroine, Elle, provides a fictional example of how activism can be supported by “the celebration of love” which is associated with “hope” (20). She finds in it “an escape” (20), not from reality, since love itself “is as real as life gets” (19), but from the hopelessness which might arise from focussing on “the ugliness the world keeps throwing at us” (20). Having “freely embraced her own pessimism” (144) in the political sphere, Elle believes events “like the Rosewood massacre or the 1921 Tulsa race riot could easily happen again” (86). Politically, her pessimism is such that while she admires her best friend and business partner Shaye’s “strength to constantly push back against a system fighting to keep people uneducated and unaware” (141), she fears that “the world was destined to break Shaye’s heart” (144). Elle does, nonetheless, make a contribution by opening “her checkbook” (141). She thus proves Ahmed and the critics of romance wrong: she is very much aware of the need for political change and it is precisely because this awareness is so strong that she needs the hope provided by her belief in love. As theologian A. Elaine Brown Crawford argues, hope can be defined as

the theological construct that moves [...believers] beyond endurance to survival and, ultimately, toward the transfor-

mation of oppressive circumstances. Hope is the bridge from oppression to liberation that facilitates full humanity and fosters an undaunted passion for life. (xii)

Thus, even when romances deal solely with “love, intimacy, and caring” and eschew a broader engagement with “social justice and economic equality,” their role in providing hope to individuals may indirectly benefit society.

This role creates a parallel between the work of romance authors and that of pastors: “the offer of hope is central to what pastors do. Oftentimes, it is all that they can offer. To be a pastor is to be a provider or agent of hope” (Capps 1). Moreover, Howard Stone and Andrew Lester emphasise the importance of stories to pastoral care:

Since hope is future-oriented, caring for persons who feel hopeless means helping them to *imagine*. Those who lack the capacity to fantasize, to imagine, to picture in their mind’s eye events that have yet to occur, cannot hope. Despairing people tend to envision a pessimistic outcome. They communicate it with phrases such as: “That’s impossible.” “That will never work.” “I can’t do that.” “I don’t know where to go from here.” [...] Alternative, hopeful future stories allow space for creation’s inherent potential to develop. They free persons to explore options, to experience new things, to imagine change, to expect surprises, and to anticipate growth. (262)

The “future stories” Stone and Lester were referring to are the kinds of narratives people create about their own lives and include “The visions, vocations, and commitments that give our lives meaning and fill us with hope” (260). Nonetheless, romance novels can be considered a related type of “hopeful future stories” because they allow readers to “experience new things, to imagine change, to expect surprises, and to anticipate growth.” As author Paula Detmer Riggs has stated:

If the people in my fictive world can face their own mistakes, learn to forgive themselves, and rise above the harm they’ve

caused themselves and others, so can each and every one of us.

Our mistakes are most likely far more benign, and yet, perhaps, just as painful to admit. [...] It's often easier to accept our failings when we compare them to the far more serious failings of fictional folks. Living through their pain, seeing them make restitution and thus find redemption and happiness is often enough to encourage us to do the same. (188)

Romance can thus be considered a form of pastoral caregiving, particularly when it is received by "troubled people" (Stone and Lester 259) such as the reader who, in the years after she was "diagnosed with clinical depression," found that romances offered

more than simple enjoyment – they gave me faith that I could carry on and, if not completely beat my depression, sneaky chronic bastard that it is, I could at least learn to live with it. Build a satisfying life, maybe even find my own happily ever after. (Ciucci)

or the reader-turned-author who testified that she

started reading Harlequin romances at the time of my parents' divorce, when I was about eleven. [...] The irony that I turned to romance at a time of family breakdown is not lost on me. [...] They gave me hope. They gave me a belief in love that lasted, in happy endings. They promised that relationships could work out, that all was not lost. It was a message I desperately needed to hear. (Reid Boyd 267)

Like a talking therapy, romances "allow space for [...] inherent potential to develop" (Stone and Lester 262): they give readers a safe space in which to

figure out how to get to the happy place. And sometimes the path isn't always clean and it's not always easy and even at the end sometimes the questions aren't all answered and

everything's not tied up in a bow and that's okay too because that's life. (Rai qtd. in Faircloth 2017)

The chapter which follows explores in more detail a variety of ways in which romance provides pastoral care.



## Chapter 4

# Pastoral Care

The ministry of the cure of souls, or pastoral care, consists of helping acts, done by representative [...] persons, directed toward the healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling of troubled persons whose troubles arise in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns. (Clebsch and Jaekle 4)

William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jaekle define “representative [...] persons” as “persons who, either *de jure* or *de facto*, bring to bear upon human troubles the resources, the wisdom, and the authority of [...] faith and life” (4). Romance authors clearly qualify as such both because, as mentioned in the previous chapter, they resemble pastors in offering hope and because, as discussed in the chapter about faith, by publicising their credentials as individuals with particular experience of and knowledge about love, they give themselves a level of authority in discussing love.

A few authors have brought this authority to bear fairly directly, as when “Ruby M. Ayres was answering readers’ problem letters in *Home Companion* in the 1950s” (Anderson 1974, 266). Generally however, they exert the capacity to help troubled readers through their fiction. Debbie Macomber, for instance, has written that her “major goal” is the writing of “uplifting books. When people finish a [...] story I want them to feel better about life, about the future. I want to imbue my readers with enthusiasm and hope” (Jaegly 76). Author Jennifer Greene has acknowledged that

Possibly that caring between reader and writer is something that someone outside the romance field wouldn't understand. Romances are about us—our struggles, our hopes, our needs. [...] I sincerely believe that romances have the unique power to reach each other—and to help each other. That's always been my front line goal in writing. (Jaegly 42–43)

This “caring between reader and writer” is not simply felt by authors: communications from readers attest to their perception of its existence. Leigh Michaels, for example, once averred that she was

in awe of the ways in which my stories have touched the lives of my readers. I've heard from people who have been able to deal with painful past relationships because of a story I wrote, who can look more positively on lives full of sadness or illness because of the escape my characters offer. There's even a reader whose life may have been saved because my story about carbon monoxide poisoning prompted her to have her furnace checked. (Jaegly 86)

The reciprocal nature of this understanding of the role romances can play in readers' lives is significant since pastoral care

begins when an individual person recognizes or feels that his trouble is insolvable in the context of his own private resources, and when he becomes willing, however subconsciously, to carry his hurt and confusion to a person who represents to him, however vaguely, the resources and wisdom and authority of religion. (Clebsch and Jaekle 5)

Of course, some readers are considerably less troubled than others but,

as Harlequin has found with its reader focus groups, [...] reading offers [...] a temporary rest from the present stress and demands of life.

One woman in a focus group mentioned that her every waking moment was spent caring for her son, who was dying.



The only time she had to forget that daily pain was when she was reading a romance, because then she could get away from that imminent unhappy ending.

It's not always a tragic situation that brings readers back to romance. Any amount of rest from a present stress could be desired. (Wendell 33–34)

The mother of a dying child was quite clearly troubled “in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns” but all stresses which involve doubts about the purpose of one’s life and how one relates to others are associated with “ultimate meanings and concerns” to a faith which centres around love. That romance novels can heal, guide, reconcile and sustain their readers is evident from the accounts of both readers and authors.

#### 4.1 Healing

Healing is “that function in which a representative [...] person helps a debilitated person to be restored to a condition of wholeness, on the assumption that this restoration achieves also a new level of spiritual insight and welfare” (Clebsch and Jaekle 8). Hope, which brings with it “a new level of spiritual insight and welfare” is, as we have seen, a medicine in plentiful supply in the romance author’s pharmacy. Indeed, hope is such an important feature of romance reading that Janice Radway, having studied romance readers, “found it impossible to ignore their [...] fervent insistence that romance reading creates a feeling of hope, provides emotional sustenance, and produces a fully visceral sense of well-being” (12). Romance fiction is thus an ideal treatment for hopelessness, which pastoral theologian Andrew D. Lester has described as being “like an infection that invades a person’s being and causes a sickness of the spirit. Despair is a serious spiritual disease” (72).

Maysie Greig, writing in the 1930s, felt that “*happy* love stories” were an antidote to this illness:

You can so infect people with your own misery that you can make them miserable when they were quite happy and

contented before. To be happy is as though you opened every window in your mind and let in strong, clean sunlight. That is why I think every one should try to be happy, and read stories that make one happy, rather than those that increase one's sense of futility and despair. (qtd. in Anderson 1982, 318)

In an article published in 1988, Amal Treacher, a feminist academic, bore witness to the fact that romance could function as an cure, albeit a temporary one, for depression:

I pick up and read romantic fiction when I am feeling depressed, unloved and unloveable, and somehow, through the process of reading, I manage to feel loved even if in fleeting and intangible moments. What the books satiate, even if very fleetingly, is the longing to be loved[,] to feel full, whole, integrated. (82)

Many readers “pick up and read romantic fiction” when they are already feeling happy and loved; they are not readers in need of pastoral care. For those readers who do require pastoral assistance, however, it appears that some degree of healing can be produced by romances, probably through their general emphasis on the positive and hopeful in life (central to which, of course, is love).

Some romances, however, attempt to heal very specific hurts. The advice imparted by one Barbara Cartland heroine may, admittedly, seem to some to be too trivial to classify as healing: in one novel the heroine advises the mother of a baby who “is teething” (109) to use honey to “soothe him and make him sleep [...] Just give him a little on the tip of your finger, [...] and put half a teaspoonful in his bottle. [...] I promise you it will keep him from crying, and it will also make him grow strong. Honey is very good for babies” (110). Parents who have experienced a baby who “cries not only all day, but also at night” (109) will no doubt consider this situation rather less trivial and, indeed, will well understand how parents such as this tired mother, with a husband who is made “very angry” (109) by the crying, will almost certainly achieve “a new level of

spiritual insight and welfare” once their sleep ceases to be disturbed. Furthermore, Cartland’s intent here was almost certainly to perform a “helping act”: she believed so strongly in the benefits of honey that she wrote *The Magic of Honey Cookbook* (1976), presumably to encourage the consumption of a substance she considered to be “the greatest medicine [...] in the world” (9).

An authorial intent to provide healing to those in a more serious situation can be discerned in Lucy Monroe’s *Blackmailed into Marriage* (2005), in which the author explicitly stated that she included information regarding one particular “physiological sexual dysfunction” and its treatment,

for the tens of thousands of women who suffer in silence [...]. Only one in ten will seek treatment and of those, less than thirty percent will be willing to undergo physiological treatment such as the dilation procedure for vaginismus. I hope that if you are one of the women suffering in silence, you will be silent no longer, but most of all that you will realize that it’s not your fault. (187)

Monroe appears to have been intent not just on guiding readers towards physical healing but also on healing their emotional pain.

This dual intent is also apparent with regards to the information concerning miscarriage which is provided by Holley Trent’s *The Coyote’s Bride* (2018). Here the heroine’s doctor states that although “Nobody talks about it [...] it’s more common than you think” and the text provides a warning that it is possible for some miscarriages to require “immediate treatment” and a blood transfusion, though “The anemia from the blood [...] lost from the complications would eventually correct.” The information was included for pastoral reasons, as Trent made explicit in an author’s note at the end of the book:

in this story, my intention wasn’t to downplay the heartache of pregnancy loss but to educate readers about how common miscarriages are. They were discussed in hushed tones when I was growing up, and so when I

experienced a string of them, for a while, I thought they were all my fault. I wondered what I could do differently.

And like Lily, I had one of those situations that should have resolved itself uneventfully but ended up sending me to the hospital (in an ambulance). The doctors said it was a fluke.

Trent added on her blog that

That was an experience I inserted into the history of my character Lily, not because I wanted to shock or upset readers, but because I hoped that if I could reach a few who *needed* that story at that exact moment and who felt empowered by her rebound-in-progress, it'd be worth it.

The information thus serves to direct readers towards physical healing should they experience the type of miscarriage which requires urgent medical attention but, perhaps more importantly, it seeks to produce emotional healing.

Prevention is often preferable to healing damage which has already occurred and it is logical, therefore, that some romances offer guidance on how to avoid injury. Leigh Michaels' story which included information about carbon monoxide was mentioned in the previous section and Joanna Chambers' *Unnatural* (2017) depicts a child being saved because the hero has learned from tragic prior experience to recognise the signs of drowning. As the author observes in a note to the reader,

The instinctive, and uncontrollable, response of a drowning person is to extend the arms laterally, pressing down on the water, and lift the chin—both actions allowing the victim to continue breathing as long as possible. The victim goes very still and is unable to wave or shout out to signal their distress, usually quietly sinking below the water within a minute or so.

While Chambers does not state that the information is intended to benefit readers should they find themselves in similar circumstances to the

hero, her note explicitly claims that her depiction of drowning differs from (and thus, by implication, counters) the way in which it “is often depicted on film [...], with the victim shown to be violently and noisily struggling in the water.”

Another romance which appears to intentionally impart information in order to preserve its readers and their loved-ones from harm is Brenda Jackson’s *Tonight and Forever* (1995) in which the depiction of condom-use “can be seen as teaching, or endeavoring to teach, socially responsible behavior to a community of readers who could potentially be affected by HIV/AIDS” (Moody-Freeman 2016, 120):

Given the sexual health environment of the mid to late 1990s, the years in which Jackson’s first novels were published, these eroticized and romanticized depictions of safe sex practices might well be read as a deliberate, didactic intervention by the novelist, aimed at illustrating to her readers how they can experience pleasure even as they choose to become responsible agents accountable for their own healthy sexual practices. (Moody-Freeman 2016, 112–13)

Certainly feminist romance reader and academic Jenni M. Simon, who was at school in the 1990s, relates that her health classes taught her only

how my body worked as a site of reproduction and pleasure for a man. I learned how to protect myself and what to be fearful of. However, nowhere in that education was a tutorial on why I still wanted to have sex—despite the unpleasant outcomes. (ix)

Her first romance novel gave her information which enabled her to understand her sexuality differently, and she remains

forever grateful for the person who introduced me to the romance genre. [...] I learned more from that book about my body and what I should expect from a partner than the state issued textbook I was provided in Health class. (ix)

Certain environments are perhaps more conducive to healing than others. For mental health issues, for example, the privacy of a therapist's couch may be beneficial. Gail Araujo, in her summary of the interviews she held with nine romance readers found that this was the type of environment romance novels could provide. They served as a safe space in which readers could:

escape into themselves, a place where there will [be] no judgments, and where they can explore their feelings about issues without having to explain or justify the need for these explorations or their ultimate feelings about them. Although all of the women have strong social networks of friends and other women with whom they can share their thoughts and feelings, there is always the fear or sense that these moments of sharing may come with judgments or the giving of advice. Reading as an emotionally interpretive act provides a private outlet for women to confide and confess their feelings and thoughts without this judgment or the need for justification. (52)

Similarly, reader and writer Robin Lovett found that romance was "an excellent place [...] to recover from sexual assault" in part because

Page after page, romance novels say to the reader, "You are in control. You decide. You deserve what you want." With my everyday hypervigilance degrading my needs and telling me that going after what I wanted would put my life in danger, to read romance heroines doing just that and thriving reinforced all the wisdom my therapist could supply.

It may be argued that some or all of these examples do not fulfill all the criteria established for pastoral healing. If so, romance may not be alone in finding it difficult to perform this function, for at a time when physical healing is most often performed by medical professionals who may also, along with psychologists and counsellors, undertake emotional healing, "Of the four functions of pastoral care, healing seems [...] most problematical in itself" (Clebsch and Jaekle 42).

## 4.2 Guiding

Romance novels can provide guidance in a number of areas. The

pastoral function of guiding consists of assisting perplexed persons to make confident choices between alternative courses of thought and action, when such choices are viewed as affecting the present and future state of the soul. (Clebsch and Jackle 9)

The pastoral nature of guidance in romance is assured by virtue of romance's beliefs about the nature of love: in romance any decisions regarding relationships, both personal and communal, can be considered to affect "the present and future state of the soul" inasmuch as true love is deemed to be both long-lasting and beneficial. Authors of romantic fiction generally have "an interest in, liking for and understanding of real people, and a desire to convey those insights and emotions to readers through characters" (Baker 74). According to Helene Schellenberg Barnhart, theirs is a profession which allows them to "touch other lives, expanding other minds with information you've carefully researched and with stimulating ideas born in your imagination. You'll be privileged to touch the human heart, stirring it to new awareness" (249).

In order to be able to make "confident choices," it is generally necessary to feel well informed about the various options available. There are many social issues which can be expected to affect romance readers and their communities, either directly or indirectly, and about which they may at some point have to make "choices" so, in their writing, authors have often explored "divisive issues like class, love, women's sexuality and pleasure, rape, virginity, money, feminism, masculinity, and equality" (Rodale 12). In recent decades they have engaged with "multiple social concerns like PTSD syndrome in the US after the Iraq war, and discuss whatever issues may be affecting personal relationships in contemporary society, from single-parenthood to online dating services" (Pérez Casal). One study, based on "129 romances [...], published between 1978 and 2013" (Chelton 268) involving adoption, found that "In terms of information-seeking, adoption reunion romances

do provide in the aggregate mostly the same information on adoption searching as that recounted in true memoirs and adoption search manuals” (270). Such information could assist both parents who have given a child up for adoption, and adopted children themselves, in making “confident choices between alternative courses of thought and action.”

The benefit of fictionalisation is, as one author, Daphne Clair, has stated, that

Serious matters are [...] individualized, given a personal face. One woman’s efforts to overcome the effects of rape on her love life, or one man’s battle with alcoholism for the sake of his relationship with a woman, described by a skilled and sincere writer, can illuminate, educate, comfort, and influence, even mobilize. A reader who cares about your characters will gain understanding of their problems in a wider sense. Stories influence readers. (Grant 12)

Although it is somewhat unusual for authors to elaborate precisely what type of understanding they hope their readers will gain, or the kind of comfort they wish to impart, they do sometimes do so. Talia Hibbert’s *Merry Inkmas* (2017), for example, concludes with an author’s note in which she states that:

Homelessness in Britain is on the rise, and certain groups are especially vulnerable. From LGBTQ+ youth to victims of domestic violence, the disadvantaged are often the first to suffer.

[...] I ask that you bear in mind the principles of love and kindness to all. Everyone is human; everyone deserves safety. No matter where you live, someone in your local community needs you—even if all you have to give is friendship.

The explanation in the first paragraph, and the pleas in the second, appear to be directed to readers who, while they may benefit from gaining a



greater understanding of the issues raised here and in the novel as a whole, have not experienced them directly. However, it is clear that in assisting these readers to remember “the principles of love and kindness to all,” Hibbert may be seen to be attending to the “present and future state of the soul[s]” of these readers.

Thomas J. Roberts has argued that, in addition to providing readers with information, popular fiction parades “before us models and countermodels of the exemplary that help us to see ourselves for what we are” (128). It can be said, then, that

novels may fulfil for us some of the functions that lives of the saints performed traditionally. People used to read, and some still do read, such lives in order to understand the nature of virtues like constancy and fidelity [...] and their role in human lives, and to discern, in the way people change over time, the redemptive power of grace in those lives. (Sherry 108)

With regards specifically to romance novels it would seem more accurate to refer to the redemptive power of love rather than of grace and, given the variety of literary modes that are used, it would be wrong to assume that all romance protagonists are the equivalents of saints and therefore models of a very elevated calibre. Nonetheless, there are many who appear in some ways “superior in degree” (Frye 33) to normal human beings; such protagonists are, indeed, so frequent in the genre that Susan Ostrov Weisser has complained that in “love stories [...] the ones who are lovable and are loved (not necessarily the same) are [...] represented as a privileged class, to be imitated or at least envied” (11).

Daphne Clair has stated that

The great bulk of romantic heroines are good models for young women if they really want to use them that way: they’re gutsy, they have hard times, they survive. It’s more subtle in the older books. It had to be. [...] I suppose romances to some extent give women clues. (McAlpine 62–63)

Of course, as Clair implies, some readers may neither need or choose to “use them that way” and Clair adds the caveat that romances leave the power of interpretation in the hands of readers because they “are not ‘how to’ books”; she does not “set out to improve my readers. I think that would be a hell of a cheek” (62).

If romances guide their readers, then, it is in a collaborative manner, dependent on the readers’ discernment. Even Sam, a protagonist in Anne Tenino’s *Romancelandia* series who has “a habit of reading romance novel plots into everything” (81) and is convinced that “Romance novels have an often uncanny ability to predict reality” (198), acknowledges this need for readers to assess and interpret their contents because

what happens in a book is *distilled* reality. [...] Because it’s the written word, not a movie or anything, readers need, like, fortified reality in order to really *feel* the character’s journey, so the author has to amp things up. Look at all the steps that go into making something happen and then only pick out the important ones, *then* she has to, like, give it steroids. Make it bigger than it would be in real life. (382)

As the psychologists Stephanie C. Stern et al. have observed,

Fiction has been characterized as a form of simulated social experience that allows the reader to practice attributing motives, emotions, and other mental states to characters engaged in social interactions that are embedded in a larger, simulated social world. (450)

There are certainly examples of readers using romances to explore sensitive issues. In the 1990s, for example, the

Owners of a bookstore in South Carolina that regularly encourage[d] book swaps, parties, and discussions said that romance plots are often used by readers as a framework to discuss issues that might otherwise seem too controversial or too personal. Not surprisingly, these issues often—though not always—were directly related to expectations and negotiations of gender. (Williams and Freedman 149)

A similar, albeit fictional, situation is described in Laurie Paige's *The Cowboy Next Door* (1999). Paige's heroine, Cybil, runs "a sort of dude ranch for women who were in the process of getting a divorce" (13) and, perhaps

Surprisingly, her clients read the romance books she bought and discussed the problems of the main characters as if they were old friends. She thought the heroines' problems sometimes helped them to work through their own troubles. (104)

Perhaps these fictional clients would concur with author Helen Mittermeyer's suggestion that,

In some ways, a writer can define truths and lies along the romantic highway. She can achieve this by cataloguing the bumps in the road and by pointing out the necessity of controlling the ride and not being a passive passenger in dealing with life. [...] Romance novels are entertainment, but no one can say there's nothing to learn from them. (55)

Marianne K. Martin, an author of lesbian romances, similarly argues that

We need love, and we need to know where to find it, how to accept it, and how to keep it. I certainly don't have all the answers, but I like to think that by presenting life-like situations and allowing my characters to hope and letting them search and helping them to succeed that I send the message of possibility to my readers. (qtd. in Pearce 2004, 99)

### 4.3 Reconciling

Romance novels model not just individuals and their behaviours, but also relationships between individuals. As such, they may be deemed to perform the function of "reconciling" when they seek "to re-establish broken relationships" (Clebsch and Jaekle 9). It must, however, be

acknowledged that some romance novels depict unhealthy communication and do not provide realistic models for reconciliation. Daniela Kramer and Michael Moore were concerned about the patterns of communication they found in Harlequin Mills & Boon novels from the 1990s and therefore stressed that

Free-flowing, congruent communication is a basic necessity for every healthy society, and its lack is a symptom of pathology. Small, primary groups, such as the family, are especially sensitive in this respect: Intimacy is fed by open communication, as if it were a lifeline. When romantic fiction's heroes and heroines lie to and insult each other [...] and actively hide their thoughts and emotions from the one person on earth with whom they will purportedly spend the rest of their life, they do more than just present a bad example: They spread the myth that this is how it is, that discommunication can serve as the ground for a lasting relationship. (35)

Kramer and Moore recognise that “there is an implication in these novels [...] that ‘things will get better’ after the wedding” (35), and that a “corollary of this belief” is the belief “that love changes people, and that this change is for the better” (37) but this only leads them to warn that “It is hard to exaggerate the potential damage of such an unrealistic expectation from spousehood” (35). It should not be assumed, however, that all readers who believe in love’s transformative power have unrealistic expectations and therefore anticipate witnessing such dramatic transformations in their own lives. Indeed, a lack of realism may be signalled to the reader in various ways: the metaphor of devilishness, for example, may be deployed to describe one of the protagonists (as in many of the novels discussed in Chapter 9), or explicit allusions may be made to a fairy tale such as *Beauty and the Beast*, which Kramer and Moore recognised as a template for roughly a third of the novels in their sample (37). Such romances can be considered to depict miracles of love: they portray risky, unlikely scenarios and are best read theologically, as parables about the power of love, rather than as models for behaviour.

