

Francophone Perspectives on Romantic Fiction: From the Academic Field to Reader's Experience (Interview with Agnès Caubet, Romance Reader and Webmaster of Les Romantiques, fan website and webzine)

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Abstract: Although Francophone romance scholarship dates back to the 1980s, the scholars who write it are not generally familiar with the genre and French readers have rarely been interviewed. After examining why contempt for romantic fiction and romance readers remains predominant in the French academic context, this paper offers a conversational discussion between a scholar (Séverine Olivier) and a reader (Agnès Caubet) about the genre and its reception in France. In 2001, Agnès Caubet created Les Romantiques, the first and currently only Francophone website about the romance genre. Her own experience as reader, the importance of the website, discussion boards, a webzine she managed to launch and the contacts she established with French romance publishers open new perspectives on romantic readers and romance reading.

About the Author: A former F.R.S - FNRS research fellow, Séverine Olivier earned her PhD in literature from the Université Libre de Bruxelles. Her dissertation, *Le roman sentimental. Productions contemporaines et pratiques de lecture*, focused on the Francophone romance market and its readership.

Agnès Caubet created Les Romantiques website in 2001. It is now a flourishing community of French-speaking readers, with 60,000 visitors and 1.5 million pages seen a month. Through her work on the site and the webzine created in September 2007, she is in touch with readers, writers, and French publishers.

Keywords: Agnès Caubet, French academic field, romance reader, romance reading, Séverine Olivier

Although Francophone romance scholarship dates back to the 1980s, the scholars who write it are not generally familiar with the genre. They identify romantic fiction exclusively with Harlequin category romances or Barbara Cartland's romance novels, and when they try to understand romance readers and why they read romantic fiction, Francophone romance scholars are, with few exceptions, condescending and partial. In the words of one scholar, they try to explain "why romance readers read what they shouldn't read" (Bettinotti 1998, 173). Despite the ethnographic model offered by Janice Radway and others, French readers have rarely been interviewed. This paper will examine why contempt for romantic fiction and for romance readers remains predominant in the French academic field, bringing to light the differences between the dominant construction of the genre and its readership in the French critical context and romance readers' own perceptions of the books they like to read. One particular reader's experience will be central: that of Agnès Caubet, Webmaster of *lesromantiques.com*. In 2001, Caubet created the first and currently only Francophone website about the romance genre. It is a flourishing community of French-speaking (mostly romance) readers, with 60,000 visitors and 1.5 million pages viewed a month. Although she is not "representative" of all the romance readers, her own experience as reader, the importance of the website, discussion boards, and webzine she managed to launch, and the contacts she established with French romance publishers open new perspectives on romantic readers and romance reading, in France and, potentially, elsewhere.

Romantic Fiction and the French Academic Field

Since the 1980s, when the first Harlequin novels were translated into French, only a dozen Quebec and French monographs about romantic fiction have been published (See Spohner and RomanceWiki). Even though the French-speaking romance market is smaller than the English-speaking one, this is a small number of studies in comparison with Anglophone scholarship. To situate Caubet's experiences as reader and editor, this paper will first go back over the construction of Francophone romance criticism: it will outline the dominant views about romance readers and romance reading in the academic field, underline how Francophone scholars generally consider popular romance readers, and explain why condescension remains predominant.

Harlequin published its first romance novels in French in 1978. Scholars in Quebec and France soon took an interest in the genre, especially in Harlequin romance novels written in, or more often translated into, French (see Cadet; Graner; Helgorsky 1985 and 1987; Richaudeau; Rihoit). As a rule, they analyzed these texts through the lens of narratology, i.e. Genette and Greimas's theories of narrative discourse. In 1983 a special issue of *Études Littéraires*, followed by *La Corrida de l'amour: le roman Harlequin*, edited by Julia Bettinotti, defined and described the narrative "formula" and standard characters of Harlequin novels. In these accounts, five narrative steps—still often quoted in French studies—characterize category romances: the meeting (*la rencontre*), the conflict (*la confrontation polémique*), the seduction (*la séduction*), the confession of love (*la révélation de l'amour*), and the wedding (*le mariage*). These approaches to romantic fiction developed out of real curiosity and these essays are never disdainful of the genre. But the 1980s were

also years of condemnation. According to Michelle Coquillat and her feminist *Romans d'amour*, romantic fiction develops and illustrates a "psychology of dependence and submission": the heroine would be tamed and humiliated by a brutal hero. Coquillat identified romantic fiction (in fact, a very few Harlequin romances and some books by the early 20th century Catholic author "Delly"[1]) as dangerous novels for readers who were assumed to be naïve and socially poor women. Her essay crystallized the condemnations of romance fiction. Outdated, this essay is nevertheless interesting, since the condemnations Coquillat expressed continue to influence the Francophone academic field.

