



ROMANCE GENRE STUDY

The ARRT Genre Study Group studied the Romance genre from 2009-2010.

Classics

Pride & Prejudice and Wuthering Heights

Why were these chosen as the two books to open our genre study? While organizing the study, Debbie found the poll taken by the Guardian about their top romance novel: 1. *Wuthering Heights* and 2. *Pride & Prejudice*. She found this very interesting since most librarians would not label *Wuthering Heights* as a romance. This leads to the point that we must come to terms with the publishing juggernaut categorizing things differently (as do patrons!) then we would.

So how is a romance novel defined? It's the relationship of a man & woman, where they meet, the arc of their relationship and how they come together in the end.

So at first glance **is** *Wuthering Heights* a romance? The group's comments were that it seemed more about vengeance than romance, that it's a sort of stalker novel, Ted Balcom described the characters as causing misery for others, that it was a sort of "dark love story". It was mentioned that the movie distorted the original story, and that the novel itself, along with *Gone With the Wind*, changed the idea of romance—that passion is often tragic. Heathcliff has become an archetype—the dark hero. In the modern romance, we think we can change the hero but he seems a more immovable character.

What about *Pride & Prejudice*? In this novel, the characters meet, have conflict, and overcome their difficulties and wind up "happily ever after." Much of the story is about how they change their view of one another.

Both these novels are about marriage, both are set in England, both involve characters in the gentry. A lot of readers would lump them in the same category—as mentioned previously, the public doesn't separate books the way we do—they would see both novels as romance. So how do we deal with patrons who want romances with a capital "R"? Sometimes we have separate sections in the library. We often put these novels in fiction depending on how publishers market the books and the covers they use. Romances are marketed to "sell" or not; hidden romances sometimes capture the non-romance readers.

What's a romance? After their 1991 study, these were ARRT's conclusions for the definition:

- Key appeal words, "Happily Ever After."
- Point of View is critical—normally today 3rd person, deep inside the head of the hero and heroine.
- Had to have a happy ending.
- Love story is the most important facet
- Characters challenged by person, problem, some impediment to their love.
- There is usually a miscommunication—characters may dislike each other, then love one another.
- Escapist reading
- Emotional appeal—the characters, situations, tug at you.
- Fast read—less complex—lots of dialogue.
- Strong female characters.
- Can be read for other details—clothes (Regencies), local setting, learn history, mystery.
- Allows readers to participate in characters' lives (3rd person POV)

So how do the two books read stack up? In discussing the two works, the group came up with these conclusions:

Wuthering Heights

Appeal? The characters do not live happily ever after, unless you look at it from a supernatural angle; together again in the Afterlife.

POV? The POV was filtered, gossipy, not told from the characters' POV. Bit of imbalance as it is told from POV of servant who admits freely she doesn't like Cathy. Her interpretation of events?

Happy Ending? You could say that the children have transcended the dark and provide the happy ending; their relationship evolves from a hate to love. [Debbie noted that historical romance often put in births at the end as epilogues to prove to readers that the women survive childbirth. Susan Elizabeth Phillips also does this in her contemporaries, to prove that the characters have stayed together and there is a "fruit" of their love.] There is a sort of traditionalism to the *Wuthering Heights* story—order is restored at the end; the lineage is properly inherited.

The characters had identity issues—"He is me" and the main characters seem to hate other characters.

Is this escapist reading? Maybe not for us, but for the reader then it would seem sensational—most people were horrified by the violence and manners of the characters. The feelings seemed too strong, disturbing.

Did the book have emotional appeal? It was rough emotionally then, but now? Too suffocating? This book did not move out into society, it stayed with the characters (much like the author herself) so it can seem claustrophobic.

Fast Read? It seems more complex now, but for the time it was written, it probably was a fast read.

Strong Female? The females do assert themselves, Cathy is able to deal with Heathcliff (he calls her “saucy”) Cathy has a civilizing ability, yet she succumbs to fever spells and starves herself as a way of asserting control. It was pointed out that Emily Bronte herself had anorexic behaviors.

Read for Other details? Yes—there were abundant descriptions of the moors, the animals, the dialect (Yorkshire accent).

Do we participate in the characters’ lives? Not really, except to see the characters crazed. Romances usually have more a sense of control for readers.

Pride & Prejudice

The novel had a happy ending, the love story was most important; there was a challenge to the romance. There was a POV from both, Darcy’s came from his housekeeper; there was miscommunication. It was escapist, had emotional appeal, was a relatively fast read (or a least faster than *Wuthering Heights*); it had a strong female character, and could be read for witty dialogue and historical detail. Readers are definitely able to participate in the emotional life of the characters.

It was generally agreed that *Wuthering Heights* did not really fit the definition of a romance, while *Pride & Prejudice* did.

Contemporary Romance

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

Many participants indicated that the religious aspects were not what they expected and some were bothered by the emphasis on spirituality; although it was mentioned that once the sex got started some of that impression was muted. There was a series of epiphanies the author used to move the story forward and some felt that it seemed contrived.

Analysis of Phillips’s novel

- Is this Christian fiction? No, and one of the reasons it was picked is as a foil for the Christian romance we will be studying later, to help define what a Christian romance is and also because Phillips works contain the elements common to contemporary romance. This is also different from most of Susan Elizabeth

Phillips works, usually she has no religion in her romance novels, but this one does have it because of the character of Ethan, the preacher; the plot device of the debunking of a false preacher; and the setting in South Carolina. Everyone will come in to the work with their own expectations and read it differently, finding what appeals to them. One participant illustrated this when she noted how the book had more sex than she remembered reading previously and that what she had remembered was the sense of humor.

- One common element in Phillips' novels is picking up current events in her plots. Her newest novel, *What I did for Love*, has an Angelia Jolie-Brad Pitt-Jennifer Aniston triangle in it
- Wacky sense of humor—she likes to play with readers—one example is God's voice sounding like Mr. Rogers, Oprah, and other unlikely people.
- Characters had different morals to sex within the same book—this reflects the fact the author has no agenda.
- Characters are complex enough to be memorable. There's enough background to give actions texture and motivation, and enough details to make them realistic—courage and persistence.
- Obstacles at first seemed insurmountable—especially the rocky relationship with the child—but the relationship changed and was well done. Most children in romances are throwaway characters.
- Sarah mentioned the audiobook reader of the work, Anna Fields, was fantastic. Unfortunately she recently died in an accident.
- Lost it at end with the faith healing angle? Why? Many participants felt it was already over the top for spirituality. Some people may enjoy Christian element—redemption of religion? Morality play? Good is rewarded, bad punished.

The List—Appeal Factors

How does the novel compare to the established list of characteristics for a romance?

- Happy ending? Yes for everyone!
- Love story the most important facet? Yes—also becoming a family, opening yourself up to love adds to the story—more in depth.
- Characters challenged by person, problem, some impediment to their love. Yes—poverty grief, community against the heroine, the brothers bad opinion of her past.
- There is usually a miscommunication—characters may dislike each other, then love one another. Yes, this is one of the most important elements of the book.
- Escapist reading Yes. Romances by nature are unrealistic, usually for readers there is a need to suspend reality, be in the fairy tale (escapist element). Problems that are more real, some readers may not like it and want more distance, more fantasy. It's important to know what a patron wants in a romance. For example some readers find it hard to relax in a romantic suspense when the heroine might be shot at.
- Emotional appeal—the characters, situations, tug at you. The situation with the child is definitely a tearjerker as he tries to get Gabe to say he likes him. Contrived? Manipulative? Yes, but it's done to engage emotion. Some

participants mentioned they were wired to respond, felt the manipulation was too blatant, needed to be more subtle, or didn't like the child character. Someone mentioned liking that the kid was annoyed and bratty at times, more realistic.

- Fast read—less complex—lots of dialogue. Yes. Snappy dialogue which is a characteristic of Phillips' books.
- Strong female characters. Yes. Some people felt Rachel wasn't appealing in the beginning—bad mothering choices like coming back to a town that hated her; but she does change. She originally wanted the money she felt she earned through pain but as she makes connections she develops a bit. Annie Glide (off stage) was a strong female character from other books.
- Can be read for other details. A little bit about the world of televangelist and drive-in theaters. There is some symbolism—broken down drive-in, broken down people being restored.
- Allows readers to participate in characters' lives (3rd person POV) Yes—everyone was clear, we knew why Gabe was resisting Rachel. Was Ethan creepy since he only noticed Kristy when she dressed slutty? As a secondary character we don't get into his life as deeply so it's harder to identify with him. Ethan/Kristy served as a comic relief to ease the tension of main relationship and deflect the heavy scenes. Kristy also allowed us to see a kinder side of Rachel, helping someone else. Phillips often has secondary romances in her books, often older characters.

What's the appeal of contemporary romances?

You don't have to learn anything; it is set in our time, our world; feels like an alternate reality (fantasy). But does this make it harder to suspend disbelief? They also usually become dated more quickly when mentioning trendy topics as details, They also seem to come in "waves", books about hidden babies, books about cowboys, etc.

- Two characters falling in love
- Fast paced--easy.
- Misunderstanding that must be resolved
- Emotional, not intellectual
- Happy ending
- Characters well developed (although somewhat stereotypical), likeable.
- Fairy-tale—Cinderella—penniless Rachel marries rich Gabe. This is also a sexual fantasy that you have to go with or you see the sexist elements—things you wouldn't allow in literature. Is this one over the top? Vet who's a millionaire? Can author convince you? Test the level of your patron's tolerance.
- Author can reverse stereotypes and make it more interesting.
- Usually doesn't step outside conventions, you'll always have a happy ending. It's reassuring to readers there always be a happy ending. Genre = Formula. This makes it different from Chick Lit which doesn't always have a happy ending.
- Sexual content can vary as can reader perception. Someone on Amazon rated *Dream a Little Dream* as mild.