Romances can, nonetheless, help readers with their own relationships. In 1997 practicing psychotherapist Victoria L. Badik wrote that she had used genre fiction, including romance novels, to assist in the process of reconciliation:

Many of the problems seen in a typical therapist's practice are essentially communication problems. Phrases like "He just doesn't understand!" or "She doesn't get it!" are heard all too often. By introducing clients to novels that deal with similar issues you allow them to step back from their conflicts and reappraise their situation. (242)

Author Vicki Essex has also expressed an awareness of romance's potential in this area:

I think when you look at the whole genre and you realize [...] that healthy communication is part of a healthy relationship, that's what you're going to take from romance [...]. That is what is so important. (Toronto Public Library).

Among the romances which model healthy communication are some which attempt to promote reconciliation in a realistic and pastorally appropriate manner. Debbie Macomber, for example,

has examined relationship repair tools in many of her books, most notably *Hannah's List*:

"In my book, there's a couple, Winter and Pierre, who have gotten into a routine of fighting, separating, and then breaking up again. It's a pattern that's continued for years. They're in love, but they can't seem to get along. Another character suggests that Winter make a list of everything Pierre does that irritates her and then write down her reaction to that behavior.

When she sees how she's nagged and pouted and exploded at him, she recognizes her own part in their troubled relationship. She persuades Pierre to do the same thing, and

once they see what's happening to them they're able to resolve their problems [...]. A reader wrote to tell me she'd used the same technique in dealing with a situation in her marriage, and it helped her and her husband tremendously. ["] (Wendell 192–193)

Jennie Gallant's *Lady Hathaway's House Party* (1980) similarly suggests how to effect a reconciliation, in this case for a couple who have become estranged through a lack of dialogue. As the novel opens, Oliver and Belle, the Duke and Duchess of Avondale, have "been estranged for ten months, after a whirlwind romance and marriage" (3). They meet again at a house party organised by Lady Hathaway, who is of the opinion that

A young couple needed advice starting out, and there had been no one to give it. Belle with no mother, and a father too far away to give her a hand, and Oliver with no living immediate family.

Marriage was hard enough for any two people [...]. Add twelve years age difference [...] add the disparity in their backgrounds and the hopes for success dwindled toward zero. (3–4)

She therefore attempts to offer some advice indirectly by recounting that in the early days of her own marriage her husband

was a great ninny, and I not much better [...]. The two of us keeping all our troubles to ourselves, instead of talking them out, yet we both wanted the same things. I was trying to please him, and he in his stupid way was trying to please me too—or show off to me what a dashing buck he was anyway, which amounts to the same thing, I suppose. (77)

Lady Hathaway's narrative is designed to promote reconciliation, as are others, offered to Oliver by "two happily married men" (89), who craft their stories so that they appear to be merely part of "an innocent discussion. Avondale would not welcome advice, but a discussion of wives in general might pass." One may therefore suppose that the novel which

contains these accounts can also be read this way, should any of its readers find themselves in a similar situation to Belle and Oliver's.

If romances can reconcile, this should not invariably be assumed to be a mere fortunate side-effect of their focus on successful relationships. Vicki Lewis Thompson, for instance, appears to have deliberately set out to promote reconciliation in her readers' lives. A short description of the author included at the beginning of her second novel, *Promise Me Sunshine* (1984), states that as a "perennial optimist, Vicki likes to share her outlook with her readers, showing how barriers can be broken down through loving communication" (2). Thompson's "outlook" was certainly shared with her readers in this novel: the most significant barrier to the heroine's happiness is her nine-year-old daughter, who is resolutely opposed to her mother's new relationship. However, as the heroine acknowledges, "Once I let her know what I wanted, that I have needs, too, she began to change..." (213–214). Love in romances is not limited to romantic love, and its attempts at reconciliation may therefore extend beyond relationships like those of the central protagonists, to family and others in the protagonists' communities.

#### 4.4 Sustaining

Where reconciliation or healing are impossible, or not possible in the short term, pastoral care-givers may attempt to sustain the sufferer. Sustaining

consists of helping a hurting person to endure and to transcend a circumstance in which restoration to his former condition or recuperation from his malady is either impossible or so remote as to seem improbable. [...] But it goes beyond mere resignation to affirmation as it attempts to achieve spiritual growth through endurance of unwanted or harmful or dangerous experiences. (Clebsch and Jaekle 8–9)

At the most basic level, the hope and happiness generated by romance's optimistic endings may assist in "sustaining" readers such as the mother

with a dying son, described above, and the reader mentioned in the previous chapter, whose romances helped her to “live with” depression. Best-selling romance author Berta Ruck, having lived through the First World War and its aftermath, was most certainly aware that she and her readers existed in

a world in which war still exists, rages. Also disease, crime, poverty. A world where men can be cruel, nature relentless; where love can turn to indifference, unkindness, hate! A world where any day death can swoop, to snatch young, promising, cherished lives. (46)

In such a world, all of us are “hurting” and restoration to a state of child-like innocence of these threats is “either impossible or so remote as to seem improbable.” However, romance, through its happy endings, argues that, as Ruck put it, “happiness is life’s true stuff, with trouble the mere superimposed pattern” (Ruck 47). An emphasis on the joy that is still available in the midst of suffering may assist us in enduring the troubles we encounter but it can also go further and help us to refocus the narratives we tell about our own lives so that they stress the positive, and are directed towards hopeful futures.

#### 4.4.1 Writing Better Life Stories

Interwoven with models of personalities and depictions of behaviours to emulate or avoid are the back-stories concerning characters’ pasts and also the hopes, ambitions or fears which motivate them and which can be thought of as “future stories” (Lester 1). Andrew D. Lester argues that “Human beings do not simply tell stories, or illustrate their lives with storytelling. We construct our sense of identity out of stories” (29):

a person’s sense of self develops out of the stories through which he or she interprets experience. These stories collect both the remembered past and the imagined future, which are then integrated into the person’s present identity. (5)

Romances frequently depict characters whose “future stories are dysfunctional” (7). Loretta Chase’s *Lord of Scoundrels* (1994) is one



such romance, and since it lays out the hero's dysfunctional backstory in the prologue, it is also a good illustration of how "stories of our past [...] structure the core narratives *from* which we live, as well as enabling us to create future stories that establish the core narratives *toward* which we live" (Lester 40). Sebastian's past story tells him that he is "a monster, impossible to love" (339) and so he adopts a future story based on a "motto from Horace: 'Make money, money by fair means if you can, if not, by any means money'" (13): his "future story" is one in which he will disregard morality and accumulate wealth to pay for the companionship he believes he cannot acquire in any other way. However, although there is no way to change the facts included in his backstory (such as his father's callousness towards him, and his abandonment by his mother), it is possible to interpret them in a different way. Instead of assuming that the fault lay in Sebastian, a new story about his past would label the father "a miserable, bitter old man" (320) and open up the possibility that Sebastian's mother "had loved him in her own temperamental way" (360) and, rather than "drag a little boy off on a dangerous sea voyage, with no assurance she could provide for him" (321), decided to leave him in a place of safety. Accepting the revised past story enables Sebastian to create a new future story, one in which he will have someone "to accept him. Someone to look upon him and touch him with affection" (340).

Ruth Wind's *Jezebel's Blues* (1992) suggests that the act of recognising a "future story" *as* a story increases an individual's ability to review it and assess its narrative elements. In this novel the hero never even knew who his father was (117), was orphaned by a flood when he was six and then had a childhood which was "bad [...]: motherless and full of too much work" (71). His past story, then, is full of sorrow and his future story seems headed for more unhappiness. However, he comes to recognise that his dysfunctional future story closely resembles his favourite novel,

a story about a boy from the wrong side of the tracks who fought like hell to be somebody, only to die a tragic, early death believing the worst everyone had ever said about him. [...] But tonight, as he read, Eric felt an embarrassed little

shock over his identification with the main character. It seemed uncomfortably melodramatic. [...] In a way, the book was the story of his life, and [...] it rang true. But as he read, he grew uncomfortable.

For every time the young man had a chance, he sabotaged himself. (231–232)

The result of this critical re-reading is that Eric stops sabotaging himself and instead lets himself imagine a happy future story for himself, filled with love as well as success in his professional life.

Alec, the hero of Kathleen Gilles Seidel's *Again* (1994), an actor in a daytime soap opera, may seem very different from Eric: Eric had low self-esteem and was convinced that he brought with him "chaos [...] dark passion and heavy burdens" (Wind 221) whereas Alec has always attempted to take on other people's burdens. Nonetheless, Alec too has a problem with creating a functional, hopeful future story. He has been shaped by a tragic story in his past, that of being "the wonderful big brother to the sick little sister" (359) who died. His future story is that of an "ideal white knight" (Seidel 346), "the knight who picks up his arms in service of the weak and defenseless" (353), very similar to that of one of the characters in the soap and

The new director was right. The white knight paid for his gleaming goodness; he moved too far from the muck and ashes, the passion and shadows that made up real life. Jenny could see that happening to Alec. He would become the elder statesman of day-time, respected by all, the one who got things done, the one everyone else leaned on. But there would be something empty and distant about him. (347–48)

By "playing the rescuer" (342), and engaging in a series of quests which required him to practice "noble self-denial" (345), he has learned to have "no hope or expectation" for himself, which "was a form of death."

Luckily his heroine, Jenny, is a scriptwriter and thus when she puts her mind to "thinking about narratives—something she knew a lot

about” (351) she can identify the “problem with the way he was telling the story.” In fact, she can see that he needs an entirely new story, based on another character in the soap opera, one who has “fought for his country, [...] borne arms, [...] done battle” (354) and thus has some of the white knight’s sense of duty. This character is not yet set in his ways, although it seems likely that if “he never got a story, if he just stayed the dashing, not-so-young bachelor” (361) he would very possibly “end up all noble and stiff.” As scriptwriter, Jenny plans to give this character a positive future story by pairing him with the character she herself resembles: their “best chance of being really wonderful people is if they are married to each other” (362). Alec, who as an actor also has some skill in examining stories, recognises the possibilities inherent in the new storyline and promptly proposes to Jenny.

These protagonists who have endured “unwanted or harmful or dangerous experiences” (Clebsch and Jaekle 9) grow through revising or replacing the dysfunctional future stories which arose from their hurtful past stories. By virtue of being romances in which the protagonists’ dysfunctional future stories are explicitly shown to be stories, Seidel’s and Wind’s novels suggest how romances, in the hands of attentive and receptive readers, can perform a pastoral function with regards to readers’ future stories. Romance novels which explicitly or implicitly demonstrate that dysfunctional future stories can be revised or replaced, may guide readers towards examining and, where necessary, changing their own stories to ones which enable them to transcend hurtful circumstances.

#### **4.4.2 Enduring and Growing after Personal Tragedy and Trauma**

In some cases, an individual will have had a future story which was positive but circumstances then ensured it could not come to fruition: a future story may be “lost, stolen, abused, or distorted by a developmental snag, a traumatic event, or any combination of life forces” (Lester 44). If the individual is to find a positive way forward, they will need to adapt their future story or create a new one. One of the cases Lester discusses involves a woman whose “core narrative, the central drama of her personal

identity, included the specific future story of having her own biological child” (46). Unfortunately, this narrative had failed to come to pass and so, in this context, the story had become “dysfunctional because it contributes to despair rather than hope” (48). A secondary character in Janice Gray’s *Lullaby of Leaves* (1969) has had her future story closed down in a similar way. Rosemary was pregnant when the car she was travelling in crashed, and when she “recovered consciousness they told me my baby was dead. And that I could never have another” (82). She is “extremely unhappy” (84) but is opposed to adoption because “I couldn’t let some other child take my baby’s place” (82). However, meeting and getting to know some children in need of adoption seems to allow her to put aside this interpretation of adoption: by the end of the novel she has learned “the joy that could come through the warm and loving hearts of children who needed her as much as she need them” (187) and is ready to adopt.

Since Rosemary is a secondary character, little detail is given about the process by which she relinquishes her now-impossible future story but it certainly appears that the interactions with the children are sustaining to her, enabling her

to endure and to transcend a circumstance in which restoration to [her] former condition [...] is [...] impossible. [...] But it goes beyond mere resignation to affirmation as it attempts to achieve spiritual growth through endurance of unwanted or harmful or dangerous experiences. (Clebsch and Jaekle 8–9)

In order to move beyond “mere resignation” to “affirmation,” such attempts “to achieve spiritual growth through endurance of unwanted or harmful or dangerous experiences” must inevitably seek out some byproduct of the “harmful or dangerous experiences” which can be considered positive. Rosemary’s loss of her child in a car accident, for example, creates a situation in which she is able to become a substitute mother to children whose situation is a mirror-image of her own: their “father was killed in a car crash and their mother was terribly injured” (17) and died in hospital. Out of these two tragedies, then, there arises an opportunity to find an unexpected “joy.”

The Anglican priest hero in Kate Hewitt's *A Vicarage Christmas* (2017) makes a more general argument that "it's only when we've been broken that we can truly know what it means to be healed and whole." Here, a negative experience is recast as a route to a deeper understanding and appreciation of positive elements of life or, put in Clebsch and Jaekle's terms, "spiritual growth." Various characters in Nadine Mutas's *To Entrhall the Demon Lord* (2017) also attempt to find a sustaining way to understand suffering. The heroine, Maeve, has endured torture which left her mentally and physically scarred. However, one of the secondary characters states that "there's always two ways you can look at something" and the suggestion that there are alternative ways to interpret situations is echoed by Maeve's therapist, who encourages her to think of herself as a "survivor" rather than a "victim": "A shift in perspective, a seemingly simple change of vocabulary, yet it turned the tables in her head. That word gave her courage, strength, and a budding sense of pride."

This "shift in perspective," from the traumatised victim to the survivor who has found a new narrative to sustain herself, is given first metaphorical and then physical form. As the novel opens, Maeve has spent months recuperating and is "sick and tired of pity, of being coddled and treated like a cracked vase that could shatter at the slightest vibration." This view of her is not sustaining: it keeps her feeling "Broken. Weak. Disfigured." Her hero, however, sees in her scars "a stark proclamation of beauty inherent in strength and survival" and so an alternative, sustaining, way of interpreting the evidence of Maeve's torture is given physical form in the kintsugi bowl he gives her:

"Kintsugi, [...] is a Japanese craft of mending fractured objects by gluing the broken pieces together using a golden lacquer. In this philosophy, breakage and repair are part of the history of an object, and instead of disguising the fracture points, they are highlighted and embraced as a form of beauty. If something breaks, it does not lose its value or appeal. [...] When our bodies break," he added gently, "we heal, and we often realize we are stronger at the mended points."

Melissa F. Zeiger has found a similar treatment of scarring in the

huge body of romance novels whose heroines are recovering from [cancer] treatment [which] began to emerge in the mid-1990s and continues into the present. Usually in breast cancer romances, the heroine has lost a breast (and sometimes hair) to cancer, feels unattractive in her altered body, and fears she will never be loved or desired again. (108)

Zeiger highlights the fact that, despite society's "strange insistence that breast cancer patients look 'normal'—that is, unchanged, during and after treatment—and aspire to beauty and symmetry [...]; women with cancer who lose breasts and/or hair are punished for their fall from femininity" (111), the breast cancer romances take a very different approach. In these novels the heroine's

wound does not imply castration [...]; on the contrary, she is sexually empowered and, as she recovers from her ordeal, strengthened in other ways as well. Impairment becomes conducive to, rather than preventing, sexual intensity because the [...] recovery produces trust and intimacy. (111)

#### 4.4.3 Reframing Collective Stories

The finding of a new, sustaining, perspective tends to involve "reframing." Stone and Lester explain that

*Frames* are the ways we perceive events or circumstances; they shape our reality. *Reframing* changes those perceptions. It constructs for people a new way to organize and view their experiences and turns liabilities into strengths. [...] Reframing also helps people to rearrange the furniture and change the decorations in a certain room of their memory—that is, to change their understanding of the past. (263)

Reframing need not be limited to personal narratives of the kind explored in the previous sections: it may also be employed to change

perceptions of collective past stories. A particular culture or society, for example,

may actively discourage and even prohibit certain members, by virtue of gender, color, age, or handicap, from pursuing certain future stories. Pastoral caregivers must actively engage these cultural narratives, fighting to open up the future stories so that all persons have access to the full range of possibilities within their cultural setting. (Lester 136–37)

Oppressions such as racism or transphobia cannot be removed simply by reframing, but narratives which reframe past and future stories may sustain the oppressed, assisting them in moving “beyond mere resignation to affirmation” (Clebsch and Jaekle 9). For example, when Gwen-dolyn E. Osborne interviewed

Black women who regularly read romance fiction [...] each woman told me she read African American romances because she was drawn to stories about positive relationships between Black men and women (seen as missing in other forms of mediated communication) and that she liked stories about “women who look like me.” (61–62)

Such positive narratives about African Americans forming loving, committed relationships provide an affirming alternative to existing, racist framings of African Americans in those “other forms of mediated communication” which draw on “pervasive stereotypes of black men as irresponsible, hypersexual, and deviant” (Moody-Freeman 2016, 114) and of “black women as jezebels, all body and no mind.”

As we have seen, to change future stories, it is often necessary to address past stories. Sometimes they are damaging; in other cases they may even be missing entirely. E. E. Ottoman’s *Documenting Light* (2016) makes the argument that

Power in general cut deep swaths through history, marking, scarring, and claiming everything it touched. It disfigured people, turning them into characters who had never really

existed at all. It crushed places into dust and built castles of dreams, lies, and fantasies. It warped events until trying to see through the lies was like trying to see using only a broken mirror.

As Caroline Duvezin-Caubet observes, “The queer past is pieced together partly through unhappy archives, through the criminalisation and public exposure of queer acts. One could argue that real-life examples of happy queer romances left little to no trace in recorded history” (252). Yet, for Ottoman’s nonbinary protagonist Wyatt, discovering

a past that would say, *This is who we are, and this is how we fit into this world.* [...] It mattered [...], it meant a lot, feeling connected like that. If he could know in some way that there were others who’d gone through what he’d gone through—not just the ones who were alive now, but people who’d lived their lives long before he was ever born—it would be important.

Wyatt’s hero, trans historian Grayson, acknowledges that there is “no real way to prove emotions like love unless it’s written down—like, if there was a love letter” and, for various reasons including illiteracy, poverty and fear, many people in the past lacked the ability to create such documents and have them preserved for posterity. Ottoman’s protagonists must therefore attempt to uncover evidence of “real-life examples of happy queer romances” (Duvezin-Caubet) using imaginative, innovative methodologies. Historical romances which draw on history but which also use imagination to fill gaps, can be considered to be using one such method. In doing so, they may become a source of affirming, sustaining narratives which can reframe the collective story of the past.

Beverly Jenkins, “a lay minister of the Episcopal Church” (Dandridge 2016, 152) who also writes historical romance, suggests there is a connection between her two callings:

There’s so much history that is not taught in schools surrounding or concerning folks of color who have made



their contributions to American history. [...] I look at it as a quilt. The pieces pertaining to African Americans or Chinese Americans or Japanese Americans or Native Americans have been some of it ripped out, some of it cut out. And so I look at it as—I don't know if you want to use the word *ministry*—to stitch those pieces back into the quilt. (Faircloth 2016, emphasis added)

By stitching these pieces of history “back into the quilt,” Jenkins is stitching back in the family histories of many of her readers and, in so doing, reframing their perceived place in society. To borrow Wyatt's words, such romances open up the sustaining “possibility that there is a space for people like me to exist in history too. To have a past. To look back with pride and say people like me lived and loved and endured” (Ottoman).



## **Part II**

# **Further Explorations**



## Chapter 5

# Further Explorations

As theologian Werner G. Jeanrond has observed, “all experiences of and reflections on love are embedded in a particular space, time and language” (9). Lynne Pearce, for instance, has

proposed that one of the ways we might figure the changing nature of love *across* the centuries is via the notion of the different “supplementary” values attached to it in the different eras be this the “gift of a name” (for the wife) in the seventeenth century to the “gift of self-actualisation” in the late twentieth century. (2019, 37)

Similarly, Talia Schaffer has observed of marriage in the legalistic mode, which she terms “familiar marriage,” and describes as offering “trustworthy companionship and practical benefits” (42), that its:

benefits [...] got articulated only when familiar marriage faced some kind of competing model. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the three main rivals were mercenary marriage, marriage based solely on filial obedience, or marriage to a rake. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, however, it was the rake that emerged as the main threat, the one that drove writers to develop an alternative. (42)

Romance novels and their precursors have therefore changed over time: in addition to variations produced by the extent to which they adhere

to either the legalistic or ecstatic traditions and to authors' personal beliefs, they reflect, and reflect on, changes in social attitudes and conditions. Piper Huguley's *A Virtuous Ruby* (discussed in Chapter 6) calls for careful interpretation and interrogation of both texts and the uses to which they are put: some are inherently intensely problematic but even texts which are predominantly liberatory in nature may receive interpretations which exclude, erase, and oppress.

All romances are, in a sense, exegesis of the genre's central belief in love's goodness and durability. Simon May has stated (albeit with regret), that as a society

we are [...] deeply committed to the view, Greek in origin, that genuine love is evoked only by the good, that it pursues only the good, and that it fosters only the good. And that its attainment is marked by harmony and stability and understanding. On this view, if we love evil-doers it is for the specks of good that we see in them. Or, if we fall in love with destructive people, this is not genuine love. (34)

May's observation raises questions about the extent to which romance acknowledges both the destructive potential of love and the extent to which it considers true love able to foster "the good" even in "evil-doers."

As discussed in Chapter 9, many romances use metaphors of damnation and devilishness to indicate the presence of either "evil-doers" or those who have been deeply harmed by a loss or lack of love. Narratives which focus on the salvation of devilish and damned protagonists can be read as hopeful expressions of faith in love's goodness. Nora Roberts, in her *Three Sisters* trilogy, by contrast, explores ways in which love can be perverted. Roberts' texts (discussed in Chapter 10) thus acknowledge that although love is immensely powerful, its intensity, if warped, has the potential to be extremely destructive.

The legalistic mode advocates for a cautious approach to love, in which it is assessed against, and bounded by, moral and social conventions. Rose Lerner's *In for a Penny*, however, serves as a reminder that the opportunity to gain spiritual insights may be lost if a purely legalistic approach to love is adopted. Lerner's novel, which is the subject

of Chapter 7, draws on precursors of the modern popular romance and thus suggests that romances, in their current form, combine elements from both legalistic and ecstatic literary traditions about love, in order to access the benefits of both while minimising the risks inherent in each. One question which arises from the linkage between sexuality and the ecstatic mode, however, is whether it compels the romance novel, as a form, to denigrate or erase asexual forms of intense love.

While it may be, therefore, that the romance genre needs to develop new, emotionally intense, ecstatic rituals which are not based on sexual activity or the building and release of sexual tension, the ecstatic mode has traditionally been characterised by its imaginative approach. As such, it has been able to generate a range of characters and plots which, unrealistic though they are (or, perhaps, precisely because they are unrealistic) can give shape to, or symbolise, hopeful future stories. Chapter 8 focuses on Alyssa Cole's *A Princess in Theory* which, with its paratext, directly addresses the hopes given form in narratives about an individual who is of low social status but becomes a princess. Moreover, with an epidemiologist as a protagonist and its demonstration of the complexity of the supposedly "low-skilled" tasks performed by those in poorly paid jobs, it seems an apt novel to examine during a pandemic which caused the UK government to publish

a list of "key workers": those deemed "critical to the Covid-19 response" in a bid to ensure that the country continues to function during the pandemic.

The list [...] includes "those involved in food production, processing, distribution, sale and delivery, as well as those essential to the provision of other key goods," like food and medicine. [...] It turns out then, that the government does value the work of shop workers and delivery drivers, even if they will rarely admit it. [...]

