

## Getting Laid, Getting Old, and Getting Fed: The Cultural Resistance of Jennifer Crusie's Romance Heroines

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**Abstract:** The human body is a cultural text, and can be therefore be used to promote or resist various social norms. Jennifer Crusie, who defines herself as a writer of feminist romances, uses the bodies of her heroines to countermand several patriarchal assumptions about femininity. Within the Western patriarchal hegemony women are valued primarily for attractiveness, and the unspoken cultural definition of female beauty is a woman who is, among other things, young, thin, and sexually modest. Crusie, by creating heroines who are older, fatter, and more sexually experienced than the “ideal” woman, yet who are still able to establish their social and romantic worth, illustrates the feminist ideology that women have value and accomplishments beyond the limits of the socially paradigmatic definitions of femininity and beauty. Her novels serve as a feminist parables that reaffirm the inherent normalcy and desirability of an imperfect female body.

**About the Author:** Kyra Kramer is a stay at home parent and freelance academic with a background in medical anthropology and feminist theory. She has co-written an essay about the socio-cultural aspects of the protagonists' bodies in romantic texts, as well as an article about the possibility that Henry VIII's blood type was the root of his reproductive and political troubles. She has also published work on the agency of the Female Gothic heroine. She is currently working on a book about the historical “slut-shaming” of powerful female rulers.

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Jennifer Crusie identifies herself as a feminist author who attempts to communicate the ideals of gender equality via her narratives. As she has explained, she chose to write feminist romances because too few authors were writing the “edgy, angry feminist love

stories I wanted to read” and the “combination of what you love in your romance reading and what you can’t find in your romance reading defines the romance you want to write” (“Emotionally”). Her aim has been for her romantic writings to communicate

what the best romance fiction does: it tells the story that reflects a woman’s reality as it could be and as it often is. It tells her she is not stupid because she’s female, [ . . . ] that she has a right to control over her own life, to children, to vocational fulfillment, to great sex, to a faithful loving partner. It doesn’t promise her she’ll get these things, but it shows her a woman like herself who struggles to attain any and all of these and wins, not because she’s beautiful or young or lucky, but because she works for them. It says that a lot of the “truths” that the different societal ideologies have foisted on her are lies and that she has the right to point and laugh when those ideologies try to limit her. (“Romancing”)

One of the ways in which Crusie contests “a lot of the ‘truths’ that the different societal ideologies have foisted on” her heroines is through her depiction of their bodies. In several of her novels, her heroines find a satisfying romance in spite of the fact they transgress in some way the modern cultural conceptualisation of what is a “desirable” or “beautiful” woman, thereby contesting the cultural ideal of “feminine beauty.” Although there are several other areas in which the bodies of her heroines are consistent with culturally ascribed definition of what is normal or what is beautiful—in that they are white, middle-class heroines who are not transgendered, homosexual, disabled, or disfigured, among other variables—there is at least an attempt by Crusie to stretch the narrow definition of what kind of woman is ‘allowed’ to live happily ever after within the cultural narrative.

The importance of any transgressive depictions of the body should not be underestimated. Feminist anthropologists have long argued that women’s bodies are often subject to unspoken yet forceful cultural restraints that are an attempt to diminish women’s rights and their power in the social network. Although cultural “constructs and bodies are not the same; neither are they separable” (Marks 182). Therefore, the body is often symbolic of larger cultural beliefs and norms, and as such it can be used as a medium for social expression or dissent. Female bodies that do not adhere to the hegemonic social ideals are seen as rebellious, or even as battlegrounds for opposing viewpoints of femininity. While it is true that Crusie’s heroines do not challenge all aspects of the socio-cultural normative body, to write about heroines who are fat, or whose sexuality is active rather than the passive receptacle for male desire, or who are middle aged, does oppose and call into question the hegemonic and patriarchal suppositions of femininity and ‘correct’ gender roles.

Women’s bodies have been historically fictionalized as the abnormal counterparts of normative white, male, heterosexual bodies, and have accordingly been typified as biologically inferior to those of men (Urla and Terry; Tavis; Braidotti; Horn). Women as a whole have been traditionally viewed by Western philosophy, religion, and science as inherently symbolizing the animalistic body, whereas men as a whole have been viewed as representative of the human ability to surmount the needs of the body via elevated mental functions (Goldenberg; Shildrick and Price; Bordo; Grosz; Martin). Just as the body has

been constructed as the negative half of the mind/body dualism, the fleshy hindrance for the mind/soul to overcome, women have likewise been socially and historically equated with the body. Since women are synonymous with the body, and the body has been historically considered as fundamentally negative, from the socio-cultural point of view “women *are* that negativity” (Bordo 5). Feminist theorists have fought vigorously to asseverate women’s physical normalcy and to protest the idea that women are helplessly ruled by biological imperatives. The female body is therefore frequently the locus of attempts to assert women’s inherent equality in feminist writing.

The human body is both naturally and culturally produced, and each body has three distinct points of analysis and perspective (Scheper-Hughes and Lock). These “three bodies” exist synchronously, superimposed on the physical reality of the individual’s body. Each of these three bodies can be used as a means to either dispute or support socio-cultural ideologies.<sup>[1]</sup> While the most obvious body is the individual body, or the embodied self, the human body is also a social body and a political body. The social body is a symbolic representation of culture. The cultural conceptualization of the individual body becomes a cultural text, because socio-cultural “constructions of and about the body are useful in sustaining particular views of society and social relations” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 19). For example, a statement about the attractiveness or unattractiveness of a person’s physical appearance can also be understood as a comment on how well that person embodies cultural beliefs, norms, and ideas. Accordingly, the admiration of an individual’s lean, “fit” body represents the cultural admiration of “discipline” and the relative value ascribed to self-control. The political body is a conceptualization of the way in which governments can regulate, punish, and control the individual body. The political body is created by culture in much the same way as the social body is produced. Culture provides the “codes and social scripts” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 26) that coerce the individual body to conform to “the needs of the social and political order” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 26). One of the most explicit forms of socio-political power over an individual’s body is the power to regulate “sexuality, gender, and reproduction” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 27). Thus, culture defines appropriate “masculine” and “feminine” behaviors, and those definitions are enforced with social policing and/or criminalization.

Since the body exists concurrently as both a natural and a cultural object, it is nearly impossible to examine the individual body independently of the social and political bodies. A person has a certain amount of autonomy, or agency, in regards to their individual body. However, the individual body is so closely intermeshed with the social/political body that it cannot help but represent cultural assumptions. From a cultural perspective, the body is the “terrain where social truths and social contradictions are played out, as well as a locus of personal and social resistance, creativity, and struggle” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 31). Consequently, if the heroine’s individual body differs from the ideal, this can form a subtle but salient part of the feminist architecture of any romantic novel. Any depiction of the heroine’s physical appearance not only describes how the heroine looks, but also contains encoded messages about the cultural value and socio-political freedoms of women.

