

ENGL 5900Y / WGST 5902D

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

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Mondays, 8:30-11:30 (WINTER TERM)

Online delivery method: Blended (all online, but with synchronous and asynchronous components)

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 this past December 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 we will glance at genre precursors and early landmarks by 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.

A tentative list of romance authors we will study include: Victoria Holt, Diana Gabaldon, Beverly Jenkins, Cat Sebastian, Tessa Dare, Courtney Milan, Mary Balogh, Loretta Chase, Julia Quinn, Josh Lanyon, Lee Welch, Harper Fox, Casey McQuiston, Taylor Fitzpatrick, Jordan L. Hawk, Alyssa Cole, and Chuck Tingle.