

PURSUING HAPPINESS

READING AMERICAN ROMANCE
AS POLITICAL FICTION



Laura Vivanco

READING

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Pursuing Happiness

““We hold these truths to be self-evident,” Savannah said, reciting the Declaration of Independence to the class-room, ““that all men are created equal ...””

She paused here, as an image of Jake popped into her mind. *Equal, yes, she thought, but certainly not the same.* She’d never met a more virile man than Jake.

Realizing the children were staring at her, she blinked back to the present and continued, ““that they are endowed”

Good grief, yes, he most certainly—”

Stop that! She frowned and shook the thought from her mind.

““... by their creator,” she moved on, ““with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.””

The pursuit of happiness.

—Barbara McCauley, *Texas Heat*

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To Monica Jackson
(1959–2012)

and

Liz Montgomery
(1967–2015)

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Preface

This book is dedicated to Monica Jackson and to Liz Montgomery. Monica Jackson (1959–2012) was a romance author who kept asking:

why black racial separation is so prevalent in romance. My favorite theory is that it's the nature of the romance genre. Romance is fantasy-based. Readers are notoriously picky about their settings and having sympathetic characters that they can relate to [...]. These are a few of the reasons, but figuring out how to address the issue of segregation in romance and thinking about how to go about changing it, is a daunting task. Race is an uncomfortable and taboo subject to discuss on nearly any level by almost anybody, black or white. Desegregating any institution in this country has always been a monumental struggle.

Her courage and persistence in speaking out about the racial politics of romance fiction inspired and motivated me.

Liz Montgomery (1967–2015) was a romance reader and reviewer whom I knew as “Meoskop”. Never content to just ‘say something nice’, she “bang[ed] on a lot about the way domestic violence can be subtly normalized in the genre” and critiqued the “strong pressure in the genre to suppress personal emotions for socially prescribed reasons” which led to the production of “characters [who] are saintly”.

That said, she loved romance fiction and once wrote that:

My path is to take the core message of romance, that we all deserve happy endings, and live it in my daily life. I don't want to see your academic or social qualifications. They don't matter to me. You do. Because you are enough, as you are, without any external validation. You spent the most precious commodity any of us have, our limited time in this life, on experiencing a piece of art.

Monica and Liz's time in life was limited, their endings came too soon; I'm grateful for the ways in which they shared their "most precious commodity" with their fellow romance readers.

I would also like to thank British romance author Joanna Chambers. Some years ago she gave me her copy of LaVyrle Spencer's *Morning Glory* and challenged me to explain its appeal to American romance readers. That was the seed from which this book grew.

Acknowledgments

The quotation from Monica Jackson in the above Preface is from

<http://www.likesbooks.com/209.html>

Liz Montgomery quotations in the above Preface are from:

<http://www.vivanco.me.uk/blog/post/being-admirable-repressing-complaint>

<http://loveinthemargins.com/2014/02/09/is-it-romance-or-is-it-erotica/>

<http://loveinthemargins.com/2014/02/23/moonstruck-madness-and-domestic-violence/>

<http://loveinthemargins.com/2014/10/23/class-and-privilege-the-listen-linda-edition/>

List of Illustrations

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Page 44: “Workers” road sign from “Part 6—Temporary Traffic Control” of the Federal Highway Administration’s *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices* (2009; rev. 2012). <<http://mutcd.fhwa.dot.gov/pdfs/2009r1r2/part6.pdf>>.

Page 62: A “prairie schooner”. Released into the public domain and donated to the Wikimedia Foundation by the Archives of Pearson Scott Foresman. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Prarie_schooner_%28PSF%29.png>.

Page 88: The Statue of Liberty. Photographed by João Carlos Medau on 11 February 2014. Online at flickr <https://www.flickr.com/photos/medau/13365028933> under a Creative Commons 2.0 generic licence.

Page 110: “Tumbleweeds lodged against a Wire Fence in Winter” from Joseph Y. Bergen’s *Foundations of Botany* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1901). Internet Archive: at <https://archive.org/stream/foundationsofbot00bergrich#page/380/mode/2up>.

