

Carleton University  
Winter 2021  
Department of English

ENGL 5900Y: Selected Topic in English Studies/  
WGST 5902C: Pleasure, Politics, Pop Culture

## **Writing/Reading Desire: The Pleasures, Politics, and Poetics of Contemporary Popular Romance**

Online Seminars: Mondays 8:30-11:30 a.m. EST on Zoom

Location: online, cuLearn

Format: Blended

Instructor: **Prof. Brian Johnson**  
Email: [brian.johnson@carleton.ca](mailto:brian.johnson@carleton.ca)

Prof. Johnson's Office Hours: by appointment, Big Blue Button

### **Course Description**

Love stories that promise “happily ever after” are a billion dollar creative industry; they make up approximately one third of the fiction market. Yet, romance still struggles for legitimacy, routinely finding itself dismissed and mocked in the popular imagination as “escapist” “formulaic” “trash,” the risible epitome of “women’s culture.” Romance writers, readers, and scholars take a very different view. As early as 1984, literary sociologist Janice Radway’s historic feminist psychoanalytic account of the semiotics and affective economy of women’s fantasy in *Reading the Romance* crystalized scholarly debate over the (anti-?)feminist implications of mainstream romance. This debate continues to unfold in places like *The Journal of Popular Romance Studies* and has been further stimulated by the genre’s often highly politicized transformation of romantic fantasy since the 1960s by feminist and LGBTQ romance writers themselves. The new privacy and convenience afforded by eReaders and the ebook self-publishing revolution of the 2000s also played a major role in diversifying the genre from within, opening romance conventions of to the innovations of increasingly professionalized fanfic and slash writers and their audiences, a development that is especially evident in the recent burgeoning of “m/m romance” (romances about gay men written primarily by and for straight women) as a bankable subgenre. Meanwhile, parallel debates over the whiteness of romance have been unfolding for some time within the industry itself. The history of the industry’s internal struggle with the genre’s racism came spectacularly to the fore in December 2019 when romance novelist and industry anti-racism activist Courtney Milan was formally censured for “ethics violations” by the Board of Directors of the Romance Writers of America for daring to call out the use of racist tropes in another RWA member’s novel. The headline-making implosion of the RWA that followed from the ensuing twitter backlash of #IStandWithCourtney brings the contested field of the genre’s institutional setting into stark relief.

The goal of this seminar will be to explore this terrain from a variety of critical perspectives with an eye to better understanding what is at stake in this evolving genre's ever-expanding repertoire of fantasies of love, sex, desire, pleasure, and satisfaction across increasingly unstable normative boundaries of gender, sexuality, race, class, age, and ability. Although popular romance has a long history--whose genre precursors and early landmarks include the works of Jane Austen, the Brontës, Georgette Heyer, and Mary Stewart—the course will not principally be a genre history. Instead, we will focus on reading popular romance novels of the last thirty years, focusing especially on mass market fiction like Harlequin and Avon historicals; m/m and gay romances by both mainstream and independent publishers; and the extraordinarily diverse archive of self-published ebook romances available online. Our approach to investigating these texts will be eclectic. It will include readings in cultural studies, psychoanalysis, structuralism and genre theory, literary sociology, fan studies, feminist and gender studies, queer theory, affect theory, and critical race studies. These readings will be set in conversation with weekly case studies of romances, authors, issues, and subgenres, including many mixed genre romances that reinvent the tropes of the Gothic, science fiction, horror, and crime fiction. Throughout, our seminars will be animated by an inquiry into the pleasures, politics, and poetics of this incredibly diverse, exciting, and often contradictory cultural field.

## Technical Requirements for Online Learning

The following is a list of minimum recommendations. For program-specific requirements, please see the corresponding section below. For additional information see: <https://carleton.ca/its/help-centre/faq-technical-specs-for-new-students/>

Requirement	Windows-based PC	Apple Mac/macOS-based PC
Operating System	Windows 10	macOS 10.15
Web Browser	Google Chrome, Firefox, Edge	Google Chrome or Firefox
Processor	Intel Core i5 based model	Intel Core i5 based model
RAM/Memory	4 GB, Min	4 GB
Storage	Minimum 5 GB available space	Minimum 5 GB available space
Screen Resolution	1024 x 768	1024 x 768
Connectivity	WiFi or Ethernet; available USB port(s) to accommodate recommended accessories	WiFi or Ethernet; available USB port(s) to accommodate recommended accessories
Security	Antivirus	Antivirus
Internet Speed	Min. 5 Mbps download	Min. 5 Mbps download
Accessories	Speakers, Microphone or Headphones, Video Camera, Keyboard	Speakers, Microphone or Headphones, Video Camera, Keyboard