Within Western cultural paradigms “no female can achieve the status of romantic or sexual ideal without the appropriate body” (Bordo 154). Women who have inappropriate bodies, bodies that do not fit within the ascribed definitions of normal and/or attractive, frequently suffer social penalties as a consequence. Some of the many ways women’s bodies are rendered transgressive, and thus undeserving of romantic fulfillment under

traditional cultural narratives, are when a woman controls her own sexuality (and reproduction), when she gains weight beyond what is ideally allowed, or even when she has grown older. It is these particular socio-cultural contraventions that Crusie has chosen to address in some of her romantic fiction.

As defined by the limitations of hegemony-approved 'correct femininity,' women must balance on a cultural tightrope of socially condoned sexual behavior. Those who have "too much" sexual freedom or "too little" interest in sex face being labeled as either slutty or frigid, appellations that are seldom used to describe men's sexuality. Women who are more sexually active than is sanctioned by the socio-cultural definition of normal female sexual behavior are rarely depicted as the central or long-term love interest of the hero in mainstream entertainment. The hero may have short amorous relationships with "bad girls" but he predominantly falls in love with (and thus commits to) the "good girls." Likewise, women who are overweight are also undervalued and are therefore only rarely depicted as potential long-term sexual partners for the hero. Instead, corpulent women are often the target of physical humor in popular visual media, especially comedies that are aimed at a young, male audience. In this type of comedy the idea of a heavysset woman as a sexual or romantic partner is portrayed as ludicrous, and being forced to interact with an overweight woman is a source of humiliation for the male protagonist. Even if a woman manages to persevere in both socially approved sexual behavior and requisite slenderness, she is nevertheless eventually going to lose the cultural approbation of her body because she will inevitably age. The older female body functions as a text illustrating how sexuality and aging are "social constructs that we interact with simultaneously through our language (which is also our culture) and our bodies" (Marks 182). Women become socially transparent as they age; they are rendered almost invisible in mainstream popular culture and lose much of their ascribed social value as potential romantic/sexual companions (Woodward).

In contrast to the patriarchal narrative, several of Crusie's female protagonists discover they can live and find love unfettered by some of the cultural expectations of how woman's bodies should look and act. They are thus free to be middle-aged, initiate sexual encounters, eschew underwear when it pleases them and eat Krispy Kreme doughnuts. These depictions of the individual bodies of her heroines are an incarnate rebellion against several of the cultural norms that impose an almost unattainable model of ideal womanhood. Simultaneously, the social bodies of the heroines are acting as metaphors for the larger feminist rebellion against the prevailing misogynistic cultural constructs. By freeing the bodies of her heroines from some of the socio-cultural injunctions concerning age, weight, and sexuality, Jennifer Crusie communicates a compelling feminist message of women's empowerment and emancipation from some elements of the hegemonic gender ideology.

This essay will focus on three novels in which the feminist message of patriarchal resistance is conveyed by Crusie's rendering of the female body in a particularly clear way: *Welcome to Temptation* (2000), *Anyone But You* (1996), and *Bet Me* (2004). In these novels the hero's desire for the heroine is, respectively, a repudiation of the accepted cultural beliefs about how a woman may express her erotic appetite, how old a woman can be and still be a sexual being, and how much a woman can weigh and still be desirable.

## Getting Laid

Feminists have long contested the way in which women's sexuality is socio-culturally constructed. *Welcome to Temptation* explores one woman's escape from the limitations placed on female sexuality by cultural expectations. The central female protagonist, Sophie, begins her relationship with the hero, Phin, solely to liberate herself from her sexual angst and recoils from any possibility of love or emotional commitment. It is only as she comes to know Phin better, and begins to trust him not to hurt her emotionally, that she stops seeing him exclusively in terms of the sexual pleasure he can bring her and starts thinking of him as someone with whom she is involved romantically, thus connecting with him emotionally as well as sexually.

When she was still a teenager Sophie learned that, simply because she was female, her sexual behavior could cause her to become the subject of social policing via the use of shame and ridicule. She had tried to earn the approval of a popular boy in her high-school by permitting him to have sex with her. It was her first sexual encounter and she had allowed it because she

wanted to be "in" just once [ . . . ]. Except it was awful, and when I got to school on Monday, everybody knew. And when I went to the cafeteria at lunchtime, his best friend came up and stuck his finger in the pie on my tray and scooped out this big, gloppy cherry and said "Heard you lost this, Sophie." And then everybody laughed. (34)

This form of social policing devastated Sophie emotionally and left her with a lasting fear of falling victim again to a culturally imposed

sexual double standard that endorses different sexual behavior for women and men, whereby women are expected to confine sexual behavior to the context of a committed relationship and men are expected to engage in sexual behavior in all kinds of relationships. (Greene and Faulkner 240)

Her fear fosters an enduring distrust of "town boys." As a result Sophie has restricted her sexual needs to "safe" relationships with boring but acceptable men, represented by her boyfriend/therapist. Therefore, when Sophie first meets Phin she immediately distrusts him because he looked "like every popular town boy who'd ever looked right through her in high school, like every rotten rich kid who'd ever belonged where she hadn't" (22). This fear is compounded by the fact she finds Phin extremely attractive and there is a great deal of sexual tension between them.

When Sophie finds herself in a potentially erotic situation with Phin, she tries to talk herself out of participating in a sex act she really wants. She tells herself that her lust for him is "dumb" and that she is "not this kind of woman" (84). Phin offers to perform oral sex on her, in order to give her pleasure without guilt or responsibility, "an orgasm you don't have to work for" (84) but she insists she would "have to be depraved to say yes to something like that" (85). Instead of placating her with assurances that she would still be a "good girl," Phin tells her that she would be "Wild" (85) and "Reckless" (85) and "*Satisfied*"

(85). The thought of herself as daringly erotic and sexually fulfilled is so exciting that Sophie “arched into him, depraved and abandoned after all” (85). Phin encourages Sophie to release her sexuality without making demands for reciprocity, and gives tacit approval of her potentially “bad girl” behavior. The idea that she could enjoy her sexuality and not suffer social reprisals or condemnation for it is so freeing for her that she is able to have “glorious” (87) multiple orgasms. This is a major turning point in her feelings toward Phin. Instead of reviling him as a town boy who is trying to seduce her in order to humiliate her, she tells him that “I like you after all” (88).