Only a few weeks ago, [...] government described these jobs as "low skilled" and therefore low value. [...]

Yet this crisis has shown that we still rely on people to keep

the lights on, to stock supermarket shelves, and to care for the sick and elderly. These “low skill jobs” are the bedrock of our society. (King)



## Chapter 6

# Words and Power: Piper Huguley's *A Virtuous Ruby*

A belief that words have power is implicit in my definition of modern popular romances as

novels whose authors have assumed pastoral roles, offering hope to their readers through works which propagate faith in the goodness and durability of love.

If their words were powerless, the novels could not influence their readers and provide pastoral care. Piper Huguley's *A Virtuous Ruby* (2015), however, provides a salutary reminder that however powerful words may be, there can be barriers which prevent them from reaching an audience or limit their impact. Ruby, the novel's heroine, attempts to use her words to effect change in the town of Winslow, Georgia, in the year 1915. Unfortunately for her and her family, Paul Winslow can say with perfect truth that "This is my town. What I say around here goes" (148). Moreover, since it was on Paul's orders that Ruby was raped by David Winslow, Paul's son, it is clear that words may be deployed in ways which are actively harmful. Given the US setting of the novel, and the race of its protagonists, in this chapter I wish to examine some of the ways in which the words of African American romance authors, in particular, have had their power limited, and ways in which the romance community, and in particular romance publishing, have failed to counter racism and, indeed, have actively discriminated against Black authors. Moreover, given that

Piper Huguley is both a romance author and an academic, it seems appropriate to use insights provided by her novel to critique popular romance scholarship.

While the circumstances surrounding the publication, reception and analysis of US romances are less extreme in nature and outcome than some of the events described in the novel, they are shaped by the same underlying processes. As romance author Denise Williams, who has taught a college course on “Romance Novels as Tools for Justice,” has observed,

Racial violence [...] doesn’t begin with physical violence. It begins with every day choices like which books to read, to listen to Black voices or justify, rationalize, and dismiss racism concerns as exaggerations. It doesn’t begin with physical violence, but it ends there too often.

For this reason, positive, non-stereotyped representation in popular culture matters immensely: the power of romance’s words has not always been used to provide hope and pastoral care to all readers and, indeed, romances have sometimes condoned or even encouraged discrimination and oppression.

## 6.1 “The right of Representation”: Popular Culture

Popular culture’s ability to promote racism is clearly illustrated by D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* which, as Huguley’s novel notes, contains a happy “resolution of the white love story” (159). Griffith’s movie was based on “a popular novel about the Civil War and Reconstruction by southern author Thomas Dixon Jr.” (Lehr xii) which can perhaps also be considered an early romance novel. Dixon’s *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905) is a work which he described as a historical novel into which he had “woven a double love-story” (n.p.) and it is this latter element which ensures that the novel conforms to the criteria established by romance scholar Pamela Regis: it is “a work of

prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” which, among its “narrative elements” includes “a *definition of society*, always corrupt, that the romance novel will reform” (14). That this reform, in Dixon’s novel is abhorrently racist since its agents are the Klu Klux Klan, does not, *per se*, disqualify it from being considered a romance. Rather, it demonstrates how popular culture, including popular romance, can act to strengthen prejudices and spread hatred for some, even as it promotes love between others.

*The Birth of a Nation* includes a depiction of “a Negro trying to rape a young white girl” (Huguley 158). Given that both Ruby and her mother have been raped by white men, Huguley’s novel provides an antidote to the movie’s “wrong-headed portrayal of Negroes as greedy and lascivious” (Huguley 158). The binary opposition between white femininity and darkly dangerous male sexuality is one which has long been present in romance, albeit usually presented in a less explicitly racist manner: “the interplay between whiteness and darkness in various popular romance sub-genres participates in a racialized literary discourse—one that relies on and reinforces typical associations of feminine whiteness with innocence and purity, and of masculine darkness with danger and sexuality” (Burley Abstract). To the extent that dangerous darkness in romance has been eroticised yet largely limited to non-Black protagonists,

the fetishized racial boundary of white desire created by popular romances establishes a racial/ethnic hierarchy that invests white and Native American characters with a host of heroic erotic potential. Black sexuality (both male and female) is correspondingly beyond the pale, existing as a threatening presence. (Burley Abstract)

The movie also depicts “Negroes as lazy” (Huguley 159) and this, too, has relevance to popular romance. Stephanie Burley notes that it took a long time for romances with Black protagonists to be published, in part because “First among the obstacles, according to Vivian Stephens, Michelle Allers, and other African-American romance authors, was the industry’s misconception that African Americans ‘don’t read’ ” (132). In

this context, the depiction of Ruby's intellectual abilities acquires wider implications. Her parents have insisted that she and her siblings "study and read and talk" (Huguley 73) and she is talented, "garnering A's in nearly everything she studied" (155). This depiction of Black dedication to academic achievement stands as a rebuke to all those who assume that people like Ruby lack the skill or inclination to read.

Another obstacle to publication, at least according to mainstream publishers, is a perceived "lack of 'quality'". Arguments around quality, however, often seemed disingenuous and showed how little reflection there was about how notions of 'quality' are shaped by an individual's particular class and education" (Saha and van Lente 2). Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente's report, *Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* (2020), was focused on the UK publishing industry, but is also applicable to publishing in the US. US publisher Suzan Tisdale, founder of Glenfinnan Publishing, made arguments about quality in 2019 when she attempted to refute concerns about racism:

When we receive a manuscript from anybody for Glenfinnan, we don't know who's written it, 98% of the time we don't know the author. It's just a blind submission. The only thing we look at, ever, is the manuscript. Is it beautifully written, is it funny, is it compelling, is it intriguing, is it written well? (qtd. in Vivanco 2019)

Such criteria are not, of course, objective. It is fully possible for an editor's feelings about what is "compelling" and well written to be shaped by their prejudices. However, by claiming to be judging all submissions impartially, the blame for a lack of success is transferred wholly onto rejected Black authors: the implication is that their manuscripts were badly written and neither funny, compelling nor intriguing. Adam, who has "dedicated" himself "to his studies" in order to become "the virtuous and best student" (Huguley 16), and who is certainly a better student than his white brother David, yet whose ability to find work will be shaped by his race, undercuts claims that Black authors fail to find agents or publishers, or fail to win contests, solely because their work lacks merit.

Ruby and Adam’s talent and courage is, moreover, part of the pastoral care Huguley offers her readers. As she revealed in an interview, her ministry as an author has been profoundly shaped by

An essay by Langston Hughes called “The Need for Heroes” [which] impacted me deeply and called to me to write historically. The situation that compelled Hughes to write about the need to celebrate the ancestors as heroes in story [...] still, unfortunately, exists. (Webb)

In his essay, published in 1941, Hughes addressed other African Americans, arguing that:

In our books and plays, our songs and radio programs, Negroes have a need for heroes [...]. We have a need for books and plays that will encourage and inspire our youth, set for them examples and patterns of conduct, move and stir them to be forthright, strong, clear-thinking, and unafraid. [...] It is the social duty of Negro writers to reveal to the people the deep reservoirs of heroism within the race. It is one of the duties of our literature to combat—by example, not by diatribe—the caricatures of Hollywood, [...] the endless defeats of play after play and novel after novel—[...] there is a need, more than anything else, of great patterns to guide us, great lives to inspire us, strong men and women to lift us up and give us confidence in the powers we, too, possess. (184–185)

There is, in other words, a pastoral need for positive representations of Black people, written by Black authors. Specifically in romance, Black protagonists, through their lives, loves and happy endings, counter both the omissions of Black lives elsewhere in the genre, and the stereotypes about Black people which still lurk within romance fiction. Black romance authors like Huguley are, then, claiming their “right of representation” in fiction and many, too, are calling for greater Black representation within what might be thought of as the legislature of romance: the ranks of editors and other decision-makers of romance publishing.

## 6.2 “A history of repeated injuries”: Publishing

Like Ruby, many Black authors believe it is “Time for things to change” (Huguley 9). Ruby, however, faces the threat that if she refuses to “keep things quiet” it is she whom “they be lynching [...] next” (7). Clearly, Black authors’ lives are not similarly threatened by those with power in publishing but, as one Black author, who chose to remain anonymous, stated in 2007:

If you whine and rant too much in this business it’s easy for publishers to get rid of you, particularly if you’re not a big money-making star.

There’s always someone eager to step in and take your place to maintain the status quo. Also, I’ve seen how people who are vocal on this issue are treated and often attacked for trying to raise awareness. (Mystery Author)

Ruby’s key demand is for “equal pay [...] at the mill” (Huguley 52) and again, there are parallels with the situation in publishing: there are significant discrepancies “between what black and white writers earn from their publishers” (Flood).

Power in US publishing, like power in Winslow, has been overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of white people. In 2019 the Lee & Low Diversity in Publishing Survey found that “76 percent of publishing staff, review journal staff, and literary agents are White,” only 1% of people employed in Editorial were Black and “The percentage of people in Editorial who self-identified as White increased from 82 percent [in 2015] to 85 percent.” These figures for Editorial are important to bear in mind given that editors can push for changes in manuscripts. The draft of Beverly Jenkins’ *Night Song*, which was published in 1994 by the mainstream romance publisher Avon, for example, was textually assaulted, with clearly racist intent, by a freelance editor:

Scenes were changed. The scene where Cara’s grandfather appears, “n[...]er, n[...]er” replaced his name. Characters were depicted as “black as coal.” I was devastated when I

received the galley. I called Vivian Stephens, my agent, and told her that she should return the advance on the book. I did not want the book published like that. The editor called. She cried and apologized. For four and a half hours, the editor and I were on the telephone going over the revisions. (Dandridge 2010, ellipses added)

Even after publication, Jenkins found that there were “stores that refused to sell” her books, and there were also further disparities in how she was treated by her publisher: “a VP of marketing told me in 04, she’d looked at my file and saw that they’d done next to nothing for me” (Jenkins).

Finding a publisher in the first place is disproportionately difficult for Black romance authors. The Ripped Bodice romance bookshop’s racial diversity survey for 2019 found that “For every 100 books published by the leading romance publishers in 2019, only 8.3 were written by people of color.” That 8.3% includes authors from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds and is not limited to Black authors: the proportion of romances published by Black authors must, therefore, be smaller still. This figure is, moreover, an average: Bethany House and Tule Publishing released no romances at all by an author of colour. The differing percentages across Harlequin imprints is also potentially instructive: their series lines saw 5.5% of books written by authors of colour and their digital-first imprint, Carina, reached 20.7% but their long-established print imprints which market books individually, rather than as part of a series, published a significantly greater proportion of white authors. Of the romances published by HQN, which claims to publish “the best in mainstream bestseller romance by the finest authors in the field” (HQN) only 2.9% were by authors of colour and among the titles published under the Mira imprint, which in 2019 “placed over 60 titles on the *New York Times*, *USA TODAY* and *Publishers Weekly* bestseller lists” and claims to be “proud to publish great stories for a broad audience” (MIRA) only 3.6% were written by authors of colour.

In the 1980s, however, there were almost no Black authors published in the mainstream of romance publishing. Moreover, one of the routes to publication involved erasure of Black protagonists. Donna Hill,

whose first romance novel, *Rooms of the Heart*, was published in 1990 by Odyssey (an African American publisher) “recalls a time early in her career when an editor offered to publish her manuscript ‘if I could make the characters white’” (Dyer 42) and

When Harlequin American Romance published Sandra Kitt’s first novel, *Rites of Spring* (1984), and thereby made her one of the first African-American authors to cross the color line of popular romance, her racial identity was hidden so that readers would have no idea that they were buying a novel written by a black woman. (Burley 137)

At the end of the same year, Harlequin did publish a romance by Kitt with Black protagonists (*Adam and Eva*). Its editor was, significantly, Vivian Stephens:

A Black editor in a predominantly white industry, Stephens sought to incorporate the voices of women of color into the burgeoning romance industry. In 1980, Dell published the first category romance by a Black author with Black protagonists—*Entwined Destinies* by Rosalind Welles (the pseudonym of journalist Elsie Washington). Stephens also made sure that Dell’s Candlelight lines included romances by Indigenous, Latina, and Asian authors, creating almost single-handedly the category that trade publications called “Ethnic Romance”.

In 1983, Stephens moved on to Harlequin. (Bowling Green State University)

Unfortunately, with Stephens’ departure, “Ethnic Romance” at Dell suffered a set-back. Stephen Ammidown, while an archivist at Bowling Green State University’s Browne Popular Culture Library, reported that “The books were there, but after Vivian Stephens moved to Harlequin, the will to publish them evaporated”; despite having been written and submitted to Dell, “Elsie Washington’s second book never got published” (2020a) by them.



In 1983, the year Vivian Stephens moved to Harlequin, the company published *A Strong and Tender Thread*, a romance containing Black protagonists but written by a white author, Jackie Weger. According to another Harlequin author, Kathleen Giles Seidel, when it was put out to “test marketing” it had “tested horribly” (Vivanco 2015). Sandra Kitt recalls that the following year, “when the executives in Canada realized ADAM & EVA would have black main characters they wanted to reject it, afraid of what the reaction would be from white readers. It was published anyway, too far along in the production process” (Kitt). Afterwards Kitt was “told by a Harlequin official at the time that they’d ‘only received 4 letters’ objecting to the book” (Kitt). Nonetheless Paul Grescoe, in his book about the history of Harlequin, reports a swift, racist backlash from Harlequin readers in response to the publication of *Adam and Eva*: “Harlequin got scads of letters complaining about the book, including one from a Philadelphia woman who said, ‘Those people should have their own series’” (279). Grescoe has been criticised for not doing “his homework” (Seidel 1997, 251) so perhaps he was confusing reader responses to Kitt’s novel with those to Weger’s. However, he has also been critiqued for “Relying heavily on interviews with several Harlequin executives and former editors” (Seidel 1997, 251), so it could be that his account reflects their recollections of the response to Kitt’s novel. What is clear is that, as Stephanie Burley has observed,

even this tenuous foray into racial diversity was short-lived. For the remainder of the 1980s, Kitt continued to publish Harlequin American Romance novels featuring white heroes and heroines without acknowledging her status as a groundbreaking African-American author. She was, in a literary sense, passing as a white (i.e., un-raced) author. (138)

As for Vivian Stephens, “after working at Harlequin for about two years” she “was fired. She [...] was never given any explanation for why she was forced out” (Beckett) and “without her leverage, fewer writers of color found doors open to them in the romance world (or the publishing world, for that matter)” (Swartz).

In 1991, Lisa Jones stated of Harlequin that out of “the company’s 800 romance writers, only two are African-American, and they don’t write about black characters” (233). There seem, in fact, to have been at least three: Kitt, Eva Rutland and Chassie West, using the pseudonym Joyce McGill. Their minority status and the suggestion that they were, in a way, “passing” as white, recall the situation of Adam in *A Virtuous Ruby*.

Adam’s skin is “cream-colored” (Huguley 10) and so, although there are some clues as to his Black heritage, including the fact that he addresses other Black people “respectfully” (12) in a way that a white doctor would not, he has been able to live and study, unquestioned, “in the white world” (17). Indeed, when Mary Winslow, his white father’s white wife, first sees him “He could tell instantly from her manner and slight smile she believed him to be white. If she thought him Negro, she would not be smiling at him at her front door” (18). It is thanks to this ability to pass for white that Adam was able to attend “the University of Michigan medical school” (28) because “Negro doctors don’t go to no Michigan school” (37). Moreover, continuing to pass would make him “more acceptable to his father” (20). Ultimately, however, despite all the advantages of passing as white, and all the hardships entailed by claiming his Blackness, Adam decides “he would take comfort in being a Negro man” (203) because “I have to own all parts of who I am” (244).

Harlequin’s Black authors who “passed” as white were also eventually given opportunities to do the same. Eva Rutland “got to write Black characters towards the end of her career in romance” (Ammidown 2020), including *Heart and Soul*, published by Harlequin in 2005. As Joyce McGill, West wrote various romances with white protagonists until 1992 when Leonore Fleischer noted that with the publication of *Unforgivable* the Silhouette imprint was

bringing out its first adult romantic mystery novel to feature an African American man and woman as hero and heroine. A few years earlier, Silhouette’s first young adult ethnic romance, *Lesson in Love*, was written by Tracy West. Tracy West and Joyce McGill are both pseudonyms of the

same writer, Chassie West, an African American woman who is celebrating her 20th anniversary as a writer. (37)

However, although Fleischer reported that West/McGill was “already plotting [...] future novels, including romances” (37), this appears to have been the last romance McGill wrote for the imprint. Sandra Kitt’s run of romances featuring white protagonists ended when *Love Everlasting* was published in 1993 by Odyssey. This was a decade in which

several small presses emerged to focus on romances with African American heroes and heroines; Odyssey Books, launched in 1990, and Genesis Press, established in 1993 with its first Indigo Romance title released in 1995, were two of the most important. Then in 1994 Kensington Publishing [...] launch[ed] Pinnacle’s Arabesque Romance, a line of multicultural romances, with Sandra Kitt’s *Serenade* and Francis Ray’s *Forever Yours*, two African American romances. The line was a success and in 1998 was bought by BET (Black Entertainment Television). (Ramsdell 2018a, 86)

In this decade, then, despite the appearance of occasional romances with Black protagonists in more general romance imprints, including works by Beverly Jenkins at Avon and Maggie Ferguson at Harlequin Intrigue, it appears the vast majority of romances by Black authors and featuring Black protagonists were published by presses and imprints specifically focused on Black or “multicultural” romance.

At Harlequin the beginning of the twenty-first century saw further attempts to publish Black romance, including Robyn Amos’s *Hero at Large* (2000), another work of romantic suspense for Silhouette. Brenda Jackson, who had already established herself as an author of Black romance, recalls that “Harlequin asked me to write for Desire, saying it would be the first Desire with a Black hero/heroine” (Jackson) with the result that *Delaney’s Desert Sheikh* was published in 2002. Romances with Black protagonists nonetheless remained rare at Harlequin until the acquisition from BET of Arabesque in 2005, where it retained its identity as a line publishing Black romance, within the Kimani imprint.

The acquisition suggests that although Black romance publishers and imprints had demonstrated the existence of a market for Black romance novels, their success could also be used to justify Black romance's continued separation from the mainstream of romance publishing. One of the most public examples of the existence of a separate imprint being cited as a reason not to acquire Black authors occurred when,

During the Spotlight on Pocket at the 2015 RWA conference, an attendee asked Executive Editor Lauren McKenna, "Are you working at all on diversifying your author list?" When McKenna requested clarification, the attendee observed that it seemed most of Pocket's authors were white. McKenna then responded:

"Right now, we [Pocket] don't have an African-American line. Our sister imprint—because we are all Simon & Schuster—[...] Our sister imprint, Atria, has an entire two lines dedicated to African-American titles, and they really do corner that market. We find doing just one in a larger list, it tends to lose its focus and it really doesn't get the attention and time it deserves, so it also requires a different marketing and publicity plan. (RWA 2016)

There are likely to have been many more such incidents. Preslaysa Williams, for example, mentioned on Twitter that she wrote some books for younger readers at around the same time as she started writing romance which she

pitched to a CBA [Christian Booksellers Association] editor [...] and she directed me to Lee & Low instead.

She said they do "multicultural fiction"

(Implying that their house does not do that)

Series is still unpublished.

Clearly, Black imprints are not, and were not, the only option for Black romance authors. A rare Black editor such as Vivian Stephens

could be hired by and publish Black romances for non-Black imprints, and Beverly Jenkins at Avon was consistently published by such an imprint. However, separation and inequality were the norm. The unequal treatment received by Jenkins has already been mentioned, and as Gwendolyn E. Osborne observed in 2004, despite "the number of Black romances and readers [...] growing [...] African American romances are rarely reviewed by mainstream literary or romance media" (65). Inequality also extended to booksellers: Black romances were generally to be found in the African American section of the store rather than with other romances. As one romance reader commented in 2008 under the pseudonym "AA response" with regards to the major bookselling chain Borders,

Black authors writing romance aren't considered romance authors by Borders, but put in a racial category of fiction. The romance specialists don't deal with the black romance authors. Blacks are not a part of Border's romance initiatives.

Black authors writing romance are segregated from the other romance authors by policy, much like the South's Jim Crow laws.

Over ten years later, when reporter Lois Beckett was investigating racism in romance, the segregation continued. Beckett visited Kianna Alexander, a Black romance author who, despite

her success, [...] knows all about the barriers that make it more difficult for authors of colour to succeed. On the morning we met, we visited her local Walmart to look at the book section. Her latest Harlequin romance was on display, but it was not placed with the other romance novels. Instead, it was on a separate shelf marked with a neat label: African American. [...] The African American section is not an issue specific to Walmart, or to North Carolina. Many black romance novelists told me they had found bookstores and large retailers stocking their work

in a special black section, far away from shelves that the majority of romance readers will be browsing.

The segregation of Black romances has, therefore, often too-closely mirrored the segregation found in Winslow.

### 6.3 “Obstructing the Laws”: Romance Writers of America

In Winslow Adam correctly argues that Ruby “didn’t do anything wrong. You’re infringing on her rights as a United States Citizen, rights she is guaranteed under the fourteenth amendment of the Constitution” (Huguley 148). Unfortunately, in segregated Winslow, it is all too clear that in practice there are many who do not enjoy “the equal protection of the laws” which is promised by that amendment. Sadly, one can find parallels in the treatment Black romance authors have received in the Romance Writers of America (RWA), the national organisation for romance writers.

Although its founders included the groundbreaking Black editor and, later, agent, Vivian Stephens, the RWA appears to have quickly become an institution dominated by white women. When Kecia Ali explored the “RWA archives at BGSU [Bowling Green State University, which] cover the period from RWA’s founding in 1980 through 2008,” she found that

what is most striking for the period the archives at BGSU cover is the organization’s overwhelming whiteness. Passing allusions to the confederacy and Southern belles (and once, a reference to “our Grand Wizard” in committee correspondence) are notable.

On 30 March 2018 the RWA Board made an official statement that they were “committed to RWA being a welcoming and fair professional writing organization, open to all romance authors.” The next day Courtney Milan, then a Director-at-Large on the Board and a “woman of color,”

though not Black, used Twitter to give more detail about some of ways in which the RWA had not been welcoming to “all romance authors”:

Did you know that women of color who attend RWA often have what is in effect a buddy system? So they’re not left alone? Did you know that every year, Black women who sit down at lunch tables see white women stand up and move to not sit with them? (qtd. Vivanco 2018)

Piper Huguley herself faced discrimination of a similar kind in 2013, and her experience demonstrated that it could come from staff as well as from fellow authors. She was

up for a Golden Heart Award [...] and [...] was the only black finalist nominated for any of RWA’s awards that year (for her historical romance *A Champion’s Heart*).

An exclusive reception for award finalists is a staple of RWA’s annual national conference. But when Huguley tried to walk into the Atlanta hotel bar where the reception was being held, she says, an organization staff member stood in her way.

“She sort of stepped across my path and asked me if she could help me,” Huguley recalls.

All finalists send a picture of themselves to the organization. They also have to RSVP for the reception and wear special ribbons with their convention badges. Huguley had done all of that, so she expected to be welcomed into the reception. She did not expect to be treated as though she were an intruder. [...]

Huguley politely showed the staffer her finalist ribbon, and the woman stepped aside without apology or explanation to allow Huguley entry. But Huguley says the message was clear: As a black woman, she didn’t belong at that awards reception.