## Choosing What You Read:

### An Important Heads Up About the Reading List and Seminar Format

This seminar has a somewhat unconventional approach to weekly readings and presentations. All seminar members will read a minimum of 10 romance novels total over the duration of the course (about 1 per week, with exceptions for weeks that focus more on secondary materials). However—and this is the unconventional part—we will not all be reading the same novels. During each regular week of the class, there will be a choice of 4 or 5 novels to read. Each of these books will be presented on and discussed during our online meeting; you will be responsible for reading ONE of them. (You are of course welcome to read more if you have time and the desire!) I will circulate an online sign-up sheet for the entire reading list early in the term, and I will ask you all to sign up to read 1 novel per week, as well as signing up to be the presenter for 3 of these. This will ensure that every novel has a presenter and that a total of 4 seminar members (including the presenter and myself) will have read and be able to comment on each book. Each regular class meeting will be run like a conference panel in which the class will hear short seminar presentations on the week's 4 (occasionally 5) novels. Afterwards, we will have a general discussion of the presentations, readings, and topic for that week, with each seminar member bringing their own reading experience to bear on that week's discussion. This format ensures that we will cover a lot of ground; each presenter will always have at least 2 respondents (plus me) with which to discuss their novel; and hopefully we will all come away from the course with a broad as well as nuanced understanding of this incredibly diverse, exciting, and understudied field of cultural production.

### A Word About Challenging Content

Popular Romance overlaps with erotica and can often be a challenging genre because of its focus on intimacy, power, fantasy, kink, and transgressive themes. The required readings include sexually explicit material as well as potentially triggering material, including representations of homophobia, transphobia, sexual violence, and abuse.

### Inclusivity Statement

I am committed to fostering an environment for learning that is inclusive for everyone regardless of gender identity, gender expression, sex, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, ability, age, class etc. All students in the class, the instructor, and any guests should be treated with respect during all interactions. It is my hope that our class will support diversity of experience, thought, and perspective.

Please feel free to contact me via email, anonymously, or in person to let me know about any experiences you have had related to this class that have made you feel uncomfortable. I will continually strive to create inclusive learning environments and would therefore appreciate your support and feedback. If you would prefer to talk to someone other than myself, please feel free to contact our Chair, Dr. Janice Schroeder <JaniceSchroeder@cunet.carleton.ca>. Additionally, I welcome emails or synchronous “in person” communications to let me know your preferred name or pronoun.

## Texts

The course will be using online editions of all of the course texts. Students are responsible for purchasing digital versions of the primary texts from amazon.ca or chapters.indigo.ca. Some primary texts are also available at smashwords.com. Additional secondary sources will be posted to our cuLearn page as needed throughout the term. Remember that you are not required to read all of these. You will only have to purchase 10 of the following primary texts. I would suggest waiting to purchase any of them until you have signed up for the readings..

Loretta Chase, *Lord of Scoundrels*  
 Lynsay Sands, *To Marry a Scottish Laird*  
 Courtney Milan, *The Duchess War*  
 Scarlett Peckham, *The Rakess*  
 Beverly Jenkins, *Rebel*  
 Alyssa Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*  
 Kennedy Ryan, *Long Shot*  
 Adriana Herrera, *American Love Story*  
 Sarina Bowen and Elle Kennedy, *Him*  
 Annabeth Albert, *At Attention*  
 Cat Sebastien, *The Lawrence Browne Affair*  
 Garrett Leigh, *Misfits*  
 Jayce Ellis, *Learned Behaviors*  
 James Earl Hardy, *B-Boy Blues*  
 Alexis Hall, *Glitterland*  
 Marshall Thornton, *Femme*  
 Rick R. Reed, *Caregiver*  
 K. E. Lane, *And Playing the Role of Herself*  
 Olivia Waite, *The Care and Feeding of Waspish Widows*  
 Junauda Petrus, *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them*  
 Jennie Davids, *New Ink on Life*  
 E. E. Ottoman, *Documenting Light*  
 Jay Northcote, *Starting From Scratch*  
 Rebekah Weatherspoon, *Xeni*  
 Alex Beecroft, *Blue Steel Chain*  
 Deidre Knight, *Butterfly Tattoo*  
 Keira Andrews, *Kidnapped By the Pirate*  
 Josh Lanyon, *Death of a Pirate King*  
 K. J. Charles, *An Unnatural Vice*  
 Wendy Hudson, *Mine to Keep*  
 Catherine Friend, *The Copper Egg*  
 Lee Welch, *Salt Magic, Skin Magic*  
 T. J. Klune, *Wolfsong*  
 Kresley Cole, *A Hunger Like No Other*  
 Michelle M. Pillow, *His Metal Maiden*  
 Talia Hibbert, *Get a Life, Chloe Brown*  
 Lyssa Kay Adams, *The Bromance Book Club*  
 Casey McQuiston, *Red, White & Royal Blue*  
 Olivia Dade, *Spoiler Alert*