Introduction

AMERICAN popular culture is “big business”; its wide appeal ensures that what it is “saying about and to Americans everywhere is important” (E. Richards 19). Some individual creators of popular works, like Travis Hagen, the comic-artist hero of Emilie Richards’s 1985 romance novel *Gilding the Lily*, may of course demur, arguing that they had “no idea” their output “would be considered social commentary by anyone. I make it a point to stay away from politics and religion” (19). However, as romance heroine and scholar of popular culture Lesley Belmont retorts, “We both know that’s not true [...] they’re rife with political comment. They’re just very subtle. The message is even more far-reaching that way, I’ll bet” (19).

It has long been recognised that one may do worse than study popular culture if one wishes to understand a society and its attitudes. A tourist in early nineteenth-century England who chose to consult the *Leeds Guide; Including a Sketch of the Environs, and Kirkstall Abbey* would have been informed that:

Public amusements, especially those of the Drama are calculated to give us an insight into the taste and manners of a nation; in popular Tragedies, we trace the refinement of the passions; Comedies are often satires on existing follies and fashions of the times; and even Pantomimes generally exhibit caricatures of the frivolities of the day. (Ryley 61)

More recently, Ray B. Browne, a pioneer of popular-culture studies, declared that “the popular culture of a country is the voice of the people—their likes and dislikes, the lifeblood of daily existence, their way of life” (1). This book explores what one form of US popular culture, its romance fiction, reveals about Americans’ political “likes and dislikes”. (The Americas include, but extend far beyond, the USA. However, since the focus of this book is on the USA, unless specified otherwise the word “American” is used here to refer specifically to

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people, places, etc from the USA.)

Romance novels have often been described as “escapist” but romance readers cannot escape politics because:

Politics is everywhere. This is so because no realm of life is immune to relations of conflict and power. There is always the possibility that social relations could be ordered differently, which means that there is inevitable dispute as to the most appropriate, or just, way of organizing these relations otherwise. (Squires 119)

At the most basic level, there is bound to be politics in romance fiction because the love lives of the two or more protagonists in a romance will invariably involve “relations of conflict and power”. There is, moreover, no way of wholly separating the private sphere from the public when the latter so often influences the former. In many of Jayne Ann Krentz’s romances, for example:

the hero and heroine are initially constructed as “good” at work and “bad” at love, yet they both ultimately become part of a successful and contented romantic couple due to their transference of management skills and business ethics into the relationship. (Young 97)

Applying some of the terminology and practices of the workplace to marriage is nothing new: the early twentieth century saw a “remarkable infusion of business language into the sphere once held apart for love and sentiment” (Rodgers 200). This was a period in which the:

Ladies’ Home Journal [...] ridiculed the idea of working wives [...] but [...] held up a model of the middle-class woman as a business partner in her husband’s success, doing her share by maintaining an efficiently managed home. [...] Even marriage could be put into the language of work; it was a matter of persistence, industry, and patience—woman’s “specific share of the world’s work.” (Rodgers 200)

Although much has changed in the intervening decades, “the ‘marriage as work’ formula” (Celello 2) has persisted and thrived to

such an extent that now “The pairing of ‘marriage’ and ‘work’ is so pervasive and reflexive that it is difficult to imagine a time in which this was not a guiding maxim of American unions” (Celello 1–2).

The writing of novels which depict these unions is also a form of work and is shaped by economic factors. Romances are a type of popular fiction and as such can be considered:

commodities that are typically developed in accordance with mainstream convictions—[...] in capitalism as the ideal economic system, in wars fought in the name of democracy, and in heterosexuality and whiteness as the normative state for romantic experience. (Kamblé 23)

In my conclusion, I explore some of the “mainstream convictions” present in the work of LaVyrle Spencer, who has been described as “the classic, quintessential romance writer, whose novels are regularly reprinted and kept in stock” (Chappel 108), and in particular her *Morning Glory* (1989), which won the Romance Writers of America’s award for “Best Romance of 1989” and was made into a movie, released in 1993, starring Christopher Reeve and Deborah Raffin.