How to find out about the steaminess factor

What readers will tolerate is different; it's a challenge because you can't get inside

reader's head to know. Sometimes readers will open up after a few visits to RA. Sometimes readers want more complex, like women's fiction with romance.

- Allreaders.com—has more description for sexiness level.
- *Romantic Times*

What about the other authors we read, how do they work within this sub-genre?

- Tori Carrington—Blaze, very steamy. This is actually a husband and wife team (very unusual).
- *Trouble in High Heels* by Leanne Banks. Quality of writing not as good as benchmark, but the reviewer mentioned her patron who loved the author. Mother in book is kind of a floozy.
- *Good Girls Do* by Cathy Linz. The book had humor, less angst, snappy dialogue, eccentric characters, lots of sex, and some inconsistent writing (mustard kisses?!) The language was not explicit. The character was a librarian who read *Booklist*, *PW* and *LJ*, conveniently mentioning those who would review the book!
- Sandra Hill—books border on the erotica for sex scenes.
- *Daddy Quest* by Laura Handlin. There was a Christian sub-scene, no sex until end, book about bringing the family back together. The author now actually writes paranormal.
- *Hot Dish* by Connie Brockway. Very visual, zany, a mystery (what happened to the butter sculpture?), the main character wasn't likeable to the reviewer. This author also writes historical.
- Lisa Kleypas—abusive relationship—marriage—that seemed to drag out, edgier, disturbing. Closer to suspense? This author usually does historicals.
- Robin Carr—historical to contemporary titles with ex-marines, usually back from Iraq; a sort of "little woman" vibe to reviewer, blue-collar crowd; her books can tip close to women's fiction—she has a miscarriage in one book. She has a whole series which allows you to get back into characters' lives from different angles.
- Christina Skye—Navy Seals—almost romantic suspense? Much of the contemporary appeal, humor, witty.
- *Blame it on Cupid* by Jennifer Greene—reviewer felt it was shallow, too many holes in plot.
- *What to Do About Annie?* by Millie Criswell. Plot involves a Catholic priest, the problem is that the details are wrong. This is something that pulls you from book.
- *Larger Than Life* by Allison Kent—no conflict between characters, she usually writes categories, sometimes it makes it harder for the author to develop plot and characters in larger works. Sex level borders on erotica.

Historical Romance

The meeting began with Joyce Saricks sharing an article, "Love is In the Air" from the *Daily Herald* about how romance fiction thrives in tough economic times.

The Subgenre studied was Historical Romance, the benchmark title read was *Slightly Married* by Mary Balogh. One of the things that made it necessary that the story be a historical was Aidan's sense of honor dictating he marry the heroine to protect her. This could not have happened in a contemporary story. This historical detail helped dictate the plot and bring together the main characters.

This book is part of a larger series about the Bedwyn family which was introduced in the novel *A Summer to Remember*. There was discussion about whether this book could be read as a stand-alone. Many participants felt it could be read without the other books in the series because the author tends to give threads of explanation in her series. This serves as an enticement to look for the other books rather than being an irritant. This is increased by the excerpt from the next book (a convention of many series titles) at the end of the novel.

Some of the discussion by participants:

- It seemed unbelievable that the village would accept the varied family that appears in the novel—unmarried woman, two orphans, a cast of misfits as employees.
- Joyce S. mentioned that one of the things she looks for in historical fiction is a sense of time—how detail is absorbed into the story. She pleasantly surprised by this novel because she had low expectations as to how it would be done; but she thought the author did manage enough historical detail.
- Lucy, who emailed her comments in, thought there should have been more historical detail.
- Someone mentioned that they found the situations unintentionally funny, rather than romantic and probably wouldn't continue this series.
- Another participant mentioned how the characters seemed vulnerable due to loss, so there was no place for the humor (like Mr. Collins in *Pride & Prejudice*) to alleviate the situations.
- For people who take history seriously, does this pass the test? There has been a trend in the last ten years to have books deal with hero's problems with war. An example of this is Susan Enoch's *England's Perfect Hero* which deals with a shell-shocked veteran of the Napoleonic Wars. In Balogh's work, her hero Aidan says he feels like a "murderer" which is unusual and characteristic of the author to give her books a twist. This is unlike *Pride & Prejudice* which is written entirely from the woman's point of view.
- Some felt it had not passed the test, that it was too multicultural and had too much twentieth century mentality in the story; especially the love scenes—would they really take off all their clothes out in the open? Plus, Aidan the character seems too conservative for such behavior. Yet it's necessary to make some adaptations for the reader. But since our speech patterns are so different now, it's necessary to adopt them for these novels so that they are readable. There's a balance between authenticity and too much work for the reader.
- Authors like Amanda Quick usually contain even less historical detail. (she's actually better at romantic suspense and will turn up later) If a patron wants a

historical romance, usually the romance is more important anyway, and they may already know many details of the time period so a lack of details may not bother them. It's more important that what details there are be correct.

- If a patron reads widely in a particular time period or setting, that's their comfort zone, so it's important to know which historical romances they are interested in. Joyce mentioned that she's interested in English mysteries set 1890-1940s because she's familiar with that era, but that if she's reading outside of that, in unfamiliar territory, a romance can be easier to absorb. Cathy Jo mentioned that there are romance readers who only want to read in a particular era which is hard because they may miss good authors.

Assessment—compared to the other benchmark, *Dream A Little Dream*.

Sexual explicitness--compared to the last benchmark—very similar, but less often. One participant said she thought it was mild and had to read it a couple of times to make sure it was sex. It happened later in the novel, after the marriage of convenience. Makes a different pacing to the physicality, in an historical the characters are not expected to immediately jump into a sexual relationship. Another reader was surprised there was sex at all since it was set during the Regency. Debbie said that these are really historicals set during the Regency period which means they will follow different conventions. They've been written to meet reader's demand for more sexual explicitness. One participant was taken aback by the explicitness and didn't enjoy the book.

Someone mentioned that they liked it better because they got more lost in the story, they had been offended by the contemporary because it seemed anti-feminist and they couldn't suspend disbelief.

One participant liked the characters better in *Dream a Little Dream* and thought the brothers and sisters in *Slightly Married* were annoying. She generally likes contemporary stories more, but was interested enough in historical detail to look up more information. Another mentioned liking *Slightly Married* characters more and felt there was more depth to supporting characters.

In both stories, family is very important. For *Slightly Married*, this fits into historical detail, as during that time family was very important part of the social structure.

It's easier to be more critical of contemporaries because historicals can help us suspend disbelief—expectations are different. If you were reading SF, you would easily suspend disbelief about ships traveling across space. Sometimes traumatic events like 9/11 can increase the need to escape from the modern world.

The Checklist

After examining the novel against our checklist, it fit all the criteria of a romance—a happy ending, romantic relationship the most important feature, a challenge to the romance, the POV, the miscommunication; it was escapist, emotional, fast read, strong

female character, setting offered historical detail, and the reader participates in the characters' lives.

Authors Read by Participants

The discussion then moved on to the titles that participants had read from the list of historical writers that did/didn't seem to fit the criteria:

- *School for Manners* series by Marion Chesney. The first novel POV is different because it's told from the two sisters who run the school, so it's focused on the agent rather than the hero/heroine. Less so in the rest of the series. There was no sex in the book.
- *Twice the Temptation* by: Suzanne Enoch. This romance was ½ historical and ½ contemporary setting. Both stories involve a diamond. There is no tension in the book, nothing separating the hero/heroine. There's what some might consider "bad language", but some of these words appear in Shakespeare.
 - Do these type of words bother a patron? It's important to know. Usually you don't see them as much in historicals because bad language isn't used in the presence of "ladies" in Regency books. The Georgian and medieval might be a bit more "racy" because times were more earthy. Good authors can use creative descriptions of sex vs. using the "F" word.
- *Slightly Shady* by Amanda Quick. The mystery seemed more central, although there is romance & sex there. There is also a paranormal element.
- *Seduce Me at Sunrise* by Lisa Kleypas. It seemed more *Wuthering Heights*; hero & heroine had matching tattoos. Debbie mentioned how trends will influence books coming out—since paranormal became popular, lots of those books coming out. The settings may be historical, but they differ somewhat from the convention.
- *Brides series* by Maggie Osborne. The miscommunication seemed forced, somewhat minor; Debbie mentioned there will be a range of miscommunication since author's styles vary. It seemed more like women's fiction because there was an emphasis on the relationship of the women and there were several simultaneous romances.
- *Only Love* by Elizabeth Lowell. Set in the west after the Civil War and is the fourth in a series. The reader never finds out where the heroine is from, the dialogue is not well written, lost of sexual allegory, story plot okay. Fast read.
- *Powder & Patch* by Georgette Heyer. Dull, no strong female character except for the crotchety aunt. The heroine is immature, not engaging, no modern sensibilities. Debbie mentioned that this author was the first after Austen to write regencies and it's hard to compare her to the present, when authors write in a very different way. Her jargon is authentic enough to have preserved some phrases from disappearing historically, she's referred to in OED. The dialect can be a distraction in reading because you have to "learn" it. She's better in audio where you can appreciate the language.
- *The Sword and the Sheath* by Bonnie Vanak. There was no detail, stilted dialogue, and not a traditional historical as the heroine is a swordswoman, protecting the hero in a quasi-desert setting. Part of a series.