For years, RWA's members of color had felt stigma and hostility like that experienced by Huguley [...]; they'd felt unwanted, disrespected, or simply shut out. (Grady)

It is, moreover, strongly suspected that racism has played a part in the judging of RWA contests. In 2018 the Board of the RWA acknowledged that

during the last few years, we've taken a hard look at contest issues, including judging, categories and scoring. A recent discussion among our members has highlighted a systemic issue—black authors are significantly underrepresented as finalists [...] from what we could determine, the statistics for black author RITA finalists from 2000 to 2017 are:

- The number of finalist books by black authors is less than half of 1% of the total number of finalist books
- No black romance author has ever won a RITA

In 2019 the then President of the RWA, HelenKay Dimon issued a more trenchant condemnation of the RITA judging procedure: “The Board affirmatively states that there is a serious problem with reader bias in the judging of the RITAs. This is most evident in the preliminary round of the RITAs” (RWA 2019). The same reader bias affected the Golden Heart contest for unpublished writers since the judges were “anonymous, the scoring system [...] vague and wildly subjective” (Waite). As with the RITAs for published writers, there was statistical evidence that it was “much, much harder to final if you're writing marginalized heroes and heroines” but one anecdote, relating to a somewhat unusual situation, is extremely telling:

Author Nicki Salcedo wrote frankly about entering her manuscript with a black heroine in 2011 and scoring in the bottom 25%; the next year, she removed all references to the character's race, and the exact same book was named a finalist. (Waite)



The last Golden Heart contest was held in 2019. That year also saw the final RITA contest, in which two Black authors at last won RITAs: Kennedy Ryan for a contemporary novel, *Long Shot*, and M. Malone for the novella “Bad Blood.” In 2020 the RWA Board “made the decision to retire the annual RITA Awards” and proposed replacing it with a new competition whose rules would minimise bias, and which would be named after Vivian Stephens (RWA 2020a).

The lack of Black authors among the RWA’s award winners has had consequences not just for Black authors who were discriminated against, but also for readers. In particular, it has had consequences for romance scholarship. It seems probable that some novels will have gained more reviews, and been more widely discussed, as a result of winning a RITA, and this could have made them more likely to come to the attention of scholars. Moreover, as A. Dana Ménard explained in 2013, with regards to a study she undertook based on

the 20 most recent winners of the RITA award for best single-title contemporary romance novel [...], by including books selected by [the] community itself as “exemplary,” it was hoped that the sample would reflect a kind of distillation of the best that the community has to offer.

It certainly was “a kind of distillation,” not necessarily of “the best” that romance has had to offer, but of the best which was both entered into the competition and found palatable by all RWA judges. In that sense, at least, it may continue to have historic value for romance scholars: as long as the biases in the selection process are borne in mind, the list of RITA winners may serve as an indication of a particular section of the romance community’s values and preferences.

#### **6.4 “We hold these truths to be self-evident”: The Tasks of Romance Scholarship**

One of the most important tasks of romance scholarship is to interrogate the genre’s norms. Clearly, this is a task which needs to be performed

carefully and respectfully, acknowledging the genre's strengths and the ways in which it benefits readers, while avoiding both unquestioning loyalty and defensiveness. It is perhaps easier now to achieve such a balance given that the field has developed since the 1970s. The initial wave of research into the romance was, admittedly, often highly critical and the second "wave of American scholarship on the popular romance novel" (Selinger and Gleason 13), which appeared in the 1990s, therefore often consisted of "novelists 'writing back'" (13) to defend romance against the critiques of academics such as Janice Radway and Tania Modleski. Prominent among the works produced by this second wave is the essay collection *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance* (1992), whose introduction states that "When it comes to romance novels, society has always felt free to sit in judgment not only on the literature but on the reader herself" (Krentz 1): the responses in the book lay stress on "female empowerment" and "the inherently subversive nature of the romance novel" (5).

However understandable this attitude, it has to be acknowledged that romance novels express a variety of hopes and widely differing ideas about who is deserving of love. During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), for example, Falangist authors used romance novels to demonstrate how women could support the fascist struggle for victory (González-Allende). Their political hopes and their views of who should receive a happy ending are widely divergent from those to be found in many texts published in the US in the wake of Donald Trump's election as president in 2016:

Len Barot, president of LGBTQ publisher Bold Strokes Books, said unit romance sales have increased by over 25 percent. "We've also seen an increase in published titles featuring transgender characters as well as other subject matter dealing with issues 'under fire' in the current political climate: immigration, domestic terrorism, hate groups and climate change within the context of romance novels." (Bussel)

What this demonstrates is that the core of the romance genre, its focus on love and hope, can be interpreted very differently by different authors and some of those interpretations encourage the intended readers to oppress or exclude other potential readers.

It may be painful for some authors and readers of romance to come to terms with the fact that their genre, despite preaching messages of love and hope, has included many texts which have implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, excluded and denigrated some potential and actual readers. However, as Huguley’s novel demonstrates, even the most lofty of ideals, and the most sacred of texts can, whether inadvertently or deliberately, be turned to oppressive purposes. The Reverend Charles Dodge, for example, attempts to use “Proverbs, 31” (Huguley 165) as an indirect attack on Ruby, whose name is an assertion that she is

“[...] a virtuous prize.”

“You know your Bible. [...] It’s where we got her name. ‘Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.’” (59)

The Bible verses which Dodge quotes in full are:

Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he will have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life. (166)

He then argues that, by contrast, when a woman is lacking in virtue, she is the one who will benefit from a husband. It is, however, notable that he defines the virtuous woman as one who “does not get herself into trouble” (166). Given that Ruby has got “herself into trouble” because she does as ordered by the preceding verse, “Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:9), one may have serious cause to doubt Dodge’s reading of the text. Moreover, earlier in the novel it was revealed that he became pastor of First Water Christian Church under false pretenses (110). He is thus a demonstration that not all those who claim the status of a person who can “*de jure* or

*de facto*, bring to bear upon human troubles the resources, the wisdom, and the authority of [...] faith and life” (Clebsch and Jaekle 4) deserve to be granted it. Moreover he is, in a sense, using his warped understanding of his faith’s teaching to write an oppressive romance plot, in which he features as the husband who will provide Ruby with a happy ending by curing her of her outspoken nature.

Many in the romance reading and writing community like to think of the true faith articulated by romance as “revolutionary [...] in its celebration of love triumphing over the artificial divisions that keep us apart” (Herendeen 418). However, conventions which limit the types of “artificial divisions” contested by the genre may blunt its revolutionary potential, much like the conventions surrounding the reading of the Declaration of Independence each year in Winslow to mark the Fourth of July, “our beloved country’s [...] birthday” (Huguley 136). Ruby loves

the soaring poetry of the Declaration, but Paul Winslow asked Dr. Archibald Melvin, minister of the First Presbyterian church, to read it [...] and the way he read the words made Ruby want to fall asleep. (93)

Ruby’s response is a physical, literal one but it is symbolic of the intended effect of the reading: Paul Winslow organises it, and the accompanying festivities, “so little people like [Ruby’s young sister] Delie would believe everything was just grand. And would want to work for him in the next few years” (93). It is, then, intended to cement the status quo. Ruby, however, decides to speak the words of

the Declaration of Independence right along with the Reverend, word for word [...]. She believed, wholeheartedly, in what she said and she recited it to all with everything in her. [...] At the part of reciting the list of grievances against the king, Ruby would say the “He,” with special emphasis. It came across, to Adam at least, as a heartfelt condemnation of Paul Winslow and his rule in the small town. (136–137)

Her reading challenges the crowd to listen more closely and to recognise the possible implications of the Declaration for the present. I have fol-

lowed Ruby’s lead in the titling of the subheadings in this chapter, applying them to the context of popular romance fiction.

Ruby’s reading is a challenge not because she changes the words of the text but because her identities are such that she would not normally be expected to minister to others in this way. Similarly, common plots and themes in the popular romance genre may read very differently when the identities of the protagonists or their authors are different from those which have hitherto been the norm.

Romance scholarship can only be enriched and enabled to give a better account of the genre if the scholars within the field, and the readers they engage with, come from the widest possible range of backgrounds. Different areas of discomfort and hurt, or of enjoyment and solace, may point to aspects of the romance which require further examination. Romance scholarship must also continually interrogate which primary texts it has chosen to focus on. Identifying understudied areas of the genre is important, not least because it will enable scholars to present a richer, more nuanced picture of the romance’s complexity and diversity and better understand the work it performs for readers. Rita B. Dandridge, for example, as an academic who was a “collector of African American women’s novels” (2004, vii) found that the “enthusiasm” generated in her by Anita Richmond Bukley’s African American historical romance *Black Gold* and similar romances “published in the 1990s was soon challenged when I attempted to locate critical commentaries about them.” To fill this gap in the scholarship she wrote *Black Women’s Activism: Reading African American Women’s Historical Romances* (2004) which, in 2020, remained “one of the only full length books on popular romance fiction by black writers” (Moody-Freeman 2021, 233).

## 6.5 “The voice of justice and of consanguinity”

One might say, then, that Black romances have been treated in a way that parallels Paul Winslow’s behaviour towards Adam. Adam is clearly the son of Paul Winslow but at the first meeting between father and son Paul chooses to sit

opposite Adam [...], not coming close enough to touch the flesh of his first-born son. [...] Not even a handshake. [Adam] sat back down, thinking it was good to sit or he would be reeling at this rejection of his humanity. From his father.

“You have the Winslow eyes,” Paul Winslow said, even though Adam could see he clearly didn’t mean to speak those words aloud.

He continued on, “You’ll see, in David, your younger...”

His father would not finish the sentence. And Adam wanted him to. [...] Why couldn’t he say David was his brother? (Huguley 19)

Paul holds back because words have power. Even the admission that Adam has “the Winslow eyes” is inadvertent: it admits to a connection between them. Deliberately naming Adam as David’s brother would go yet further and suggest that the two were equals or even that Adam was deserving of greater respect due to his seniority. Moreover, although Adam had hoped to be treated as “a human being” (16), to be given “his father’s respect. And to belong” (16), he has only been summoned to Winslow because Paul Winslow has found a use for him: “The colored workers are always getting sick and costing me money at the mill. They need their own doctor” (21).

Paul Winslow’s interest in seeing his son is spurred by the realisation that Adam can be of benefit to Paul’s business. One can perhaps identify parallels with mainstream publishing firms which created or acquired African American romance imprints but then largely kept their Black romances segregated from their white ones. Like the novels which were shelved in the ‘African American section’ because of the race of their protagonists and authors rather than alongside the other texts in the same genre, Adam is only partially acknowledged as part of the family and his work is intended to be with the Black inhabitants of Winslow, not the white ones.

In the penultimate chapter of the novel, however, Adam claims his rightful place by adding to the genealogical details which have been

placed in “the Winslow family Bible” (243): “Adam set his jaw. ‘I’m putting myself in this Bible. I belong here’” (244). Black authors have certainly written themselves into the romance genre. Kim Gallon noted in 2013 that although “Scholars of the African American literary tradition and of popular romance have paid virtually no attention to romance found in the black press,” “the black press in the 1920s and 1930s also published romance fiction.” Further back in time, texts such as Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), began the “first wave of African American women’s historical romances” (Dandridge 2010), and Margo Hendricks, in her forthcoming academic book, *Heliiodorus’ Daughters: Black Women and the Romance Industry*, identifies a Black presence as far back as the ancient Greek romance known as the *Aethiopica* or *Theagenes and Chariclea*. Such texts are an important part of the modern romance’s family tree and deserve to be inscribed in their rightful place alongside medieval romances such as Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* and the novels of Jane Austen, which appear in the novel examined in the following chapter.





## Chapter 7

# Ecstatic and Legalistic Literary Traditions: Rose Lerner's *In for a Penny*

Rose Lerner's *In For a Penny* (2010), set in the early nineteenth century, frequently alludes to works which would now be considered precursors of the modern romance genre and which seem to fall into two distinct literary traditions, one primarily legalistic in nature and the other ecstatic. The novels of Jane Austen, which value propriety and good taste, can be considered legalistic, not least because legalism is associated with activities "conducted in a relatively calm and sober atmosphere" (Whitehouse 294). Legalism, one might say, values sense over sensibility, just as Austen does. In contrast to the realistic, legalistic tradition represented by Austen stands the "romance, broadly construed to include everything from ballads to chivalric tales" (Fuchs 118). This motley group of texts is also present in *In For a Penny*: Nev is a reader of Minerva Press gothic romances, Penelope (usually referred to as Penny) and Louisa sing popular ballads including "songs about girls joining the navy" (Lerner 112), and the first work of literature Penny and Nev discuss is Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, a representative of the large body of medieval and early modern romances. The latter is also a work which represents the ecstatic mode: in it love is "very intense emotionally" (Whitehouse 294) and might even be considered to have produced an "altered state[...] of consciousness" (Whitehouse 294) in the lover who is "so enamored" he does not know whether he is "on horseback or on foot" (Lerner 304).

First printed in 1485 by William Caxton, the *Morte* had only recently staged a comeback in the years before *In for a Penny* opens: there had been a very long gap between William Stansby's 1634 edition and the editions published in 1816 and 1817 (Matthews 355). The renewed interest in the *Morte* can be considered part of a wider "rebellion against a constraining neoclassical aesthetic ideal of order and unity" (Kilgour 3). The antiquarians who championed Malory's work in the early nineteenth-century:

promoted the genre of romance partly in reaction against the dominant neo-classicism of the eighteenth-century. Warton [...] conceded that most good taste and criticism flowed from neo-classicism and its emphasis on realism. But, he suggested, something had been lost with the rejection of medieval culture, for all its superstitions. "We have parted with extravagancies that are above propriety," he wrote, "with incredibilities that are more acceptable than truth, and with fictions that are more valuable than reality" [...]. Romance, more than any other genre, embodied the spirit of these fictions. (Matthews 357)

Whereas the "improbabilities" of the romance tradition excite a sense of wonder, novels such as Austen's "are concerned with selfhood and morality within a cultural context and thus depict the inevitable conflict between private and public personas and between illusion (imagination and desire) and the actualities of daily existence" (Brothers and Bowers 4): "middle-class, Christian, and family-centered values [...] dominate characterization, plots, and themes" (Boyd Thompson 374).

In keeping with I. M. Lewis's observation that "sober ritualistic dogmatism is the mark of religions which have become so thoroughly embedded in society that almost all trace of inspirational spontaneity has departed" (Lewis 119) and "the more strongly-based and entrenched religious authority becomes, the more hostile it is towards haphazard inspiration" (Lewis 29), Lerner's novel associates legalistic fictions with propriety and social acceptability while ecstatic fictions are depicted as guilty pleasures. When Lerner's protagonists first meet, Penny admits to be-

ing “fond of the *Morte d’Arthur*” (5) but flushes at acknowledging this, “as if it were something to be ashamed of” (5), and promptly adds that her “taste in *modern* literature is rather more elevated” (5). The *Morte*’s antiquity perhaps gives it a slight degree of cachet, lacking in the other ecstatic texts present in the novel. Penny and Nev are at least willing to admit to reading the *Morte*, whereas Nev has “not the heart to admit” his “shameful fondness for the Minerva Press” (71), a publisher which was “synonymous with Gothic potboilers” (Mandal 166).

By contrast, Penny declares unequivocally that Austen is an author she would “recommend” (Lerner 71). A community-wide acceptance of Austen is signalled in *In for a Penny* by the mention of Sir Walter Scott’s having given “one of her books a most favorable review” (69) and it is indeed the case that

Sir Walter Scott hailed the “new style” of novel [...] crafted by Austen for its characterization, its depiction of the life and speech of ordinary people, and its eschewing the improbabilities of the romance—even for its comic parodying of the characters, situations, and plots of those stylized heroic fictions. (Brothers and Bowers 6)

Austen’s novels, which are firmly in the legalistic tradition, embody all the values to which Penny, whose parents were originally working-class, aspires. For Penny, “Control, restraint, elegance—they were all synonymous with that indefinable something that made you gentry and not common. Excess was [...] all the things that Penelope had trained herself never, ever to do” (Lerner 107).

That Austen’s novels can be considered “calm and sober” (Whitehouse 294) legalistic works is demonstrated by passages such as the following, which Penny comes across during her reading of *Mansfield Park*:

*This would be the way to Fanny’s heart. She was not to be won by all that gallantry and wit and good-nature together could do; or, at least, she would not be won by them nearly so soon, without the assistance of sentiment and feeling, and seriousness on serious subjects.* (Lerner 66)

In keeping with her ownership of a “well-thumbed copy of *Sense and Sensibility*” (19), Penny rejects her mother’s talk of “Grand Passions” as “romantical” (20). Her own intellectual preference is for legalistic love: “Mutual esteem and warm affection were good enough for her” (20) and these, she is sure, she could find with her friend Edward (who shares a name with the hero of *Sense and Sensibility*, who marries the sensible Elinor). However, by the time Penny argues that “Surely a good, sensible man must always be pleasing” (64), it is clear that good, sensible Edward is not as pleasing to her as Nev.

As Penny acknowledges, she “had chosen a pleasing form over every dictate of reason” (65) and from a legalistic point of view, “choosing a pleasing form, easy address, or an attractive costume over sense and character is unpardonably foolish” (64). Ecstatic passion-love of the kind associated with love at first sight would seem, to bystanders, to be based solely on what is visible, such as “a pleasing form” and “an attractive costume.” Yet the mysteries of the ecstatic mode are not revealed through careful, rational study: they are the product of experiences such as “collective possession and altered states of consciousness” (Whitehouse 303). There is certainly little logic and no deliberation involved when Penny agrees to marry Nev, “a man of whose character she knew nothing—or worse than nothing! A man, in fact, of whom she knew only that he had a spendthrift father, a taste for strong drink, and a very pretty mistress” (Lerner 28). Rather, as though possessed, she assents to Nev’s proposal because “her tongue moved without consultation with her brain” (25).

Admittedly she reverts to a semblance of rationality by proclaiming, in what seems a pastiche of Austen, that she sees

no reason why two people of good sense and amiable dispositions should not find a tolerable measure of conjugal felicity, even if they are not, perhaps, united by those bonds of affection and familiarity which one might wish. (26)

Yet this temporary, superficial reversion to rationality is undermined by the fact that it is rather unclear at this stage in the novel whether they are, in fact, “two people of good sense.” Penny’s rejected, sensible, legalistic suitor certainly believes they are not, and sends Penny a wedding gift

of a series of Hogarth prints depicting *Marriage à la Mode*. These begin with Lord Squanderfield contracting a marriage to a rich merchant's daughter, proceed through "the young couple's idle, unchaste life" (55), the lord's death at the hands of his wife's lover, and end with a depiction of the deathbed of his wife who, "back in her father's house, had taken an overdose of laudanum on hearing of her lover's execution" (56). It is a gift which clearly predicts a disastrous ending for both bride and groom since Penny is the daughter of a rich member of the mercantile class while Nev, like Lord Squanderfield, is an aristocrat.

Due to his lifestyle, Nev would also appear to be similar to Lord Squanderfield in character, and thus the antithesis of the Austenian hero. Indeed, Penny marries Nev despite the warnings contained in Austen's novels. Lerner deliberately depicts Penny reading the following passage just before Nev arrives to propose to her:

*Her thoughts were silently fixed on the irreparable injury which too early an independence—and its consequent habits of idleness, dissipation, and luxury—had made in the mind, the character, the happiness, of a man who, to every advantage of person and talents, united a disposition naturally open and honest, and a feeling, affectionate temper.* (19)

It is a description of Austen's anti-heroic Mr. Willoughby, in *Sense and Sensibility*, whose choice of bride, like Nev's, is shaped by her wealth: Willoughby's Miss Grey "is very rich" with "Fifty thousand pounds" (Austen 205) and Nev's Penny (whose surname, Brown, is similarly monochrome) has a dowry of "a hundred and seventy-five thousand pounds" (Lerner 7). Nev, too, has certainly acquired "habits of idleness, dissipation, and luxury."

Nev is, however, perhaps implicitly compared favorably to one Austen hero with respect to his response to Penny, for Nev considered her "very pretty" and appreciated her "fine dark eyes" (4) when they first met, at a ball. This description may recall Mr. Darcy's comment about "a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman" (Austen 73) in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, yet the proud and proper Darcy showed

no enthusiasm about Elizabeth Bennet at the ball at which they first met. Indeed, he

had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty; he had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticise. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. (70)

By contrast, Nev was eager to make Penny's acquaintance, even though her mother's Cockney accent made it clear that they were of much lower social status than him (Lerner 3). He may be faulted for his lack of propriety, but his lack of pride is depicted favourably.

With this and his "feeling, affectionate temper" intact, Lerner's novel proceeds to demonstrate that Nev's character had not sustained an "irreparable injury" as a result of his bad habits. Instead, he is able to veer from a life of excess to total renunciation of gambling "along with liquor and horse racing and women of easy virtue" (68) and also of his best friends, on the grounds that, as he tells them, "I've got to be respectable now, and I can't do that with you two" (53). Moreover, he adopts a clearly legalistic view of love and marriage:

Living with someone, being married [...] that's *work* [...]. It's trying to be what she needs even if it doesn't come naturally, and struggling to understand her, and working together to make a life! It's accepting that sometimes things aren't perfect. It's understanding that sometimes one of you has responsibilities that have to come first, and knowing that she understands that too! (236)

In this legalistic frame of mind, Nev is unsympathetic towards his sister Louisa's love for Percy Garrett. It is clearly ecstatic "passion-love" (Paizis 109): "Louisa [...] was madly in love, [...] Mr. Garrett loved madly enough to throw caution to the winds" (Lerner 218). Nev critiques their behaviour, saying he

can't understand how a clever girl [...] could have been so *stupid* as to risk *everything* for a few stolen kisses. Tom Kedge saw you, did you know that? He's threatening to tell Sir Jasper. The bastard's been skimming from the Poor Authority funds and underpaying his employees, and I'm going to have to renew his lease to save you from the consequences of your own folly. (235)

Ruled only by love, Percy and Louisa simply respond by saying that they love each other; "He and Louisa said it the same way, as if it excused everything, as if it were the one unanswerable argument in the world. Maybe it did and maybe it was" (242). It is, indeed, the ecstatic mode's argument about the rule of love. To Nev, though, who is taking into consideration the rules of society and attempting to be both "a responsible landlord and a responsible guardian to Louisa" (161), their love does not justify putting him in a position where he feels he must choose between letting Louisa's reputation in society be destroyed, which would make her a social outcast, or abandoning measures to protect those who live on his estate from exploitation by Tom Kedge.

It should be noted, however, that although Percy and Louisa's ecstatic love eventually prompts them to elope, risking yet greater scandal, they then swiftly return because, as Louisa tells Nev, "I made him turn back after the first twenty miles. I couldn't do that to you, Nate" (305). Louisa's ecstatic love, it would appear, has been tempered by legalistic love, for her brother. Ultimately, therefore, neither the ecstatic nor the legalistic mode seems wholly satisfactory as a guide to how to approach all aspects of living. It is admirable to be "responsible" (161), especially when, as is the case for Nev, one has power over others' lives: "At [Nev's estate of] Loweston, if a man who had lived there all his life could not find work, it was because Nev had not hired him. If a child starved it was because Nev and Penelope had not given her food. At Loweston, they were answerable for all those people" (151). However, legalism can lead to "missing chances to be happy" (207) when it becomes "refined, sensible, and a little too careful" (95). Instead, the novel seems to adopt the Greek motto "*Pan métron áriston* [...]. Moderation in all things" (51)

with respect to the ecstatic and legalistic modes. Marriage to Penny helps Nev become more legalistic in his approach to life, while she is enabled to explore ecstatic aspects of existence:

She was in love, she loved him madly. She had always thought that grand passions were a myth created by fools to explain their own weak-willed behavior, and now their reality was blinding. Penelope felt as if she had turned a corner on an ordinary London street and seen a great dragon coiled there. (264)

Their marriage, then, effects a reconciliation of the ecstatic and legalistic modes in much the same way that the modern romance genre shows itself to be the offspring of both Austen who, it has been claimed, is “the mother of the romance novel” (Crusie 240), and that collection of unruly ecstatic texts which includes the medieval romance, the Gothic novel and popular fictions such as broadside ballads.

As a work of literature, *In for a Penny* clearly combines elements of literary realism in the tradition of Austen with aspects of Gothic romance. Although Penny rejects the legalistic approach to marriage promoted by her reading of Austen’s fiction, neither she nor Lerner ever reject realism to the extent of viewing Nev in an unrealistic manner. As romance reviewer Janga Rholetter has observed, Penny

never sees him as a romanticized, impossibly handsome figure whom she loved at first sight. She views him as “a perfectly ordinary-looking young man” of “middling height” with hair that is “merely brown” and eyes that are “an ordinary blue, of an ordinary shape and size.”

