

Taking Romance Seriously

The conventional wisdom says Abby Zidle, Senior Editor of Pocket Books, is that women who read romance are "sad, bored housewives." But as a Ph.D candidate reading romance novels, that didn't jive with her experience as a reader. So how does she square the conventional wisdom with her experience as a reader and publisher?

Why do women read romance?

I began writing my PhD on romance novels and arguing that they were proto-feminist and not anti-feminist, really because I was still reading romance all through this. And I thought — the conventional wisdom says women who read romance, they're sad, bored housewives, they don't know any better. And I'm like, "well, I'm a smart cookie and I am really gaining some enjoyment and pleasure out of this so what is it about it that I like? Let's pursue that." And as long as I was talking about the romances it was great, and then when it came time that I was supposed to apply literary criticism and make it all academic I realized oh, I don't want to do that, I just want to work with these books, and that's when I bailed on the PhD and entered publishing.

Why do readers respond to romance novels?

I think that my answer to why women love romance and why it's not some opiate for the masses is that this was a genre of the people in a way. It's really so uniquely constructed and developed by the fans of it, it's so responsive to audience desires, and there are so many great romance writers who have said, "Well, I got started because I couldn't find a story I wanted to read and so I had to make it myself." And I think the story that they were looking for is one that validates female experience and female expression and says you deserve to have a rich, satisfying emotional relationship; you deserve to have your desires whether it's for career or love or sex validated and fulfilled and that it is not greedy, it is not trivial for you to pursue those things. And I think what romance does is honor those desires and the fulfillment of them in a fully satisfying way.

Why are romance novels dismissed?

We're such a sexualized culture now and so on the one side you have little girls with "juicy" written on sweats across their butt who are trying so quickly not to be little girls anymore and adult women are being so pressured to be sexy, be thin or be pretty or have the better hair, the better skin. But don't be too sexy or you're a slut. And I absolutely think that that's something that we still struggle with and that's why in many ways it's, I don't know, an act of resistance sometimes to write a romance, read a romance, to proudly read your romance with the cover showing. I think that it can be frightening to people and because it's challenging the status quo and in a way I think that's maybe why the mainstream media, people who don't read or enjoy romance like to trivialize it and mock it because we do that to make things little and to make them less frightening.

I think that there is a tougher fight any time to make people treat any enterprise that is largely female driven seriously, and I think it comes back to that idea that home and hearth is not an interesting sphere, not a serious sphere. Love is not a serious issue. Mysteries are intellectual and they are puzzles and they are convoluted and so it seems like more has gone into it perhaps to the uninitiated and not-- I love a mystery, they're great, but I think that a romance is just as complicated and nuanced and challenging for the people who look at it with an open mind and open eyes and can recognize that look. The nuance of social relationships is just as rich and engaging as tracking a killer. Jane Austen is not for nothing.

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