Later, while her body is still in a blissfully post-orgasmic state, she tries to chastise herself for indulging her libido with a man she was unsure of, a man with whom she had no intention of having a relationship, a man who represented many of her insecurities even as he inspired her fantasies. She feels guilty because her sexual exploration “was so wrong of her” (93) but “it had felt so *good*” (93) that she mentally “relived the whole thing all over again, dwelling lavishly on the moments that were particularly perverse and unlike her” (93).

In spite of her intense enjoyment, at this point Sophie still has not entirely shaken off the social norms that insist “good girls” simply do not have sex with gorgeous strangers in order to obtain an orgasm. “Good girls” make love with men they adore, preferably within the bonds of holy matrimony; only “bad girls” fuck men they aren’t committed to. Sophie still has difficulty even imagining herself saying “fuck me” to Phin; it “sounded so unlike her [ . . . ]. Then she thought of the dock. And Phin. And the heat rose again. *Fuck me.* ‘Fuck me,’ she tried out loud. [ . . . ] ‘Fuck me,’ Sophie said again, and went upstairs to practice” (108).

Despite her resolution to have wild, uncommitted sex just for the physical thrill, Sophie fears that it makes her “slutty” (115) and “depraved” (115). From a hegemonic cultural standpoint, Sophie is being a “slut” when she seeks sexual fulfillment and tells Phin to fuck her she is initiating sex and aggressively communicating her sexual needs. She is not passively waiting for Phin to seduce her nor is she being the object of sexual aggression. This transgresses the normative sexual script in which women must be “sexually available but not sexually in charge of themselves” (Wolf, *Promiscuities* 136).

Sophie’s view of her own sexuality has been shaped by patriarchal acculturation, the learned acceptance that masculinity comes with certain privileges and authority which a “feminine” woman must not imitate or usurp. The influential French philosopher Michel Foucault postulated that this socio-cultural “power has not operated primarily by denying sexual expression but by creating the forms that modern sexuality takes” (Sawicki 38). In other words, socially perceived experts on normal or moral sexual behavior, such as biomedical practitioners, scientists, and clergy, establish the “authoritative knowledge” of normal sexuality.<sup>[2]</sup> They create arbitrary definitions of sexual normalcy, and those definitions are then used as a way to control the sexual expression of the individual. Thus, Sophie fears being a “slut” because she has been enculturated to believe sexual freedom is a masculine prerogative and therefore deviant in a woman.

Feminism attempts to reconceptualise what is considered normal female sexuality by challenging the patriarchal authoritative knowledge. Romantic fiction, by expressing sexuality via women’s discourse, can allow women to regain control over their own embodied sexuality. The romance genre provides a setting in which the predominantly female authors may, if they so choose, explore female sexuality and seek to redefine what is

“normal” for women to feel or desire. Crusie asserts in her essay “Romancing Reality: The Power of Romance Fiction to Reinforce and Re-Vision the Real” that many romance novels reposition women

at the center of their own sexuality. Many modern romance writers zero in on the sexual lies women have been told, reversing patriarchal constraints and confirming what women already knew about their sexual identities but that many distrusted because it conflicted with the conventional wisdom that detailed what being a good woman was all about. If romance novels do nothing else, they should earn the respect of feminists for the way they re-vision women’s sexuality, making her a partner in her own satisfaction instead of an object.

Although most feminists maintain that women are the real experts in their own sexual satisfaction, it is also an area of divisiveness in feminist theory. Radical feminists (radical feminism is one of many differing feminist theoretical perspectives, along with libertarian feminism, Marxist feminism, etc. . . .) maintain that all sexuality has been conceptualized through masculine discourse for so long that true female sexuality cannot emerge until all patriarchal customs and sexual practices which objectify women have been dismantled (Sawicki).<sup>[3]</sup> Radical feminist theorists would therefore be likely to reject Crusie’s argument that romantic fiction liberates women’s sexuality on the grounds that it isn’t “real” female sexuality; it is merely a reiteration and rearrangement of masculine sexuality. In contrast, most libertarian feminists, while acknowledging that there is a chauvinistic bias in most socio-cultural sexual expression, tend to view “the release of female sexual energy as more important than the restraint of male sexuality” (Sawicki 35). For libertarian feminists the romantic novel’s depictions of women’s sexual pleasure does not necessarily stem from patriarchal repression, but can instead help women “by generating [women’s] own sexual imagery, by becoming [women’s] own sexual authority, and by thereby repossessing [women’s] own sexual world” (West 129).

Crusie obviously falls into the libertarian feminist camp, maintaining that the sexual depictions in a significant portion of romance novels bolster women’s sexuality by

making it clear that, far from being helpless, asexual beings who must be seduced to respond, many women like sex. A lot. Romance novels spend pages describing women’s sexual pleasure including details that mama never told and patriarchy would be appalled at. (“Romancing”)

Novels about women reclaiming their sexual autonomy “are transgressive inasmuch as they are aggressive, asserting female desire in a culture where female sexuality is viewed as [ . . . ] conjoined with passivity” (Hite 121-22). Writing about women from a feminist perspective or in a woman’s voice is subversive because it “suggests that patriarchal language cannot fully contain and control the female body” (Hite 134). Crusie rejects traditional male-orientated writing and instead writes defiant, feminist romantic “fiction about women who had sex and then didn’t eat arsenic or throw themselves under trains or swim out to the embrace of the sea” (“Romancing”).

In *Welcome to Temptation*, as Sophie's sexual relationship with Phin progresses, she becomes more secure and comfortable in her transgressive behavior. She explains to him that she wants "something exciting and different and depraved" (138), communicating her needs and expecting him to meet them. Sophie tells Phin that their sexual relationship is "like college" (139), and demands that he teach her "something new" (139). Although the role of teacher could be construed as a position of control and authority, Sophie's demand that Phin teach her reverses normative female sexuality because she, not Phin, is negotiating the desired sexual behavior. The act of negotiation makes Sophie sexually assertive, and therefore deviates from the culturally approved female sexual script. Thus, Phin becomes her ally in her investigation of her sexual needs, not her master. Their early sexual relationship also flips the sexual script because Phin is the object (although not a passive object, so it is more egalitarian than the traditional sexual script allows for women) of Sophie's enterprising sexual exploration.