- Barbara Cartland romances—you'll find the majority of them in Large Print because the original paperbacks haven't survived. Clean as whistle, her style is no longer as popular—young, somewhat insipid heroines.
- Barbara Metzger is an author who used to write Regencies but has evolved into more paranormal & more explicit books.
- *Woman of Passion* by Virginia Henley. Very historically detailed work. Character goes from poverty to riches. Great beginning, but so many sex scenes they interrupted the story. Vivid descriptions.
- *Temptation of a Proper Governess* by Cathy Maxwell. Governess meets accused murderer, anti-hero. Many of her books have marriages of convenience. Endless sex scenes that don't develop relationship; bad writing if it interrupts the plot.
- *Devil to Pay* by Liz Carlyle. Similar to Mary Balogh. Kind of humorous.
- *Sins of Lord Easterbrook* by Madeline Hunter. More character development and history.
- *Your Scandalous Ways* by Loretta Linda Chase. Witty repartee. She has to learn to trust/he has to learn to accept her divorce. Venice & Venetian society as backdrop. Family centered, slow seduction lots of dialogue.
- *Duke & I* by Julia Quinn. A Regency, like Jane Austen, poking fun at society. A couple pretend an engagement to avoid matchmaking. Has humor.
- *Potent Pleasures* by Eloisa James. The heroine was wasted on the hero. Somewhat contrived.

How Much is Too Much?

- This can be harder to judge since people have different standards for sexual description. It can be intriguing that a reader will say they don't like sexy descriptions, but the book they are reading is full of them.
- Authors can also vary within their own cannon. You can check this on some of the romance reader websites: Romantic Times has a 5-7 year backlist, there's allreaders.com, The Library of Congress's site for the Blind & Physically Handicapped has information on sexiness of books.
- Most romances do have sexual detail & most readers expect a level of it in their books.
- People often challenge library books for language or content, but not romances!
- Titles? Some participants were troubled by the titles. Lack of imagination. Do the authors select them? Or does the publisher "franchise" them, like the John Sanford "Prey" series.

Category Romances

The Subgenre studied was Category Romance, there are no benchmark authors, rather a certain style, theme or common element for each line. These categories fit into slots described by the *Romance Writers Pink Pages* (1993). Now obsolete, this work gave page and word count; very precise descriptions for what they would publish. People sometimes complain about lack of description or character depth or that the books

seem shallow, but there is not often a lot of time or space to fully develop stories. The electronic version of the Pink Sheets for Harlequin is available on its website, the writing guidelines help describe all the different lines, plus the new ones they are introducing.

Some of the books read were:

Sierra Bride by Jenna Kernan (Harlequin Historical Series) had a great American western setting, good characters and was enjoyable for these factors.

Taken by the Viking by Michelle Styles (Harlequin Historical Series) is set in Medieval times. Tukie read this one and mentioned it was evident author had an interest in the era and knew something about it. This came out in the bits of information she provided on the time period, clothing descriptions, etc.

Viking Warrior by Connie Mason (Leisure Historical Romance). Arabella read this one and thought the descriptions were a bit cheesy “his sword was strong,” and felt its style was more similar to a non-category romance.

Make Me Yours by Betina Krahn (Harlequin Blaze). Cathy Jo read this one and mentioned that it’s from the very racy line that Harlequin publishes. It’s common for this line that there is sex within the first few pages and then a relationship is built.

Right Mr. Wrong by Cindi Myers (American Historical Romance). It had a ski setting and the author is a fan and knows skiing. It allowed a relationship to develop. Its part of a series by the author set in the same town.

The lines have evolved over the sixty years that Harlequin has been in business. They used to be very chaste, now more modern, with sex (some lines hotter than others), also suspense, intrigue, and paranormal. They used to be sold either by delivery or in chain stores like Walgreens or supermarkets; but now categories are sold mostly online or through home delivery. There is an embarrassment/convenience factor that makes home delivery easier than going to a library. Plus not all libraries have all the lines. Barnes & Noble sell the historicals, and many of the categories can also be found at Target, K-Mart and Walmart.

Authors writing in series...

You’ll see some of this. You may see a two-page genealogy of character names and relationships. Writing in a series allows the development of characters and story lines more than in a stand-alone and there is a bit more room for setting detail. In category romances, you’ll more often see “themes”. This allows multiple authors to write for the one line. One example is the Nascar theme, a very clean line, one hot kiss, average writing.

Betty mentioned some appeal factors to categories—you can get a new book that’s not very expensive, they don’t take a lot of time to read (important to busy women), they are simple, serve as a small “time out” for readers. You can often pick them up at used book sales.

Debbie commented that a number of famous authors started in categories, like Nora Roberts, Debbie Macomber, etc. These are often collectibles now, although the internet has made it easier to get copies of those no longer in print. Often, the publisher will also offer reissues of the popular authors—combining two categories by the same or different authors in one volume.

How do different libraries make collection decisions for this subgenre? How did we choose the books for this assignment?

Jo Burnell mentioned her library has plans to increase the standing plan; while some libraries, like Geneva, have no standing plan, they order only reviewed titles. This can be a problem for award winning titles that are out of print or unavailable by the time they win a RITA! Cathy Jo mentioned that Harold Washington Library center (CPL's central library) orders everything, but that they often have to weed for space.

Participants chose the books differently—one person took ½ dozen, couldn't read them, went back and chose two more; another person went to a chain book store (their library doesn't stock them) and bought two by sight; one person read the *Romantic Times* and looked for four star review items; another person looked for different category lines; Donna, who works at Oak Park had a hard time because they were all interfiled with other romances so she used a series keyword search. She mentioned the difficulty (that patrons must also face!) of reading the small print. Another participant mentioned going to the collection, picking titles and then checking the Amazon reviews and circulation stats. Several people picked things up at the last meeting in Geneva from the book sale, another person picked the first two involving Italian men and another picked after reading a LJ/Booklist review. Someone asked two romance reading patrons to suggest titles.

Astrid commented that she objects to the sameness of the books in the category

Subgenre, but noticed that many readers like this and are not disappointed by it. That the undemanding nature serves as a stress release. Debbie commented that the lines "Brand" themselves by having similar covers, title art, etc so that readers can recognize them. It also makes it safer for reader suggestions since you know what is in each of the category lines.

Some of the titles might also have been published in multiple countries, since it's easier to translate small books.

Did your category romance fit into another genre?

Several of the category lines are a blend of other genres: Harlequin Intrigue has a mystery element; Silhouette Nocturne has a paranormal edge. The latter is actually a new line, capitalizing on the explosion of readership in this area. Paranormal is so part of the cycle of interest right now.

Are the category lines falling?

Jo, who has experience working at Barnes & Noble, mentioned that Harlequin wanted to

go younger which is why they changed their covers. They also introduced Harlequin Teen which has a paranormal element (ala *Twilight*). Regency categories have mostly moved over to the regular historical romance, so the category historicals have moved into the American west and other time periods.

Nancy mentioned that she noticed a lack of sense of humor—there's more melodrama—there used to be a love & laughter line that was axed. This is an example of Harlequin's business model, they frequently introduce new lines and if they don't show a profit fairly quickly or stop making a profit, the lines are ended. A number of more erotic lines are also being introduced. Some of the Kensington Brava feature man on man sex, but are written for women. There is also a Zane imprint for erotica.

"Bonnet Book" romances are the inspirational line. Many of them are published in the following imprints: Heartsong, Steeplehill, Love Inspired.

Romantica

The Subgenre studied was Romantica. Since this is an evolving genre there are no benchmark authors so participants were asked to read two works from a list of suggested authors or by publishing houses that are publishing in the subgenre.

Debbie opened the discussion by asking whether people had read this subgenre before, if their libraries collected this subgenre, how they were circulating, and what participants thought of the books compared to other subgenres we've read, anything that surprised you?

Linda said she's already read some of the authors because she reads contemporary romances. Karen mentioned she doesn't usually read romantica but that they circulate strongly at her library and that Lora Leigh's marine series hooked her because she's a fan of romances that run in series. Monique noted that the range of experience was wide in the books (which makes it hard to define romantica). [Erotic Reader](#) served as her benchmark; she felt that the acceptance of this subgenre depends on the author. With a good story and good writing the explicit sexual details didn't bother her. Debbie agreed, saying that when done with skill, a writer can get away with more and that when done clumsily the results can be a book that turns readers off.

Cathy and Annabelle asked if anyone had read something they found enjoyable? Christine mentioned she'd read a Susan Johnson novel, *French Kiss*, which resembled chick lit, the characters were engaging; scenes were very graphic, a bit startling but okay; and the vocabulary in this subgenre is different. Debbie commented that the graphic words used by characters to describe the sex scenes can seem harsh and for herself she's not a fan of graphic language in any genre of fiction. If you don't use the language from day to day it's jarring when you come across it. This may also be generational as it may not bother younger readers.

Someone mentioned they'd read a Robin Schone's *Scandalous Lovers* which was historical and although there was a lot of sex, it was tasteful and elegant which contrasted to the contemporary romantica novels. Sue had read an Erin McCarthy book and compared it to the mystery genre—if the graphic details (whether sex or violence) get in the way of the story it creates a block for the reader; it's better if more detail is left to the imagination because readers like to create some images for themselves. There were also several books that had a paranormal element which has been previously mentioned as a trend for romance.

Karen read a Jess Michael book where the plot was trying to catch a date rape drug, and the environment was darker. Kimberly mentioned that she thought there were currently more issue driven books in the romance genre overall, that as women's roles have changed so the books have changed—you are more likely to see single mothers as characters.

Joanna mentioned that in comparing her historical and her contemporary (Lora Leigh's *Only Pleasure*) she thought that the contemporary seemed to work better, because of the anachronisms in the former. The latter was part of a series, which is all about a club for ménage a trois and she was surprised that the author's writing did actually carry it through the graphic descriptions and scenes.

Monique mentioned that Lori Foster has done a huge range of romance, from Harlequin to contemporary to her current romantica title, so even within an author's bibliography a readers' advisor has to know the titles.

Origins of Romantica

You could consider forerunners to romantica in some of the banned erotic novels of the early 20th century like *Delta of Venus* by Anis Nin Lady, Henry Miller's novels, the writings of Marquis De Sade and Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Although several participants felt these were more literary erotica and the level of writing was far higher than some of the romantica sub-genre.