By the end of the 1980s, new horizons began to open. After the first and so-far only Francophone conference entirely dedicated to the genre, held in Limoges in 1989, the number of essays and articles increased: some Francophone scholars tried to examine the so-called "paraliterature" (la "paralittérature") without prejudice, at times pursuing questions posed during the Limoges conference by Ellen Constans. But although scholars' approaches changed, their use of the word "paraliterature" to describe romantic fiction continued to imply a hierarchic vision of the literary field: one in which popular romance novels could not be assimilated to "Literature." (After all, "para" literally means "close by" or "next to," and "paraliterature" is implicitly inferior to what it cannot simply *be*.) A more significant departure from scholarly precedent came in 1991, when Bruno Péquignot published *La relation amoureuse: Analyse sociologique du Roman Sentimental Moderne*, the first (and so far only) French sociological essay focusing on romance readers: specifically, readers of Harlequin novels. According to Péquignot, category romances describe an initiatory quest and represent for readers a guide to the ideal relationship. Romantic fiction illustrates a dream, a utopia wherein a man and a woman, both equal, finally communicate. To understand the readers who were drawn to this utopian quest, Péquignot interviewed female romance readers he met on trains between Lyon and Grenoble. They were in their thirties, employed, married and generally ashamed of the books they read.

As the first attempt to understand French romance readers, Péquignot's essay remains important in romance academic history. Unfortunately Péquignot did not record or transcribe his interviews with readers, leaving subsequent scholars to wonder what the role of this scholar was in potentially altering readers' discourse about their reading. Moreover, since *La relation amoureuse* is the only essay in French about French-speaking romance readers, and since it focused on Harlequin readers, the information we have about French romance readership exclusively concerns readers of category and contemporary romance novels. This reinforces the assumption, in the Francophone academic field, that all popular romance fiction can be identified with Harlequin romance fiction, and especially with the novels published in a single category line, Harlequin Presents. Scholars generally are not aware that single-title romances and multiple romance subgenres exist, and they have generally failed to take an interest in the range of romantic fiction published by one of Harlequin's most important competitors in the French market, J'ai lu.

J'ai lu entered the French romance market in 1991, translating into French what Harlequin did not: Anglophone historical romance novels. The decision to focus on these texts was strategic and market-driven. In the 1980s, when Harlequin entered the French market, many publishing houses published romance novels but Harlequin, with its American and English category romances and its commercial strategies, rapidly overshadowed its competitors. Rather than directly competing with the international conglomerate, J'ai lu left the translation of contemporary category romances to Harlequin

and focused instead on historical single-title romances, building its historical line “Aventures et Passions” on such titles as Jude Deveraux’s *The Velvet Promise* (*Les yeux de velours*) or Johanna Lindsey’s *So Speaks the Heart* (*Esclave et châtelaine*).

Despite this surge in Francophone romance publishing by J’ai lu, in the 1990s academic essays continued to focus on Harlequin or on specific French writers like Delly, Max du Veuzit or Magali[2] (Bettinotti and Noizet; Paulvé and Guérin). Many books published on romantic fiction in the 1990s condemned the genre. Category romances were perceived to reinforce patriarchy and were considered as an ideologically dangerous fiction for female readers, even though readers were never interviewed for this research (Noizet; Préfontaine). However, after Péquignot, some scholars tried to describe the reading process. Nicole Robine took an interest in the cultural practices of “young workers” (young adults who began working at 18 or 19), and observed that young working girls generally chose to read Harlequin novels. According to Robine, category romances, short and easy to read, symbolize a cultural compromise for these young girls, torn between their family situation and educational background. Thus, romance reading was socially determined or, if romance readers didn’t come from working class backgrounds, psychologically determined: according to Robine, only working class women or teenagers would be attracted by romantic fiction. While Nicole Robine presented a sociological vision of some romance readers, Annik Houel published a psychological essay influenced by the “nurturing theory” proposed in the early 1980s by American scholar Janice Radway, in which readers are said to be drawn to texts where the romance hero nurtures the heroine like a mother, and consequently nurtures the reader, who identifies passively with the heroine. Despite these efforts to take readers seriously from sociological and psychological perspectives, however, scholars’ prejudice against and disdain for the genre remained evident. Readers were repeatedly compared with drug addicts—this even happens in Houel’s essay, alongside the talk of nurture—and the novels themselves were considered to be commercial product without artistic quality, written to seduce naïve teenagers and culturally inferior housewives.