Explicitly political statements and, indeed, explicitly American political statements, can be found in US romance novels, including Lynna Banning’s *Smoke River Bride* (2013):

“But this is America,” she shouted in the strongest voice she had ever used. “We are all kinds of people, with all kinds of backgrounds. We all have the same rights because that is what this country stands for.” (229)

Despite the fact that, as Banning acknowledged in a note placed at the beginning of this novel, “As a nation, we have not always shown tolerance toward those who are ‘different’ from us” (6), her romance’s half-Chinese heroine seeks to counter racial discrimination by portraying it as un-American; the reference to “the same rights” would seem to allude to the Declaration of Independence’s famous assertion “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights”.

Authors who choose to include explicitly political statements

in their works do risk being unpopular with readers, who may find themselves in disagreement or simply “feel that political education spoils a good romance” (Hermes 51). In general, therefore, the politics in romance remains implicit and may not be obvious to readers of mainstream romances who themselves feel part of the mainstream: for them, the politics in the novels may well go unperceived because it reaffirms widely accepted political beliefs. For instance, when the heroine of Justine Davis’s *Deadly Temptation* (2007) declares that:

she was all for free enterprise, but stealing someone else’s work wasn’t her idea of the way things were supposed to be. It had been ingrained in her from childhood by her father; you were supposed to use your own talents and skills, make it on your own merit, not rob from others. There was no satisfaction, no pride to be found in success you hadn’t earned. (152–3)

readers may simply accept this as a passage which describes the values of the heroine and her family, rather than reading the passage as an encapsulation of the essence of the American Dream blended with the American Work Ethic.

Given the core plot of romance novels, however, even readers who generally shy away from the overtly political, and who overlook much of the implicit politics in romance novels, may find it impossible to avoid noticing the fact that romances deal with gender and sexual politics. Indeed, they may actively appreciate romances for offering a vision of better “social relations” between the sexes. The readers interviewed by Janice A. Radway in her influential study, undertaken in 1980–81, for instance, were mostly “married mothers of children, living in single-family homes in a sprawling suburb of a central midwestern state” (50) and:

They made it clear [...] that they believe their self-perception has been favorably transformed by their reading. [...] Although marriage is still the idealized goal in all of the novels they like best, that marriage is always characterized by the male partner’s recognition and appreciation of the heroine’s saucy assertion of her right to defy outmoded conventions and

manners. This fiction encourages them to believe that marriage and motherhood do not necessarily lead to loss of independence or identity. (102)

For other readers, however, the gender and sexual politics, or indeed other aspects of the implicit politics, of mainstream romances can be distinctly unpalatable. Such readers may therefore seek out specific authors or sub-genres in which the politics is more in line with their own beliefs.

An “idealized goal” of heterosexual marriage, for example, reflects a political context which is at best heteronormative, at worst homophobic, and would have been unachievable by the lesbian readers of lesbian romance novels surveyed by Jill Ehnenn in the 1990s, of whom:

only half [...] were able to report that their work/home environment was “pretty accepting” as opposed to “kind of” or “very” homophobic. It seems that reading for escape and reading as affirmation might often be related for lesbians who read in order to escape from an environment that makes them feel negatively about their sexual identity. (124)

For very different reasons, many evangelical Christian readers also prefer novels which offer an alternative to the “social relations” depicted in secular romances of the kind read by Radway’s interviewees: they “want stories that, unlike secular romances, affirm their spiritual ideals and offer wholesome entertainment” (Neal 78).

When seeking to understand American politics in the broadest sense, romance novels written by Americans and sold in the US provide “an excellent form of evidence because they have a large and dedicated readership (41 million readers in 1998, 51.1 million in 2002) of, in many ways, statistically average American women” (Clawson 462). Despite the disdain and suspicion which has often been directed at it, romance has been described as “the dominant form of American fiction” (Regis, “Female” 847) and in the years since 1960, when the Romantic Novelists’ Association (RNA) was founded in the UK, “the geographic center of romance writing and publishing has shifted from Great Britain and the Commonwealth to

North America” (Mussell 8).