Moreover, since Nev is not “living in a Minerva Press novel” (Lerner 47), his need to marry for money is not represented as a “tragic sacrifice” (47). Even Nev’s debts of “tens of thousands” (48) of pounds are prosaically given to include bills for “candles and black gloves and ink” (23). Also detracting from potential melodrama is another way in which Nev requires Penny’s financial assistance. He can, as her father observes, “barely



add" (29), and this incompetence leads Penny to offer him a quick lesson in how to "cast out nines," a "method for verifying sums" (27). Penny, then, is definitely not the stereotypical Gothic heroine, whom she considers

a fainthearted creature incapable of a single coherent speech or thought [...] Existing merely to be abused by one's guardian or abducted by an unprincipled rake [...] I never fainted in my life, and I am quite [...] capable of self-exertion and rational thought. (72)

However, Penny and Nev's neighbour, Sir Jasper, became a widower under rather mysterious circumstances: his

wife was killed by one of the [spring] guns [in the grounds of their home], two years ago. She ought to have known better than to go walking in Sir Jasper's coverts, but—well, no one knows what happened. She was found with a bullet through her head. (88–89)

This could merely have been an accident, but one imagines it would certainly have led to speculation by an avid and credulous reader of gothic novels such as Austen's *Catherine Morland*. In *Northanger Abbey* (1818) she suspects that General Tilney had murdered his wife, only to be scolded

Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you – Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? (Austen 159)

The denouement of Lerner's novel, however, does nothing to dispel the possibility that murders of this kind could be planned by men of Sir Jasper and General Tilney's standing. Sir Jasper's being English and a Christian does not prevent him feeling emotions of "pure violence [...] His face was chalk white, his eyes dark furious slits" (Lerner 272). Perhaps Sir Jasper did commit an earlier crime and it is not until he goes "mad" (290), blaming Penny's "degenerate influence" (275) for all his plans going awry, that his true nature is revealed to the neighbourhood.

Gothic suspicions seem vindicated by a plot which involves a situation that recalls and undercuts Penny's earlier words about the lack of realism inherent in "desperate duels amidst Gothic ruins" (71). Penny is lured into the woods below a "Gothic ruin" (286) so that Sir Jasper can dispose of her but Nev follows them, confronts the murderous Sir Jasper, and

Within a very few moments, Penelope had more sympathy with Gothic heroines than she ever had before. There simply did not appear to be anything she could do to help Nev [...]. So she stood like a particularly useless stone and watched as he and Sir Jasper lunged and fainted [...].

Penelope remembered the Gothic heroine's weapon. She began to scream, as loudly as she could. (299–300)

Having incorporated the Gothic into the plot, this section of the novel ends with the death of Sir Jasper and a return to normality which blends and reconciles the ecstatic and legalistic literary traditions: over a family breakfast Nev outlines an alternative to a "daring raid on the jail to free the poachers" (308) which will achieve this goal by literally co-opting legalism:

I shall have to become a justice of the peace and drop the charges. [...] True, he'd originally been planning something more in line with Louisa's suggestion [of a "daring raid"], but with Sir Jasper safely dead, this was a better way. (309)

## 7.1 Ecstasy and Asexuality

This ability to combine and reconcile the ecstatic and legalistic modes and literary traditions suggests a degree of flexibility in popular romance, which is also evident in the ways in which romance has expanded in recent decades to include a wider range of protagonists, beyond those who are young, cis, white, neurotypical and heterosexual. There is, however, still much progress to be made, including with respect to “compulsory sexuality,” the “pervasive cultural assumption—set into relief by the emergence of asexuality and popular responses to it—that everyone is defined by some kind of sexual attraction” (Emens 306). Rosiee Thor, an asexual and aromantic romance reader has stated that

I. Love. Romance. But romance doesn't love me. [...] To be honest, romance novels are often extremely *inhospitable* to people like me. Romance as a genre is sometimes built on tropes or stereotypes that are actually part of a bigger cultural bias that contributes to the violence we experience in real life.

It therefore seems important to consider how popular romance might evolve so that more novels are hospitable to asexual and aromantic readers.

One obstacle to this process may be the long tradition which connects sex and ecstatic spiritual revelation: “sexual imagery [...] appears in the writings of the great mystics of all major religions” (Götz 7). Christian mystics, for example, have historically

found in sexuality a kind of metaphor of the soul's approach to and union with God. Instead of an asceticism of sheer renunciation that would ignore sexuality altogether, these mystics re-channeled their sexual passion into love of God and found in the secular expression of sexual love an allegorical paradigm of spiritual love. (Götz 15)

In the nineteenth century, sex was sometimes considered not just a metaphor for intense, ecstatic spiritual experiences but a means by

which to achieve them: “By the late Victorian period, medical writers increasingly spoke of sexuality as an important means for enhancing the spiritual unity of husband and wife” (D’Emilio and Freedman 69) and,

especially within the middle class, sexual desires had become increasingly fused with a romantic quest for emotional intimacy and even spiritual union [...]—a “blending of hearts,” “holy kisses,” “spiritual joy,” when “souls entered Paradise” along “beautiful paths of happiness” to new “joys and blessings.” (84)

Working within this tradition, in many romances human, sexual, union is shown to permit an approach to the spiritual. It has been observed, for example, that “In [Barbara] Cartland’s novels, the revelation of a higher existence through love can, at times, be seen to model itself on the rhetoric used by female mystics, who describe God’s love penetrating the heart” (Rix), while in Alexandra Sellers’ *Sheikh’s Betrayal* (2009) the moment of orgasm is described as a moment in which

all need, all urgency, exploded in a blaze of honeyed light that swept out from the tiny space where souls and bodies met, to enrich all creation. And, bathed in its glow, blinded by its brightness, for that place cannot be seen by mortal eyes, for one moment of perfection they cried out their gratitude, and then, slowly, because they must, sank back together into the abode of separation. (129)

Even when there are no explicit spiritual or religious allusions associated with it, sex between protagonists tends to be depicted as an ecstatic event i.e. “very intense emotionally,” “highly stimulating,” and tending “to trigger a lasting sense of revelation, and to produce powerful bonds between small groups of ritual participants” (Whitehouse 294). Moreover, depictions of sex or sexual tension are often thought to be necessary to reproduce an ecstatic experience for readers: one guide to writing romance claims, for instance, that “Sexual tension—that push/pull of the physical “Should I or shouldn’t I?” question—is the driving force be-

hind romance. It builds anticipation and both your characters *and your readers experience it viscerally*" (Kent II, emphasis added).

Sexual attraction is often presented as an essential component of the ideal relationship. In *In For a Penny* it is clear that Penny abandons both legalistic ideals of marriage and her legalistic suitor because she finds Nev extremely sexually attractive: her decision to marry him is motivated by the way his smile makes her feel "hot, and strange inside" (Lerner 21) and the fact that when he kisses her she "ached in places it wasn't ladylike to think about" (24). Her legalistic suitor Edward, by contrast, "had always been all that was respectful, never given her more than a chaste kiss on the brow or the cheek" (24). When Penny tries to imagine being married to Edward,

sharing a bed with him. It did not repulse her; it only left her feeling blank. Would she ever have realized that something vital was absent? Or would she have gone her whole life believing that anything more—flame, fire, passion—was a lie dreamt up by horrid novelists? (220)

Penny's musings on her own relationship do not necessarily mean that sexual attraction is being presented as "vital" for all, nor that relationships which lack this component are all being branded as lacking in "flame, fire, passion." Indeed, Lerner is unlikely to have intended such a reading since she herself is "demisexual and spent many years in a queer-platonic relationship" (Lerner 2020). In any case it is certainly legitimate for authors to both write about ecstatic effects which are produced through sex or sexual tension, and to depict their characters' appreciation of this aspect of their relationships. What I wish to highlight in this sub-section is simply that the frequency with which the ecstatic mode is linked to sex and sexual attraction may make it more difficult for some authors to imagine non-sexual experiences which would evoke ecstatic responses. Moreover, given the preponderance of the associations between sex and ecstatic passion, and the emphasis placed on the role of sex within fulfilling relationships, romance readers who place less or no importance on sex may feel that the genre, taken as a whole, does not value non-sexual relationships between people who are in a committed partnership with

one another, and considers there to be something lacking in the lives of those whose sexual activity does not produce intense ecstatic experiences.

There is a parallel here with the predominance of the English Regency period and its aristocrats in historical romance. As Elizabeth Kingston has stated, “it is good and entirely fine to enjoy rich white people in ball gowns making googly eyes at each other” but over time the market dominance of these stories has made it “hard for non-white perspectives to even exist in the same space,” not least because although the vast majority of Regency-set romances are, as Jennifer Hallock has observed, “selective in their historical accuracy,” the version of history they depict has become normalised and their norms have at times been “used as a weapon to criticize, dismiss, belittle, and silence authors who dare to write anything different from what’s expected” (Kingston) even if it is, in fact, historically accurate. Romance has similarly developed certain norms regarding sexuality and these may impede the creation and acceptance of texts which present alternatives to them.

It may be easier to create such alternative texts in the legalistic mode since the legalistic mode is less closely associated with sexuality. The greater challenge is to identify and depict non-sexual experiences which are, nonetheless,

very intense emotionally; they may be rarely performed and highly stimulating (e.g., involving altered states of consciousness or terrible ordeals and tortures); they tend to trigger a lasting sense of revelation, and to produce powerful bonds between small groups of ritual participants. (Whitehouse 294)

Lerner’s novel, despite linking the ecstatic mode very strongly to sexuality, does provide some indications of ways in which this might be achieved. One non-sexualised experience in the novel which may have ecstatic potential, given Whitehouse’s reference to “terrible ordeals and tortures,” is intense physical danger. In *In For a Penny* the moment of danger is brief and its implications are not explored at length but it does appear to trigger at least one revelation: it makes absolutely clear to Penny that Nev is “perfect, perfect for her. How could she leave

him? That had been death's chief terror too: leaving Nev" (Lerner 302). Another non-sexual activity with strong ecstatic potential which appears in *In for a Penny* is the production and reception of music. Music has long been associated with ecstatic religious experiences: in "Sufism, *samā'* ('listening,' 'hearing,' 'audition') refers to the listening to music, singing, chanting and measured recitation designed to bring about religious emotion and ecstasy" (Gribetz 43) and the medieval theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali stated that Sufis attained a state of "ecstasy [...] through hearing music [...] due to the mystic relationship which God has ordained between the rhythm of music and the spirit of man" (qtd. in Gribetz 51).

Admittedly music is sexualised in *In For a Penny* since:

When he brushed a thumb over her nipple, she tensed like a bowstring. [...] She kept her eyes closed, but her whole body was waiting—it was as if she were listening very carefully for the opening strains of an overture. (Lerner 97, emphasis added)

and, later,

A thought came to her—*this is how a violin feels*. She was filled with sound, resonating to Nev's playing—trills and arpeggios, higher and higher, the tempo increasing until she vibrated under his hands—

Suddenly the pleasure was so strong she could hardly bear it. "Oh!" she cried out—she would break—she would die—and then the whole world rang with a crescendo of bright, pure pleasure. (119)

However, there are other elements of the depiction of Nev and Penny's relationship to music which reveal its non-sexual ecstatic potential. It is mentioned that Nev had felt a "yearning toward something undefined" sometimes "when he heard the opening chords of a favorite piece of music. He had read a poem, once, that almost described it: *a shaping and a sense of things beyond us*" (182). Music is thus acknowledged as having the ability to create an altered state of consciousness

in a listener such as Nev which brings them close to knowledge of the spiritual mysteries “beyond us” and our everyday lives. In addition, music produces a “powerful bond” between Penny and Nev, with ‘love at first sight’ occurring when

A violin screeched painfully. Behind him, someone groaned. Nev turned. A slender, dark-haired young lady tricked out in orange silk was grimacing and whispering in an older lady’s ear.

He liked orange, he liked slender girls, and he liked people who disliked bad music. (2)

As Nev tells Penny much later: “I didn’t realize it at the time, but from the moment I saw you, you made me want to see you again” (216). Certainly Nev and Penny’s interest in one another has a strong sexual component, but their shared love of music is far from irrelevant. Indeed, on the occasion of their betrothal Nev suggests that their liking for “Arne’s arias” (24) will help them “rub along tolerably well together” (24). Penny’s mother, far from considering this an irrelevance, is moved to favour the match between Penny and Nev in part because Penny tells her that

“[...] he likes Arne.”

Mrs. Brown’s face softened—a little. “That composer you’re always on about? What a coincidence.” (31)

This last comment perhaps faintly recalls the conventions of “passion-love” which imply “forces outside human control, be it ‘destiny’ or even ‘nature’, which essentially connotes the primacy of external or unknown forces and a corresponding diminution of human responsibility and control over what takes place” (Paizis 109). Coincidence could be an unknown force at work, and so too might be the “insidious voice [...] inside” (Lerner 28) Penny which favours her union with Nev: it does whisper to her about their sexual compatibility (“*he kisses well*” (28)) but it begins by emphasising their musical compatibility (“*He likes music*” (28)). In addition, the first occasion on which Penny and Nev hear



each other's singing voices perhaps provides a musical parallel to the ecstatic passion-love experience so often evoked through depictions of sex: "their voices fit together somehow. They seemed instinctively to know when to rise and when to fall in harmony, when to soften and when to strengthen" (45). Through music there arises a deep, instinctive and irrational sense that they belong together.

## 7.2 Pastoral Care and Escapism

Given that romances are novels whose authors have assumed pastoral roles, offering hope to their readers through works which propagate faith in the goodness and durability of love, it is vital to make romance hospitable to a range of readers: to do otherwise implies both a lack of faith in the ability of love to bring benefits to all, and suggests that certain readers are undeserving of pastoral care. Moreover, in providing pastoral care, there are advantages to being able to call on both modes: depending on the nature of a particular reader or problem, one or the other may be better able to teach "us to know ourselves or our fellows better" (Lerner 2010, 72) or spark that sense, "while reading, that here was *myself*" (72).

The ways in which texts in the legalistic literary tradition do this may be more immediately obvious but, as Karen Sullivan has suggested with regards to Arthurian romances, of which the *Morte* is one, the ecstatic literary tradition too can be considered to

represent life "as it truly is," not, perhaps, in its everyday reality, but in its exceptional aspect. If romance takes us away from our world through its fictions, it does so in order to bring us back to this world with an improved ability to recognize and appreciate its most intense and heightened moments. [...] Far from rejecting romance, we should embrace it for awakening us to that in life we would not have noticed were it not for its sake, and for confirming the reality of what we have perceived, however ephemeral it may have seemed. If "to romanticize" refers to the way in which we distort reality in order to make it resemble the conven-

tions of romance, the term “to realicize” could be coined to refer to the way in which we also distort reality in order to make it adhere to the conventions of the realist novel. (24)

It is also the case that individual readers may interpret and experience the same text in a more, or less, realistic manner. Lerner, for example, has both observed that “it’s not that uncommon to be very interested in reading and writing about sex despite not necessarily being all that interested in HAVING it,” and suggested that when studying romance fiction it is “important to look at the function of sex in a romance as a metaphor or narrative element, as well as literally/realistically” (2020a). This latter argument, with particular reference to depictions of rape, has also been made by Angela R. Toscano:

Discussions of rape in popular romance have most often centered on how these scenes affect or reflect the lives of romance readers. Detractors of the genre have used its presence to support the notion that romance is a patriarchal and repressive literary form, while defenders have often pointed to the presence of the rape scene as a way for women to explore their sexuality. (2012)

Toscano herself, however, “advances an entirely different reading,” namely “that the presence of rape functions as a parodic parallel to the violence of falling in love.” This seems a distinctly ecstatic way of reading such scenes, but it is no less valid for that.

Perhaps ecstatic fictions, precisely because they are not realistic, are helpful when one does not “wish to be oneself. Sometimes it can be pleasant to imagine oneself as a dark hero tormented by his sinful past, or a noble knight capable of saving a fainting female with one blow of his lance” (Lerner 2010, 72). Properly interpreted, these escapist narratives can, as Sullivan suggests, awaken readers to new, exciting future stories for themselves. One can certainly see such possibilities in the broadside ballad (University of California) of “The Bristol Bridegroom” which Penny recites to Nev (Lerner 2010, 113–114). In it a merchant’s daughter runs off to sea in pursuit of her “true love” (114). When Penny was younger, she

did think about emulating its protagonist literally: at school, Penny was “very unhappy. I thought about running off and volunteering for the navy all the time” (114). This would almost certainly have led to a less than ideal outcome for her; it is generally inadvisable to take texts in this tradition as perfect templates for behaviour in the real world. Nonetheless, at the time the text did perform an important function for Penny: she acknowledges that it gave narrative expression to a wish on the part of her younger self “to rebel against something she cannot change” (113). The ballad thus represented a longing for a world in which she could be guided by her feelings, gain “a man’s freedom” (113) of opportunity, and escape the confines of the future envisaged for her by legalistic norms. Moreover, when the adult Penny trusted her emotions and chose Nev over Edward, she acted in accordance with the message of the ballad. Had she not done so,

she would have gone on being drab, practical Penelope forever. And she would have thought that she was living her best, truest self. Never joking or crying or making love in the middle of the day. Speaking seriously on serious subjects. And the part of her that had [...] wanted to be a sailor [...] would have grown smaller and smaller until it faded away entirely.

Penelope found that she couldn’t quite bear the thought. She did not want to be ashamed of her feelings anymore.  
(222–23)

The unrealistic narrative gave form to Penny’s emotions and hopes. In the next chapter, I want to explore another novel which shows the value of another, much more famous, unrealistic story: the Cinderella narrative, which, “with its beautiful but undervalued woman and the instant recognition she garners from the prince, is of course the quintessential romantic story” (Weisser 1).



## Chapter 8

# Metaphors of Hope: Princes and Alyssa Cole's *A Princess in Theory*

In this chapter and the next I will look at three of the most common metaphors of hope in romance. All involve some kind of salvation, but whereas the narratives discussed in the next chapter refer to devils and the damned, the focus of this chapter, the Cinderella narrative, involves salvation by means of a prince, and thus expresses hopes which, at least initially, appear less theological in nature. According to Jan Cohn the majority of romance is, basically, a Cinderella story,

the story of how a modern young woman succeeds in marrying a handsome, desirable, and wealthy man. Put more simply, it tells the story of how the heroine simply *succeeds*, for in conventional, which is to say politically conservative, terms, her only possible success in our society comes in marrying happily and marrying well. Put more polemically, popular romance tells the story of how the heroine gains access to money—to power—in patriarchal society. (3)

This “handsome, desirable, and wealthy man” has often been referred to, metaphorically, as a “prince,” who

can be flawed, but he can't be fatally flawed, and in some way he must offer the heroine something of great value, usually something that will increase her power. So while romance heroes don't have to be handsome, they do usually have to be strong or admired in their communities (status) or wealthy or successful or all of the above so that by offering the heroine marriage, public confirmation of unconditional love within the sanctions of society, they increase her security. (Crusie Smith 1999, 55)

The many lesbian romances which have incorporated "iconic images and characterizations" (Betz 107) from *Xena, Warrior Princess* demonstrate that a romance "prince" does not have to be male, and other romances could be listed which demonstrate that the person to whom the "prince" offers wealth and security does not have to be female. What is consistent is that the nature of the hopes embedded in the "prince" remain associated with security and social status. Marc Zvi Brettler, however, cautions that "Religious notions must be understood within specific systems, and rites or institutions 'shared' by different religions might actually have very different meanings or functions" (16), and it is therefore worth noting that different authors, and different princes, will no doubt represent different understandings of "wealth," "security," and "social status."

In what follows, I limit my analysis to the prince in Alyssa Cole's *A Princess in Theory* (2018). Thabiso Moshoeshoe, its princely protagonist, is not simply a metaphorical prince: he is an actual prince, albeit of the admittedly fictional state of Thesolo. However, regardless of the skill and detail with which he is written, and even regardless of the realism with which certain aspects of his character are rendered, an element of his princely status remains metaphorical, because of what his title represents. It leads his people to expect him to be "both provider and protector" and "more like a mythical prince than a flesh and blood one" (28). In this he resembles the kings of ancient Israel, whose "populace [...] wanted a king who possessed certain qualities such as longevity, wisdom, wealth and strength, since such a king would foster social stability. No histor-

ical king possessed all of these qualities” and yet “the qualities of long life, wisdom, wealth, strength, majesty and beauty are typically applied to human kings” (Brettler 51). In other words, their king was both a real, fallible, potentially weak and frail person and also the national figurehead who was ascribed “longevity, wisdom, wealth and strength” along with his crown. The same gap between the real and the metaphorical prince is evident in Thabiso.

What underlies the romance narratives of marriage to a prince is, “coded and cautious, [...] an outlaw world where the forbidden is allowed, a magical world where the impossible occurs” (Cohn 7). Therefore, when a prince is functioning as a metaphor, “popular perceptions [...] are more important than the historical realities. This may be illustrated by analogy—to understand the metaphor ‘man is a wolf’ we must study popular perceptions of wolves rather than their ‘real’, biological behavior” (Brettler 25). The hopes embodied by the romance prince owe far more to fairy tales than they do to any real, historical prince and that is certainly true of *A Princess in Theory*, which includes one metafictional moment in which Thabiso recognises that the story of his lost betrothed “had become his own personal fairy tale, or like the Mills & Boons romances he’d sneaked from the queen’s library as a teen” (Cole 31), and another in which Naledi, the heroine, thinks that the way Thabiso looks at her recalls

the look on Charming’s face when Sleeping Beauty’s eyes fluttered open. The expression of awe that Eric sported when he woke to find Ariel cradling him on the beach. It was the look that she thought only existed in Disney cartoons because it seemed so highly improbable that anyone would ever look at her that way. (88)

The fact that romance has recourse to “the impossible” is not, however, an indication that its authors are unaware of reality. Alyssa Cole, the author whose novel is the focus of this chapter, has demonstrated her knowledge of harsh realities repeatedly in romances which, in her own words, include “some form of activism or involvement with the government or with programs to better the community” (Green). Moreover,

the incredulity with which Naledi responds to the initial overtures from Prince Thabiso is an acknowledgement that the events depicted are not going to be entirely realistic: in the real world Naledi would be correct in assuming that personalised emails purporting to be from an African prince, asking the recipient to “please send the following verifications of identity: a scan of your license, passport, or other form of ID; up to date medical records” (Cole 1), are indeed the work of “a scammer” (3). Nonetheless, as we saw in the previous chapter with regards to the association between the imagination and the ecstatic mode, authors may feel there are certain ideas and emotions which are better expressed through extravagantly unrealistic plots or character types.

Cole is, moreover, well aware that fictional princesses are considered by many to be “a tool of the patriarchy [...] an outmoded concept designed to keep girls from reaching their true potential” (Cole 2018a) by encouraging them down the “politically conservative” trajectory outlined by Cohn. It is clearly true that if the “prince” is read very literally, he could be understood as a suggestion to young women readers that the solution to all their problems is marriage to a wealthy man. However, Cole herself interprets him rather differently:

it annoyed and perplexed me when I saw the sudden rejection of the pop culture princess phenomenon. It seemed to me that (mostly) white women, who’d grown tired of the fantasy that was at its base — the idea they could be given their wildest dreams and a crown to boot — had made a unilateral decision that this wasn’t what women needed, without considering the malnourished fantasies of millions of black and brown girls. (2018a)

The particular meanings of Thabiso’s metaphorical princely nature are most clearly indicated by an honorific which Cole created specifically for him: His Royal Highness Prince Thabiso Moshoeshoe of Thesolo is the “Bringer of Light and Love” (2018, 206). This is a title applied to him regardless of whether or not, in any particular instance, he is actually bringing light and love to a situation, because it indicates the benefits which he, as a princely metaphor, is expected to bring to others.