Although they didn’t focus on romance readership, the 2000s saw an evolution in the reception of the novels themselves. In her 2000 study *Parlez-moi d’amour: Le roman sentimental: des romans grecs aux collections de l’an 2000*, for example, Ellen Constans tried to link romance novels with the French literary canon, comparing some of the major French classics (*Tristan et Iseult*, *La Princesse de Clèves*, *Le Diable au Corps*, etc.) with modern popular romantic fiction. Implicitly, of course, Constans’s work was also a major step forward in legitimating romance readers; alas, the deaths of Constans and Canadian scholar Bettinotti in 2007—both scholars seriously interested in romance novels—seem to have brought an end to these more positive developments, even as romance subgenres have proliferated and evolved into new popular genres. (For example, no book has yet been published in French on chick lit.)

In the French academic culture, which still sees the “book” as the “conservatory of cultural legitimacies and hierarchies” (Collovald and Neveu 15), Francophone popular romance fiction has thus faced a number of distinctive challenges. A hierarchical vision continues to shape Francophone literary study, so that “high literature” (or simply “literature”) remains defined by its opposition to “low literature” (or “paraliterature”); in this context, romantic fiction remains condemned as bad literature, both literarily and culturally poor. The genre is also tarred by its association with the mass market, and worse

still, with the *American* mass-market: there are few French authors, and publishers don't want to risk publishing an unknown French author when they can translate a famous American, English, or Australian one at little cost. The novels are thus seen as second-rate imports, mass-produced on an industrial scale, without aesthetic quality or individual interest. Finally, the genre is socially disqualified since it is associated, not just with lower-class readers, but specifically with female lower-class readers, who are presumed to be in need of scholarly protection. Despite the work of Richard Hoggart, Michel de Certeau and many others (Owen; Collovald & Neveu) which amply demonstrate that "popular" readers are not the victims of the books they like to read, romance readers are persistently characterized as passive and subject to ideological manipulation. No wonder, then, that the Francophone study of popular romance fiction continues, as a rule, to act as a sort of cultural watchdog or guardian, focused on the need to disqualify the genre and to denounce the dangers it represents. Romantic fiction is a "*mauvais genre*" (bad genre), linked to "*mauvaise lecture*" (bad reading) and to "*mauvais lecteurs*" (bad readers).

But are romance readers really passive and naïve? Are they really bad readers? To answer this question, I spoke with Agnès Caubet, founder and webmaster of [lesromantiques.com](http://www.lesromantiques.com).

Interview with Agnès Caubet

Born in 1967 in Clermont-Ferrand, Agnès Caubet attended business school and is a computer trainer. She began reading category romances in the 1980s when she was sixteen, and in the 1990s, she fell in love with historical romance. Frustrated because it was difficult to get the books she liked, let alone any information about their authors, she turned to the Internet, where she found many American websites dedicated to romantic fiction, but no comparable French site. To fill that need, in 2001 she launched "Les Romantiques" (See <http://www.lesromantiques.com>).

Agnès Caubet may not be a representative Francophone romance reader—but then, representativeness is a problematic concept when speaking about romance readers, in France and elsewhere. (Were the Harlequin-reading commuters interviewed by Péquignot, the ones who were so ashamed of the books they read, representative? Not enough research has been done to say.) Certainly her education and experiences demonstrate that not all French romance readers are teenagers and desperate housewives buying their books at the supermarket, a persistent stereotype in French academic research and popular media. It is also inarguable that, via her website, Caubet is uniquely positioned to discuss the experiences of an extended Francophone readers' community; in fact, thanks to her website, she has become an interlocutor between that community and French romance publishers, able to offer to those publishers, and to *JPRS*, a variety of new perspectives about the genre and its readers.

Séverine Olivier: *Agnès, you are a romance reader and the Webmaster of "Les Romantiques," a French website dedicated to romantic fiction. Before answering questions about your own romance reader's experience, could you answer some questions about your experience as a Webmaster? Why did you decide to launch the website?*

Agnès Caubet: Romance reading was, for me as for many others, a very solitary hobby. It was impossible to find any information about the authors, the new releases, the sagas and sequels. That was a very frustrating experience. In Paris where I lived, I would sometimes spend an entire Saturday afternoon visiting every supermarket I could think of to find out if they had new books on their shelves. Often I found none. Did I say frustrating?