Novels in which a female protagonist does not follow the sexual script, refuses to be the receptacle of male desires, and is instead the active agent of her own sexual satisfaction, are disruptive and potentially feminist because they rebel against cultural norms regarding feminine sexual behavior. Accordingly, one may consider *Welcome to Temptation* to be a feminist novel because the heroine commits feminist acts: she contests passivity and actively seeks sexual fulfillment.<sup>[4]</sup>

Crusie is well aware that the liberation of her heroine's body, i.e. the freedom of her protagonist to be sexual and still be a woman who is beloved and respected, is a crucial component of feminist writing in the romance genre. All of her romances have heroines who are either sexually emancipated or learning how to be so. Even if a Crusie heroine requires assistance from the hero to fulfill her sexual potential, he does not "rescue" her from her sexual inhibitions nor does he use the heroine to fortify his ego: she is never a conquest. As Crusie explained in her essay "Glee and Sympathy":

My sex scenes—and my romance novels—are about determined women who go after what they need and get it, which is why I think they're a feminist act. Naomi Wolf once said that men called women who liked sex "sluts," but that was okay because "we need sluts for the revolution." That's what I'm doing, that's my mission in life, I'm writing sluts for the revolution. I'm very proud.

Sophie is therefore representing an aspect of the feminist revolution when she begins to actively reject the cultural stereotypes that insist men will use women's bodies and then socially punish them for their sexual openness. Tired of being a prisoner of the potential shame that could be inflicted on her by a sexist social ethos, she decides that her fear of being used as a sex object was

the same thought she'd been having for fifteen years without any insight or growth, it was the thought that had led her into two years of mind-numbing security with Brandon, it was the thought that had kept her from having the kind of wickedly abandoned sex she'd been having since she'd met Phin. It was, in short, nonproductive. (147)



Eventually their relationship evolves past the purely physical and Sophie begins to care about Phin emotionally and trust him. She then starts to reciprocate sexually by offering to try to fulfill some of his fantasies. Their relationship thus becomes one of mutuality and equality, within which both feel free to express their sexuality without shame or pain, demonstrating the untruth of the socio-cultural belief that “bad girls” can never be respected or loved.

By the end of the book, Crusie has integrated all three aspects of the body in support of women’s sexual freedom. As an individual Sophie has achieved fulfilling sex and obtained Phin’s love, while her social body is rewarded with cultural validation when Phin asks her to marry him and even his previously hostile mother supports his choice. Finally, her political body literally becomes part of the body politic: Sophie decides to run for mayor. Not only has she avoided being punished by the establishment for her sexual liberation, she will likely gain access to the governmental power structure. She therefore secures love, social status, and a career as a result of her sexual renaissance.

On the surface, the novel appears to be about an individual woman learning to enjoy her own sexuality; however, Sophie’s body is also a social body and thus *embodies* the larger cultural milieu. Although the misogynistic social bias insists that women who enjoy their sexuality “too much” are sluts, Sophie is validated and rewarded for being a slut, not punished. Her individual body may remain within the hegemonic ideal (she is white, able-bodied, heterosexual, not overweight, etc.), but Crusie does this to isolate a variable in terms of her social and political bodies, so that her refusal to obey the sexual script exemplifies women’s resistance to the double standard more generally. Therefore, when Sophie successfully embraces unsanctioned sexual behavior, it symbolizes the *possibility* of all women’s successful cultural nonconformity, even though it addresses only one aspect of that nonconformity.

## Getting Old

The way in which a woman’s body is socially policed changes as she ages. Young women are called sluts if they have autonomy over their own sexuality, whereas older women are culturally denied control over their sexuality inasmuch as they are stripped of their eroticism. An older woman is culturally constructed as asexual: the older the woman, the less she is thought of as a sexual or romantic figure. The older female is supposed to willingly relegate herself to the background, emerging only in the context of a motherly role. The way the aging female body is socio-culturally conceptualised is therefore a feminist issue (Woodward; Gibson). Simply to write a novel, especially a romance novel, with a female protagonist who is in midlife is transgressive, considering that mainstream culture appears to want “to erase the older female body from view” (Woodward 163).

Although several of Crusie’s novels touch on the issue of age, it is only in one of Crusie’s earlier novels, *Anyone But You* (1996), that the heroine’s age is central to the plot and forms the barrier between the protagonists which must be removed before emotional satisfaction can be achieved.<sup>[5]</sup> This can be considered a feminist text because the forty-year-old heroine, Nina, in asserting her own worth and attractiveness as an individual, rebels against the social norms that devalue women as they age.

Alex, the hero of *Anyone But You*, is described as a “tall, blond, broad-shouldered and boyishly good-looking” (41) doctor. Nina initially rejects even the idea of a romantic or erotic attachment to him, in spite of her desire for his body and her enjoyment of his company, for entirely socio-cultural reasons. She thinks that if she

started dating him or, dear God, sleeping with him—she swallowed at the thought— people would say she was in her second childhood. People would look at them on the street and wonder what he saw in her. Guy [her ex-husband] would sneer. Her mother would roll her eyes. His friends would make jokes about Oedipus Alex [ . . . ] her body was forty years old. The whole idea was impossible. (55)

Alex, in addition to being ten years younger than Nina, has typically dated young women who are considered highly desirable. Why would he chose the forty-year-old Nina when he has beautiful women in their twenties competing for his affection? Nina confides her worries to her best friend, saying

“[ . . . ] I’m *visibly* older than he is, and it’s only going to get worse. And there’s my body.” She stopped and swallowed. “Everything’s lower and chunkier than it used to be. You should see the women he dates. They’re young and beautiful and—”she made a face—“taut and perky, the whole *Playboy* bit. And you want me to flash him a body that has twenty more years on it than the ones he’s used to? There’s a limit to how long I can hold in my stomach.” (120)

During the course of the story it is Nina, not Alex, who has to come to terms with the fact her body is alluring even though it is no longer firm and her breasts are beginning to droop. Alex always finds her desirable, but Nina cannot believe that he is not negatively influenced by the social norms that insist only youth is beautiful. Nina, not Alex, is the one who struggles to overcome the socio-cultural message that women must be young in order to be loved. Nina can perform feminist acts such as leaving a loveless marriage and restarting her career, but she has not overcome the social conditioning that leads her to believe that she is not “young enough” to be worthy of a handsome younger man. Alex’s approval isn’t sufficient to change her mind: Nina needs to find her own sense of romantic worth.