## 8.1 “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28)

It is certainly possible to see a prince’s wealth as excessive, an authorisation of greed and a life of sloth. However, as Pamela Marks has argued, a desire expressed in many romances, and perhaps especially in those which contain a “prince,” is the desire not for great wealth, but for “a protector” who will act as a “shield” (11) against “the slings and arrows of the struggles of everyday life” (11–12). This is “not necessarily [...] a rich man” but it does involve salvation from “a life of cheese-paring or drudgery [...] waiting tables at a truck stop, endlessly scrubbing toilet bowls or dirty diapers or the kitchen floor of a single-wide trailer in some dreary desert town” (12). Naledi hopes to avoid this type of future through her own efforts, but in the present she is still juggling her “lab assistant job, waitressing, and grad school” (Cole 2018, 4), and with “student loan payment nudges” (3) a staple in her inbox Naledi is very aware of her precarious financial situation:

having multiple sources of income was a safety net she couldn’t live without. She didn’t have family to turn to when times got rough, and one mistake at work or school could have a domino effect on the life plans she had so carefully been setting up. (4)

When Naledi dreams of wealth, it is not an extravagant hope. She would merely like to have “enough money to make [...] purchases without triple-checking her bank account balance beforehand” (14). Perhaps to emphasise the absence of avarice or extravagance in Naledi’s hopes, the novel ends with the couple planning to live not in a vast and luxurious palace but in a New York “brownstone” and Naledi wondering “if their new home would have a washer and dryer. After all, [...] even her wildest dreams could come true” (360).

Hoping for at least a basic level of economic security is not incompatible with the spiritual life. It is a hope present in the Lord’s Prayer,

for example, in which a plea for “daily bread” sits alongside requests for other, less tangible, goods. As theologian Clive Marsh has written,

material conditions do not of themselves effect salvation, but it is easy to see how a person with few possessions might hope and expect that salvation may include an improvement in their material well-being. To express it differently again: money does not make people happy but it is understandable to assume that a basic level of material well-being needs to be presupposed for openness to salvation to be made possible [...] salvation is not to be bought, but everyone—to use financial imagery—needs some kind of deposit, or ‘float’, to have the chance to flourish. (Marsh 152)

The hope for economic security expressed in romances is usually coupled with a desire for emotional security.

## **8.2 “Thou art my hiding place and my shield” (Psalm 119: 114)**

When Naledi and Thabiso first meet, she is “vulnerable. Frustrated. A woman at the end of her rope” (Cole 2018, 46) who lacks emotional security and support. She is “tightly closed in on herself” and it is “tiring [...] to always be that way” (98). The “heart of the matter” is that Naledi is “alone” (17). Until she met Thabiso, the person to whom Naledi was closest was more of a burden than a support, since Naledi “couldn’t help but worry” about Portia, “and worrying had no concrete results in the real world except draining her much-needed energy” (10). With this as her most significant experience of emotional closeness, it is not surprising that in general she remains emotionally detached: “Being outwardly friendly while keeping people at a distance was second nature” (8). Naledi’s experiences have taught her that revealing her true feelings and asking for what she wants or needs is likely to have negative consequences: “challenging the people who held power over you made

you undesirable, and undesirability meant gathering all of your things into a black plastic trash bag and being sent back to the group home” (6). Deprived of emotional support and security, the thought crosses her mind that she herself is like the trash, or at least, that if she “jump[ed] into the compactor chute” (14) she would not be missed except by Portia, who depends on her, and the “bill collectors” (14) who pursue her relentlessly, but not because they care about her as a person.

Naledi has goals and strong ideals: her desire is to become an epidemiologist because “When disease strikes, it’s always the most vulnerable populations that are hit hardest. I want to do research that helps make the world safer for them” (58). However, on a daily basis, and with regards to her personal life, she lacks the emotional uplift which comes with hope: she tries “not to get too excited [...] because excitement was just another name for expectation, and expectations were the fastest route to disappointment” (14). Moreover, her hopes are all aimed towards a career because she believes that as a person

She was like a faulty piece of Velcro; people tried to stick to her, but there was something intrinsically wrong in her design. Twenty plus years of data, starting from that first foster family, supported that hypothesis. [...] Portia’s late-night drunk visits were worrisome, but Ledi was still shocked each time that her friend cared enough to stop by. (23)

The prince, at least in Cole’s novel, represents emotional security and caring and all that is the opposite of dealing with “opportunistic parasites, looking for their next resource to suck dry. [...] Someone always wanting *something* from you” (140).

That situation is the topic of a conversation Thabiso has with a taxi driver and, having established their shared experience of feeling exploited, the conversation moves on and the driver relates that

“[...] Every night when I get home from work, my Divya is waiting for me. We cook together, and I tell her about the people I’ve met during my shift and she tells me about

the people she met during hers. And those moments make everything worth it.

“She’s also a driver?” Thabiso asked.

“A nurse,” the man said, the pride in his voice unmistakable. “She studied very hard for a very long time. Those loans will take forever to pay off, but she’s never been happier. So I’m happy too.”

They pulled up to a red light, and when the driver looked over his shoulder at Thabiso, the glower that had been in his eyes was gone, the creases smoothed from his forehead. His eyebrows rose as if he’d had a revelation.

“Actually, I need to change what I said. Everybody wants *something* from you, but sometimes there’s a person you *want* to give to. Sometimes what you give them makes you better for having given it. And it makes having to give to everyone else not so bad.” (141)

The “revelation” is one suitable for a faith based on love. It is a revelation about how giving is only resented when there is no love: in the driver’s relationship with his wife, they grow by working and talking together and giving to one another out of love.

This love that sustains the couple as they share life’s burdens is the answer to the question Naledi had “tried not to ask herself too often”: “*Wouldn’t it be nice if someone took care of me, instead?*” (21) and it models the behaviour that Thabiso will later display to Naledi as he declares:

“[...] I’m here because I wanted to see you. I know you’re used to doing everything yourself, but I wanted to make sure you were okay [...]. Are you okay?”

Everything Ledi thought she’d known about her needs and wants slid away, leaving her open, exposed, and shocked by his gruff demand. She’d had support, she’d had friendship, but she’d never had a man standing before her looking so frustrated on her behalf. (177)

This is the prince as champion of his princess’s happiness: her emotional needs are his priority. However, since he is a prince, and not a taxi driver, he has the power not just to make her “feel like I’m already something” (184) but to make others see her as someone special too.

**8.3 “Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?” (Matthew 6:26)**

According to theologian A. Elaine Brown Crawford, “moral evil,” the “evil that results from human choice and acts of free will” (12) can be

expressed through [...] socially constructed acts of evil. Socially constructed evil devalues, dehumanizes, and marginalizes particular groups of peoples. Its pattern of relationships is hierarchical, subordinating the dignity of one group to another. (12)

In *A Princess in Theory* it is clear that Naledi is subordinated because of her identities. As a Black woman she is not treated like an equal and “a normal human” (Cole 2018, 5). Instead, when she began a new job as a laboratory assistant she was initially asked “to take out the trash more frequently” because her supervisor, Brian, assumed “she was the cleaning woman” (4). Even after her status was clarified he “often stopped to explain basic concepts to Ledi—and Ledi alone—during lab meetings, while asking Kevin, the newbie, for his advice on how things should be run” (4) and, despite her adoption of a “pleasant but deferential tone that seemed to edify him” she still runs the risk that he will accuse her of “giving him attitude” (5). Her life, then, involves her being repeatedly patronised and assumed to be both ignorant and uppity.

There are many readers who, like Naledi, find that their gender, social class, ethnic/racial origin, or a combination of these, render them

lesser in the eyes of society. Their “wildest dreams” (360) may in some senses be both very modest and revolutionary. Pamela Fox has argued with regards to early-twentieth-century working-class women authors in the UK that “The romance plot comes into play [...] to represent a utopian private arena in which one is valued for one’s *gendered* ‘self alone’ (142). The “prince” represents a further development of this wish, of women’s “wildest dreams” to also be valued outside that “utopian private arena”: marriage to a prince is a metaphor for gaining societal validation, for being seen and recognised by all as an intrinsically precious, unique human being. Cole’s discussion of her work suggests that this longing exists because many women, and particularly “women of color [...] grew up in societies that told them they weren’t beautiful or wanted — that the happily ever after ending was not for them. They are taught [...] their greatest value is in how much they can endure or how useful they are to others” (Cole 2018a).

Naledi’s situation is compounded by the fact that she grew up in foster care, trying to make herself “useful to her foster parents. People didn’t get rid of things they found useful. In theory, that is” (Cole 2018, 81). She is also burdened with extra work by others in her lab, perhaps partly due to her wish to be useful, but also due to the intersection of sexism and racism, which ensure that “men make life harder for women who say no, especially women who look like me [...] STEM is already hard to navigate—being marked as someone who doesn’t work well in teams or contribute enough could tank my career” (81). Naledi therefore works “hard—so much harder than she should have had to, really” (6). Her waitressing job brings her no more respect. Though she herself describes waitressing as “physically demanding, and sometimes emotionally, but [...] not rocket science” (37) it is, like many so-called ‘low-skilled’ jobs, considerably more difficult than many, including Thabiso, would assume: he

had thought he was fit and had stamina, but he was drenched in sweat, he’d pulled something in his back while attempting to lift a heavy tray, and [...] Plating up food correctly and serving it to the right person without error was not quite as simple as he’d imagined. (52–54)

Not enough people are granted this type of insight, however, so Naledi is “used to people thinking she wasn’t capable of comprehending things” (37).

She is, then, repeatedly placed in a position where she is undervalued and unappreciated and “living in the dark” (218). Thabiso, however, “is offering to bring her into the light, and that would change everything” (218). Thabiso, as “Bringer of Light” both takes Naledi into a place of emotional lightness, where she has visible connections to others, and also puts her into the spotlight, so that she can be seen and acknowledged as a princess. That “moment when Africa’s Most Eligible Bachelor introduced his betrothed” (236) to the waiting crowds matters, not because Naledi seeks fame, but because it is a moment in which it is declared and accepted publicly that someone who has previously been exploited and only expected to provide services to others, is in fact valuable and worthwhile as a human being.

Cole’s novel is thus an affirmation she provides to her readers of their worth as individuals: this novel is dedicated to “all the people who were told they couldn’t be princesses: you always were one.” The hope expressed by the novel is that they will be recognised as such by others. At very least, as Cole stated in an interview,

when you finish a good romance — you feel full of hope and that the world is full of possibilities. Even if everything felt really shitty when you first picked up the book, you’re like, *Okay, the world itself does not change, but by reading this book I feel somewhat better. I feel better in myself and I feel like there is something good in the world.* It can be like medicine for your spirit. (Green)

Ensuring that readers can experience these moments of hope is part of the pastoral care romance fiction provides.

The metaphor of the prince can also express faith in the ecstatic prospect of love at first sight and perfect, instant compatibility. In Cole’s novel this aspect of the metaphor is not emphasised, but rather the figure of the prince is used primarily to express legalistic hopes of finding a better way to live within society. In the next chapter I will

examine two other metaphors of hope which are much more ecstatic in nature. They express hope that love's goodness is so great it can save even those who feel themselves to be, or are felt by others to be, great dangers to society. These metaphors cast a protagonist as a devil, or as one of the damned. As such, these protagonists are in many ways the dangerous opposites of princes: they offer emotional risk rather than security.



## Chapter 9

# Metaphors of Hope: Saving the Damned and the Devilish

Megan Crane has asserted that she and her fellow romance authors “see very few limits to the things they can make right with the power of love.” They may therefore be moved to express the extent of this faith in love by placing their protagonists in extreme spiritual/emotional peril, from which they will require salvation. There are “three main aspects or dimensions” to most Christian “theological discourses on salvation”:

1. a description of the state from which it is understood salvation is necessary;
2. the process by which salvation is realized and the extent of human participation [...] in making salvation possible;
3. an articulation of what the final end state of salvation will be like. (Morris 37)

These aspects provide the structure for this chapter.

### 9.1 States from Which it is Understood Salvation is Necessary

The situations and life histories of romance protagonists can vary greatly. However, when one encounters repeated metaphorical allusions to theo-

logical concepts and entities such as hell, demons, and the devil, it is likely that the peril facing a protagonist is severe and they are in acute need of salvation. There are two classes of protagonist whose situations are often described using such theologically-inspired language. The first comprises protagonists who seem emotionally dead, or trapped in an emotional hell, through circumstances largely outwith their control. In Carola Dunn's *Miss Hartwell's Dilemma* (1988), for example, Lord Daniel Winterborne has "been through hell" (204) as a result of an unhappy relationship in his youth, by the end of which he was both betrayed and publicly deserted. The experience left him "melancholy" (141), "not a sociable man" (15) and for a time he was such a "hermit" (209) that he would not even see his family. Though the reference to hell is a figure of speech, it is perhaps given symbolic form in the novel by the "roofless dungeon" with "snow on the floor" (188) into which he is thrown by a vengeful relative of the woman whose betrayal originally caused his retreat into isolation. He is metaphorically "led [...] out of the darkness where I thought to lie entombed forever" (216) by the aptly named Miss Hartwell, his saviour and "the light of my life. That may sound trite but it is true" (216). Appropriately, Miss Hartwell is also instrumental in ensuring his release from the physical prison which is the equivalent of the psychological state that held him captive for years.

In contrast to this class of trapped and tormented protagonists there is another, comprised of those who might be said to rule in hell. Romance authors have often signalled that a protagonist is among these sinners in the most extreme need of salvation by giving them the "mythical resonance [...] of the devil himself" (Barlow and Krentz 17) and as Eric Murphy Selinger has observed, "you don't have to look very hard to find popular romance heroes associated with the Devil" (2012, 40). Georgette Heyer, for instance gives the hero of *These Old Shades* (1926) the nickname "Satanas" (44), a variant of "Satan," and has him proclaim that he will dress his pageboy in black so that "Innocence shall walk behind Evil" (22). Sebastian, Lord St. Vincent, the eponymous hero of Lisa Kleypas's *Devil in Winter* (2006) "looked like a fallen angel, replete with all the dangerous male beauty that Lucifer could devise" (14), is "debauched, amoral, and perversely proud of it" (2), has a "long list of villain-

ous acts” (1) to his name and “excelled at his chosen occupation—that of degenerate seducer” (2). Sir Alasdair MacLachlan, in Liz Carlyle’s *One Little Sin* (2005), is not dissimilar in appearance, for with “his golden good looks [...] MacLauchlan was the very devil—worse, a devil who looked like an angel” (65), he is an “arrogant devil” (153), and he and his friends are known “to take and use and exploit” (9). It would seem to be true of romance readers, therefore, as it has been said of heaven, that there is more joy “over one sinner that repenteth [...] than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

What these two classes of protagonists share is a lack of loving relationships. Although this focus on a lack of love might, in the context of a need for salvation, initially appear to be a departure from conventional Christian theology, in which the “state from which it is understood salvation is necessary” (Morris 37) is taken to refer to the saving of the soul from sin, sin itself can be considered “the negation of love” (Gutiérrez 176). Indeed, it has been concluded that

love is the supracultural essence of the Levitical law. Paul states this explicitly in Romans 13:8–10, “Whoever loves his fellow man has obeyed the Law. The commandments [...] are summed up in the one command, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Whoever loves his neighbor will never do him wrong. To love, then, is to *obey the whole law.*” (Dye 29)

Liberation theologian Gonzalo Gutiérrez has stated that faith can be considered “a commitment to God and neighbor, a relationship with others” (6), “love is the nourishment and the fullness of faith” (7) and sin may be

regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of brotherhood and love in relationships among men, the breach of friendship with God and with other men, and, therefore, an interior, personal fracture. [...] Sin is evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of man by man, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes. Sin appears, therefore, as the fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation. (175)

Romance novels generally focus more on “interior, personal fracture” than on the broader consequences of “fundamental alienation” but, in popular romance as in Gutiérrez’s theology, it is failures with respect to love that shape the state from which popular romance deems salvation to be necessary. One of Jo Beverley’s military heroes, who has been dubbed “Lucky” due to his ability to survive while others around him died, considers himself “damned rather than lucky” (1995, 266) and asks his heroine

“[...] Can you not imagine what it feels like to lose friend after friend, colleague after colleague, until you don’t dare make friends or care for colleagues again? Is that not to be damned?”

If it was, she shared that hell, for after one loss she had not allowed herself to love again. (267)

In the words of another romance heroine, who could perhaps be considered to be speaking here for romance writers, “being alone and unloved is the worst punishment any of us could ever dream of” (Handeland 146).

## 9.2 An Articulation of What the Final End State of Salvation will be Like

In romance, as in the broader context addressed by the Christian theologian Clive Marsh, “the gift of salvation that is given [...] is the strength to [...] overcome all that, in any given situation or personal life history, could obstruct the capacity to love, be that material lack, disrupted relationships, lack of love shown to us, low self-esteem” (202). By the end of Heyer’s *These Old Shades* the hero’s friend

tells him: ‘You have learned to love another better than yourself, and I believe you will make [...] a good husband’ [...]. This is one of the most explicit statements in Heyer’s work on the nature of love and it is the lesson almost all her male characters have to learn before they become fit

husbands. [...] Heyer borrowed the basic plot as well as her [...] saturnine hero (whether consciously or not) from Ethel M. Dell's *Charles Rex* (1922) [...whose eponymous hero's] salvation is [...] that he has learnt to put another before himself. (Wallace 38)

As in the case of the cursed dragon-man, who looks "like Satan," in Aster Glenn Gray's *Briarley* (2018), protagonists in need of salvation often need to "learn to love" but they must also "be loved in return." To be saved is to enter into a state in which one both loves and is loved and it is a state essential to the romance since a novel cannot be classified as such unless, by the conclusion of the text, the protagonists have achieved it.

### 9.3 The Processes By Which Salvation is Realized

In romance novels it is usually, though not always, love in its romantic form which effects a protagonist's salvation. The parson in *Briarley* notes that "there is nothing in the curse that says he must learn romantic love" and therefore decides to begin by ascertaining whether a dog's love might be sufficient, since he had "seen many people who have suffered [...] return to life and love and happiness through the agency of a good dog" and children, though they "might be even more effective [...] than a puppy" are not a practical option in this case. The dog, it turns out, is not sufficient, but she certainly assists in the dragon-man's change of heart. Other romances, including those in Nora Roberts's Three Sisters series, which is the subject of the next chapter, also suggest that romantic love is not the only, or always an essential, form of love and neither is the love of biological family members. For this reason, many protagonists in romance novels are never shown to be in need of salvation. In Michelle Hauf's *Her Werewolf Hero* (2016), for instance, it is stated quite explicitly that the heroine, who has relatives, friends and an occupation that interests her, does not require any additional love in her life:

Though she was twenty-nine, having kids was not on Kizzy's radar. She'd not once heard her biological clock

tick and wasn't worried about that, either. A husband might add a new angle to this adventure called life but wasn't necessary to her happiness. (18)

However, when the spiritual journey of a romance protagonist is directed towards salvation, there is almost inevitably some link between their spiritual character-arc and the central romantic relationship. The critique of one short exception to this rule, written by its own author, provides some clues as to why this is the case. In Meljean Brook's "Falling for Anthony" (2005) the heroine, Emily, became "overwhelmed by bitterness [...] and tried to hurt those she loved most" (211). There is a gap of many months between the opening chapters, which depict her hurting Anthony, and his return to her. In the interim, she is saved by having to care for her young, recently orphaned, nephew Robert but this is not shown. Instead, she summarises the experience for Anthony: "Being with Robert made me remember how good it felt to believe in love, to regain that optimism and innocence—hope without *naïveté*. I was able to let go most of that bitterness I'd let consume me" (237). Handling the salvation of a protagonist in this way ensures

She doesn't really have an arc. She's stupid and thoughtless in the first chapter, then the next time we see her, she's already changed — and the reader doesn't see that change and growth, so to them, she's essentially the same person. (Brook 2012)

From a technical perspective, this is clearly unsatisfactory. However, Brook's solution would not be to expand the role of the nephew and show their relationship in more detail. Rather,

if I had to do it all over again, I'd have shown Emily after she hears that Anthony was killed on the battlefield [...]. It would have allowed us to see her grief and regret and pain, and also cleared up the plot noise that comes later, when she's explaining to Anthony [...]. (Also [...] moving the story forward instead of wallowing in the past as she does in a scene or two with Anthony later.)

In a romance such as this, which is both short and already has a secondary paranormal adventure plot, a salvation achieved via love for a minor character diverts attention from the central “story” between the major characters, which needs to be kept moving “forward.”

It is not uncommon, however, to find a secondary character, particularly a child, assisting in the process of salvation alongside the character who inspires romantic love. In Liz Carlyle’s *One Little Sin*, for example, the devilish hero is confronted early in the narrative by the heroine and her little sister, Sorcha, who appears to be his child. Over time, the heroine is

amazed by the change Socha’s presence seemed to engender in MacLachlan. His eyes softened, and the hard lines of his face instantly gentled. Lips that were ordinarily curled with cynicism turned instead into a pure and honest smile, stripping away the years and tempering his jaded gaze. (108)

It would seem, therefore, that romances do not insist that romantic love has uniquely salvific abilities. Rather, the pragmatic demands of structuring plots and character arcs generally cause popular romances to focus on salvation effected through romantic love.

### 9.3.1 Fighting Demons and Resurrecting the Dead

When a protagonist is in severe need of salvation, the process by which it is achieved is quite likely to involve more than simply falling in love. The precise process by which salvation is realised will, of course, vary according to the protagonist’s circumstances but there are two broad types of process by which protagonists are saved. The first of these is employed when the protagonist, largely or wholly through no fault of their own, appears emotionally dead or trapped in an emotional hell of isolation, low self-esteem, and perhaps misplaced guilt. This “process by which salvation is realized” (Morris 37) can be conceptualised as a freeing from Hell or as a raising from the dead. At the heart of the process to save such a protagonist is a struggle to defeat the negative beliefs and emotions which

constitute the protagonist's tomb or hell: only then can the protagonist reach out and accept happiness.

In Elizabeth Hoyt's *Lord of Darkness* (2013) this process is summarised in "*The Legend of the Hellequin*," a short tale which appears in installments spread across each of the chapters of the novel. Hoyt's "books often feature quotes from [her] own fairy tales at the beginning of each chapter" because she "like[s] the idea of the fairytale serving as a foil for the main story, either highlighting a theme or thread within the main story, or throwing a slightly different light on it" (*The Literary Shed*). In *Lord of Darkness* the Hellequin is a creature who spends most of his time in Hell and whose "companions are tiny imps, naked, scarlet, and ugly. Their names are Despair, Grief, and Loss" (25). One day, however, the Hellequin encounters a woman, who is "lovely, her face both innocent and good" (45), and as they become more closely acquainted she rids him of Despair, Grief, and Loss, pushing them one by one off his horse; by the end of the tale, she has "outwitted the Devil and saved me from Hell" (357). Godric St. John, the hero of the novel, is in a state similar to the Hellequin's: he feels as though "He'd died the night [his first wife] Clara last drew breath" (76) but there is "still a tiny spark inside of him [...] that hadn't died" (112–13) and so for him, too, there is "one who can save him" (275). In his case, however, the companion imps of Despair, Grief, and Loss are internalised, and there is no external Devil with whom to bargain. Instead, the heroine challenges Godric himself, gradually drawing him back into society. This is a process which in the early stages includes Godric being "persuaded [...] to accompany her on a social call" (37), moves on to reconcile him with his family, and concludes with declarations of love, the anticipation of parenthood, and his admission that "You saved me" (354).