Then my husband, my newborn son, and I left the capital and went to live in a small village in southern France where there was no supermarket at all. But a big change was taking place at the time: it was at the beginning of the year 2000 and Internet access was growing fast in France. So all of a sudden, I was able to buy hundreds of historical romances, the subgenre I preferred, on Amazon! Great! Except, until then I would choose my books by reading a few pages in the supermarket. Now the only thing I got was a very short back cover blurb that didn't say a lot.

I began surfing the Internet and found American websites such as "The Romance Reader" and "All About Romance," that told me about the books I wanted to read, but of course I had to link the American title with the French one first. So I got the idea of creating a database... and why not share it on the web? There was no French website about romance, and so "Les Romantiques" was born at the beginning of 2001, initially as a buyer's guide for readers who wanted to shop on Amazon.

A few days later, I received an email that said more or less: "Hey, I just found your website, it's great! I thought I was the only one in France reading that kind of book. I know no other readers. Would you care to add this author? I could send you the information you need." I received a lot of these emails over the months and the site grew and grew. Then at the end of October 2001 the message board was created

[See <http://lesromantiques.yuku.com/directory>]. A community of readers was building up. Until then, most of them had never been able to talk to anyone about their love of romance, and there they found other readers who understood them. It was a very exciting time for everyone. Today "Les Romantiques" is a great readers' community. In 2004 we launched our annual short story contest. And, in September 2007, we released the first issue of our monthly webzine.

SO *You know that romance readers are often embarrassed by their reading practices. Often "alone," they don't speak much about romance reading and generally hide their romance novels. So why do they access your website and why do they log in to the message board? Could you explain what makes the social network linked to your website so different? Do romance readers feel free to speak even though they generally hide their books at home and from their relatives?*

AC It's exactly that. They finally find people who understand them, who won't laugh at them when they talk about the book they just read and loved. I think the main appeal of the website and its message boards is that we can talk with other readers and find new authors and new books that we will enjoy. But for some of our readers, it has also set them free.

They were afraid of reading on a bus, of letting their friends and family see the books they were enjoying, of saying they liked that genre. Speaking with unashamed readers has given them the strength to speak up for themselves. Seeing that they were not alone has been a kind of relief for them. They don't feel strange or silly anymore and if someone challenges their choice of literature, they have enough self-confidence now to answer them proudly.

SO *As a "great readers' community," does "Les Romantiques" have an impact on the French romance market? I know readers extensively discuss publishers' practices on the website, lines, translations, clinch covers, ebooks...*

AC Compared to the American one, the French romance market is rather small. There are only three or four publishing houses that sell romance. The ebook revolution has not reached us yet, so there are no ePublishers. The main publishing house is Harlequin. The second one is J'ai lu, with a strong historical romance line called "Aventures et Passions". J'ai lu also publishes contemporary romance, romantic suspense, paranormal romance and romantica. And then there is a fantasy and Sci-Fi publisher called Bragelonne who recently took an interest in the new paranormal romance and urban fantasy wave and publishes titles by Laurell K. Hamilton and J.R Ward. Bragelonne's original target audience was teenage boys, and by publishing paranormal romance, it aimed to target more women readers. Finally, the Presses de la Cité publish some best-selling romance authors such as Jayne Ann Krentz and Julie Garwood, but they tend more towards women's fiction.

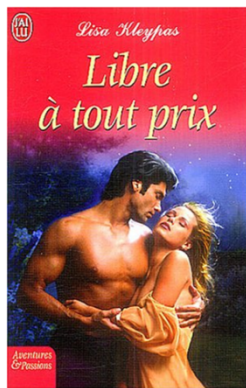
Romance is a "bad genre" in the publishing industry as well as in the academic field in France. There are numerous publishing houses, but none would think of publishing romance as such, they think that having a romance line is demeaning. Why? Because it's not literature, of course... I think this attitude comes in fact from the nineteenth century, when women were considered as having an inferior intelligence. We are interested in reading about emotions, and this alone is for many men the ultimate proof that what we read is not intellectually satisfying, just emotional garbage, inherently inferior. And even if a publisher overcame its prejudice and said: "Hey, women want to buy that kind of thing, why shouldn't we give it to them and make money?", there would be another prejudiced person that wouldn't let it happen, called the bookseller. Harlequin and J'ai lu romance lines aren't sold by booksellers in France, only by supermarkets. The other publishers I mentioned have the "good idea" not to write on their books that they are romance, so they have some space on booksellers' shelves.