Although Nina is not yet an “old” woman, at forty years old she is approaching the menopausal stage. For women the transition from middle age to old age “has long been underwritten by the biological dividing line between the reproductive and post-reproductive years, with the symbolic date of older age for women understood as coinciding with menopause” (Woodward 168). Crusie illustrates the effects of these enculturated beliefs by addressing Nina’s anxieties about menopause. Nina fears menopause and all its attendant social implications for her sexuality. Like many women, she has been culturally indoctrinated to assume that her sexuality and attractiveness will cease at the same time as her menses. She has a conversation with her best friend about her coming change of life after she

read an article on menopause [ . . . ]. It said that perimenopause starts in the forties. [ . . . ] There was a list of symptoms [ . . . ]. Warning signs. They were awful. [ . . . ] One of them is that your pubic hair starts to thin [ . . . ] I was in the shower last night and I looked, but the thing is, I never paid that much attention before, so I don't have any idea if mine's thinner. (51-52)

In effect, Nina was unconcerned about menopause until she read that she *should* be worried. Now she is looking for physical proof that her sexual self is diminishing, and that old age is rushing toward her, heralded by perimenopausal-related bodily changes.

Nina is surrounded by socio-cultural messages implying that any romance, or even the attempt at a romance, especially with a younger man, is unfeasible for a woman her age. The socio-cultural climate continually reinforces the belief that she is undesirable because she is middle-aged: "a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification" (Sontag 102). Nina's mother bluntly tells her that she was foolish to get a divorce because she has "put on weight" (37), developed "crow's-feet" (37) around her eyes, and worst of all, is "sagging in more places than just your jawline" (37). The cultural construction that only youth can be beautiful or sexual "absents old(er) women from the erotic arena and kills people's ability to imagine [ . . . ] old(er) women as erotic" (Frueh 66). Women are rarely presented with any cultural images that suggest age is compatible with attractiveness, instead they

are advised to avoid unnecessary exposure to the elements, such as wind, water and 'damaging UV rays' of the sun in order to keep skin 'fresh and young looking'. Only youthful bodies or bodies with the appearance of youth are considered beautiful and valued in our society [ . . . ]. The cosmetic industries capitalise on the fear of ageing by offering products endorsed by scientific language that claim to prevent or reduce the signs of ageing, which is discussed as though it were some kind of disease that it is every woman's responsibility to try to prevent. (King 35)

Studies have shown that women are judged to have lost not only their attractiveness, but also their essential femininity when they age (Saltzberg and Chrisler). Older women are socially dispossessed of their embodied gender because they are desexualized, and sexuality is culturally synonymous with femininity. The fact that women are culturally indoctrinated to believe they cannot be older and sexual at the same time is explicitly addressed in *Anyone But You*. Alex's brother observes that as women approach midlife they

look at magazines and see all those damn seventeen-year-old anorexics in push-up bras, or they go to the movies and see actresses with tummy tucks and enough silicone to start a new valley, and then they look at their own perfectly good bodies and decide their sex lives are over. (158)

Nina's ex-husband verbalizes the dominant patriarchal assumptions when he tells Nina that she is "a lovely woman" (165) but unfortunately she looks her age, and therefore

it would be “humiliating” (165) for her to take Alex as a lover. Nina is angered by her ex-husband’s sexist and patronizing remarks, yet she has absorbed the same cultural biases and therefore she privately agrees with him. When she thinks of how her body has “softened with age, everything lower than it used to be” (166), she internally concedes that her ex-husband “was right” (166) to mock the possibility of a relationship with Alex. Nina feels great personal trepidation when she considers having sex with Alex because she thinks her body’s age-related “flaws” make her unappealing to a man his age. She looks at her naked reflection in the mirror and thinks that “[g]ravity had betrayed her when she wasn’t paying attention. Looking closely, she could see the damage. Cellulite. Fat. Bulge. Droop” (181). Nevertheless, her indignation about her ex-husband’s complacent chauvinism regarding her age and desirability impels her to begin an affair with Alex.

Nina tries to convince him that they should always make love in the dark because her body is “*lower* than it used to be” (185), and even though Alex tells her that he doesn’t “care if it’s on the *floor*” (185), she fears what he might think if he sees her mature body without the mitigating concealment of clothes. Alex is infinitely less critical of her body than she is. He views her body as desirable because it is a part of who she is, and he is in love with a woman, not with the ideal female body. However, her sexual and romantic relationship with Alex does not relieve her culturally constructed fears about her supposed undesirability.

Nina’s sexual angst stems from the fact that she cannot really “see” the desirability of her individual body: it is too inscribed with the social text of what her body should look like in order to be “really” attractive or desirable. In consequence, her social body eclipses her individual body. Since the socio-cultural atmosphere is prejudiced against aging women, she is afraid her body inspires only negative thoughts and feelings, and she has difficulty believing that Alex feels otherwise. However, in order to enjoy her relationship with Alex, Nina must accept her body’s romantic value despite its differences from the cultural construction of female beauty. She must find a mental framework that allows her to reconceptualise herself as sexual and erotic. To find personal happiness and romantic fulfillment she empowers herself by adopting a new, feminist mindset through which to view her sexuality and physical appeal.

Nina’s insecurities about her romantic worth are intensified by her interactions with her mother and ex-husband, but she is encouraged by other characters in the novel to accept the feminist realization of her desirability. Her best friend, Charity, invariably and firmly admonishes Nina for not trusting in her own eroticism. Charity tells her bluntly that the biggest problem facing her isn’t the chronological age gap: “The real problem is that you don’t believe Alex could love you because your body is forty years old and your face has some wrinkles” (144). Additionally, Nina’s upstairs neighbor, Norma, is a healthy and vigorous woman in her seventies who still sees herself as desirable. Norma has a younger lover (a man in his early sixties) and she points out that having a younger lover means he will not “run out of steam in bed while you’re hitting your stride” (81). Norma chastises Nina for declining a chance to date Alex, pointing out that “There are too few good men around to ignore one just because he’s the perfect age for you” (81). Norma makes it clear that it is foolish to let Alex’s age stand in Nina’s way. Eventually, these positive messages began to sink in. Nina then embraces her age and asserts her personal desirability. As the book reaches its romantic resolution Nina strips off her clothes in front of her mirror and tells herself that “There was nothing wrong with her body. All right, it was softer than it

had been, and her waist was thicker than it had been, and nothing about it could be called perky, but it was a good healthy body, and Alex loved it" (218).

Nina only resolves the novel's romantic conflict after she asseverates her self-worth and rebels against the way in which female beauty, sexuality, and desirability are culturally defined. When she refuses to become romantically invisible, even though she is middle aged and possibly perimenopausal, she rebels against a cultural ethos which implies that an older woman in an erotic relationship is a paradox. Her decision to transgress against patriarchal constructions of worth and attractiveness is a decidedly feminist act.