Bodice rippers from the seventies and eighties often had forced sex. Rape happened because of a misunderstanding, the female character was in the wrong place at the wrong time, but the coercion still makes them dicey. Although different from romantica since the sex is consensual, the intensity of the scenes can be considered a sort of forerunner.

Erotica vs. Romantica vs. Pornography

Annabelle mentioned that when searching for her books, she used erotic fiction as her search term and other participants confirmed this. (As an interesting sidenote, when I plugged this in to the Chicago Public Library catalog as an experiment, I got hits for Laurel Hamilton, Phillip Roth, Susan Minot and the novel *Lolita*. Which tells me that LC has a very broad classification for this area)

You do need some tag to search for the books, but libraries can be uncomfortable with the erotic tag. Debbie wondered if this is because if it looks like the materials weren't intentional, you can't get into trouble? Nicole thought that they should be labeled erotica so that patrons can find them and that you can explain to patrons that it is an adult collection and that patrons have different tastes in fiction.

Kim asked, what's the difference between romantica and porn? Debbie said in her opinion it's a print medium vs. a visual one. Kim said she considered herself liberal and tolerant, but the Zane books pushed her over the edge. The books about the APF—a sorority in college contained street language, no plot, characters are in their late teens and early 20s and contains a lot of sex and violence. Lynne theorized that it's not pornography if women have the power, like the APF novels, and are not mere objects.

Terri asked about how to explain to patrons why you have it in the library and many participants agreed that if books are a high demand item, then we will buy them despite personal doubts about content. An example is the memoir, *My Bloody Life*. Tukie added that we purchase detailed books about serial killers both fiction and nonfiction that are very dark, so it's all subjective as to what people think is acceptable. It seems that patrons are less likely to object to violent content than sexual content. Libraries that participate in MyMediaMall have video. Astrid said she was surprised that they had it, since this is a visual product that could be more questionable than the print product.

Time can also play a part, as Henry Miller used to be unacceptable and he's now a noted literary figure. Madonna's book was also once very controversial.

Appeal of Romantica

"The Line" is something that all readers' advisors and collection development staff have to deal with in all genres. The comfort level for recommending or purchasing materials, even beyond our comfort level, attempting to understand appeal for things we don't like ourselves. So what is the appeal of romantica?

It's something forbidden, an escape fantasy, a safe way to explore these desires. The women are always in control in the books, so it's less threatening than male pornography. The environment can be an appeal, something out of the ordinary—a brothel, a sex club—that interests readers.

But is it a Romance?

- Happy Ending? Michelle said one of her books did not have it but that it was part of a series with a paranormal triangle relationship. Joanna mentioned that her contemporary with the ménage a trios had two characters pair off in the end. Debbie said that this means something different for this subgenre, that it's more a happy ending "for now" than forever.
- Love Story the most important facet? Many of the books seemed more about the sex, some on same plane as other sub-genres. But if you don't value this as

having to be the most important part of the book, it seems what love story is there will satisfy the reader.

- Romance being challenged by person or problem? Mixed responses on this as well. Some yes, some no.
- Told from the point of view of both lovers? Yes...but since there are often multiple lovers, it can be hard to narrow main characters at first.
- Miscommunication as conflict? Some works didn't seem to have a conflict. Susan mentioned her book had the husband "the beast" who just kept them apart.

Escapist Reading? YES!. This seems to be a strong appeal and characteristic for this subgenre.

- Emotional Appeal? It really depended if you connected with the story or not.

Trudy said her books seemed more sex than appeal. Writers aren't writing for that, but it can strike readers that way. Lynne thought hers was more emotional—two boys escape from being sex slaves in Turkey (*Simply Sexual* by Kate Pierce). One is heterosexual the other deals with being homosexual in a culture that considers it a crime. Linda read Emma Holly's *Cooking Up A Storm*. A new chef to a B&B heats things up—but it seemed one sex encounter after another—multiple sexual relationships—didn't feel emotional. Robin Schone's *Scandalous Lovers* takes place in a Victorian era with older characters, but still didn't allow enough character development; this one of the complaints about erotica/romantica. This may stem from the fact that these books are less about emotional arousal than sexual arousal. It is important to many readers whether characters care about each other and whether the writing makes the reader feel it.

- Fast read? Less complex style? Yes.
- Strong females? Yes females seem to be in control in most of the books.
- Can be read for other things, settings, costumes etc? This is a mixed because it depends on which authors, some write in setting details, others only a backdrop. Although it does introduce new words, sex toys, and other things a reader may not be familiar with.
- Participant in the character's lives? Yes, but more physical than emotional.

Most of the participants seemed to feel that these were not romances, if you remove the sex many of the stories can't be told.

Tuki also said that many of the books showed characters using condoms; that safe sex seemed to be an aspect which is healthy; a number of participants noted that their books did not have safe sex practices, maybe it was part of the forbidden, taboo aspect of the books.

Inspirational Romance

In opening the discussion, Debbie W. mentioned that she had personally struggled with which benchmark to choose, but that she'd had a number of conversations with patrons that pointed to *Redeeming Love* by Francine Rivers being an important book. It was mentioned in a work by Lynn Neal called *Romancing God: Women and Inspirational Fiction* which had an entire chapter on the novel. Neal interviewed readers about why they read what they read to discover appeal factors for inspirational fiction. A quote from Neal's work said that all evangelical romances discuss a journey to "remarkable love" from troubled marriage or courtship, where the romantic love is superseded by the spiritual love for God. Usually the courtship is very traditional. The book is a very interesting insight into this subgenre, but you may have to interlibrary loan the item.

Yet the benchmark depicts a relationship that does not seem traditional--the main character, Angel, is a prostitute. But it is a life she was forced into through poverty and abduction, which mitigates her profession. Some of the participants discussed the fact that the beginning of the book was difficult due to the rape of Angel as a child, although no details were given. Some participants felt that her sinfulness was reiterated too much "pounded at you throughout the book," and this made the novel dark. But as a counter, the Bible itself is dark in many parts and grim)

Redeeming Love is twelve years old and still a best-seller. Readers are still commenting on the book on Amazon with no bad reviews. Debbie noted that the book has a lot of psychology - that the reader has to go over and over Angel's state of mind. Nicole thought that this fleshing out of her psychology seemed more realistic, that her issues are dealt with rather than glossed over as in many other romances. Her lack of morality or grace and low self-esteem serve as a tool to have the character do more analysis of self and inner thinking that helps guide her spiritually. The book was originally written for Bantam as a straight romance then rewritten afterwards for Multnomah with profanities removed and the voice of God goes from being vague to more concrete and there is a more explicit message of salvation.

The book also was about trust—trusting and being disappointed—Angel can't really experience trust until she converts and feels healed spiritually. In the later editions of the book there were study questions on other themes such as resignation, redemption—which indicates that the book is being used for church book groups.

Debbie asked what other books and authors participants had read and how they compared to the benchmark and also whether they fit into other sub-genres besides inspirational.

Christine had read *All Through the Night* by Davis Bunn with Janette Oke and felt the romance was very tenuous, more a suspense. It was about God, but more of a thriller.

Monique thought her book was a Love Inspired Suspense. (Title?) There was a romance, but it was more about the mystery. The spiritual part was helping the character to convert—which seemed understandable after being shot at constantly!

Linda read a Dee Henderson book, *Danger in the Shadows* which is a prequel to the O'Malley series—a family of seven orphans who adopted one another. Her book concerned an author in witness protection from a dangerous kidnapper who tries not to fall in love with a famous retired athlete. Linda felt it was romantic suspense as well as inspirational and was well written.

Another Dee Henderson book that was read was *God's Gift* which was a more evangelical romance about a missionary home on medical leave who heals the heart of a woman who was sending him care packages. The female character is depicted as strong, a career woman while the hero is a carpenter. The religious factor impacts the sexuality factor—that human/erotic love puts you in touch with God's love.

Evangelical romances have a few common elements: the authority of the bible; cosmic view of history; importance of witnessing; living a spiritually transformed life. The authors themselves advertise “this is the way that I live” which is attractive to readers who want the reinforcement. The readers take them very seriously; on Amazon, readers jumped all over a negative review someone wrote. The books can be disconcerting to non-Christian readers, if you don't belong to the “club” you can't be valued, so it doesn't feel inclusive.

Annabelle commented that many inspirational romance readers like a clean story with not a lot of overt detail—*Redeeming Love* is not clean. This brought up that several of the participants had gotten copies through ILL that were the original version (with profanities, etc.) and had been surprised by the subject and language.

Even for the expunged version a few readers were appalled by Angel and her life. But the publisher gives a warning in the edition that this is based on a bible story and is told not for prurient reasons but to prove the depths of God's love. This illustrates a tension in the genre about sex details. As mentioned in Neal's book there are Christian readers who feel very different about what constitutes appropriate detail and still allows the book to retain its moral status.

Trudy thought that an appeal factor of the sub-genre is that there's a message in the books - that they are trying to teach something. Debbie mentioned that some believe people who read this sub-genre are incorporating the books, using them for confirmation of their own beliefs. The books mirror the reader's values. One of the main challenges is that the sometimes evangelical nature of the books, “level of preachiness” can pull you out of the story. Knowing which authors are at what level can be difficult.

Astrid thought the main message for the books seems to be teaching praying as a life skill and giving yourself up to the Lord. In the books she read, love for God is more important and misunderstandings between characters are related to religious difficulty

which is solved when the character converts. She felt that Lori Wick's books seem to have characters that basically say, I can't have a relationship with you until you convert.

Cathy Jo read a Mennonite book, *Fields of Grace* by Sawyer which used the theme of faith being tested—while migrating to America, Lillian's husband dies then her youngest son dies and she is forced to marry to enter the U.S. Cathy Jo felt the story line seemed kind of horrendous and that the constant talking of faith slowed the plot. Debbie mentioned that inspirational romances often do handle characters in difficult circumstances because to the audience that is what faith is all about.