SO *These books are generally hardcover books or trade paperbacks. Furthermore, in order to be sold on booksellers' shelves, Harlequin and J'ai lu publish some of their books in trade paperback and hardback.*

AC But even so, there are limitations. Once I was talking with the editor who had bought the rights for *Someone to Watch Over Me* by Judith McNaught. Readers had been waiting for five years for a new Judith McNaught book, and we knew that the Presses de la Cité had bought it. Three years later, I asked the editor why they hadn't published it yet! She answered that there was not enough space on their schedule (they publish two women's fictions a month, which is not a lot), so I said: "but it's Judith McNaught, can't you just

publish a third book any given month, for her?" Her answer was illuminating but very sad: "Oh but we can't. The booksellers won't put it on the shelves, they have limited space for women's schlock, they don't want to be burdened with too much." That's sad, because I am quite sure women read more, on average, than men and would love to buy these books from those who are unwilling to put them on their shelves. So we have a genre that's regarded as demeaning by French booksellers as well as publishers and only two of them dare acknowledge they are publishing romance.

We are in contact with all the publishers, but it's not always easy to open a dialogue with them. They will all tell you that they "love" hearing from the readers, but what they like, in fact, is receiving fan mail. They are often reluctant to give us information and listening to what readers have to say is a pretty new experience for them, it basically came with the Internet. It took us many years to establish a real relationship with J'ai lu. We met for the



first time with this publisher in 2002. At first, what we told them of our likes and dislikes was so far away from what they thought that they just dismissed us as not relevant. They told us we were not the average readers, that we were fans and thus did not have the same profile as their "true" readers. Their true readers, they perceived, were the ones who would once in a while pick up a book in a train station to kill time during a journey. But little by little, the way they saw us changed, until finally two years ago, we had a major breakthrough when they

acknowledged that changing the covers would be a good thing for their historical line. That's the first thing we had told them eight years ago, but their answer was: "Our salesmen say that the supermarket department heads say, that we absolutely need to have a couple on the cover, otherwise the books won't sell." We answered: "Well, we buy your books in spite of the covers, not because of them, trust us." It took six years for them to follow our little piece of advice, but last year we were happy when the director of J'ai lu met us in person and told us that the change of covers had been a great success in terms of sales. They then proceeded to change the covers of all their romance lines, which we are so happy about. We now have an appointment every year with J'ai lu's editors to show them the results of our annual poll on the releases of the previous year, and chat about what they have in store for the upcoming year.



SO *The publishers' strategies you detailed and the clinch covers outline how publishing houses view their romance readers... sometimes with prejudices that could explain scholars' attitudes towards romance readers. In fact, clinch covers reinforce the visibility of the genre, easily picked up without thinking much about it. In the publishers' mind, readers seem to be more passive than active. But the contacts you established with them seem to prove your website and the readers it represents can have an impact on publishing practices. In the romance market, books are made for their readers and readers have a voice, even though this voice contributes to the condemnation of the genre. Romance novels are commercial novels made to please romance readers and, thus, cannot be "great literature." Nevertheless, although J'ai lu changed its mind and followed your advice about the book covers, this evolution is also linked*

to transformations decided in the United States. It seems to me that the French romance market is only a pale copy of the American one: new series and new subgenres (erotica, paranormal romance, etc.) launched in France are first of all tested on American readers. What do you think about the evolution of the romance genre? Do you think it fits with French readers' expectations?

AC You are absolutely right, nothing new is created in France, as everything comes from the American market. As an aside, the ebook revolution will certainly change that, but time will tell... Right now, French publishers of course follow the trends of the American market, as the massive attack of the vampires and werewolves proves, but they also select trends they think will appeal to their readership. For example, they won't publish military romance, because in Europe patriotism is not as popular as in the USA, perhaps due to two rather recent and ugly conflicts on our soil. On that one I think they might be wrong, because many French readers who read in English are fans of Suzanne Brockmann. I loved every one of her books, and I don't think I'm a big war enthusiast. They also won't publish inspirational romance, because in Europe religion is a charged subject. On that one I tend to agree with them, I'm a practicing Roman Catholic and am not at all keen on inspirational romance. So every new trend in the US is not automatically fed to the French market: it's more complex than that.