## Getting Fed

Women are culturally desexualized not only by their age, but also by their body fat. Fat is a feminist issue: cultural norms insisting on hyperslenderness for women are used to control women and keep them "in their place" (Orbach; Bordo). The overweight body, especially the overweight female body, is very rarely portrayed as a sexual or desirable body in any form of mainstream culture; rather, the more corpulent a female body is, the more likely it is to be a source of social and sexual ridicule.<sup>[6]</sup> The constant and pervasive cultural messages about the undesirability of heavysset females has created a climate wherein women learn to view themselves negatively if they do not have the idealized super-thin body (Bordo; Urla and Swedlund). As a result, obsession and misery about weight are now the cultural norm (Saltzberg and Chrisler).

Min, the central female protagonist of Jennifer Crusie's *Bet Me* (2004), struggles to reconcile the fact she is overweight with her likelihood of having romantic fulfillment. She doubts her desirability and her romantic worth because she is heavysset. Her weight is a significant barrier between herself and Cal, the novel's hero. Even when the other barriers are surmounted for Min, she cannot help but worry "about how fat she must feel under his hands" (307). In order to comprehend why Min's weight is such an issue for her, it is necessary to understand the socio-cultural implications of the overweight female body. Why is Min's social body so problematic, just because her individual body has more fat on it than judged ideal by her society?

Historically, female fat was seen as a sign of health and beauty, and was considered an intrinsic quality of femininity. However, when women began to gain social equality, there was a complete reversal of the social ideal of female beauty (Wolf, *Beauty*). Now a Western woman must have the ultra-thin and ultra-fashionable "look of sickness, the look of poverty, and the look of nervous exhaustion" (Hollander qtd. in Wolf, *Beauty* 184) in order to approach the socio-cultural ideal of beauty. As a result, many modern women are restricting their caloric intake to appear more feminine. Whereas the denial of food was once historically and traditionally imposed on female children and adult women by the patriarchy as a way of reinforcing their low status and worth in a community, now women impose these food restrictions on themselves (Wolf, *Beauty*). Since hyperslenderness has become synonymous with feminine qualities of beauty and self-denial, even a normal amount of female fat has accordingly become a sign that a woman is neither beautiful nor feminine. Women who only have the medically recommended 20-25% body fat frequently

consider themselves “too fat” to be beautiful; their healthy amount of body fat shows that they have failed to deny themselves food like “good” women should.

Unlike women, men have heretofore been encouraged to eat heartily and take the “lion’s share” of food, therefore obvious signs of eating have become socially linked with masculine qualities. The ideology of food consumption equaling masculinity is still so pervasive in modern culture that plump or obese women are now not only unattractive, they are subconsciously considered unfeminine. From a cultural standpoint a fat woman, a woman who has obviously eaten “too much” food, has usurped the male prerogative of calorie consumption. When women eat a “man-size” portion of food, it implies that they are claiming to have the same social worth as men. The “fat chick” is mocked in popular culture because she is frightening: she embodies female rejection of the patriarchal establishment. An obese woman is not only a symbol of female appropriation of male privileges, she is also “the embodiment of woman’s insidious tendency to occupy more than her allotted space” and “the outward and visible sign of a world out of control” (Hite 136). Cultural constructions promoting thinness for women are not really concerned with beauty, rather they are advocating thinness as a way of ensuring “female obedience” (Wolf, *Beauty* 187). A slender female body unconsciously assuages fears that women are encroaching on men’s traditional entitlements.

The interpretation of a fat woman’s political body as a symbolic threat to established social norms is mainly part of the national subconscious, rarely addressed outside of feminist theory. By contrast, people are more aware of the negative cultural meanings imposed on an overweight woman’s social and individual body. Since the body is a “direct locus of social control” (Bordo 165), women’s bodies are constantly policed, particularly through cultural constructions of the “proper” weight, in order to ensure that they are conforming to the socio-culturally correct form of womanhood. If an individual female body is fat, her social body is consequently interpreted “as reflecting moral or personal inadequacy, or lack of will” (Bordo 192). Therefore, heavier women are not given the dignity of being conceptualized as feminist rebels, they are thought of as too lazy and weak-willed to deny themselves food like “good” women. The issue of weight has become dissociated from the larger social context and culturally repositioned as an individual woman’s personal problem.

Min is highly self-critical because she is overweight vis-a-vis modern Western cultural standards: a problem shared by many women. From the earliest pages of *Bet Me* we see that she thinks of herself as inferior because of her weight. She believes that the maid-of-honor’s dress that she will be wearing in her sister’s wedding makes her “look like a fat, demented shepherdess” (2). Furthermore, she tells herself she would “look like Barney’s slut cousin” (4) if she dared to wear a sexy purple leather outfit and views herself as one of “the terminally chubby” (9).<sup>[7]</sup>

To further intensify Min’s belief that she is not attractive because she is not thin enough, her mother, Nanette, constantly reinforces the cultural message that only slender women are romantically desirable. Nanette is convinced that only women who conform to the socio-cultural ideal of beauty will achieve a woman’s ultimate life goal—marriage. She therefore believes that by constantly haranguing her daughter about her weight she is acting in a loving, supportive way and she tells Min that she only wants her to be “married to a good man who will appreciate you for how wonderful you are and not leave you because you’re overweight” (116). Nanette’s relentless policing of Min’s food intake and

social body *for Min's own good* is representative of the cultural surveillance woman must endure. This lamentable mixture of love and body policing is clearly seen when Nanette tells Min that "I know you think I'm awful. But I know how the world works. And it's not kind to fat people, Min. It's especially not kind to fat women. I want to see you happy and safe, married to a good man, and it's not going to happen if you don't lose that weight" (304). Sadly, it never occurs to Nanette that instead of helping to socially police her daughter's body, she could teach Min to resist the cultural constructions that devalue fat women.

Confronted with constant social messages that only slender women are erotic, it is certainly understandable why Min should consider herself too heavy, simply because she is not thin. Min is described as the "chubby friend" (11) by another character in the novel, and the term "chubby" hardly connotes morbid obesity. In another era Min would have been, at most, pleasingly plump. These cultural stereotypes of female beauty are visually transmitted by models, dancers and actresses who are almost universally thinner than 95% of the female populace, so it is unsurprising that a survey conducted in 1985 found that 90% of the women respondents believed they weighed too much (Wolf, *Beauty* 185). Therefore, Min's angst is almost certainly shared by most of Crusie's readers. Even the thinnest women reading *Bet Me* can sympathize with Min, because they have also been repeatedly exposed to socio-cultural messages that they are never quite thin *enough* (Bordo).