Between Sundays by Karen Kingsbury is one of the few stories set in a modern big city. A foster child is convinced that a disillusioned quarterback is his real father against the protests of his foster mother. Astrid also read a Karen Kingsbury novel, *Just Beyond the Clouds* and felt uneasy about it; the novel concerned Down Syndrome adults and the evangelical message was overwhelming—in one scene they had all the DS adults praying on their knees in a restaurant and it just felt wrong.

Place Called Home by Lori Wick is set in a Victorian era as an heiress who escapes from an evil man who stands to inherit if she dies. It has gender issues as part of the story; the character is feisty and obedience becomes an issue.

Englischer by Beverley Lewis is an Amish romance and also concerns obedience. A young woman promises her father to give up her art for six months only to become involved with an outsider who comes to town. The conflict is with authority (rather than between the characters) Fear of ostracism by God, family, and social group.

Another Lewis title read was *Covenant* which was a post-WWII story—a nice depiction of Amish sect with engaging characters. Although the participant felt it was a poor choice since it was more a coming of age story than a romance. Girls are only sixteen in some of the Amish/Mennonite stories, which can make it hard for an adult to read those romances. More like a depiction of a sociological group. These type of titles are often referred to a "Bonnet Romances" due to characters clothing and are often not real romances.

Monique mentioned she picked *When Calls the Heart* by Janette Oke and she selected it for the different time period and setting—it's about the Canadian Mounties. One reader mentioned she was turned off the genre by Oke's books, due to constant interruptions that bail you out of the story. Stacey felt her characters were more "stay in your place", not feisty, more subdued.

Debbie asked the participants to think back to the contemporary benchmark we read—*Dream a Little Dream* by Susan Elizabeth Phillips. At that time we considered it vaguely Christian, but in reading these titles we can see the real difference. The element of religion might have seemed more vivid because it was unexpected.

Inspirational Romance in Library Collections

Do people find the books on their own or ask? Participants commented that readers ask for authors or series versus a particular title and that they are often older readers. So readers have their own sources and know authors already; using Christian newsletters, friends at church, Christian bookstores and websites—*Romantic Times* has an inspirational section.

Do we label them or are they in a separate area? Most collections have them with romance collection although a few leave them in fiction collection. They can be difficult to catalog, are they women's fiction? Romance? Librarians often have to make the call on title by title basis, although some publishing houses have imprints for inspirational. What can make this more difficult is that there are a number of writers who used to write straight romance who switched to inspirational like Debbie Macomber, Robin Hatcher, and Karen Kingsbury. Having authors who wrote both can complicate recommendations to the reader.

Debbie mentioned that Christian romance is low on the totem pole although it makes money. It's not studied, it's swept under the rug which might have something to do with the fact that the Christian publishing world is male dominated and the books are not often reviewed by mainstream. This also reflects what happens in romance publishing in general. This can make it hard to purchase if it's not being reviewed!

When we are discussing inspirational romance, are we limiting it to evangelical? When we limit our romance inspirational displays to evangelical writers, we are limiting the reader's definition.

The List

- Happy Ending? Yes
- Love story between hero & heroine the most important part? No, not for inspirational.
- Romance Conflict? Yes
- Miscommunication? Yes
- Told from point of view of hero & heroine? Yes.
- Escapist? There was some disagreement on this because many participants felt that readers read to validate themselves, not to escape. But for some readers this is an unconscious part of it, they are reading for romance, so for them it is an escape.
- Emotional appeal—yes
- Fast read—less complex style? Most of the books are accessible and easy to follow, but the benchmark was allegorical which made it more complicated and it was 600 pages!
- Strong female characters? Yes.
- Read for other details? Yes—the religion.
- Participate in character's lives? Yes.

Time Travel/Science Fiction Romance

Debbie began the meeting by reminding everyone that the next meeting is paranormal. Since this is such a big sub-genre, Debbie wanted to brainstorm for ideas on how to approach it. The final two meetings will be Romantic Suspense and then Women's Fiction to look at how it compares to the romance genre and then a final wrap up about how the sub-genres fit together.

The SF subgenre was discussed first, Debbie said that the first time she did a romance genre study, SF and Time travel were discussed separately, but now publishing trends have changed, each has shrunk and they sort of fit—Debbie asked participants to think about how they fit together as we discuss them both.

Science Fiction Sub-Genre

Debbie asked if there were any SF readers in the room and asked how the romance version compared to straight SF they were reading. It was generally agreed that the romance SF was less “what if” and more stories in an exotic locale. There is less world building than in straight SF. The author Catherine Asaro is an exception—she's more dramatic; her books seem more like space opera which is generally known as a “drama in space”. Karen mentioned that Asaro's books are more character driven which she thinks is really necessary for romantic SF. Yet these books seem more SF than Jayne Ann Krentz's novels written under the Jayne Castle pseudonym.

Nicole read *After Dark* by Jayne Ann Krentz. It was set on a different planet, but she felt the psychic powers in the book and the ghosts made it seem more paranormal than SF. Her first three set in St. Helen's (*Amaryllis*, *Zinnia*, *Orchid*) read more like SF. It was agreed that to someone who doesn't read SF generally these “fluffy SF” (also referred to as “SF cozy”) novels might appeal. They might appeal to readers who really want a romance, but set in another world.

Kimberly read *Winter Tide* by Linnea Sinclair and thinks she would have classified it as fantasy. It had lots of magic, she thinks of SF as more “nuts and bolts” Debbie said she reads this author often and mentioned that her books usually contain an adventure/quest and the romantic elements are important but can be overshadowed by the adventure elements. Astrid also read a Linnea Sinclair book, *Down Home Zombie Blues*. It was set in Florida but characters went back and forth to spaceship. Astrid felt it borrowed heavily from *Battlestar Galactica*. Cathy Jo read *Hope's Folly* by Sinclair and also agreed it borrowed from *Star Wars* but she liked the characters and the fact that she could pick up a book even in the middle of the series and read it. It featured a May/Dec romance, had likable characters, but was more space opera than SF. *Finders Keepers* by Sinclair also borrowed themes from *Star Wars*. It was also written in 1st person which is unusual, because you only get the story from the female point of view—romance novels are usually in 3rd person.

Donna read *Close Encounters: An Alien Affair* by Katherine Allred which also had a Star Wars type setting and in 1st person. It had genetically modified humans, a lot of plot taking place telepathically since the hero/heroine don't speak each others language.

Paranormal romances, many are in 1st person, so authors are trying to broach this with publishers and audiences. Mainstream SF readers are not the audience for this subgenre which is predictable and familiar. Karen mentioned that she thought that romance readers who mostly read contemporaries are probably not the audience either since the SF elements may seem too strange to them. These books are ideal for the reader who wants something a little different. Like Harlequin readers who like the books in different settings—lots are in foreign countries.

Many participants who had read Asaro books also mentioned that there were less sex scenes or that they were more restrained. Tuki read *Fire Opal* by Catherine Asaro and thought there was little resistance for the characters to overcome. There was tension with the villagers but not between the characters. There was also an element of magic—powers to heal; no sexual heat. It seemed atypical overall. This was also true of some of the other books. *Yours Until Dawn* by Teresa Medeiros had more tension than sex.

Stacey mentioned that as she read her books she often felt more like SF with romance and added that she often stopped to ask if the relationship was the most important aspect of the novel since there was so much extra with all the world building. She had read *Shades of Dark* by Linnea Sinclair.

So who do these books appeal to? It was discussed that the books did have happy endings, but you couldn't picture men reading them or serious SF readers. There's more romance/emotion/relationship (again the space opera theme) and females are often the main character. Many men want books with males as the central character that they can identify with. There is a sort of continuum; male readers will accept a female central character if she occupies a role a male character would. An example of this is the Honor Harrington series, which offers a character who is tough. Astrid also thinks there are men—like her husband—who won't read female authors.

Cathy Jo mentioned that hard SF is really driven by story, detail, or theme not the characters. Joyce mentioned that many of the sequels in these series are secondary characters having relationships. Debbie thought that this is because so much effort goes into world building that the author wants to use the setting repeatedly, so you see more series.

This subgenre would appeal to romance readers who like adventure, but safer. Like romantic suspense, this sub-genre has action, conspiracy, threat. The pacing is faster, relationships are an issue (who do you trust?).

Sarah compared the subgenre to the historical subgenre—a different setting, an escape from the contemporary world, she liked the historical settings better, but not women's

roles in them. With SF this opens up a bit more, there are also some parallels, like the Honor Harrington series mirroring Horatio Hornblower.

We worked through the list of romance characteristics to determine whether this subgenre meets the criterion.

- Happy endings? Yes.
- Love story the most important facet? Some yes, some no. Debbie said to look at last page to see what's mentioned for a final judgment.
- Challenged by person or problem? Yes.
- Told through point of view of both? Yes. (although some exceptions like *Wintertide*)
- Miscommunication? Yes
- Escapist? Yes, although it depends if you enjoy the subgenre.
- Emotional Appeal? Yes
- Fast read? Yes. As mentioned, these books are SF cozy, so they are not as complex. Christine mentioned that if you jump into a series from the middle. It can be slower because you have to absorb the details. Maybe one of the ways authors get around this is by using familiar scenes (Star Wars, Battlestar Galactica, etc.) These books are also longer (300 pgs average) because there is world building and readers need more detail.
- Strong female character? Yes for the most part.
- Read for detail? Yes. The exotic world offers something else to read for outside the romance. There is usually history, clothing, community life and some harder details like guns, experiments, etc.
- Participate in characters' emotional life? Yes although there can be exceptions, Karen read one with a female robot!