SO *In fact, even though romantic fiction is an international mass-market product and romance readers of all countries want to escape and fantasize, escapism and fantasy depend on national imagery. Therefore, French publishers only select romance novels that they think will sell (Paizis).*

Since romantic fiction has evolved, sex has become more "important." Although romance novels are identified by the French academic field as akin to Barbara Cartland's romances, they can be very sensual. While reading some press articles about Harlequin for example, I have sometimes found that romance reading has been considered as feminine "masturbatory" reading ("lecture masturbatoire"). What do you think of sex in romance novels? Given that publishers have proposed erotic series ("Spicy" by Harlequin or "Passion Intense" by J'ai lu), do you think that sex in romantic fiction is more and more important?

AC Well, sex is really an issue in French. In fact, US romance has become more and more explicit and the sensuality level is often sustained by rather crude expressions or words. These are very difficult to translate into French, because crude words are not often written and give a really vulgar undertone. That's why translators use euphemisms to tone down the vocabulary a bit.

I remember when J'ai lu published their first books in their "Passion Intense" line. They sent advanced reading copies to us and we were dumbfounded. There was a historical, *Beyond Seduction* by Emma Holly, and because the translator didn't know what to do with the very crude vocabulary, he went to find seventeenth-century words and expressions à la Marquis de Sade, that were totally ridiculous or impossible to understand without a dictionary of ancient French. We had a lot of fun reviewing the book, but when I saw the editor on our next meeting in Paris, she was furious.

Anyway, this kind of ancient vocabulary was dropped forever and now translators try to use contemporary vocabulary, but it is not easy, and they are often tempted to cut a sex scene or two, because they are such a pain for them.

I think sex is more and more present in romance. Readers often say that the story is more important to them and complain when there are too many sex scenes and not enough character development, but the fact is that when a novel is not sensual enough, they feel cheated. They have come to expect sensuality in a romance, but it must not overwhelm the characters or the story: a difficult balance to find for authors and translators.

SO *Even if many French scholars and sometimes publishers consider romance readers to be passive readers, what you've said proves that they are, more than ever, active readers. That's why I tried to reevaluate French and some American theories (like the "nurturing theory") about popular romance reading in my doctoral dissertation on Francophone romance readers. I interviewed readers aged between 20 and 91 in 2007-2008 through a survey placed in libraries, second-hand bookstores and rest homes, and also via ads in TV magazines or via the website "Les Romantiques." Readers generally came from the middle classes and were employed or retired. Some of them were ex-romance readers. My sample was not representative, but the readers were drawn from diverse backgrounds and the readers I interviewed read all kind of romance novels (contemporary or historical, romance novels published by Harlequin or by J'ai lu...) What I discovered, which seems very important and interesting to me is: just as there are numerous and varying kinds of romance novels, there are numerous and varying readers and numerous and varying reading preferences. However, in research, and especially in the French academy, romance readers are generally considered to be a single, homogeneous group. Agnès, what do you think about this? As Webmaster of "Les Romantiques," you've met many readers.*

AC I totally agree with you. The thing that many "outsiders" fail to understand about the romance genre is that it has been one of the fastest evolving in the past twenty years. They often imagine it as small and simple, limited to short novels about boy-meets-girl, as if only Harlequin Presents existed. They are totally unaware of the numerous subgenres that have appeared along the years.

We were recently contacted by four Psychology students who were assigned a study by their teacher. The question was: Is Harlequin ethological? They wanted us to give them three or four books titles that were representative of Harlequin. Our first answer was: but representative of what? Are you aware that there are more than fifteen very different Harlequin lines? They were not, and neither was their teacher apparently.

So yes, I think that there are very different novels in the romance genre and thus of course different readers who are looking for very different things. Although there are of course trends, like in anything else.

We launched a challenge at the beginning of 2010: we asked our readers to write down every book they read, romance or anything else, even nonfiction. The idea was to have an objective view of what a typical romance reader read in a year. Well, after six months, the conclusion was: there is no typical romance reader!

37 readers registered the books they read. They read an average of 10 books a month per reader, but beyond this figure lay a great diversity. The minimum seemed to be 3-4 books a month (16%), whereas the big readers tended to read 15 to 20 books a month (24%). I would like to point out that these figures match almost exactly what the rest of the French population reads per year, as shown in a 2008 poll by the magazine *Livre Hebdo*: 1-5 books a year for small readers (35%) and 20 plus books a year for big readers (9%). [See: <http://www.livreshebdo.fr/actualites/DetailsActuRub.aspx?id=1552>].

Romance readers tend to read much more than the rest of the population, but there is also a great diversity of reading habits among them. Finally, I would like to add that 20% of the books listed by our readers were not romance.