In Justine Davis's *Clay Yeager's Redemption* (1999) Clay, like Godric, is both a "man who might never heal if he didn't exorcise his demons" (229) and one who believes he is "just as dead as his once happy life, but his body kept going" (79). Clay's case is, perhaps, a more difficult one than Godric's because Clay's demons have convinced him that there is no possible process by which he can be saved. The words "penance" (93) and "absolution" (153) are referenced quite explicitly and



Clay is convinced he does not deserve the latter. This leaves him trapped in a permanent state of penance, “haunted by demons” (95) who ensure he will “endure the punishment, pay the price no one else would exact from him” (80). That punishment involves cutting himself off from his father and colleagues, living on the road, constantly on the move, and alone except for his dog. Neither his father telling him that “It wasn’t just your fault. You can’t punish yourself forever” (93), nor a formal diagnosis of “Survivor’s guilt” (168), were able to prevent him roaming “aimlessly, rootlessly” (168).

When he meets his heroine, Casey, however, things begin to change: “Even when he’d tried to run, he hadn’t been able to leave her behind” (169). Perhaps this is, at least partly, due to the fact that she, too, has been traumatised by violence. Shared suffering is not essential to saving protagonists struggling with “demons” but nor does it seem wholly irrelevant. In the case of Clay and Casey, as in that of Godric and his heroine, who had both suffered a bereavement, the protagonist whose role it is to assist the other has already largely overcome the experience. When the protagonist who assists has suffered and risen again, she perhaps resembles the Christ of the Isenheim altarpiece, painted by Matthias Grünewald. Created “at some time between 1510 and 1515” (Marsh 60) for a hospital chapel, the “graphic nature of the crucifixion portrayal” allowed the “patients facing inevitable death” to “see in the figure of Jesus one who suffered as they were suffering” (62). Clay certainly responds to Casey partly because he senses that she “had faced her own demons” (105) and will therefore “really understand” (105) his situation; this creates “a connection with her unlike anything he’d ever known” (105).

Another similarity between how the sixteenth-century patients would have responded to the altarpiece and how these heroes respond to the heroines who assist them, is that the offer of salvation “is experienced affectively and does not come solely as the result of cognitive insight, aesthetic appreciation, or even religious knowledge” (Marsh 68). Casey does have at least one cognitive insight Clay had “never thought of” (168), but on the whole, an attempt to argue the demons into oblivion merely results in Clay giving “a weary sigh, as if he’d been through this countless times. She was sure he had been” (162). A breakthrough comes

after she has abandoned “any effort to make him see reason” (166): like the Hellequin’s lady, who argued with the imps Loss and Grief before simply pushing them off the Hellequin’s horse, Casey’s next move is physical, and all the more effective for that, because it directly accesses his emotions. She “Instinctively [...] reached for him” (166), “holding him as if she wished she could absorb the pain” (168–169) and he knew “he wasn’t going to run. He wasn’t sure when he’d made that decision, wasn’t even sure he had; he only knew that when he thought of pulling away from her, he felt a pain that made moving simply impossible” (169).

It often takes more than one battle to win a war against a set of entrenched demons, however, and it is after several more sorties that another physical move on Casey’s part brings Clay within reach of salvation:

she took him in her arms and simply held him, stroking his hair, his cheek, his back [...]. And after a while, something quietly broke inside him, flooding him with a warmth that was unlike anything he could remember. A warmth so powerful that the pain ebbed at last, leaving him feeling emptied. Not hollow, but scoured somehow, and waiting, not painfully but expectantly, as if for the first time he thought that perhaps he could be filled again, could be alive again. (223)

The final stage of the process requires Clay’s more active participation, for salvation is not simply something which is offered: it must be actively accepted.

### 9.3.2 Accepting the Gift of Salvation

In Suleikha Snyder’s *Bollywood and the Beast* (2014) it has been ten years since Taj’s “career had been declared dead,” years which have been a “long journey to hell,” spent in a house which he describes as an “oversized crypt” and “a tomb. Fit only for the dead.” Taj thinks that Rocky, his heroine, “could not possibly beat his demons” and to some extent he is correct. Though he tells her she “brought Diwali into this place, where

none of us want light or joy or evidence of God. You lit every corner, every shadow,” and she both gave Taj a reason to leave his “tomb” and would be willing to “meet him at the gates of hell if he asked her to,” she acknowledges to him that she “can’t do it all alone. You have to fight, too. *For me.*” Taj and other such protagonists have to have the “nerve to reach out and take what they’d found, despite the odds. Despite the memories. Despite everything” (Davis 245).

There must, then, be “human participation [...] in making salvation possible” (Morris 37) not just on the part of the character who brings light into the darkness but also on that of the individual to be saved. This is because in the theology of popular romance novels, as in more conventional theology,

salvation comes in an interpersonal encounter [...]. Redemption is sealed in the gift of self from one person to another, in which we are given a choice of allowing our isolation to end [...] subjective redemption is the human act of accepting this gift and offering self in return. (Heath 261)

Since Taj has “gone out exactly four times” in the past ten years, his exit from his house, journey by airplane, and arrival to claim Rocky’s love in a very public place make manifest his choice to end his emotional isolation in a very visible way which demonstrates he is willing to make a significant contribution to his own salvation.

### 9.3.3 Saving Devils

When protagonists fall into a “state from which it is understood salvation is necessary” (Morris 37) as a result of harming others in some way, the process by which their salvation is realized is somewhat different from that of fighting demons and resurrecting the dead. It too, however, requires the participation of the individual who is to be saved. As the retired vicar and father of the heroine in Donna Lea Simpson’s *A Rake’s Redemption* (2002) states:

No man changes unless he wants to, after all. And no woman can make him. He may *want* to change for her sake, but unless there is a true inner resolution, unless he really wants to change for his own reasons, it will not stick.

This will to change in order to cease acting sinfully can be referred to as “contrition” and has been defined as “sorrow for one’s sin and resolve to turn away from it” (Berkman 97). Contrition is the first stage in the sacrament of penance and is an emotion which, as author Elisabeth Hobbes has stated, makes the key difference between a “bad boy” capable of salvation and an irredeemable villain:

Mainly it’s about remorse. A bad boy must, when confronted with the impact of what he has done, show remorse. Having hit rock bottom he needs to have the desire to change and make amends, to redeem himself in some way for who and what he was. (Pink Heart Society)

The other stages in the sacrament of penance are confession, atonement and absolution.

The process by which a devilish protagonist makes amends, or atones, can take many forms but

almost all modes of atonement involve some sort of emotional, physical, or material suffering, some sort of pain, loss, or sacrifice. Guilt and remorse are painful. Acknowledging wrongdoing and offering an apology can be humiliating. (Radzik 20)

In Heyer’s *These Old Shades*, the devilish hero’s atonement involves an act of renunciation: he tells the heroine “I want you to forget me. I am no proper man for you” (389–390). Here, the act of atonement is merged with one of confession, since he explains to her the reasons why he is unworthy of her: “To no women have I been faithful; behind me lies scandal upon sordid scandal” (391). In *Devil in Winter* the devilish hero states that he “can’t ever atone for the things I’ve done” (Kleypas 362) but that admission of contrition, and the changes he has already made

in his life, are sufficient for the heroine to grant him absolution: “You don’t have to be anything other than what you are” (362). In *These Old Shades*, however, since the heroine herself is “something of an imp” (106) words of absolution are offered to the devilish hero by a priest who has given her shelter: “God will forgive you much for your kindness to her” (Heyer 384).

#### 9.4 Salvation as Miracle

Since raising the dead can be considered miraculous, and the saving of the damned and the devilish possibly even more so, romances in which these events occur are probably intended to be read as miracles rather than as relationship advice. According to St. Augustine, miracles are extremely unusual examples of how a particular phenomenon may be made manifest in the world. He

defined the miracle as any difficult, unusual event which exceeds the faculties of nature and surpasses the expectations or ability of the observer to comprehend, so as to compel astonishment. [...] Miracles are essentially an acceleration of the normal processes of nature whereby the seeds (*semina seminum*) inherent in nature are activated. These phenomena occur in such an unusual way that they are termed miracles, and are intended to teach us a lesson. (Goodich 147)

However, Augustine’s is not the only definition of the miraculous and although this chapter has been devoted to “difficult, unusual events,” neither are these the only types of miracles depicted in romance fiction. Some romances take what Marina Warner refers to as “the position of absolute faith and maintain that [...] miraculous work informs all natural phenomena [...], both startling and otherwise” (317–318). This is the position adopted by Dave in Elliot Cooper’s *Hearts Alight* (2016): he states that he “read once that either everything in the world, in the universe, is a miracle, or nothing is. Everything I know about nature, about the

goodness in the world ... it amazes me.” Similarly, in A. E. Wasp’s *City Boy* (2017), one protagonist is suddenly filled with an

awareness of how miraculous it was for two people to find each other amongst an infinity of possibilities. And yet it happened every day. Like birth. Each time a child arrived safe and whole into the world, it was a miracle; no less wondrous for its familiarity.

Whether a novel expresses its faith through unlikely miracles or more quotidian ones may indicate its positioning with respect to two main modes of faith: the ecstatic mode emphasises the power of the unusual in order to move the believer and reveal spiritual truths, the legalistic mode stresses the security and truth that are to be found in existing social structures and daily routines. The former celebrates the eruption of the spiritual into everyday lives, whereas the latter encourages the view that deep spiritual truths, even miracles, are present in the quotidian itself. As we have seen, however, romance can combine elements of both the ecstatic and the legalistic modes. The paranormal romance series by Nora Roberts which is the subject of the next chapter certainly does so: it combines a series of events in which the forces of evil are very dramatically made manifest, “altered states of consciousness” are experienced, and “terrible ordeals” (Whitehouse 294) are undergone, with a series of legalistic assessments of love.

## Chapter 10

# Love and rules “to prevent its aberrations”: Nora Roberts’ Three Sisters Trilogy

In the title of this chapter I refer back to Mr. Stanley’s words in Hannah More’s *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808), through which he expressed a legalistic caution about love: “love itself requires some regulations to direct its exertion; some law to guide its motions; some rule to prevent its aberrations; some guard to hinder that which is vigorous from becoming eccentric” (332). Nora Roberts’ Three Sisters trilogy advocates for such an approach inasmuch as it depicts a variety of ways in which love can become destructive and suggests the need to evaluate and assess experiences of love in order to be certain that it will indeed be beneficial. The trilogy, comprised of *Dance Upon The Air* (2001), *Heaven and Earth* (2001), and *Face the Fire* (2002), explores various aberrations which arise from love, or what purports to be love. The first novel examines a possessiveness which resorts to control and violence, the second focuses on a vengeful response to the loss of a loved one, and the third outlines some of the damage which can be caused by over-dependence on a beloved. The series can, then, be read as a legalistic warning that possessiveness may, at least initially, be indistinguishable from love, and that it is important to guard against the development of perversions or “aberrations” of love such as revenge and despair.

The novels are set at the beginning of the twenty-first century but refer back to events which took place at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries. In this earlier period a demonic “dark force” (*Dance* 252) was responsible for the deaths of “innocents” (*Heaven* 336) as a consequence of the witch-hunts in Salem, Massachusetts. Three white (in terms of their magic, as well as their skin colour) witches named Air, Earth and Fire escaped, however, to Three Sisters Island, which they created as a haven “from hate [...] from fear, from death and scorn” (*Dance* 4). The three lived on the island they had created but were “fated to love and to lose” (*Face* 1): as a consequence of romantic love they too were, after a time, “destroyed” (*Heaven* 336). In the present day the three witches’ descendants, Nell, Ripley and Mia, who have inherited their magical abilities and also inhabit the island, must learn from their ancestors’ failures: before these three present-day heroines can defeat the “dark force” of evil and save the island, they must find true love. However, the ascendance and subsequent defeat of the demon may serve as an illustration of C. S. Lewis’s claim that if we “give our human loves the unconditional allegiance which we owe only to God [...] they become demons. Then they will destroy us, and also destroy themselves” (Lewis 2002, 10). Roberts’ trilogy certainly demonstrates why the legalistic mode insists that love must be properly regulated.

The witch “known as Air wished for love” (*Dance* 94) and left, marrying a man who beneath his “golden and handsome” exterior “was dark” and “killed her for being what she was” (94). It is implied that his actions were motivated by the demon intent on destroying the witches and certainly “The force that was unleashed centuries ago” uses Evan Remington, the modern-day counterpart of Air’s husband, “as a conduit” (*Face* 129). Nell, the new air witch and Evan’s wife, senses “A kind of cold, deliberate madness” (*Dance* 304) inside him and Mia names it as “evil” (*Dance* 304). Evan “couldn’t stay sane when forced to face what lived inside him” (*Heaven* 107) which, as Ripley discovers, is something “very strong, and very dark” (*Heaven* 295). Air’s story may therefore serve as a warning that care is required in the search for love, since individuals may not be all they appear at first sight.



The witch known as Earth, filled with “rage and [...] grief” (*Heaven* 1) at Air’s death, “built her hatred stone by stone until it had become a wall that no one could breach” (*Face* 2). With her love for Air thus displaced by an all-consuming hatred for Air’s murderer, she called down “vengeance” upon him; in doing so she “corrupted” her own power, inadvertently killed her own husband, and “sacrificed her soul” (*Heaven* 3). Since Earth’s modern-day counterpart, Ripley, possesses an “instinct to protect who and what she loves” (69), it seems safe to conclude that Earth’s act of vengeance was also motivated by love. The third sister, Fire, certainly met her death due to love:

She who was Fire found a silkie in human form sleeping in a cave near a cove. And taking his pelt, she hid it and [...] took him as lover, as husband, raised her children with him [...]. But the day came when [...] he found his pelt. And though he had loved her, when a silkie has his pelt, the sea beckons. He forgot her, their life, their love, their children—as though they had never existed—and left her for the sea. [...] Without sister, without lover, without husband she pined, and pining, despaired. She cursed her magic for bringing her love, then stealing it away. And abjuring it, leaped from the cliffs to the sea where her lover had gone. (*Heaven* 225)

Thus Air’s wrongly directed love destroyed her, Earth’s love led her into hatred, vengeance and destruction and Fire, in despair at losing her beloved and deprived of the support of her sisters, “killed herself” (*Face* 73).

As the series opens, the three modern heroines have already survived experiences very like those which killed or corrupted their ancestors. Nell has escaped her violently abusive husband, Evan, by undergoing a fake death and taking on a new identity. Years earlier, Mia and Sam’s love-story paralleled that of Fire and the silkie, since Sam “had exiled himself, deliberately, from the island and from Mia” (*Face* 6), leaving Mia “a wreck” (*Heaven* 283). Due to the strength of the bond between Mia and Ripley, Ripley “felt what” Mia felt, and “experienced, physically” (*Face* 87) what Mia experienced. Since “the longer it went on, the more

angry” (*Face* 87) Ripley got, when she eventually imagined what she’d do if someone “hurt me that way [...] a bolt of light shot out of the sky. A black bolt of light, barbed like an arrow. I sank Zack’s boat [...] Nobody was in it, but they could have been” (*Heaven* 283). Ripley’s vengeful anger only missed killing her beloved brother by a matter of “twenty minutes” (283–284).

Ripley’s anger in response to loss is in many ways the simplest of the “aberrations.” Revenge is condemned on the grounds that, as Fire told Earth, “You have no right. [...] If you cause harm, you’ll have broken your vows. You will have corrupted your power” (*Heaven* 2–3). This mirrors the injunction in Romans 12:19: “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.” There is condemnation, then, of revenge as a response to the loss of a loved one, but what Ripley must learn to regulate is not her relationships with those she loves, only her instinctive response to lash out in defense of, or in response to harm to, them. In this series it is therefore through the exploration of the relationship between Nell and Evan, and between Mia and Sam, that a deeper understanding emerges of aberrations which occur within relationships.

## 10.1 Dependence

The third book of the series, *Face the Fire*, focuses on Mia and suggests that no romantic partner, however loving, can satisfy all of their beloved’s emotional needs. Mia’s emotional difficulties were, however, initially caused by her parents. They “had been more interested in each other and traveling than in their daughter, and Lulu [...] had been hired to tend her” (*Face* 8). As Mia admits to Sam,

They never loved me. That’s sad and that’s painful, but more, they never cared that I loved them. So what was I to do with all that love just burning inside me? There was Lulu, thank the goddess. But I had so much more to give. And there you were. Poor sad-looking Sam. I heaped my love on you until you must have felt buried in it. (*Face* 324)

This summary may recall the case-studies included in Robin Norwood's *Women Who Love Too Much* (1985), which "became the guiding light to more than 20 million readers" and spent "More than a year in the number-one spot on the *New York Times* Bestseller list" (Faludi 379). Certainly Mia in her youth was a woman who fitted the pattern identified by Norwood: having been brought up in a "home in which [...] emotional needs were not met" she joined the ranks of women who attempt "to fill this unmet need vicariously by becoming a care-giver, especially to men who appear, in some way, needy" (Norwood 10).

"Sad-eyed Sam" (*Face* 51) was emotionally needy because he had been left "unhappy, moody" (*Face* 222) by the lack of "affection in his house. Oh, no neglect, no abuse, no meanness" (*Face* 48) but he knew his father was "ashamed" (*Face* 222) of him. Ripley observes metafictionally of the older Sam that he is "handsome and brooding [...] he had on this long dark coat and it was all [...] billowy. Perfect tortured-hero look" (*Face* 109–110), adding that he looked "like some contemporary version of Heathcliff looking over the moors for Catherine" (*Face* 111). He was similarly brooding at a young age, and the "dark anger in him, that restless passion [...] had drawn" (*Face* 163) Mia to Sam.

He was, then, clearly a male protagonist in one of the molds discussed in the previous chapter. However, instead of depicting their youthful relationship culminating in a triumphant, ecstatic miracle of love, Roberts takes a cautious, legalistic position and shows how attempts to save such an individual may instead lead to a damaging dependency and abandonment. For Mia it became all too "easy [...] to forget everything and anything but him" (*Face* 206), this rendered her dependent upon Sam for her happiness and led her, subconsciously, to attempt to make him dependent upon her.

Dependence takes a variety of forms. The most obvious is that of the individual who gives over "responsibility for themselves into the keeping of one who can administer it in their best interests" (Greer 180) but a more subtle form is that of the person who makes another human being the emotional "source of all good things in her life" (Norwood 189). The fact that Fire "could find no purpose for her own life" (*Face* 2) after her "husband [...] returned to the sea" (*Face* 1) indicates that she was de-

pendent on him in this fashion. Indeed, her dependence was so great she leapt off a sea cliff even though she knew that doing so would give greater power to the demon: "Her death would feed it, and still she could not face life" (*Face* 2).

Fire's is the story of a woman who, in the grip of a love which was "consuming and obsessive" (*Face* 230), "couldn't—or wouldn't—[...] live without the love of one man" (*Face* 73); it functions as a monitory tale, warning against loving "too much" (Norwood 1). Mia's girlish love for Sam resembled Fire's for the silkie inasmuch as when Sam "walked away from" their relationship, Mia was left "hurting and helpless and hopeless. It still shamed her to remember the quivering mass of confusion and grief she'd been for weeks after he'd gone" (*Face* 13). Although she did not respond exactly as Fire did, and instead gradually recovered, for a time she did think she "would die" (*Face* 39) of grief. Moreover, the experience left her fearful of "feeling my heart break a second time, because I'm not sure I could survive it" (*Heaven* 151). The intensity of this kind of love is such that its loss seems to carry with it the risk of death. Norwood uses drowning as a metaphor which, for Fire, became a reality:

It would be difficult to overstate the sheer emotional charge that this kind of relationship, once begun, carries for the woman involved. When she tries to cut herself off from relating to the man she loves too much [...t]he old emptiness surges and swirls around her, pulling her down into the place where her childhood terror of being alone still lives, and she is sure she will drown in the pain. (Norwood 94–95)

This type of love is not just unhealthy for women who "love too much": according to Norwood the fact that such a woman is so emotionally dependent on her beloved will create in her "a driving need to control" (127) him and make him dependent on her.

Nell states of love that "believing you can control it, mold its shape, plot its direction? That you *have* to do that? That's a mistake" (*Face* 314). Norwood would presumably concur, since she warns that the attempt made by "women who love too much" to control their partners

usually yields exactly the opposite of the hoped-for result. Rather than a grateful, loyal partner who is bonded to her through his devotion and his dependence, such a woman finds she soon has a man who is increasingly rebellious, resentful, and critical of her. Out of his own need to maintain his autonomy and self-respect, he must cease to see her as the solution to all his problems, and make her instead the source of many if not most of them. (141)

Fire, who “found her silkie, in human form, and fell in love while he slept,” bound him to her when she “took his pelt and hid it away so she could keep him” (*Face* 55). In taking and hiding the pelt, Fire took control over him; she “trapped the man she loved. You take a silkie’s pelt, you bind him to the land and to you. They had a life together, a family. But his feelings for her were a result of magic, not free will” (*Face* 336). Once he “found his pelt,” the silkie immediately rebelled against Fire’s choice for him: “He couldn’t stop what he did. It was his nature. Once he’d found his pelt, nothing, not even love, could make him stay. He left her, went into the sea, and forgot she existed. Forgot his home, and his children” (*Face* 55).

A similar pattern of control and escape characterised Mia and Sam’s youthful relationship. Sam, too, had “felt trapped” (*Face* 78) and he, too, “knew how it felt, to be pulled” away (*Face* 209). Since Sam’s free will had not been bound by magic, he used it to pull away from Mia, until in a final attempt to break free of her control he deliberately set out “to hurt” (*Face* 77) her. The alternative, he felt, was to have his free will contained within an intangible box created by Mia’s vision of their shared future. As he tells her years later,

“ [...] The problem was I didn’t know what I wanted. You always did. It was always so fucking clear to you, Mia. What you needed, what you wanted. There were times when your vision choked me. [...] It was as if you could see the rest of our lives in this pretty box. You had it all lined up for me. [...] I couldn’t be what you wanted. I couldn’t give you what you were so sure was meant to

be. [...] I couldn't be here. For God's sake, Mia, we were hardly more than children and you were talking marriage. Babies. You'd lie beside me [...] and talk about how we'd buy a little cottage by the woods and ... [...] It was destiny for you. When I was with you, I believed it. I could see it, too. And at that point it smothered me." (*Face* 224–225)

Mia is deeply hurt by this disclosure of Sam's past feelings because she had been "so wrapped up in the boy, and in her visions of what she wanted their life to be, she couldn't see he wasn't ready. It wasn't that she ignored it, or overlooked it [...] she really couldn't see it" (*Face* 323–324). She genuinely believed he "wanted what she wanted, and she never looked beyond that" (324). Inadvertently, then, in attempting to create for them a future which she desired and believed to be good, she made Sam feel trapped. As Norwood warns, "when we plan another's future [...] this is controlling" (Norwood 130).

Mia's path to recovery did not lead her to seek a formal support group of the kind advocated by Norwood, but she did

learn to seek feelings of self-worth and well-being from sources other than a man unable to foster those feelings. The key is in learning how to live a healthy, satisfying, and serene life without being dependent on another person for happiness. (Norwood 59)

Over time, she came to "like being on my own, in control of my destiny, and all the little day-to-day decisions and choices" (*Dance* 150). Her life without Sam was a full and emotionally rewarding one: she had her magic "gift [...] and all its joys and responsibilities" (*Face* 87), her "bookstore was more than a business to her. It was a deep and steady love" (*Face* 92), and her home "soothed her [...] the *feel* of the house [...] warm, waiting" (*Face* 27–28) while its gardens "she thought of [...] as her children. She had created them, taking the time to plant, to nurture, to discipline. And they brought her joy" (*Face* 28). Thus, she had found "contentment" as a singleton and even "flourish[ed]" (*Face* 93). Mia has, then, become "capable of handling life on [her] own. But being capable of

it doesn't mean being unable to share and depend on someone else. It shouldn't mean being unwilling to. That's the romance" (*Face* 302).

In order to defeat the demon and save her island Mia's "task, let's call it, deals with love. Love without boundaries" (*Face* 336). Mia must once more risk love, and the type of love required from her is unconditional: love with "no regrets, no conditions" (*Face* 357), no attempts to control or change the beloved and which, instead of placing boundaries on them, is strong "enough to let [...] go" (*Face* 357). This kind of love "without boundaries" (*Face* 3) becomes possible for Mia due to growing out of the belief that "there's one person for each of us who's worth everything" (*Heaven* 171). Her experiences of loving and losing have taught her that "there were some losses that sliced you to bits, shattered the spirit into dust. And still you went on, you remade yourself, mended your spirit. You lived. If not happily ever after, then contentedly enough" (*Face* 151). Secure in this knowledge, she can "look into her heart, open it and leave it bare" (*Face* 337) with no defence against the pain of loss except the certainty that she would "cherish [...] what we made together" (*Face* 357).