On the whole, most of the above list must work to have it be considered a romance. Also ask yourself, would you give it to a romance reader? You can also ask them if they like SF TV shows, romantic suspense, or enjoy long series. If you are nervous about giving it to readers, you can also do it as a display, where readers can sell themselves.

Time Travel Sub-genre

Debbie asked participants to think about whether this sub-genre is more similar to historicals because many of the settings take place in historical settings. Like the SF sub-genre, it requires world building. There is also a loss of control since many times the time portals, disappear and reappear with no notice and characters many not know why they have been sent back in time. There is usually an element of magic in the mechanism in how characters are transferred. Usually it is always going backward in time, although there are exceptions like Nora Robert's two novels *Time Was* and *Times Change* in which the heroes come from the future to the present and feel more like SF.

The book *Accidental Goddess* by Linnea Sinclair is also an exception since the character goes far into the future instead of past. Waking up several hundred years later, the heroine finds she's being worshipped as a goddess! Kimberly, who mentioned

that she usually doesn't like historical romances, actually enjoyed this one because the anachronisms were funny and there was an element of humor. Debbie described many of these books as "Fish out of Water" stories. The humor is from characters out of their element. This separates it from the SF subgenre, which is usually more serious.

Debbie mentioned that one older title that is a standard is Jude Devereaux's *Knight in Shining Armor*. This is more typical versus *Outlander* by Diana Gabaldon which was more a saga with romantic elements—in addition to an unresolved ending spanning over several books, the first book contained a female character that wasn't very likeable and an anal rape scene. The yearning in the book mostly added the romantic element (like the *Twilight* books).

In a typical time travel romance you get the best of both worlds, a historical setting and contemporary characters. The relationship between the male/female characters is even. Readers relate, what would they do stuck in a time not their own? A sort of costume drama—but you can still be a modern woman, smart and liberated.

Is it believable, once you get past the huge element of time travel itself? There is a bit of world building, so there's a fantasy element to it.

Many people read Sandra Hill's time travel romances involving Vikings like *Rough and Ready* (group of Special Forces land in Viking woman's sanctuary) and *Viking Heat* in which a psychologist time travels back to Viking era. The latter didn't seem to be funny as her brother died and she winds up with the SEALs because she's goaded into joining the military. This is a very long running series of Viking time travel and some readers felt that the series had gone stale after so many books. Astrid commented that the heroes seemed kind of dim and the humor in the books very broad, like television sitcom humor, very over-the-top.

When I Fall in Love by Lynn Kurland. The time travel for the heroine was supposed to be 800 years but the book has a regency feel. The historical detail felt like wallpaper versus real detail and like a SF romance it allows plot, but without depth. The book had low sensuality (a hallmark of her work?) which might make it ideal for readers not wanting a lot of sexual detail.

Monique read a Constance O'Day-Flannery novel. O'Day is known for her time travel romances. Monique felt the book went easier because she was familiar with the area and time period.

Debbie thought that on this note, we should really go through the list and think about whether this subgenre meets the criterion.

- Happy ending? Yes.
- Love story the most important factor? Yes

- Challenges? Yes. This is the biggest piece for this subgenre since it involves trying to get back to a time period for one of the characters and one character will have to give up their own time period to stay with the other.
- POV both? Yes.
- Miscommunication? Yes.
- Escapist? Yes
- Emotional Appeal? Yes.
- Strong Female? Yes.
- Read for detail? Yes; there's the contrast between the two settings

Paranormal Romance

Debbie opened the meeting by discussing how the paranormal subgenre used to be smaller and was discussed with the fantasy subgenre; now it's so big it is its own subgenre.. This shows a distinct publishing trend; previously the trend had been towards mystery/suspense.

Linda noticed that a great many of the paranormal romances have vampires; although a few participants had found books that did not have vampires as the main characters. But even within that niche in the subgenre, participants noticed there were differences in how the vampires were treated, the "rules" they had to follow (i.e. if they could go out in sunlight) and the mythology the authors developed around them to build the world the books take place in.

NPR did a story called "For Love of Do-Good Vampires: A Bloody Book List". It discusses the whole evolution of the vampire genre and how its surge in popularity often mirrors times when there is societal fear or tension. Monique mentioned that one of the attractions to the paranormal subgenre is that you have immortal beings that are not hurt by everyday things. Sarah thought that the vampire stories are important during times of economic distress—when you live a thousand years, one financial depression is nothing; you have beings impervious to the economic swings.

Jo said she did some research when the Twilight series came out and realized they were popular for both adults and teens and that the vampire craze had been around for ages.

Very often they are romances with a dark twist, like the show "Dark Shadows", the creatures are tortured, difficult to love and the reader becomes part of that journey.

Karen stated that she usually avoids these types of romances because she doesn't like horror, but that she has enjoyed the books she'd read because of the suspense and the world-building, which reminds her of the elements of the fantasy genre that she enjoys.

Monique had the opposite reaction, she doesn't like long series. She chose *Single White Vampire* by Lynsay Sands, where a vampire romance novelist is forced to go to a

romance convention. It was a modern setting, the writing much lighter and funnier.

Kimberly noted an insight she'd gotten from reading *Beyond Heaving Bosoms* by Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan. We no longer have a "big thing" about female virginity, so now the female character is subsumed into the male's vampire world; taken from a human state to a vampire one.

Michelle remarked that for readers having trouble suspending disbelief, the vampire hero makes some of those questions easier to accept.

Debbie then asked the participants to discuss the benchmark book, *Dark Lover* by J.R. Ward and how paranormals subgenre circulated in everyone's library.

Sarah thought the book seemed extreme, somewhat serious. Monique noticed that this cover and many of the paranormal covers had black in them or dark colors; they aren't very popular at her library and she wondered if the sub-genre had "jumped the shark."

Her second book *Huntress* was an anthology and her reaction to it was "ick". She didn't like the characters and felt the stories were harder to read because they were so short. Linda noticed all the characters in *Dark Lover* book were tattooed and thought it seemed kind of disgusting.

Karen said the book did circulate at her library and that most of the romances patrons wanted to read were darker. Astrid said they didn't own *Dark Lover* and Barbara mentioned that it did circulate at her library. Debbie wondered if these types of books get big circulation and if people who liked humor would read these. Cathy Jo mentioned that at CPL these series are extremely popular and that they are constantly replacing authors. She thought there was a correlation with how much romantica circulated at your location.

Jo thinks that the trend is waning; that the older series with name recognition will be okay but that the market is saturated for new authors. Debbie asked what people thought the next big trend would be and Jo responded she thought it would be romantica since it's closely related in style/tone/sexual content to paranormal romances.

Linda mentioned that she had ordered some paranormals for the paperback collection since patrons tend to browse more in that collection and might pick up authors they wouldn't seek out.

Debbie said that at Geneva the paranormals are circulating, but not as much, so they buy them, but no multiple copies. Terri does the same thing at her library (not buying multiples) because patrons only ask for big name authors.

Rose works in outreach with older patrons who don't like dark, supernatural material or explicit sex in their books. Trudy indicated that Lora Leigh's books circulate as well as Sherilyn Kenyon, but patrons don't ask for them, perhaps due to embarrassment. Other

participants echoed these circulation trends. Nancy noticed that people seemed to discover authors then read the entire series—people who love them *really* love them.

Michelle's library (Glen Ellyn) is increasing their order—when she was in Barnes and Noble she noticed that the paranormals were in a prominent position. Is it popularity or trying to get rid of excess stock?

Astrid read in *PW* about a Christian vampire novel coming out. There is also a zombie romance, *Breathers* by S.G Browne. There are also chick lit type paranormals, where the heroine has to deal with her life issues, romance, and the supernatural. Richelle Mead writes the Georgina Kincaid series, beginning with *Succubus Blues* and she also writes a YA series the Vampire Academy. Another author like this is Mary Janice Davidson who writes the Queen Betsy series beginning with *Undead and Unwed*. After a discussion about Katie MacAlister, *You Slay Me* it was agreed that these humorous Dragon/Demon books are also chick lit.

There are also titles like the Alex Winner *Souless* (The Parasol Protectorate) which are sort of steampunk/paranormal/romance blends. Set in an alternative Victorian England, where vampires and werewolves are the norm, the heroine teams up with the werewolf hero to figure out why vampires are disappearing and the mystery of her "soulless" state.

Sarah thought that her title by Brenda Joyce (Masters of Time series) had much more about relationships, rather than the other paranormal romances.

Some participants found *Dark Lover* very anti-feminist; reminding them of early romance where the only legitimate way to be "taken" was to be raped. Is the vampire romance a PC version of this? The women in the book also needed to be taken care of by the men; in *Lover Eternal* the second book in the series this is even more evident and the female is less strong. Jo mentioned that in *Dark Lover* when the heroine almost gets raped by the psychopathic character, Billy Riddle, she knew the book would be dark. She also thought this served as a manipulative device as to why the female character needs to be protected. If she's in enough danger it's okay to restrain her. Sarah thought that her attraction to the hero, right after being raped seemed unbelievable, that she recovered too fast. Rose thought that the book seemed almost from a male perspective—crude, no courtship. There is also the factor of all the men living together, the Brotherhood, almost seems gang-like, plus the character Zsadista, who is marred by having been a blood slave seems creepy. Does the series get darker? The heroes are dark, but honorable in their own way, just needing to be redeemed by the right woman.

Appeal Factors for the subgenre

- Bad Boy—many of the supernatural heroes are "mad, bad, and dangerous to know"
- More physical than romantic (similar to romantica)

- Community, world-building aspect (on J.R. Ward's site there are interviews with the characters, short episodes)

These books don't work as horror because there's no creepiness, they are dark and complicated, but not scary. Monique went to a paranormal romance website and found 37 subcategories. Would men read them?