In parallel with this shift, the composition of the RNA has altered:

In the beginning the members were mostly ‘romance’ writers—that is, short books dealing mainly with one-on-one relationships and with small canvasses. Now we cover an enormous range of women’s fiction from Mills & Boon [or Harlequins, as they are known in the US] through to operatic-sized epics, taking in on the way, sagas, chick-lit, contemporary situation novels [...], historicals, paranormal, and whatever the next fashion is going to be. (Haddon and Pearson 9)

Yet, even allowing for these broader parameters, romantic fiction in the UK would appear to be in decline. Joanna Trollope, in an address given to the RNA’s fiftieth anniversary conference in July 2010, took stock of its “present state” in the UK and told her fellow romantic novelists that when she had:

looked at the *Sunday Times* bestseller lists this morning [...] in the hardback fiction top ten, there are six crime or thriller novels, and in the paperback list, there are another six. That’s twelve of a single genre out of twenty. Romantic fiction has four out of twenty [...]. It isn’t selling in the quantities that it could, or even deserves, to sell. (Haddon and Pearson 256–7)

By contrast, in the US that same month, *Bloomberg Businessweek* reported that romance was “the top-performing category on the best-seller lists compiled by *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and industry trade *Publishers Weekly*”. This success is very far from being a temporary aberration: “In 1999, for example, more than 2,500 romances were published in North America, accounting for 55.9 percent of mass market and trade paperbacks sold” (Regis, “Female” 847).

There is, however, a significant difference between US popular romance fiction, which comes with the guarantee of an “emotionally-satisfying and optimistic ending” (Romance Writers of America), and the UK’s ‘romantic fiction’, which offers readers a range of outcomes. This US bias towards happy endings is not limited to romance novels: it has been observed that “the centrality and significance of

the happy ending in American popular culture contrasts sharply with the endings offered in many European-produced works” (Crothers 45). It might therefore be reasonable to speculate that the differences in the endings of these works of fiction reflect differing cultural and political beliefs. Certainly, in depicting their protagonists’ journey towards happiness, romance novels often reproduce a narrative which, according to Dan McAdams, an American psychologist, “provides Americans of many different persuasions with a common language or format for making sense of an individual life”: the story of the “redemptive self” (“American” 20).

An American who understands the events in their own life in terms of this narrative will tend to feel they were “chosen for a special status” due to possessing “some kind of physical, mental, psychological, social, economic, ideological, or spiritual advantage” (McAdams, “The Redemptive” 91); the heroes and heroines of a romance novel are ascribed “a special status” by virtue of being chosen as the protagonists of the novels in which they appear but it is also common for them to be special in some way compared to other characters and, indeed, the reader (Vivanco 29–37). As the non-fictional life-story continues, the narrator will recount how:

As I move forward in life, many bad things come my way—sin, sickness, abuse, addiction, injustice, poverty, stagnation. But bad things often lead to good outcomes—my suffering is redeemed. Redemption comes to me in the form of atonement, recovery, emancipation, enlightenment, upward social mobility, and/or the actualization of my good inner self. As the plot unfolds, I continue to grow and progress. I bear fruit; I give back; I offer a unique contribution. I will make a happy ending, even in a threatening world. (McAdam “American” 20)

Similarly, popular romance novels can be considered texts in which:

the shared and underlying mythic conviction is in the idealizing power of love to make the world, in reality so often harsh and even tragic, a better place. In line with the promise of orthodox religious faith, love offers the promise of redemption and even salvation. (Roach)

Pamela Regis, an American romance scholar, has observed that two essential elements of the romance novel must be endured and overcome before the protagonists can achieve happiness. These are a “barrier” which prevents the immediate union of the protagonists and can take the form of “any psychological vice, virtue, or problem, any circumstance of life, whether economic, geographical, or familial” (*A Natural* 32), and a:

“point of ritual death” [...] marked by death or its simulacrum (for example fainting or illness); by the risk of death; or by any number of images or events that suggest death, however metaphorically (for example, darkness, sadness, despair, or winter). (14)

In Pamela Browning’s *Feathers in the Wind* (1989), for example, the heroine, Caro, suffers a violent attack which leaves her with a “scar stretching in a dark jagged line from her right ear to her lower left jaw” (12) and, more importantly, with psychological scars that hinder the development of her relationship with the hero. Caro’s is “a story of survival” (223) which she believes could “inspire people, make them want to go on against all the odds” (223); it demonstrates “that sometimes you have to go through the bad part of life to get to the good” (236).