Min's belief that she is "too fat" to be attractive and lovable is further reinforced when the central antagonist of the novel, David, ends his dating relationship with her. Although David insists that he is ending their relationship because Min is "not making any effort to make our relationship work" (2), Min knows the real reason for the breakup is that she will not have sex with him. She never began a sexual relationship with David because she knew that if he saw her naked he would be critical of her body's surplus fat. Min explains to her friends:

We were on our third date, and the waiter brought the dessert menu, and David said, 'No, thank you, we're on a diet,' and of course, he isn't because there's not an ounce of fat on him, and I thought, 'I'm not taking off my clothes with you' and I paid my half of the check and went home early. And after that, whenever he made his move, I thought of the waiter and crossed my legs. (5)

Although she knew that David's attitude towards her weight demonstrated that he did not really value her as a person, Min nevertheless continued to date him, ostensibly because she needed a date to take to her sister's wedding. However, had she believed any other man might feel differently about her physical appearance she would have actively sought another companion. Obviously Min has no faith whatsoever in her desirability because her body does not conform to the socio-cultural ideal of beauty. Consequently, when she first sees the exceedingly handsome Cal her instinctive response is not only desire: it is also fear. She immediately concludes that "The amount of damage somebody that beautiful could do to a woman like her was too much to contemplate" (7). Since she admires his good looks, she assumes he would reject her because, "looking that beautiful,

he probably never dated the terminally chubby. At least, not without sneering. And she'd been sneered at enough for one night" (9).

Min's anxiety over how unattractive someone like Cal would find her is mainly a product of her own poor self-image. In spite of her fears, Cal is not sneering at her because she is overweight; he finds her body attractive. His appreciation for Min's figure is made apparent throughout the novel. He admires her legs because they had "strong full calves" and were "sturdy, like Min in general" (84). Cal assures Min that she is "Opulent" (147) and "Soft and round and hot" (147) and that she should never diet because "Some things are supposed to be made with butter. You're one of them" (147). Unfortunately, although Min tries to think of Cal's compliments when she views her body in the mirror, "her mother's voice [criticizing her weight] was louder" (305).

Min begins to overcome the barrier preventing her romantic resolution when she starts to resist the cultural messages about her body's supposed ugliness. Although she has been trying to cast off feelings of self-doubt about her appearance, she has been having little success. Min tells herself that her body is "not that bad" but she is "not convinced" (64). While Cal's admiration of her looks is comforting, she realizes that she is the only person who can change the way she feels about herself. She needs to internalize the feminist message that extra weight does not make her, or any woman, morally inadequate, weak-willed, or repulsive. She decides to buy new clothes that showcase her body instead of concealing her "fat" and tells herself that she is like "*one of those heavy cream wedding invitations, the kind you have to touch because it's so beautiful*" (175). Once again, only when the heroine seeks a new, feminist outlook on her society and culture does she find empowerment and fulfillment. Cal is supportive of her reconceptualization, but she does not passively rely on him to "save" her from believing in socio-cultural biases against her.

Min's growing empowerment does not stop her, or the reader, from appreciating and delighting in the way Cal assists her in combating negative ideologies about her body. He becomes a valuable ally in Min's fight to resist the cultural messages imposed on her by her mother. When Min is being hassled by Nanette to restrict her food consumption yet further so that she will fit into the maid-of-honor's dress, Cal insists "she is not too big for the dress. The dress is too small for her. She's perfect" (227). Then he puts butter on a carb-filled roll and defiantly encourages Min to eat. At long last Min is being given positive socio-cultural feedback about her normalcy, worthiness, and attractiveness. Cal is abetting her quest for feminist liberation from the tyranny of the calorie police. Min falls in love with him at least in part because his affirming messages about her body make her "feel wonderful" (277) and she is "never fat" (277) when she is with him.

Cal's approval of Min's weight is also his approval of Min's sexuality, because fat is socio-culturally associated with female sexual autonomy. Women's appetite for food is "a metaphor for their sexual appetite" (Bordo 110). In part this is because "female fat is [ . . . ] understood by the subconscious as fertile sexuality" (Wolf, *Beauty* 184). Thus, fat is not only symbolic of female encroachment into masculine spheres, fat is also a culturally implied analogue for sexual extravagance. Ironically, fat is no longer considered "sexy" because it is a symbol of uncontrolled female sexuality: it is potentially *insatiable* and may consume men as well as food (Bordo). Fat women are construed as unattractive because they are cultural representations of "women's desires, hungers, and appetites [which] are seen as [ . . . ] threatening and in need of control in a patriarchal society" (Urla and Swedlund 300). Much of the ideology connecting "excessive" sexuality with "excessive"



eating can be seen clearly in advertisements for food, especially sweet foods. Advertisements usually depict women's consumption of food as something "private, secretive, illicit" (Bordo 129) which, if it must be ingested at all, should be eaten in suitably small, genteel amounts, such as bite-size candies. Women are culturally conditioned not to give in "too much" to the "temptation" of luscious, rich, satisfying food. If they do, their fat will expose them as gluttons, the culinary equivalent of sluts.

Crusie definitely equates food with sex in *Bet Me*. Almost every erotic encounter between Min and Cal is centered around food in some manner. It is Min's culinary sensuality which awakens Cal to her potential sexuality. At the beginning of their first dinner together, when Cal offers Min bread she rejects it, just as she plans to reject him sexually. Her excuse for refusing his offering of food is that she cannot eat any bread or pasta because she has to lose weight in order to fit into a maid-of-honor's dress in just three weeks' time. Nevertheless, Cal encourages her to eat, and soon the socio-cultural connection between food and sex becomes vividly clear. When Min finally bites into the bread she "chewed it with her eyes shut, pleasure flooding her face" (40) and Cal thinks "*Look at me like that*" (40). When Min tells him that she is "not interested in sex" (41), Cal watches her enjoyment of food and knows she is lying. Min's lusty appetite inspires Cal to have lusty thoughts.