SO *You seem to suggest that romance readers don't necessarily read all the romance novels they find: they choose the romance novels they read from among romance subgenres and they don't necessarily read every novel they find. Romance readers can be selective and they don't exclusively read romance novels. It seems obvious but in the academic field it doesn't seem to be recognised. Additionally, all the readers I interviewed said romance novels were safe and easy to read. Scholars have assimilated them to passive readers who get "vampirised," dominated by their novels (Coquillat; Houel); however, I think readers accept a passive role and know the romance reading codes very well. Some of the readers I interviewed wrote short romance novels. Agnès, can you tell us more about this and about the reading process?*

AC When I think of the effect romance has on me as a reader, it always reminds me of a story I read when I was a child in *All Creatures Great and Small* by James Herriot. As a veterinarian, he explained that sometimes an animal suffered so much physical pain that it lost its will to live. He had had some success in those cases by injecting it with a massive, almost lethal, dose of narcotics that made it sleep for several hours. When it awoke, it was able to fight again for its life and hopefully get better.

To me, romance works a lot like that. I am lucky enough not to experience insufferable pain in my daily life, but from time to time, I become so weary, so exhausted by the day-to-day routine, that I have nothing left with which to fight back, to find new solutions, or even to simply go on. Those are the times when I feel the urge to scream: I need fiction, and I need it now! After a few hours immersed in a romance where everything goes well, I feel much better and able to cope with anything that comes my way.

So of course reading romance may seem passive, and as you say I accept this, because I know that it will refill my batteries for many days to come. I think romance readers are rather more active and dynamic people, because the genre is empowering. For example, I hate thrillers, because after reading one I tend to feel terrified at night, looking under my

bed to see if there is a serial killer waiting to kill me and my whole family. This does not happen with romance I am sure I will feel happy and confident after reading a good one. As you mentioned, many of us also write. It's very different from reading, but I think it's the genre that gives us the confidence to do so.

When we first met publishers, they were very surprised by us and they equally surprised us. We realized that they did consider romance readers as passive readers, who would read anything that was put on the shelves for them. They did not realize that we had favorite authors. They imagined that we would just look at the picture on the cover, realize—that's a romance book!—and then read the back cover blurb and buy the novel for the story. Well, I'm sure some readers do that, but there are also many readers who have favorite authors, who look for their backlists, who are ready to go out of their way to read what they want and not just what's given to them. For this reason, more than 20% of our members have decided to read in English. Most of them were not at all fluent at first; they had only learned English in school and had never spoken or read it for 10 or 20 years. I guess their attitude towards reading is not a passive one...

SO *Nonetheless, not all romance readers have this attitude. Maybe that's why, according to some scholars, romance novels could be dangerous: romantic fiction would propose an ideal or corrupted vision of love and romance readers wouldn't be able to distinguish between fiction and reality. They would identify with passive heroines awaiting Prince Charming and tamed by a domineering hero (Rochman). However, in 1992, Laura Kinsale argued in Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women (35-37) that readers identify with the hero too. Romance novels don't recount only the adventures of a woman but the adventures of a man and a woman. And the readers I interviewed often identified with both characters. But some of them didn't identify at all: to quote Michel Picard and his essay La lecture comme jeu, they rather identify with "situations." Romance readers don't assimilate themselves to the characters of the novels but they experience what the characters experience and particularly what they feel. Since what the characters feel is real even if the story is a paranormal story, romance reading is first of all an emotional reading. Agnès, what do you think about the identification process? Could you describe for us your experiences and your feelings when you are reading a romance?*

AC Well, I think there are all kinds of identification processes, depending on the reader. I know that I am rather "old school," because I tend to identify more with the heroine. In the 1980s, romance was written solely from her point of view. I can remember clearly the first book I read that gave the hero's point of view; I found it refreshing and new at the time.

Today, a romance written exclusively from the heroine's point of view would clearly lack something, because the reader wouldn't be able to understand the hero or share his emotions. But personally, I tend to identify more with the heroine and like a book with a good heroine even if the hero is not as well defined or as interesting. However I know many readers for whom the hero's point of view is more important.

As for the danger of identifying with a frail young heroine, I would like to share something that surprised me a lot. Some romance novels have really rough heroes, who might even bully a little the poor heroine. I tend to dislike that kind of novel, I prefer beta heroes, who are man enough not to need to punch their chests to prove it. But some readers love these big bad alpha males, and to my astonishment, I discovered that those who love them the most tended to be active women, with responsibilities in their jobs and who were pretty much in charge in their professional life as well as in their personal life: strong women, in short. I was baffled at first, and then it occurred to me that they probably liked to feel like a frail little thing once in a while, to be taken care of, as a change from their real life, where they had to be strong all the time. So much for the myth of the debilitating romance novel.