What else we read

Linda liked her second book by Susan Sizemore, *I Hunger For You*, much better. It was lighter. A vampire hunter and a vampire posing as a SWAT leader team up.

There is also the Lynda Hilburn series with Kismet Knight—a vampire psychologist. It's written in first person, plus it's a series, so can it be a true romance?

Jayne Castle's *Obsidian Prey* (Ghost Hunters, Book 6) Set in another world with psychic powers, its tone is lighter. Hero and heroine team up to discover why the rare amethyst ruin they discovered has turned so dangerous. This brought up, how we distinguish between science fiction and paranormal? It depends where the emphasis lays. This series although set on another planet is very similar to earth and the technologies are not very complex—more emphasis on the psychic powers.\

Seducing Mr. Darcy by Gwen Creedy. More chick lit, the heroine is transported into *Pride & Prejudice*, has sex with Mr. Darcy, and changes the course of the book. It has a very "sex in the city" attitude.

Kiss of Crimson by This version of the vampire lore has them as crashed aliens. Heroine saves bullet ridden hero and is plunged into his underworld and the fight to save humanity.

Ghostwalkers Series by Christine Feehan. Psychic soldiers break free after being experimented on. Drake Sisters series also by Christine Feehan, Seven sisters who are witches star in a book each.

Dark Destiny by Christine Feehan (Carpathian series) A female vampire "broken" by her parents murders, this entry in the series is the first to have a female Carpathian as heroine. Another is *Dark Slayer*, about a female Carpathian who is literally torn apart, regenerated, then brings down the dark mage who tried to destroy her. There didn't seem to be much tension in the book between the characters, more tension between heroine and the rest of the Carpathians.

Storm of Shadows by Christina Dodd. She usually writes historical. The books are still dark, but more fun, although reviewer reaction on Amazon is mixed. At PLA, when Cathy Jo saw her in a panel at a program, the author stated that she sees no end in sight to the paranormal trend.

Blood Oath by Christopher Farnsworth (the president's vampire battles supernatural

forces that would destroy the country) and Ryan Brown's *Play Dead* (zombie football team brought back to life for the big game) are more men's books. Someone who doesn't like horror might also enjoy these; supernatural element without the scare.

Touched by Light by Catherine Spangler is about a superhuman species originating from Atlantis called the Sentinels. The heroine is emotionally damaged by rape and the hero must convince her he's her missing half as well as investigate why sentinels are disappearing. There is lots of world-building, but the question is the quest more important or the relationship, is it closer to dark fantasy?

Wicked Lovely by Melissa Marr is a YA novel that blends urban fantasy/paranormal/romance. A girl who can see Faerie (which is dangerous for humans) is courted by the Faerie King who is convinced she is his Queen. This probably falls into the Twilight category. The relationship is strung out among several books, not the most important factor in each single book.

A common element in this subgenre is the threat of death. People who enjoy contemporary or historical romance might not want this, but people who read romantic suspense might enjoy this subgenre since the majority of the novels (like romantic suspense) have a contemporary setting.

The List:

- HEA? Yes, for the most part, eternally for the undead.
- Love Story the most important part? Yes, although like fantasy/science fiction
- there is a lot of world building and usually another story going, especially if it's a series book.
- Challenge? Yes! This is an important factor, since getting past the blood drinking or body shifting is usually something the characters have to overcome.
- POV both? Yes.
- Miscommunication? Yes.
- Escapist? Yes.
- Emotional Appeal? Yes.
- Strong female character? Yes.
- Read for other details? Yes, lots of world building.
- Participant in character's lives? Yes.

Romantic Suspense

What is Romantic Suspense? (Definition that Tuki & Nancy gave us)

This is a genre with roots both in Romance and Suspense. Elements from Mystery, Espionage, Thrillers, and Suspense combine with Romance to create a story that does not fit comfortably in any of the genres it draws from. The best examples blend Romance and Suspense in the right proportion (50/50) so that it needs its own genre.

Romantic Suspense is a balanced hybrid of two powerful genres, the mystery story and the romance novel so intertwined that neither can be removed without fundamental damage to both plot and theme.

History

Romantic Suspense has its roots in the Gothic tradition. In the early novels with the social structure being very much male dominated and the women did not have much of a voice, they were portrayed as being weak and very much at the mercy of the men. With the advent Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, a new feminist gothic was created—the role of the heroine was elevated from supporting character (victim) to center stage in her own rite of passage plot. Through history, as the status of women changed, so her presence was strengthened.

Contemporary authors now show women who have more power than they did in previous years but the threat is now in the form of physical, mental or emotional abuse and rape.

Characteristics of Romantic Suspense

Pacing is fast and dialogue is witty.

Tone/Mood--sense of edginess pervades the book. Even if the heroine doesn't know danger is heading her way the readers do and they are fearful for the heroine.

Heroine--Identification with the protagonist and her plight, the desire to unravel the mystery behind events as well as the building suspense, make these books page turners. The characteristics of the heroine have changed over the years. In earlier years the role of the heroine was played out more in a supporting role with the hero being the main protagonist. In modern or contemporary novels the heroine is now seen to be more the protagonist and the stronger character in the story.

POV--The central character is the heroine. The story needs to be told from her point of view. Readers identify and sympathize with her and they want to be assured of her survival in the end. Point of view of the threatened heroine dominates the story. Heroines are resourceful and independent and their survival depends upon their own skill.

Hero--For books written in the 1980's there were typically two men the heroine had to choose between. One was the villain and the other the hero. In many cases the reader could not distinguish between the two till the end. In the more recent books the heroine is more independent and typically there's only one man sometimes with questionable characteristics so that in some cases he might appear as a villain. In the end however he exhibits the traits of a true hero. Some authors portray their heroes as bad boys that must overcome their shortcomings to redeem themselves to the heroine.

Frame/Context--The authors in this sub genre employ many different frames and settings. While most of them have contemporary settings, others like Amanda Quick use

historical settings and details. Authors like Iris Johansen add the paranormal elements. Other authors employ interesting details like rare textiles, paintings, art forgery etc. and while these details add interest to the novel the main focus is still on the romance and suspense. Many readers choose Romantic Suspense for the added enjoyment of the exotic locales selected by the authors as a setting for their novels. Elizabeth Lowell writes of East Asia, Australia, and Western U.S. Elizabeth Adler sets her novels in European resorts and vacation locales. The atmosphere intensified by the isolation and foreign setting further adds to the suspense. Also elements of architecture—castles, abbeys, and mansions. Hostile natural elements, in the form of storms, wild forests, or supernatural elements. A sense of uneasiness prevails even in the quieter moments and affects the tone of these book.

Explicitness--The most dramatic change in this genre over the years has been the increase in the explicitness of the sex, violence, and strong language. The authors of the more recent books are generally from the Romance genre, Robards, Brown, and Johansen. These authors have added much suspense to their novels so they cannot be considered Romance writers by fans of that subgenre. Yet because of the inclusion of romance they do not fall into the Suspense genre either. Loyalists have followed these authors along from the Romance to the Suspense category. So, to be true to their fans, these authors keep their strong romantic elements with the inclusion of suspense to their writings. The romantic elements remain as intense and important as the suspense. If the strong romantic relationship is missing, the book probably fits in the suspense category.

Resolution--Readers of Romantic Suspense expect a satisfactory resolution. They expect to feel their heroine's plight, they anticipate experiencing a range of emotions but their expectation is that the stories are wrapped up with a successful conclusion with the main characters safe and the romance leading to a committed relationship.

The Benchmark that everyone read was *The Witness* by Sandra Brown, chosen because it seemed most true to the definition. Opinion on this and the book varied. Many participants felt like there was a lot going on, multiple points of view—the hero, the villains, secondary characters, and lots of subplots.

Things essential to the story, upon closer examination, didn't hold up. As an example, after she had her baby in Colorado and was working all alone, who took care of the child?! The secondary characters were caricatures.

The castration scene was too violent and seemed out of scale to the sense of tension it was supposed to create. Is the romance credible in light of the fact that the heroine is in so much danger? Military or police centered could expect some violence – it's the fact that these are regular people having to confront danger and violence. The romance helps balance out the violence for some readers– the rollercoaster ride can be satisfying.

Pacing was an issue – suspense is quick paced, the romantic elements slowed down the story. The suspense plot was so strong that you might be tempted to skip the romance. Brown's straight romances also include some shock value – either violence or explicit sex. So be aware when recommending her, although Sue McCallum mentioned being astounded when her homebound delivery readers who say they don't want sex or violence ask for Sandra Brown!?

Many people didn't find the main character, Kendall likeable. The lying business was unpleasant. She was supposed to be a hotshot lawyer, but she didn't seem that smart. The character felt stereotypical and the book seemed dated – the women's issues seemed especially dated.

Kendall was a good mother; the addition of a child to the plot which means the female protagonist cannot leave without becoming an abandoning mother figure. FBI agent John McGrath offers protection, that seemed to be the appeal between the characters. There were also issues of trust on both sides, some readers believed it and some didn't. It had a clearly defined insurmountable problem (a white supremacist organization out to silence Kendall, Kendall afraid to testify in a case they take her child) which also seems to be a characteristic in these books.

Why is Sandra Brown so popular – what is her appeal? She offers easy plots in a television story style – episodic. She usually has a gotcha moment that pulls you in, like in *The Chill Factor* "The grave was substandard."

How romantic suspense is cataloged—fiction, suspense, romance—depends on the author and who you think the audience is. Is there a lot of crossover? Yes for romance readers who will often read in another genre as long as there is a romantic element. Long standing fans of Brown, Iris Johansen, Catherine Coulter and other authors who crossed over into suspense have mostly followed and the authors gain new readers. Coulter has gotten even further from romance in her new books. The J.D. Robb books are not romances, but have a romantic element in them. Nora Roberts is a good author to use for helping readers because from which series people like, you can figure out what they want.

