



ARRT Genre Study Recap: *Romance*



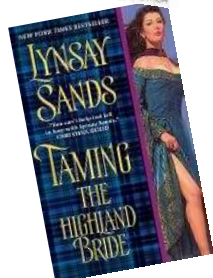
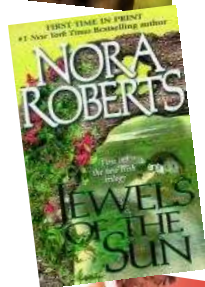
In November the ARRT Genre Study concluded a lively two-year session that explored romance fiction. Each bimonthly meeting focused on a romance subgenre, with participants reading a benchmark title as well as additional books that helped them better understand the novels and their readers. This newsletter provides a brief overview of what the group discovered. For complete reading lists and meeting notes, please visit www.arrrtreads.org/genrestudies.html.

What is a Romance?

ARRT members had last studied romance in 1991. Members of the 2009-2010 study compared the books they read against the 1991 standards:

- A love story between two people is the central facet of a romance novel
- This love story culminates in a happy ending
- Characters usually are challenged by an impediment to their love—a person, problem, miscommunication, etc.
- Romances are escapist pleasures—fast, less complex reading with more dialogue than description and less detailed character development, particularly among secondary characters
- The stories have great emotional appeal and strong female characters
- Point of view is critical—today’s readers get inside the heads of the protagonists
- The books can be read for other details, such as costume, setting, mystery, fantasy elements, etc.

Along with comparing the books they read against the 1991 list, participants talked about the benchmark title and discussed how their experiences reading in each subgenre corresponded to their



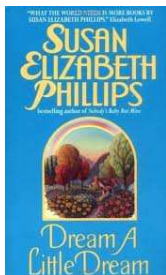
expectations. For the kickoff meeting, *Wuthering Heights* and *Pride and Prejudice* used to provide a framework for exploring the genre’s conventions. (Genre study leader Debbie Walsh of Geneva Public Library cited a 2007 poll by *The Guardian* newspaper ranking the two as the greatest love stories of all time, with Brontë narrowly edging Austen for the top spot.) However, the group realized that love stories aren’t necessarily romance novels. Our group agreed that *Wuthering Heights* did not meet the definition of a romance, while *Pride and Prejudice* did.

Talking About Sensuality

One topic that (understandably) didn’t come up during the Austen/Brontë discussion was sex. However, sex scenes are elemental to the vast majority of romance novels being published today. Several study participants were surprised to discover how steamy some of the books were. Because readers have different standards for sexual description, suggesting books based on explicitness can be challenging—you risk offending some and disappointing others.

Many participants shared resources that can help in guiding patrons with regard to a book’s sensuality level. These include include RT Book Reviews (rtbookreviews.com), All About Romance, (likesbooks.com), the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped catalog (loc.gov/nls/), and Allreaders (allreaders.com).

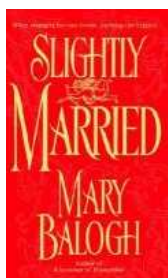
As the study progressed, it was agreed that the elements of the 1991 list still applied to much of the genre. However, there were a few surprises. The following pages provide a breakdown of each subgenre and conclude with a list of several romance novels recommended by our participants.



Contemporary Romance

Benchmark title: *Dream a Little Dream* by Susan Elizabeth Phillips

Notes: Contemporary romances offer accessibility—there aren't the hurdles of learning about a different time or world. However, some readers found this a drawback to suspending their disbelief. Within the parameters of recognizable reality, the happily-ever-after fantasy of the stories seemed particularly unrealistic. The present-day settings also cause some contemporary romances to become dated more quickly than other genres.

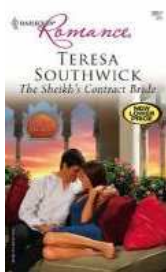


Historical Romance

Benchmark: *Slightly Married* by Mary Balogh

Notes: For this benchmark, historical detail helped dictate the plot and bring together the main characters (the story involved a marriage of convenience for a woman whose estate is entailed to a relative). Some members commented on how it was important that period detail such as clothing and speech be seamlessly absorbed into the story. In some cases, the historical elements helped them suspend disbelief more readily than they did with contemporary romance. Historicals are one of the more popular romance subgenres being published today, with the English Regency period being a common category within the subgenre. However, historical settings run the gamut from ancient civilizations to the early 20th century.

In addition, it was noted that *Slightly Married* is part of a larger series where supporting characters in one book become the main protagonists in another, a common practice in the romance genre.



Category Romance

Benchmark: None

Notes: Category romances are those published in specific lines that have distinct conventions for setting, page count, sensuality level, etc. There is a category line covering every romance subgenre. Because this cookie-cutter system doesn't really create benchmark authors, our participants selected their own books from a number of lines. Categories vary widely in quality, but readers like that they are inexpensive, fast, undemanding

reads (one participant commented that they serve as a welcome "time out" for busy people). Those who prefer more substantive character and plot development likely won't enjoy them. A number of famous authors such as Nora Roberts and Janet Evanovich began their careers writing categories.