Romances, then, like the real-life “redemptive narratives” studied by McAdams:

are not simply happy stories. Rather, they are stories of suffering and negativity that turn positive in the end. Without the negative emotions, there can be no redemption in the story. (McAdams, *Redemptive* 44)

McAdams argues that such stories draw on “images, themes, characters, plots, and scenes that resonate with some of the most cherished and contested narratives in the American heritage” (McAdams, “American” 26), including “‘rags-to-riches’ stories about ‘the American dream’ [...] along with transformative stories about being ‘born again,’ [and] ‘escaping from slavery to freedom’” (McAdams, “The Redemptive” 82). As fictional redemption narratives, many American romance novels surely recall them too.

The underlying optimism of such texts would seem to set them apart from much modern ‘literary’ or ‘serious’ fiction which, perhaps not coincidentally, “has long been subsidized by mass-market fiction and by nonfiction ripped from the headlines” (Donadio):

Love, success, and many displaced mythic oppositions between good America and evil others no longer grip readers and writers of serious fiction [...], the traditional literary themes and structures have lost appeal in part because so many Americans have lost faith in America’s future, in America’s righteousness, and in the power, meaning, and integrity of the individual. (Hume 5–6)

One can, however, continue to find “faith in America’s future, in America’s righteousness, and in the power, meaning, and integrity of the individual” expressed in popular romance novels. Indeed, for many years the guidelines for Harlequin’s line of American Romance novels quite explicitly stated that these novels should demonstrate “a sense of adventure, optimism and a lively spirit—they’re all the best of what it means to be American!” (Harlequin).

According to the Founding Fathers, being American meant being a citizen of a country in which it was believed “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”. In practice the US has not always lived up to its high ideals but for the romance authors who acknowledge that fact in their work, this would not seem to justify despair or apathy. Instead the underlying themes of their novels can be encapsulated in the words of a secondary character in Nell Stark’s *Homecoming* (2008):

Liberty and justice for all. I believe in that, and I know you do, too. I believe that the United States has a good system—imperfect, but good. I believe that we are doing exactly the right thing—exposing and working to change the parts of that system that are weak. (194)

Some of the imperfections of the system are revealed via the stories of the African-American hero and heroine of Beverly Jenkins’s *Belle* (2002) and the lesbian protagonists of Karin Kallmaker’s *In Every*

Port (1989), all of whom make an appearance in Chapter 4. These novels bear witness to the struggles of various minority groups to make it truly self-evident to US society as a whole that “all men are created equal”. The task of “exposing and working to change the parts of that system that are weak” is also shouldered by the novels in Nora Roberts’s *MacKade* series (1995–6) and Sharon Shinn’s *Twelve Houses* series (2005–8) which literally and metaphorically attempt to set houses in order and can therefore be read as blueprints for how to create better, stronger communities.

Pamela Morsi’s *Simple Jess* (1996) is the subject of Chapter 2 and a novel which suggests that a man’s status in his community owes a great deal to his ability to work, and the type of work he is able to perform. There is a broad consensus in the US that “In America hard work leads to good fortune which in turn results in money/fame/power for the virtuous individual” (Nachbar and Lause 95). This American work ethic may be deemed to set the US apart from other countries. That is certainly the opinion of the foreign-born hero of Kate Welsh’s *A Texan’s Honour* (2012), who decided to make his home in the US because of Americans’:

integrity in choosing honest work and self-determined prosperity over inherited wealth and idleness [...]. And nowhere on the continent did that quality hold stronger and truer than what he’d found when he’d visited and fallen in love with Texas. (90)

In Chapter 3 I too go west, in order to explore the significance of the West in the American political imagination.

