

The Stigma of Romance

In many business environments, women are held back by what is known as the glass ceiling, where men advance to higher positions faster. So what happens in a female dominated environment like popular romance?

What did you expect to find while studying romance?

Jen Lois and Joanna Gregson

Joanna Gregson: So we have intentionally sought out male authors and agents and editors and reviewers to find out about their experiences with this feminine community, to find out their take on it. And we have found that gender matters. That gender matters and the men are very aware of the fact that this is a hyper-feminine community. And feel very welcomed by the community, but feel like their gender is their most salient identity characteristic at RWA. So it might not matter as much elsewhere... their height might matter more, or their accents. Or something else might matter more elsewhere. But at RWA, what matters is gender. They're... constantly aware.

Jen Lois: Yes, but what didn't surprise us is that gender matters less for men in a female dominant group, than gender would matter if it was all reverse. Men are the highest level, and women encounter the glass ceiling. Well, in female dominated occupations, when men enter them, it's called the glass escalator. So you see this phenomenon, where even in female dominated occupation, men rise to the highest levels more quickly. People expect them to take more responsibility, and we can see some evidence of that. So men uh... feel a little bit like outsiders, But... by and large, there's a little bit of male privilege that protects them from experiencing the full... That's our sense.

Jen Lois: Writers say this all the time. It's a genre for women, by women, read by women, about women, the content is feminized, so um... while that's a celebration of femininity, and it's a place for women to go, to feel validated, it's also stigmatized. So that's the whole tension, of course, in trying to gain respectability. And that's the source of the stigma, on multiple levels.

So we see there being several sources of stigma that each needs to be overcome separately. Like the sexual content of the books. Now lots of books have sexual content, but romance gets... you know, the criticism for it. The

romance writers get... asked leering questions. You know, have you done everything you've written about in your books? That kind of things. And that just... I hope to see that kind of overcome.

Joanna Gregson: Because the stigma reflects the larger social control over women's sexuality, where people are more comfortable with women as objects of sexuality than agents of sexuality. Right? As objects of somebody else's desire vs being people who write about desire. Which may or may not be their own. People think it's their own. And it's autobiographical. But that's beside the point.

Joanna Gregson: one of our hopes became dispelling the stigma. And doing our part to tell the story. Of these smart, savvy, intentional, career-focused women who are really, really good storytellers and really good business people. That it's not just about... you know, having these... be undersexed or oversexed. Or... you know, writing drive! It's not that at all.

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