Inspirational Romance

Benchmark: *Redeeming Love* by Francine Rivers



Notes: Inspirational romances don't follow one of the central tenets of romance—here, the importance of the love story between the protagonists is superseded by their spiritual love for God. The books tend to be more traditional, and it is the only modern subgenre without explicit sex scenes. Participants commented that readers are often older and ask for specific titles. It can be difficult to find reviews, although *RT Book Reviews* has an inspirational section in their magazine and website. (Interestingly, some participants read an older edition of *Redeeming Love* that included some language, while newer editions have been cleaned up.)

There was some disagreement about whether inspirational fulfill the escapist aspect of other romances, as some thought readers choose them not to get away from it all but rather to validate their existing beliefs. But others felt that the romance element still provides an escape for those readers.

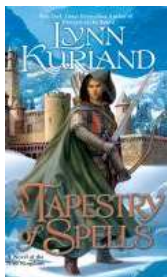
Romantica

Benchmark: None

Notes: As the name implies, romantica is a cross between erotica and romance. Because the subgenre is just now beginning to evolve, participants were asked to read works from a list of suggested authors and publishing houses (such as Kensington Aphrodisia and Ellora's Cave). Romantica is full of escapist fantasy, but the female characters are always in control, so it can be less threatening than male-oriented porn. The main appeal seemed to be the sex, not the love story.



It was noted that romantica endings often offer "happy for now" instead of "happily ever after." Many participants felt that the characters and plot were just thin frameworks for the sex, and that without the sensuality there wouldn't be enough left to tell a story.



SF/Time Travel Romance

Benchmark: One SF novel from Catherine Asaro, Linnea Sinclair, Jayne Castle or Susan Sizemore and one time travel book from Sandra Hill, Lynn Kurland, Melissa Mayhue or Teresa Medeiros

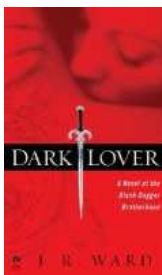
Notes: As publishing trends change, the popularity of both SF and time travel romances have waned. It was generally agreed that romance SF is less about “what if” and more about telling love stories in extraordinary locales. Benchmark author Asaro is an exception, as her books feature world-building more consistent with straight SF. It was agreed that the books appeal more to romance readers who enjoy unusual settings and action/adventure than to serious SF readers—romantic SF is driven by relationships and emotion, not story and detail.

As for time travel, participants were asked to consider whether the subgenre is similar to historicals because several involve characters going back in time. It was noted that many books have a fish-out-of-water element that allows for traces of humor (unlike more serious SF). In essence, these are costume dramas with strong, modern female characters.

Paranormal Romance

Benchmark: *Dark Lover* by J.R. Ward

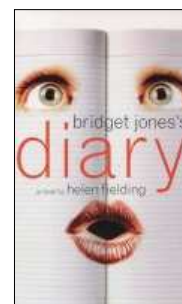
Notes: Paranormal has been a hot trend in recent years. Not surprisingly, many feature vampires. The idea of a bad-boy hero is popular, and the books tend to have steamy sex scenes. The majority of the novels have a contemporary setting, although there is a world-building element it shares with SF. Despite the supernatural characters, this isn't horror—the books are dark, but not scary (although the imminent threat of death is a common element for the characters).



out damaging both plot and theme. Fast-paced and edgy, these books are told from the heroine's point of view. Most settings are contemporary, although some authors use historical or paranormal elements. In recent years, the levels of sex, violence and language have been ratcheted up. Popular authors such as Brown and Iris Johanson have crossed over to straight suspense, although their books still often feature strong romantic elements.

Women's Fiction

Benchmark: None, although participants who had never read a Danielle Steel novel or *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding were asked to consider those as their selections



Notes: Although sometimes considered romance, women's fiction is a separate genre. The group explored the reasons why. Despite featuring romance elements, the central theme of these novels is not a romance but rather the personal growth of the female protagonist as she faces a crisis. Popular authors include Jodi Picoult, Jennifer Weiner, Kristin Hannah, and Maeve Binchy, as well as male authors such as Nicholas Sparks. Happy endings are hardly a given, character development can be meatier and some books are shot through with literary elements. First-person perspective can also be used.

Other differences include the fact that women's fiction is more commonly published in hardcover, the situations presented are more realistic and sex scenes, if any, are less explicit. Chick lit, a subset of women's fiction, is lighter in tone with a more escapist feel, but the focus remains with the growth of the main character, not the romantic relationship.