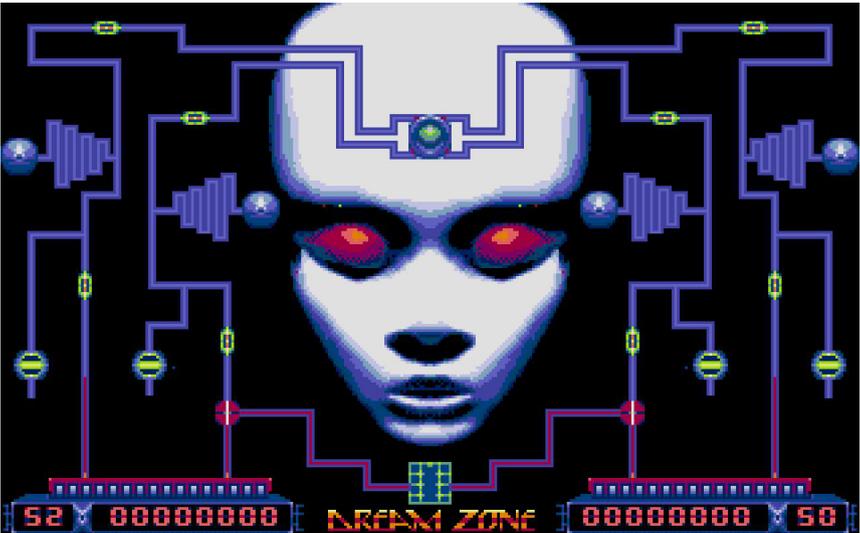
The depiction of the West in some romances appears to have been influenced by “the frontier thesis advanced by Frederick Jackson Turner” at the end of the nineteenth century, a thesis which “captivated the discipline of American history for four decades” and presented the West as “a sociocultural furnace that forged a new Americanism embodying democracy, individualism, pragmatism, and a healthy nationalism” (Malone 410). By contrast, a more recent generation of historians known as:

the new western historians set aside the mythic history of

the pioneer and national innocence that underlay Turnerian histories in favor of a more critical assessment of expansion. For the new western historians, the West was, and remains, a complex and contested place filled with diverse peoples and stamped by the mark of conquest. (Smoak 86)

This approach, too, finds its counterpart in romance fiction. In Chapter 3 I show how Ruth Jean Dale's *Legend!* (1993) and Ruth Wind's *Meant to be Married* (1998) reassess Western history and critique its violence. The past continues to affect the present; historic violence and discrimination shape contemporary Americans' narratives about their "roots", as I shall show in Chapter 5.

Conflict is also discussed in Chapter 1. Here, though, the primary struggle is between the literary critic and the author. In Chapter 1 I discuss authorial intent and the limits of a critic's expertise in the context of Linnea Sinclair's *Games of Command* (2007). One might say that, by way of a discussion of her treatment of gender politics, I address the politics of literary criticism.



Extase

Image of Extase (1991 / Cryo Interactive / Atari ST) “Each level represented a different level of emotion until the final extase (ecstasy).”

1. Games of Command: The Politics of Literary Criticism

‘When *I* use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master—that’s all.’ [...]

‘You seem very clever at explaining words, Sir,’ said Alice. ‘Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem called “Jabberwocky”?’

‘Let’s hear it,’ said Humpty Dumpty. ‘I can explain all the poems that ever were invented—and a good many that haven’t been invented just yet.’ —Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (190–1)

One of the most serious charges that can be laid against literary critics is that we take command of literary texts, appropriating them and insisting they mean what we want them to mean regardless of whether or not our criticism “grow[s] out of the art it deals with” (Frye 6). Sadly it has to be admitted that in our approach to texts some of us probably do bear too close a resemblance to the character I think of as ‘Professor Dumpty’. He is, of course, a comical creation but, as science fiction romance author Linnea Sinclair discovered, the situation may suddenly become rather less amusing if you are the author of a text to which he, or someone like him, might turn his attention:

Eons ago, when I was in college (or it might have been grad school), I remember listening to a professor expounded [sic] on what L. Frank Baum really meant to say when he wrote the