Finally, I am curious to know what the scholars you tell me about think about reader identification in M/M romance: i.e. romance novels where the heroes are male homosexuals. It's a strong subgenre of erotica and is written and read exclusively by women. There's a big lack of a frail heroine there ... That shows the identification process is much more complex than they imagine.

SO *In fact, the identification process is a complex process, whichever book we read. And fiction isn't reality. Even "popular" readers who like to immerse themselves in a fictional world know that it differs from real life. Although the identification process differs from one reader to another and although readers are different from each other, romance readers nevertheless share some characteristics. When I interviewed some of them, I noticed that, for both old and young, the first romance reading was generally linked to important life experiences like adolescence or retirement. And I think that perhaps romance reading could be linked to identity development.*

AC I don't know. I have never examined the identification process from this point of view. I began reading Harlequin's Contemporary Series Romance when I was sixteen and my mother began to buy them for herself at the beginning of the 1980s. I was quite hooked from the start and she was sometimes mad at me because I would find the new books she had just bought and take them to my room before she could even read them. Anyway, this ended when I left home at the age of eighteen to study international business in Paris. I didn't have much time to read romance and my mother got fed up with it and threw out every Harlequin book in the house.

A few years later I had finished my studies, had a job, and was married. My husband and I had just bought an apartment in Paris, and I remembered those sweet Harlequin romances I used to read when I was younger. I wanted to read that kind of book again. So I went to the supermarket, and found myself drawn more towards historical romance, because I love history and they give me more of a break from real life. That's when I fell in love with romance for the second time: this was at the beginning of the 1990s.

For me romance reading was more a question of opportunity. The first time, my mother bought the books and made them available at no cost for me. The second time, I think I was at a point in my life where I began to settle down and have time to read. I see retirement as

the same kind of opportunity: more time to do something you like, and fewer concerns that you should be doing something more important, to further your career or make a home, for example.

I think romance is an entertainment that takes a rather large amount of time. So you need to have enough time not to feel guilty about it. Of course there are also readers who come to romance when they have had a rough time in their life, like illness or the loss of a loved one. They use romance to escape a day-to-day life that has become difficult to bear, as a breathing space I guess.

I am not sure that romance helps to develop identity, if that is what you mean.

SO *I don't suggest that romance helps to develop identity. But Nicole Robine thought that romance reading could be psychologically determined. And actually, I think that the first reading can be psychologically determined, i.e. linked to some important life experiences such as adolescence, retirement, or illness as you pointed out. However, romance reading cannot be exclusively explained by these kinds of experiences. You began reading romantic fiction at sixteen but, if romance reading was exclusively psychologically determined, you would have stopped reading these books when you became an adult. Therefore, one question remains: why do romance readers read romance novels? It isn't just a question of opportunity. In interviews, readers told me "I read to relax," "I read to escape," "I read to dream." All of these answers are applicable to other types of fiction (mystery novels, western fiction...). So why do readers choose romance novels to relax, to escape, or to dream? I would argue that romance novels open a door to a world where love and, in particular, life are celebrated: a world where relationships—all types of human relationships—are celebrated and idealized.*

AC I think you have summed it up pretty well. The world of romance is safe: the goodies will win in the end, the baddies will get what they deserve. Love triumphs, romantic love of course, but also love in the family. Romance celebrates positive emotions, puts forward the best in humanity: it's a message of hope. That's why romance is empowering, I think: no matter how difficult their journey is, we feel assured that, in the end, all will be well for our heroes. We can safely feel optimistic ... When you ask readers why they prefer romance, I think the answer you get most of the time is: because of the happy ending.

SO *In fact, in romance novels, all conflicts are resolved and all relationships, in the end, are positively established. That's why romance as a reading choice could perhaps be considered as a "symptom" of a society—our society—where human relationships are difficult to establish and yet are simultaneously considered as a temporary positive solution to this social sickness, since romantic fiction offers a humane vision of the world.*

[1] Delly was the pseudonym of a French brother and sister, Frédéric and Jeanne-Marie Petitjean de la Rosière, who wrote romantic fiction at the beginning of the twentieth century.

[2] Max du Veuzit, Magali, and Delly (see note 1, above) wrote Francophone romance fiction between 1900 and 1960; they were commercially successful until Harlequin sold its first romance novels in French.

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