Their courtship continues to revolve around Cal's presentation of food for Min's culinary gratification. He invites her to a picnic lunch and brings hot dogs, the large bratwurst sausages that remind her of her childhood. When Min protests that she is absolutely not supposed to eat brats on her diet, Cal encourages her to "Live a little" (94) and "Sin again" (94) by eating this rich, calorific, forbidden food. This echoes the way in which Phin urged Sophie to indulge herself sexually in *Welcome to Temptation*. Cal is "distracted by the look of bliss on her face" (94-95) while she consumes the brats and when she "licked a smear of ketchup off her thumb [ . . . ] Cal lost his train of thought" (99). Finally, as though he were a devil, he tempts her by offering her Krispy Kreme doughnuts. He waves a pastry at her and cajoles her to "sin a little" (101), which inspires Min to call him "a beast and a vile seducer" (101). As Min opens her mouth to argue with him, he abruptly pops in a piece of doughnut. Her enjoyment of the pastry is so great that

[h]er face was beautifully blissful, her mouth soft and pouted, her full lower lip glazed with icing, and as she teased the last of the chocolate from her lip, Cal heard a rushing in his ears [ . . . ] and before she could open her eyes, he leaned in and kissed her, tasting the chocolate and the heat of her mouth, and she froze for a moment and then kissed him back, sweet and insistent, blanking out all coherent thought. He let the taste and the scent and the warmth of her wash over him, drowning in her, and when she finally pulled back, he almost fell into her lap. (103)

Cal is obviously unthreatened by a larger woman's culturally implied encroachment on masculine turf. He consistently encourages her to eat "bad" or "forbidden" foods. From the very beginning he resists socio-cultural messages about fat by refusing to accept the social implication that Min's body fat makes her transgressive and unattractive. He finds Min, in all her curvy plumpness, attractive and erotic. Min is still learning that her body does not preclude her from desirability and romance; Cal already knows this to be true.

When Min begins to indulge by eating doughnuts with Cal, she also begins to have a new, feminist reconceptualization of herself. She starts to see herself as erotic and sensual, and has a new, sexual, body image as a result. She no longer sees her body as “too fat”; she sees it as libidinal and as desirable to Cal. Min’s newfound appreciation of her individual body, coupled with her resistance to negative cultural messages about her social body, empower her to accept Cal’s love and to understand that she is worthy and deserving of romance despite socio-cultural constructions to the contrary. Likewise, the fact that Min is an overweight or heavier romantic heroine communicates a feminist message of nonconformity and rebellion against the patriarchal ethos that would deny the intrinsic sexuality and social value of a woman based on her excess adipose tissue. As Min comes to value herself, in spite of the fact she is not slender, the reader is encouraged to do so too. Ergo, Crusie uses her heroine’s body to encourage resistance to cultural messages that try to use a woman’s weight to determine her worth as a romantic or erotic partner.

## Resistance is Fruitful

Crusie’s heroines boldly go forth, with their wrinkles and sexual appetite and cellulite, and meet the men of their dreams who aid them in their rebellion and fall in love with them without requiring the heroine to lose one shred of her personal autonomy.<sup>[8]</sup> The bodies of Crusie’s heroines do not characterize “conformity to dominant cultural imperatives for [ . . . ] contained feminine desires” (Urla and Swedlund 301). Her heroines are anything but contained. Her heroines are the proverbial loose women: they are loose because they have fought free of some of the many bonds of patriarchal expectations for women and no longer function completely within the strictures of hegemonic femininity.

Jennifer Crusie maintains that romantic fiction is an important way to communicate feminist ideology because the genre,

while sometimes committing the patriarchy-reinforcing crimes the critics accuse it of, much more often reinforces a sense of self worth in readers while reflecting a psychologically accurate portrayal of their lives. It does this by demonstrating the idea of women as strong, active human beings; by reinforcing the validity of their preoccupations; and by putting them at the center of their own stories, empowering them by showing heroines who realistically take control of their own lives. (“Romancing”)

Crusie herself certainly does write feminist romantic fiction about female protagonists who are strong women actively seeking to attain their personal goals. Crusie does not overtly rail against the misogynistic socio-cultural ideology that denies women the right to their own sexuality, the right to age with dignity, and the right to gain weight without being devalued. Rather, she weaves her resistance into the narrative of her fiction, embodying feminism in her heroines as they contradict some the cultural norms that constrict women by getting laid, getting old, and getting fed.

Crusie’s novels demonstrate that feminism and romance are not only compatible, but that feminist principles can free heroines to find both romantic and self fulfillment. Her

novels provide not only an emotionally satisfying romance, they also provide a feminist parable as her heroines assume control over their lives and reaffirm the inherent normalcy of the 'abnormal' aspects of their bodies. The heroines' imperfect bodies demonstrate to the reader that, in contrast to socio-cultural constructions to the contrary, the "perfect" body is not a prerequisite for love. Moreover, as a very popular romance author, her success may help pave the way for a wider acceptance of other categories of physically imperfect and/or feminist romantic protagonists by other authors and publishers.

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[1] For further analysis of the romance protagonist and cultural embodiment, please see Vivanco and Kramer's article, "[There Are Six Bodies in This Relationship: An Anthropological Approach to the Romance Genre](#)".

[2] Information that is considered correct, regardless of its factual content, because it comes from culturally acknowledged experts.

[3] The main flaw in the argument that radical feminists make is that "they appeal to a form of essentialism in which 'male sexuality' is associated with violence, lust, objectification and a preoccupation with orgasm" and "a natural and inherently good female sexuality" is associated "with nurturance, reciprocity, intimacy and an emphasis on non-genital pleasure" (Sawicki 35). This theory relies strongly on biological determinism, which is the belief that women are born more tender and nurturing than innately aggressive and hostile men. However, feminist theory in general strives to repudiate belief in hereditary gendered behaviors, inasmuch as it has been central to the justification of women's socio-cultural and political oppression.

[4] It should be noted that *Welcome To Temptation* does not address the sexual emancipation of women on the other end of the spectrum; those who are 'frigid' or asexual. None of Crusie's heroines, nor many heroines within the romance genre, celebrate a woman's right to be free from the expectation she should enjoy sex, or maintain a woman's right to find love even if she does not find orgasm.

[5] Pamela Regis identifies "eight essential narrative elements of the romance novel" (27). One of these is "The Barrier":

A series of scenes often scattered throughout the novel establishes for the reader the reasons that this heroine and hero cannot marry. The romance novel's conflict often consists entirely of this barrier between the heroine and hero. The elements of the barrier can be external, a circumstance that exists outside of a heroine or a hero's mind, or internal, a circumstance that comes from within either or both. (32)

[6] There is a small but growing sub-genre in romance that centers around a heavier (but not *too* heavy) female protagonist. Sonya C. Brown does an excellent job of evaluating the resistance to, and support of, socio-cultural constructions of female fat and fat females in her article "[Does this book make me look fat?](#)"

[7] Barney is a large purple dinosaur in a popular children's television program.

[8] It is important for the hero to support and abet the heroine in her resistance to hegemonic norms of femininity, because such collusion establishes the hero as a fellow feminist and as a man who rejects patriarchal domination and assumptions.

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