## 10.2 Possession

Whereas Mia and Sam's relationship is salvageable, Evan's control of Nell was irrevocably warped from the beginning and could never allow either partner to flourish. Evan had offered Nell material security and social status, but at a terrible cost. She "was twenty-four. He was ten years older, and everything I wasn't. Sophisticated, brilliant, cultured" (*Dance* 111) and "He made me feel ... grateful that he would pay attention to me" (*Dance* 112). Nell was, nonetheless, at this point an "educated woman with an enviable skill" (*Dance* 111) and a burgeoning career but Evan took her away from Chicago, where she and her mother ran a "catering business" which had "built up an impressive reputation" and "developed an elite list of clients" (*Dance* 111). By removing her to California and placing her in a "white palace" (*Dance* 59) of a house where "It seemed at first like being a princess in a castle" (*Dance* 110), Evan made her a kind of prisoner. In his mind, if not in truth, he transformed her into a woman with "no

skills” and as such, he believed her dependent on him since there was no way she “could [...] earn a living without him to provide for her” (*Dance* 350).

Trapped in her “castle” Nell “had known all the privileges of great wealth. And for three years had lived in fear and misery” (*Dance* 8). In exchange for her liberty Nell is, therefore, prepared to cast away all the objects which Evan had given her: she is content to live in a “little yellow cottage and wake each morning with a giddy, glorious sense of freedom” (*Dance* 43). Given that one of the first changes she makes on taking up residence in the cottage is to plant “Herbs. Rosemary, basil, tarragon, and so on” (*Dance* 45), one might see her happiness in her new home as an endorsement of Proverbs 15:17: “Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith.” Evan’s pretended love was most certainly a form of hatred because he despises women, believing that “women, by nature, were given to flights of fancy and foolishness” (*Dance* 338) and “were, at the center, whores” (*Dance* 350).

Nell’s relationship with Evan therefore weakened and diminished her: “He made me feel small. Small, smaller, smallest, until I all but disappeared” (*Dance* 313). Nell “wasn’t a doormat” (*Dance* 239) when she first met Evan, but he attempted to change her into one. He “claimed to love” Nell “above all things” (*Dance* 7) but what this really meant was that he believed her to be “destined for [...] him, meant to be molded and formed by him” (*Dance* 267). He therefore attempted to make her into a possession. Evan had always chosen his

possessions [...] with care [...]. He had always known precisely what he preferred, and precisely what he wanted. He’d always made certain to obtain it. Whatever the cost, whatever the effort.

Everything that surrounded him reflected his taste. (*Dance* 264)

Nell, as his wife, became another possession: “She had *belonged* to him” (*Dance* 265). He had seen her and “worked very hard” (*Dance* 313) to obtain her: “He stayed in Chicago for two weeks, made it clear he was staying, reorganizing his schedule, putting off his clients, his work, his



life" (*Dance* 112). Then, when he had her, he ensured she too "reflected his taste": "Nell "looked the way he told me to look, and behaved the way he told me to behave" (*Dance* 112). Having obtained her, he considers her body a thing which "belongs to" (*Dance* 362) him and he therefore feels that Zack, who met Nell after her escape from Evan, has been "trying to steal" (*Dance* 366) Nell from him.

C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), like Roberts' trilogy, portrays a spiritual reality in which demons work ceaselessly to obtain human souls. In one letter Screwtape, a demon who is highly experienced at leading humans into sin, states that one of the ways in which to do so is to

teach them not to notice the different senses of the possessive pronoun—the finely graded differences that run from "my boots" through "my dog", "my servant", "my wife", "my father", "my master" and "my country", to "my God". They can be taught to reduce all these senses to that of "my boots", the "my" of ownership. Even [...] a child can be taught to mean by "my Teddy-bear" *not* the [...] recipient of affection to whom it stands in a special relation [...] but "the bear I can pull to pieces if I like". (92–93)

The demon in Roberts series is much less articulate but when Evan states that Nell is "mine" (*Dance* 368), "my wife. [...] She belongs to me" (*Dance* 369), it is clear that he has been taught this demonic lesson and is using "the 'my' of ownership." Moreover, like the child, he is prepared to destroy his possession: he would rather "slit her throat" (*Dance* 368) than let her go. As Nell asserts her personhood and regains the magic she needs in order to defeat the demon she states

"I belong to myself." Power trickled back into her, a slow pool. "I belong to me." And faster. "And to you," she said, her eyes locked on Zack's. (*Dance* 370)

It is an assertion both that there are "different senses of the" word "belong" and that Nell is choosing a belonging based on love and respect rather than possession.

It is also significant that Nell's sense of belonging extends beyond her new romantic relationship: "She belonged. To the village, she thought. To Zack. And finally, finally, she belonged to herself" (*Dance* 357). The "village" comprises both people with whom Nell feels a sense of community and a "spot for memories to take root and bloom" (*Dance* 42) in which she can feel secure. Germaine Greer stated of women that all their "love is guided by the search for security" (142). This was, as Nell admits, an important factor in her relationship with Evan given that

Even as a child she'd felt displaced. Not by her parents, she thought [...]. Never by them. But home had been wherever her father was stationed, and until his orders changed. There'd been no single place for childhood [...].

Her mother had had the gift of making a home wherever they were, and for however long. But it wasn't the same as knowing you would wake up to the same view out of your bedroom window day after day.

And that was a yearning Nell had carried with her always.

Her mistake had been in believing she could soothe that yearning with Evan, when she should have known it was something she had to find for herself. (*Dance* 42–43)

Nell finds this sense of home, therefore, not in either Evan or Zack, but in the village on the island.

### 10.3 The Importance of Non-romantic Forms of Love

Nora Roberts has stated that she prefers "romances that deal with a partnership, a meeting of minds and hearts" (Mussell 1997, 159). Within such a context, protagonists are likely to behave in the manner described by bell hooks and summarised by Catherine Roach:

As a true love, I must be willing to *act* [...] in ways that are caring, affectionate, and respectful, in order to nurture my

beloved's growth. Such true love also implies that, as I nurture my lover's growth, I nurture my own as well. We cannot, do not, love another truly if we abandon the duty to love ourselves and to act in our own best interests. True love, in other words, does not make one into a martyr or a doormat. If such loss of self happens—if I extend myself to the extent of loss of self—the relationship is not true love. (2016, 127)

Zack demonstrates his status as a “true love” with regards to Nell in part because he “wanted her for who she was, and not who he could mold her to be” (*Dance* 213). Robert's trilogy suggests that strong individuals, by supporting each other in a nurturing way which is respectful of the other's identity, further increase their strength: a “true love” couple “help each other find the best you can be” (*Heaven* 247), ensuring they are “stronger together than [...] apart” (*Heaven* 304).

This conception of how love's goodness is made manifest is not restricted to romantic relationships, however. Indeed, the series stresses the importance of non-romantic, yet loving, connections. In both the past and present “The three [witches of Three Sisters Island] are very strong when linked” (*Heaven* 107); although Mia is “the strongest” (*Heaven* 343) in the present day, even “she, so long a solitary witch, couldn't do what needed to be done alone” (*Dance* 285). Together, Nell, Ripley and Mia create “The circle of three. [...] A link, mind to mind to mind” (*Heaven* 107) which months later can still be detected by the paranormal researcher Dr. MacAllister Booke as

almost pure positive energy [that] encompasses an area of twelve feet, in a perfect circle. Most rites of paranormal origin involve protective circles. This is the most powerful I've found. (*Heaven* 84)

The strength provided by standing with others is emotional as well as magical: when Mia insists that Nell will have to “recognize your own power [...] I'll help you find it. I'll teach you” (*Dance* 95–96) she is, on a literal level referring to Nell's magical gifts but her offer of assistance is accompanied by the emotional advice that Nell should never

forget who and what you are. You're an intelligent woman with spine enough to make a life for herself. With a gift [...] in the kitchen. I admire you. [...] You had the courage to strike out on your own. To come to a strange place and make yourself part of it." (95)

Mia is one of the first people Nell encounters on the island; her practical support gives Nell a place to live and work and her encouragement helps Nell grow in confidence.

As its name suggests, the series places great emphasis on female friendship but the male protagonists are not limited to relating to others solely through romantic relationships with women: Zack is Ripley's biological brother, becomes Mac's brother-in-law, and the two men, along with the three female witches form a "close-knit group [...] these were five people who'd bonded like glue" (*Face* 124). Their network of friendships is almost tangible to Sam as he observes them interacting: it is evident

in the way Mia warmed when she spoke to or listened to Mac, the amused affection on her face. It was love he saw there, not the sort that sprang from passion, but something deep and true.

He saw byplay like that all around the table.

Nell scooped up a second helping for Mac before he'd asked for one. Zack tore off a hunk of bread and passed it to Mia while he continued to hold a heated debate with his sister on the pitching depth of the Red Sox. (*Face* 124)

Even Sam, at this point something of an outsider to the group, shares with Zack an "uncomplicated affection and bone-deep bond that had sprung from childhood" (*Face* 18) and later, after he has confronted the "demon wolf from hell" (*Face* 156), he calls on his "men friends" (*Face* 157) Mac and Zack to ask for their advice.

In this context, each member of a couple is far from dependent solely upon the other for happiness: rather, as Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher have observed

the protagonists increasingly figure their shared lives [...] as a set of intersecting concentric circles. Each heroine occupies her own innermost circle, an intimate space, which is both a point on a circle connecting the three witches and which expands to embrace the hero as their personal love plot progresses. Furthermore, each couple co-inhabits an “invisible bubble” within a larger circle containing and protecting the central group of characters; this core group is supported in the next band by their close friends and family, most importantly Lulu, Mia’s childhood guardian. (121)

The presence of Lulu, in particular, emphasises the value and strength of non-traditional lifestyles and non-biological bonds. As a former “freewheeling, free-loving hippie” (*Dance* 274) who “likes her own space” (*Face* 312) and lives alone, Lulu stands in contrast to her much more conventional sister, Sylvia, who has a “husband, [...] kids” and a “life in the suburbs” (*Dance* 275). While Sylvia insists that “a woman isn’t a woman unless she has a husband and children” (*Dance* 274), Lulu is a divorcee who was employed to “mind” (*Dance* 276) another woman’s child and never bore one of her own. Nonetheless, when the demon attempts to convince Lulu that “You’ve got nobody, do you, Lu? No man, no kid, no family. Nobody to give a rat’s ass about you” (*Face* 65) she knows it is “wrong about that [...]. She had family. She had a child” (*Face* 101). This is because Lulu had felt that Mia’s grandmother, Mrs. Devlin, “was more family to me than my own blood” (*Face* 118) and the night Mia’s parents brought their infant home for the first time

they went down to the hotel to have dinner, and Mrs. Devlin took me into the nursery. Mia was a beautiful baby—red-headed, bright-eyed. Long arms and legs. Mrs. Devlin, she picked her up out of the crib, cuddled her for a minute, then she held her out to me. [...] I knew she was giving her to me, and nothing would ever be the same for me again. [...] ‘Take her,’ she said to me. ‘She needs love and care, and a firm hand. They won’t give it to her, they can’t. And when I’m gone, she’ll only have you.’ [...] and before I knew

it, I was taking her. Mrs. Devlin stepped back. ‘She’s yours now.’ (*Face* 119–120)

There is, therefore, as Mac observes, a “close, familial relationship between Lulu and Mia” (*Heaven* 154) and when Sam asks Mia about her family it “took her a moment [...] to realize he meant her parents and not Lulu, or Ripley and Nell” (*Face* 222). Since Lulu is much closer to Mia than her biological parents, and Mia, Ripley and Nell are bonded through their magic like “sisters” (*Face* 218), when Nell’s pregnancy is revealed, Lulu quickly responds, declaring that she’ll “have to knit some booties. A blanket. [...] Somebody has to step in and play grandma” (*Face* 195–196): Lulu is clearly more than willing, and able, to fill that role.

Lulu’s destiny is fulfilled on the island to which she was drawn, in her youth, by “dreams” (*Face* 116), yet that destiny did not include a permanent lover or husband and she seems content with this. When Mia asks why Lulu has “never once asked me for a spell or a charm. For luck, love, fast money” Lulu indicates that she has no need for them because “I get on well enough on my own” (*Face* 203). Within the series Lulu thus demonstrates that an individual can find fulfillment of what Mac lists as the “elemental human needs. Home, family, love, financial security” (*Heaven* 154) without romantic love.

As we saw in the previous chapter, salvation in romances can be achieved with the assistance of individuals other than a romantic partner and, as I have discussed elsewhere (Vivanco 2016, 89–109), community is an important element of many romances. Roberts is therefore far from alone in the romance genre in acknowledging that romantic love is not the only type of love, and that other forms of love can also have great power to effect positive change. While some romances exclusively depict an idealised form of romantic love, a love which is, in the words of Tenlee, the heroine of T. S. Joyce’s *For the Soul of an Outlaw* (2018), “all mushy and perfect and between two people,” others, like Tenlee herself, implicitly or explicitly argue that those

books had gotten it wrong. There were different kinds of love.

When she looked at Kurt [her hero], he was everything. [...] But it wasn't always perfect and easy. [...]

And then there was her love for Gunner [Kurt's young son ...]. She wanted to [...] hug him up all the time. That wasn't in the books she'd read.

And then there was her friendships with Colt, Trigger, Karis, and Ava. That love definitely hadn't been described in the books. That love had surprised her the most. It wasn't a romantic feeling, but it held the same level of devotion that had grown inside of her for Kurt.

The presence in romance novels of close social networks imply that

it is false to imagine that the goal [or social ideal] is a free and active person completely independent of any need for other persons or society itself. The biblical story of the Exodus remains revelatory of the fundamental moral basis of human existence: liberation is *from* bondage *into* community—into a community of persons who are both free and coresponsible for one another's fates. (Hollenbach 93)

The coresponsibility of saving the community on Three Sisters Island falls primarily to Nell, Ripley and Mia, since they are the ones who are challenged directly by the demon but, as Mac states when the three meet up with their spouses and Sam, all six are “part of this, and everyone here has something to contribute” (*Face* 122). So, too, does the wider community, as the islanders “stick together” and “gather[...] around the cottage and in the woods,” turning their “hearts and minds [...] toward” (*Face* 355) Mia as she fights the demon, their lights in the darkness sending forth a “rush of energy that streamed [...] into her like love” (*Face* 352).

Less dramatically, day-to-day life on the island involves “enhanced sociality. As Ripley tells Nell the first time they meet: ‘You live on an island, everybody’s business is your business.’” (Crane and Fletcher 122). The “island grapevine spread [...] news fast” and although one could dismiss it as mere “gossip” (*Face* 30) the community’s interest in gathering

details about each other's lives is not entirely dissimilar to the observation required by Zack and Ripley's police work and, indeed, one can inform the other, as when a

towheaded boy of about ten scrambled across [...] “[...] Sheriff, my mom said I was to come right over and tell you. The tenants in the Abbott rental are having a big fight. There's screaming and crashing and cursing and everything. [...] Mom says it sounds like the man in there's beating the woman something fierce.” (*Dance* 163)

There is no guarantee, of course, that the presence of a close knit, benevolent community would have saved either Air or Nell from domestic violence. Indeed, Nell's community at the time did express concerns: her “mother had reservations” and “asked me to give it some time, but I wouldn't listen” (*Dance* 112). However, the fact that Evan “swept me off my feet” (*Dance* 110) and “dazzled me, and when he asked me to marry him, I didn't think twice. [...] We eloped” (*Dance* 112), perhaps suggests he knew that, had he acted less speedily, she might well have been influenced by those “reservations.”

## 10.4 Discernment

Evan had appeared to be “a prince [...]”. She had fallen in love with the fairy-tale look of him, and she had believed his promises of happy-ever-after” (*Dance* 59) but he was clearly not a “prince” of the kind discussed in a previous chapter. When Julia T. Wood interviewed women “who had been in romantic relationships that included emotional and physical violence” (245) they all “recalled initially perceiving their relationships as fairy tale romances, complete with an adoring Prince Charming. Women fondly remembered how their partners had courted them with gifts and made them feel special” (249). This pattern is replicated in the early stages of Nell's relationship with Evan, who exerted all the romantic charm one would expect from a Prince Charming: “He flirted with me, and it was exciting. He sent me two dozen roses the next day. It was



always red roses. He asked me out, and took me to the theater, to parties, to fabulous restaurants” (*Dance* 112).

Eva Illouz has observed that “objects different from those used for daily purposes” can be used to create a romantic atmosphere: “Gifts are one obvious example, but elegant clothes and expensive meals are also associated with romance” (116). Moreover, the trappings of romance involve at least

two elements frequently found in religious rituals: special vestments and beverages. Aesthetic or expensive objects distinguish the romantic interaction from others by making it at once more intense and more formal. Certain objects, like champagne, roses, or candlelight, have fixed attributes of quasi-sacredness that under the appropriate circumstances can generate romantic feelings. (116)

This observation takes on particular resonance in the context of a novel in which the heroines are witches, one declares that “love is the most vital magic” (*Dance* 263), and all use objects in their religious, magical, rituals. For example, in the “basic ritual” (*Dance* 325) to celebrate “The end of the third and last harvest of the year. [...] A time for remembering the dead, for celebrating the eternal cycle” (*Dance* 324), they use candles, “wand and athame” (*Dance* 325) and in Mia’s “cauldron, fragrant liquid began to bubble” (*Dance* 326).

However, while such objects are useful, they are not essential to all magic-working. As Mia explains, some magic can be performed “with your mind and heart, and others [...] require things—as an extension of power, and as a respect for tradition” (*Dance* 222); “Magic springs from the elements, and from the heart. But its rituals are best served with tools, even visual aids, if you will” (*Dance* 220). Roberts’ series appears to suggest much the same is true of the “frills, trappings” (*Face* 292) of romance: as Nell says at a thirtieth wedding anniversary

Thirty years, and they were [...] looking at each other like it was the first time. It was the best moment of the night for me. [...] Because them dancing together, them looking at

each other the way they were, was what this was all about. Not decorations or pretty lights or cocktail shrimp. It was about people making a connection and believing in it. In each other. (*Dance* 203)

Moreover, romantic objects, like those used in magic rituals, can serve both positive and negative functions. Decorations, pretty lights and romantic gifts, like the explicitly sacred objects used in magic, can be used for both good and ill, and Evan most certainly used them for evil.

Since they retain their power regardless of the uses to which they are put, it may require objective observers, unaffected by those objects, to discern their misuse. As one of the abused women Julia T. Wood interviewed reflected:

'[...] There are warning signs and I know that *now*, but when you're in it, you don't see those warning signs.' Perspective also narrowed due to the well-documented tactic of abusers to isolate their partners from friends and family. (256)

Having a wider circle of friends and relations ensures that there is a greater possibility of conducting "spiritual discernment" about developing relationships. Spiritual discernment is a term used in Quakerism to describe "that fallible, intuitive gift we use in attempting to discriminate the course to which we are personally led by God in a given situation, from our other impulses and from the generalized judgments of conscience" (Loring 3). Since the gift is thought to be "fallible," consulting with other "discerning people may be extremely helpful in helping a person to distinguish or discern the sources of her own perceptions and motivations" (Loring 7). They, as Mia says of her and Ripley's role vis-à-vis Nell, "can guide and support, instruct and assist. But in the end, it'll be her choice" (*Dance* 199). Over the course of *Dance Upon the Air* Nell makes the choice to start a relationship with Zack, but she does so not just as a result of her attraction to him and her own observations about his character, but in the context of supportive comments from Mia, Ripley and others.

There is an undeniable connection between relationship advice and spiritual discernment in Roberts' series since the protagonists' developing romantic partnerships assist them in overcoming the demon. This is made particularly explicit in the case of Mia and Sam given that Mia's "choice, when it comes, has to do with her own feelings" (*Face* 72). As a consequence, Mac repeatedly probes them for information about their relationship; without it he "can't weigh [...] theories and hypotheses. I can't calculate what we might need to do" (*Face* 230).

Given the ways in which evil "can twist itself into the desirable" (*Heaven* 323), spiritual discernment is not necessarily easy. Air

dreamed of a prince [...] who would sweep her away to some lovely place where they would live happily and have children to comfort her. She was careless with her wish, as women can be when they yearn. He came for her, and she saw only that he was golden and handsome. (*Dance* 94)

Similarly, Nell initially saw only that Evan "was handsome and romantic and clever and rich" and therefore "thought, Why, here comes my prince and we'll live happily ever after" (*Dance* 313). She then accepted control being exerted over her precisely because as a "prince" he seemed to be immeasurably superior to her in many ways: "I looked the way he told me to look, and behaved the way he told me to behave. At first that seemed fine. He was older, wiser, and I was new in his world" (*Dance* 112). In Nell's and Air's cases it took time to discern that the "prince" was in fact an abuser whose actions would assist the demon seeking to destroy Three Sisters Island. As Julia T. Wood observes:

Prince Charming is strong, powerful, sure of himself, and commanding. These characteristics of the ideal man in the fairy tale script are not unlike the characteristics of men who are violent toward women [...]. Control, domination, and even violence fit equally well with Prince Charming and the Prince of Darkness. (244)

Roberts' series thus issues a warning: evil can disguise itself as love, and love which is warped has the potential to destroy not just those

who love wrongly but also those who surround them. However, while flawed and misdirected love imperiled the island and ruined the first three witches, true love gives the modern three witches the power to save their home and community and vanquish a great evil. Roberts therefore stands with bell hooks in proclaiming that

love gives life meaning, purpose, and direction. Doing the work of love, we ensure our survival and our triumph over the forces of evil and destruction. [...] Love is our hope and our salvation. (hooks xxiv)

but she also adds legalistic caveats: discernment is required in order to ensure that love, or what appears to be love, will not lead to “aberrations,” and this discernment is aided by membership of a loving community.

## Chapter II

# Conclusion

By propagating faith in the goodness and durability of love, romance authors create a sense of hope and a space in which readers' pastoral needs can be addressed. In a way, the novels themselves, and the authors who create them, can function as a community which will assist readers in the process of discernment.

Clearly there are issues of exclusion and stereotypical representation which romance publishing needs to address, and individual authors, too, need to be aware of ways in which their work may in fact cause harms to those to whom they wish to offer only care. However, writing this book has increased my appreciation for the difficult tasks that romance writers undertake. It is no easy thing to assume a pastoral role and take responsibility for offering hope to readers through the medium of fiction. There are staples of the romance genre, including plot types such as salvation stories, which are traditional, and it is no doubt very difficult, if not impossible, to allow a free flow of the imagination while simultaneously questioning whether such elements are being deployed in a particular novel in a way which might be offensive or upsetting to some readers. As Therese Dryden has observed, writing fiction

is not a straightforward linear process. As a young writer (young in terms of how long I had been published) my focus was firmly fixed on writing novels that had an internal logic that held them together. That is, stories with strong conflicts, that were suitably romantic, and that incorporated heroines and heroes that readers could relate to and sympathise with. (384)

It was only later that Dryden realised she had written some “books that, politically, I do not agree with” (384). Editors and others in the business of publishing also play a part: they have a hand in selecting, shaping and packaging the narratives available to readers. Finally, once texts reach readers, what speaks to the needs and situation of one reader may feel hurtful or alienating to another, because readers are not homogenous, and each brings their own personality, knowledge and set of experiences to the text.

Such obstacles and the number of potential pitfalls may seem daunting but, as a romance reader, I wish to end on a note of hope and happily ever after. While individual discernment is important, it is by ensuring there is a diverse pool of authors that the genre as a whole will be best able to cater to the pastoral needs of a wider range of readers. Romance has always adapted to changing social and economic conditions while retaining the faith which is at its core; I believe it will continue to do so.

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