Wrap-up meeting

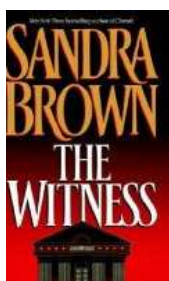
By the end of the study, participants who were regular romance readers had been introduced to new authors while those who weren't fans felt more comfortable talking about the genre. Some commented on how romances can be read as a break between heavier books. Others were surprised at the explicit sex scenes in some of the “milder” books, not to mention the graphic nature of the romantica titles and the levels of violence in romantic suspense. This highlighted a need to be familiar with authors before recommending them to patrons. The growing popularity of ebooks and the popularity of romance in digital formats serves as an added reminder that romance fans are a vital part of our reading communities.

Romantic Suspense

Benchmark: *The Witness* by Sandra Brown

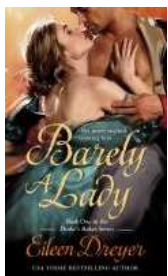
Notes: Drawing from romance, mystery, thrillers and suspense, books in this category often doesn't seem to comfortably fit in any genre, and authors can sometimes be shelved all over the library. The best examples of

romantic suspense equally balance the love story and the suspense to the extent that neither can be removed with-



Love Notes

Reading suggestions from Genre Study participants

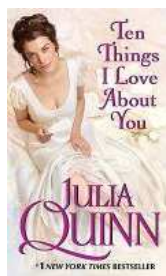


***Barely a Lady* by Eileen Dreyer (Historical Romance, 2010)**

Scandalously divorced five years prior by her husband, Jack Wyndham, Earl of Gracechurch, Olivia has remained hidden from society until circumstances lead her to discover Jack unconscious in an enemy uniform at the battlefield at Waterloo. Injured and traumatized, Jack does not recall that he is no longer married to Olivia. The times are troubled; separation has caused both to have secrets; and Dreyer has created a well-plotted, believable story of two people who surely must belong together. (Kimberly Stack)

***Ten Things I Love About You* by Julia Quinn (Historical Romance, 2010)**

Sebastian Grey exhibits the soldier's burden of carrying the horrors of war until he finds distraction and earnings through secretly writing popular novels. These hidden earnings also enable him to disdain being the heir of the repulsive Lord Newbury, who seeks to marry to provide himself with any heir other than Sebastian. Annabel Winslow seems to be Lord Newbury's answer, until she accidentally falls into Sebastian's arms. Contemporary problems disguised in historic costumes are told with a light-hearted tone and clever repartee. (KS)



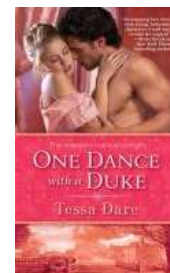
***Never Less Than a Lady* by Mary Jo Putney (Historical Romance, 2010)**

Suddenly the heir to the Earl of Daventry, Major Alexander Randall receives a command from his uncle to marry within the year, and he thinks of country midwife Julia Bancroft. Julia's secret past catches

up with her and she is kidnapped. When Major Randall rescues Julia and proposes marriage for her protection, Julia worries she won't be able to trust a man ever again, not even the handsome Randall. An intelligent female protagonist, humor, and a dash of suspense all make for an absorbing story. (Nicole Wilhelms)

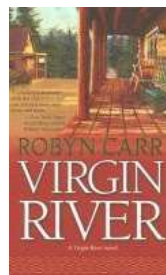
***One Dance With a Duke* by Tessa Dare (Historical Romance, 2010)**

The Duke of Morland appears at society's fetes at midnight, where he dances with one of the marriageable ladies and departs. That is, until spinster Amelia d'Orsay waylays him in an effort to beg forgiveness for her brother's gambling debt. When the news of a murder causes Morland and Amelia to leave the party, the honorable duke realizes that Amelia will be seen as having been compromised, and he leaps to marry her. The subtle suspense of the murder investigation and a developing passion between Amelia and the duke can only be set in this Regency period, with the customs and manners an integral part of a captivating read. (KS)



And just so you don't think we didn't like anything other than historical romance:

***Virgin River* by Robyn Carr (Contemporary Romance, 2007)**



After big-city nurse/midwife Melinda is widowed in her 30s, she looks for a new start in a small mountain town in northern California. Upon arrival, she discovers a town that fails to live up to the promises that lured her there, and she's about to escape when two things happen: a newborn baby is abandoned at the local doctor's office, and Melinda makes the acquaintance of a handsome former Marine named Jack, who owns the town's only restaurant/bar. The first in a series about the people of Virgin River, a true community filled with good people who are there to provide support when bad things happen. (Stacey Cisneros)

2011 ARRT Genre Study: Historical Fiction

Please join us on Monday, Feb. 14, 2011 at 2pm at Skokie Public Library for the kickoff meeting for ARRT's Historical Fiction Genre Study. We'll be discussing *Gone With the Wind* and going over the schedule for future meetings. The genre study is free and registration is not required.