## Course Calendar

Jan 11 – Introduction to the class

### Part I: Romance as Genre

Jan 18 – The Romance and Formula Fiction (asynchronous session; no regular meeting)

- See Assignment 1 for details

Jan 25 – Theorizing Romance: The Pleasures and Politics of Fantasy

- Secondary Readings TBA

Feb 1 – Fantasy, Feminism, and Historical Romance

- Loretta Chase, *Lord of Scoundrels*
- Lynsay Sands, *To Marry a Scottish Laird*
- Courtney Milan, *The Duchess War*
- Scarlett Peckham, *The Rakes*

Feb 8 – Romance and Race

- Beverly Jenkins, *Rebel*
- Alyssa Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*
- Kennedy Ryan, *Long Shot*
- Adriana Herrera, *American Love Story*

### Winter Break

### Part II: What is Queer Romance?

Feb 22 – Slash and Fan Fic (asynchronous session; no regular meeting)

- See Assignment 2 for details
- Secondary Readings TBA
- Watch: Jill Bearup's History of Fanfiction (7 parts) [https://youtu.be/IAkvQr\\_IVpE](https://youtu.be/IAkvQr_IVpE)
- Archive of Our Own Show and Tell

Mar 1 - M/M and M/M/M Romance

- Lucy Neville, from *Girls who Like Boys Who Like Boys*
- Jonathan Allan, "Towards an Anatomy of the M/M Popular Romance Novel"
- Sarina Bowen and Elle Kennedy, *Him*
- Annabeth Albert, *At Attention*
- Cat Sebastien, *The Lawrence Browne Affair*
- Garrett Leigh, *Misfits*
- Jayce Ellis, *Learned Behaviors*

Mar 8 - M/M Romance and Gay Fiction

- Secondary Readings TBA
- James Earl Hardy, *B-Boy Blues*
- Alexis Hall, *Glitterland*
- Marshall Thornton, *Femme*
- Rick R. Reed, *Caregiver*

Mar 15 - Lesfic and F/F Romance

- Secondary Readings TBA
- K. E. Lane, *And Playing the Role of Herself*
- Olivia Waite, *The Care and Feeding of Waspish Widows*
- Junauda Petrus, *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them*
- Jennie Davids, *New Ink on Life*

Mar 22 - Trans, Bisexual, and Asexual Romance

- Secondary Readings TBA
- E. E. Ottoman, *Documenting Light*
- Jay Northcote, *Starting From Scratch*
- Rebekah Weatherspoon, *Xeni*
- Alex Beecroft, *Blue Steel Chain*
- Deidre Knight, *Butterfly Tattoo*

### Part III: Mixed Genre Romance

Mar 29 - Mixed Genre Romance: Adventure and Mystery Genres: Pirates, Detective, Suspense, and Archaeological Adventure

- Secondary Readings TBA
- Keira Andrews, *Kidnapped By the Pirate*
- Josh Lanyon, *Death of a Pirate King*
- K. J. Charles, *An Unnatural Vice*
- Wendy Hudson, *Mine to Keep*
- Catherine Friend, *The Copper Egg*

Apr 5 - Mixed Genre Romance: Paranormal Transformation: Historical Fantasy, Shifters, Paranormal, Science Fiction, Fantasy

- Secondary Readings TBA
- Lee Welch, *Salt Magic, Skin Magic*
- T. J. Klune, *Wolfsong*
- Kresley Cole, *A Hunger Like No Other*
- Michelle M. Pillow, *His Metal Maiden*