The covers of these books are often generic, they look almost like the legal thrillers which probably helps them appeal to men. They are often published more in hardcover while the books that are more romance than suspense come out in paperback.

Some authors, Suzanne Brockmann for example, still have romance up and center of the books. Even with the suspense in more military themed books, like her Troubleshooters series, there is a strong sense of community, men on honor and action. There is a trend now for more series rather than stand-alones.

Some of the other authors read were:

Final Scream by Lisa Jackson. The setting was a small town ranch. Mysterious fire and

murders from 17 years ago start again. Updated version of her original novel *Intimacies*, written in 1995.

Smoke and Mirrors by Jayne Ann Krentz. A friend is murdered and there seems to be a connection to a past murder. It had more detail and was better written than the benchmark. She also writes some romantic suspense as .Amanda Quick, books with historical settings and feel more like a gothics.

Shameless by Karen Robards also had a regency setting and is the least in a trilogy of three sisters. Fast paced, not as much detail, but plot holes weren't noticeable. Pursuit by Robards. A young lawyer becomes involved in a high stakes scandal ending in what might have been a murder of the First Lady and is forced to go on the lam with a Secret Service agent. This has a contemporary setting, self-described as an "erotic political thriller."

Deadly Pleasures by Brenda Joyce. Focus is on the historical detail about the clothes and homes; suspense is slight, really more of a mystery, second in a series to focus on the character Francesca Cahill. Romance is slight—very restrained, just kissing.

Black Hills by Nora Roberts. South Dakota wildlife biologist and PI, once childhood sweethearts, team up to track a serial killer. Strong characters, romance and suspense well integrated. *Blue Smoke* by Roberts. Arson investigator is stalked by a killer who murders all her boyfriends. Good heroine, smart and logical; good romance/suspense balance; likeable characters; interesting details.

Blood Vines by Erica Spindler. After her mother dies, heroine discovers a past that includes repressed memories from childhood and a decades old kidnapping. Things is past drive current day plot. Details about winemaking, story holds together well.

Cry Wolf by Tami Hoag. After blowing a case and losing her job, public prosecutor returns home to find more murder and mayhem. Sadism-erotic stuff, book has scene with villain threatening her sexually. More like romantica. Brava tends to be the publisher of these books.

Blue Smoke and Murder by Elizabeth Lowell. Part of the series featuring the St. Kilda Consulting, a security firm, heroine suspects her aunt's death a murder connected to art. Details on auctions and art, descriptions of landscape of Arizona. Heroine has emotional baggage of a polygamist father and hero grew up surrounded by women and wants only an estrogen free zone. Yet attraction is immediate.

The Widow by Carla Neggers. Heroine is investigating murder of her husband years before on their honeymoon. Similar to Barbara Michaels, kind of gothic, felt a little like a cozy—small town, small cast of characters, the violence is off-screen. Not as much a sense of peril.

Last Breath by Mariah Stewart. The third in a trilogy, an archeologist teams up with FBI agent to hunt down missing artifacts that cause the death of those who possess them. About 60/40 with the suspense and romance;

One of Those Malibu Nights by Elizabeth Adler. Mystery of warring spouses who both claim to have been followed, rich & famous PI, beautiful heroine, saving a movie star. Her novels tend to feature the rich and famous.

Indivisible by Kristen Heitzman. Christian romantic suspense. Investigations of animal mutilations, by Police Chief struggling to remain sober and heroine, his old flame who does a prayer vine. Lots of violence for a Christian novel, animals sewn together.

Many of the books had dogs in peril, a trend? It was theorized, that like children, they are sweet and vulnerable, add to sense of peril. Many participants mentioned getting false hits while searching for romantic suspense. Bad cataloging? Publisher markets books that are not really suspense to capture more readers?

The List

- HEA? Yes. The suspense is resolved, lovers united
- Love story most important? For this subgenre, it's 50/50.
- Challenge to the romance? Yes.
- Both Lovers POV? Yes.
- Miscommunication? Yes.
- Escapist? Yes.
- Emotional Appeal? Yes, more than straight suspense because you are emotionally vested in characters which creates anxiety for them.
- Fast read? Yes.
- Strong Female? Yes,
- Read for other details? Yes.
- Participate in character's lives? Yes.

Women's Fiction

For today's study we each read two women's fiction books and we are going to cover the following topics:

Going down the list of Romance characteristics, how are the books we read this time similar?

How are they different?

Pretending it's a genre--are there subgenres for Women's Fiction? Are some of the subgenres like Romance subgenres?

The List

HEA--not all the books ended Happily Ever After. Lynne mentioned that her book *Tryin' to Sleep in the Bed You Made* by Virginia DeBerry had what she described as an

upbeat ending; two female characters--one poor, one privileged--changes places by the end of the book. The characters go through something and by the end things are getting better. Tuki said that in her books, *On Mystic Lake* by Kristin Hannah and *Bread Alone* by Judith Hendricks, both women had to restart their lives after the husbands left them for younger women. One had a happy ending and one had a more complex, less pat ending. Nancy thought the books seemed a little more true to life than romance novels' resolution, but not always HEA. Susan felt that the characters evolved more, worked through issues, and took more control of their life than they do in romance novels.

Love story the most important factor? Most people felt that the love story wasn't the most important factor in their books. The focus seemed to be more on personal growth. Characters stand on their own two feet--happiness inside. Writers like Danielle Steel always have a romance in their book, but it's still not the main focus. In Steel's book *Leap of Faith*, the character starts her courtship with the bad guy.

POV from both characters--allowed to participate in both characters' lives? Women's Fiction seldom has the male character POV, because it's about the woman's inner growth so the focus is on her. The two books *On Mystic Lake* and *Passions of Chelsea Kane* by Barbara Delinsky did have some male POV. It's interesting to note that both these authors started their writing careers as Romance writers then moved to broader audience, meanwhile Danielle Steel never wrote romances. For Chick lit authors like Jennifer Wiener or Sophie Kinsella, there is no male viewpoint. (although Weiner's book *Best Friends Forever* did have some male point of view).

Romance challenged? Yes, but it's usually the romance itself, not the individuals. For instance, in *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult, the marriage is challenged by the parents taking differing sides to the question of the child's right to refuse organ donation to her sister. In the book *Trudi read Summer Kitchen* by Lisa Wingate, the marriage is challenged by the husband's incarceration. So the question becomes, is a marriage a romance? Many people agreed it was, although not always the main challenge in the book.

Miscommunication? Yes but not what we expect in a romance. In Women's Fiction the miscommunication can be parent/child or just lack of communication. In *The Secret Between Us* by Delinsky, a lie drives the story and the truth resolves it too easily, lets characters off. .

Emotional Appeal? Yes, the empowerment and the struggles the women face create an emotional appeal for readers. Linda read *While My Sister Sleeps* by Delinsky. In the novel a family death changes family dynamics, the women were better developed. Could be a tug because it's not a HEA, there is more at stake. Are there were too many problems which can create a soap opera element, with things piled on characters. This is an important factor in the issue driven books to see how characters deal and cope with it; an attempt to find heroes and find catharsis.

Fast read? There were a number of authors like Alice Hoffman, Anne Tyler that had a literary edge, so the books varied in how easy they were to read. Also some books had more subplots and characters.

Escapist? Depends on how close it is to your problems/issues. If it's not your problem it can seem more escapist.

Strong female characters? Yes. One of the reason we identify with the books is they are empowering. Women sort through difficult situations and find resolution. Interesting irony--we identify with strong characters and not problems but enjoy how they deal with them. But many of these characters have money, are upper class--where would they be without it?

Can be read for other details? Yes some for humor, some for setting, for clothes, glamour.

**Emotional Appeal and Strong Female characters seem the most important characteristics of this list.

Differences from romance genre

In romances all problems are cured by love, whereas in Women's Fiction love is not a cure, you still have to work through your problems. Not HEA, satisfying or open ending. Many in Hardcover for first printing, and stay in Hardcover longer.

Character driven books or issue driven. Could be used for book discussion.

The age ranges of characters seem to vary more.

More substance, less fluffy. Although some readers disagreed over this one. Rose who read *Something Borrowed* by Giffin and *Remember Me?* by Kinsella thought these were fluffy.

Situations are more realistic.

The majority of books are set in contemporary times and books 10-15 years old seemed dated. There are exceptions, like Elizabeth Berg; this is similar to the family sagas where even though it starts in historical settings, it eventually works its way to the present by the end of the book. This might be because it's easier to see women solving their own problems in more modern times.

Level of sexuality in women's fiction not as explicit.

Main theme is women overcoming crisis. (from Rebecca V's book)

Frequently see male authors writing in this genre, Nicholas Sparks, Chris Bohjalian, Nicholas Evans, etc.

Subgenres

Rebecca Vnuk's breakdown:

Humor--Particularly in Chick Lit, humorous women's fiction seems to be outpacing the more serious stuff these days. It covers all kinds of storylines, and even crosses generations.

Chick Lit grows up---In the inevitable progression of Chick Lit, we've largely moved away from Single in the City books to young brides, young mothers, young divorcees

and even young widows.

Issue-Driven Women's Fiction - heavier books about heavy issues. Your family problems will seem like NOTHING after reading these books, which may be the key to their appeal.

Ensemble Fiction -Books about sisters. Books about college friends. Books about reading groups. Books about coworkers. People really like to read these because they can easily find a character within the group that they can identify with, or they can see their friends in.

Genre Study Breakdown:

Lighter-- chick lit, mum lit, divorce lit, all related to age.

Issue books--medical, ripped from the headline, child in peril

Multicultural. Amy Tan, Terri McMillan, Monica Ali

Nonfiction. Eat Pray Love.

Historical. Reliable Wife, Red Tent

GLTG. Jeanette Winterson, for example

Minutes prepared by Joanna Hazelden