Apr 12 - Contemporary Rom-Coms

- Secondary Readings TBA
- Talia Hibbert, *Get a Life, Chloe Brown*
- Lyssa Kay Adams, *The Bromance Book Club*
- Casey McQuiston, *Red, White & Royal Blue*
- Olivia Dade, *Spoiler Alert*

## Evaluation & Assignments

Due Date	Assignment	Value
ongoing	Participation	15%
Jan 18	Assignment 1: The Romance Formula	5%
Feb 22	Assignment 2: Slash and Fan Fic Show and Tell	5%
sign up	3 short presentation papers (4-5 pp.; 15% each)	45%
April 19	Essay	30%

**FINAL GRADES** Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.

**PLAGIARISM** The University Senate defines plagiarism as “presenting, whether intentionally or not, the ideas, expression of ideas or work of others as one’s own.” This can include:

- reproducing or paraphrasing portions of someone else’s published or unpublished material, regardless of the source, and presenting these as one’s own without proper citation or reference to the original source;
- submitting a take-home examination, essay, laboratory report or other assignment written, in whole or in part, by someone else;
- using ideas or direct, verbatim quotations, or paraphrased material, concepts or ideas without appropriate acknowledgment in any academic assignment;
- using another’s data or research findings;
- failing to acknowledge sources through the use of proper citations when using another’s works and/or failing to use quotation marks;
- handing in substantially the same piece of work for academic credit more than once without prior written permission of the course instructor in which the submission occurs.

Plagiarism is a form of intellectual theft. It is a serious offence that cannot be resolved directly with the course’s instructor. The Associate Deans of the Faculty conduct a rigorous investigation, including an interview with the student, when an instructor suspects a piece of work has been plagiarized. Penalties are not trivial. They can include failure of the assignment, failure of the entire course, or suspension from a program. For more information please go to: <https://carleton.ca/registrar/academic-integrity/>

**FORMATTING AND CITATION** Papers should be typed/printed double-spaced using a 12 pt Times font or equivalent with a 1” margin on all sides of the page. Also, remember to keep backup copies of your papers. Please use [MLA \(Modern Language Association\) documentation style](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_style_introduction.html). For examples, see: [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research\\_and\\_citation/mla\\_style/mla\\_style\\_introduction.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_style_introduction.html).

**LATE PENALTIES** Because this is a seminar course, your classmates are relying on you to present and share your work on time. Late submissions or no-shows for presentations will result in a late penalty or (in the case of presentation no-shows) a grade of 0 for the assignment. If you require additional time to complete the final essay, please get in touch with me about that; the deadline for the final paper is more flexible than those for the other term assignments.

## Detailed Descriptions of Assignments

### Weekly Participation (15%)

- Each week, you are expected to read all of the assigned secondary sources and ONE primary text for which you will have signed up (on three of those weeks you will be the presenter for that text).
- On weeks when you are not a presenter, please have at least a couple of thoughts to share with the class—about the text you have read. This role will be especially appreciated by the presenter for that week, as it will help to advance the discussion of the text they have worked on. Mar 29, Apr 5, Apr 12
- Each week, you are also responsible for reading the very short excerpts (200-250 words) from the novels that you *do not* read. These excerpts will be posted by each book presenter each Friday by 4:00 p.m. in the class discussion forum dedicated to each novel.

- Note that the participation grade applies only to the synchronous meetings; the work you do for the asynchronous meetings on Jan 18 and Feb 22 will be evaluated separately. See Assignments 1 and 2 below.

### Assignment 1: The Romance Formula (5%)

- First, watch Harlequin's short introductory video here: <https://harlequin.submittable.com/submit>
- Then, read the submission guidelines for some of the Harlequin "Category Romance" series (one the same page as the video--click on "more" to show the full guidelines).
- Then, read the Carina Press guidelines "What Carina Editors Want": <https://blog.harlequin.com/what-carina-press-editors-want/>
- Select and read a contemporary romance of roughly 200-250 pages (i.e. *not* a 400-page Historical) published either by Harlequin or Carina Press. Write a 250-300 word summary of the romance plot and characters that identifies the work's tropes, narrative structure, and strategies.
- Share this in the seminar forum by 8:30 a.m. Monday, January 18<sup>th</sup>.
- On Monday morning (during our regular class time), read through all of the other summaries and contribute 2 comments to the new discussion thread that I open that morning.

### Assignment 2: Slash and Fan Fic Show and Tell (5%)

- Watch Jill Bearup's History of Fanfiction (7 parts) [https://youtu.be/lAkvQr\\_IVpE](https://youtu.be/lAkvQr_IVpE)
- Do the secondary readings
- Browse An Archive of Our Own <https://archiveofourown.org/>
- Choose One fanfic or one fanfic category and write a 250-300 word overview that relates its contents to some aspect of one of the week's secondary readings
- Share your overview and one brief representative excerpt from the fanfic (or from one of the fanfics in the category) on the class discussion forum by 8:30 a.m. Monday, February 22<sup>nd</sup>.
- On Monday morning (during our regular class time), read through all of the other posts and contribute 2 comments to the new discussion thread that I open that morning.

### Seminars 1, 2, and 3 (3 x 15% = 45%)

- Sign up to present on THREE primary texts total, ONE for EACH of the following clusters of dates:
  - **Seminar 1: Feb 1, Feb 8, Mar 1**
  - **Seminar 2: Mar 8, Mar 15, Mar 22**
  - **Seminar 3: Mar 29, Apr 5, Apr 12**
- Your job in each presentation is to teach your primary text to the class in a way that will summarize the text's main features (its plot, characters, romance tropes) for those who have not read it, while also advancing a specific reading of the text that is informed by any of the course's secondary readings or by some new secondary reading you wish to bring to the class's attention. Think of it as a very thorough book review with a strong analytic edge.
- Your presentation should be 10-12 minutes in length (4-5 pages or 1000-1250 words). It is fine to speak from notes or to read directly off a script; whichever format works best for you is acceptable.
- Each book will have a dedicated discussion forum in cuLearn. In your book's forum, post an excerpt from your primary text of roughly 200-250 words that epitomizes some aspect



of the novel's style, meaning, or approach to the romance genre by 4:00 p.m. the Friday prior to your presentation. Students who have not signed up to read the novel you are presenting on will be expected to read this excerpt prior to class and it will form a common basis for discussion and comparison during the seminar's discussion period.

- Your grade will be based on the oral presentation during the online seminar; no hard copy of the presentation is required.

**Essay (30%)**

- **Length:** 12-14 pages (3000=3500 words); MLA Style
- **Due:** Apr 19<sup>th</sup>
- Your final paper should be an original, well-informed project on romance. It could be a study of a trope, a text, an author, a particular issue that has emerged from our secondary readings or primary text discussions, a subgenre, a mixed genre, etc.—there are many possibilities. You are also welcome to develop one of your presentations into a longer formal paper if you wish. The essay should have a minimum of 4 secondary sources. I would encourage you to speak with me about your essay idea sometime in mid-to-late March.

## Requests for Academic Accommodation

You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term. For an accommodation request, the processes are as follows:

### **Pregnancy obligation**

Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details, visit the Equity Services website: <https://carleton.ca/equity/contact/form-pregnancy-accommodation/>

### **Religious obligation**

Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details, visit the Equity Services website: <https://carleton.ca/equity/focus/discrimination-harassment/religious-spiritual-observances/>

### **Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**

If you have a documented disability requiring academic accommodations in this course, please contact the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities (PMC) at 613-520-6608 or [pmc@carleton.ca](mailto:pmc@carleton.ca) for a formal evaluation or contact your PMC coordinator to send your instructor your Letter of Accommodation at the beginning of the term. You must also contact the PMC no later than two weeks before the first in-class scheduled test or exam requiring accommodation (if applicable). After requesting accommodation from PMC, meet with your instructor as soon as possible to ensure accommodation arrangements are made. For more details, visit the Paul Menton Centre Website: [carleton.ca/pmc](http://carleton.ca/pmc)

### **Survivors of Sexual Violence**

As a community, Carleton University is committed to maintaining a positive learning, working and living environment where sexual violence will not be tolerated, and its survivors are supported through academic accommodations as per Carleton's Sexual Violence Policy. For more information about the services available at the university and to obtain information about sexual violence and/or support, visit:

<https://carleton.ca/equity/focus/sexual-violence-prevention-survivor-support/>

### **Accommodation for Student Activities**

Carleton University recognizes the substantial benefits, both to the individual student and for the university, that result from a student participating in activities beyond the classroom experience. Reasonable accommodation must be provided to students who compete or perform at the national or international level. Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. <https://carleton.ca/senate/wp-content/uploads/Accommodation-for-Student-Activities-1.pdf>