

Crusie and the Con

Christina A. Valeo

Published online: April 2012

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

Abstract: Several of Jennifer Crusie's novels include characters who are con artists. In an early novel (such as *Trust Me on This*) such characters are secondary, but in later novels (such as *Welcome to Temptation* and its sequel *Faking It*), the characters who are running the cons are increasingly central to the romance and the anticipated "Happily Ever After."

The presence of such characters raises questions about genre standards such as trust and trustworthiness, intention toward the other person, and ability to deliver on promises made. These elements dictate the outcomes in both con games and romantic relationships.

Further, this paper argues that Crusie's self-aware style and metanarrative tendencies extend the parallels between a con and a romance from the intimate relationships among characters to the reader-author-text relation involved in every literary transaction. Although Crusie's conning characters may be read as particular anomalies in a generic pattern, they can be also seen to raise issues of reader response in their positing of a "Happily Ever After" that seems, like any good con, too good to be true. This paper concludes by wondering about the pleasures of reading a novel whose happy ending is simultaneously wholly unlikely and generically guaranteed.

About the Author: Christina A. Valeo is Chair of the Department of Education and Associate Professor of English at Eastern Washington University. Previous publications include work on the figure of American Indians in British Romantic writing (in *Engaged Romanticism: Romanticism as Praxis*, Lussier and Matsunaga, eds) and the use of magic in the popular romance series of Nora Roberts (in *New Approaches to Popular Romance*, Frantz and Selinger, eds). Her current research interests include the quest for the ideal father in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series.

Keywords: Jennifer Crusie, popular romance fiction, confidence games in fiction, con artists in fiction, Christina A. Valeo

As Crusie's romantic leads evolve from chasing the con (*Trust Me on This*), to abandoning the con (*Welcome to Temptation*), to embracing the con (*Faking It*), they highlight the ways in which romance is like a con and the sometimes slippery distinctions between these two kinds of intimate, interpersonal relationships. The outcomes of both romantic relationships and con games depend on trust and trustworthiness, intention toward the other person, and ability to deliver on promises made. To highlight these elements is to call into question aspects of the romance novel that have come to be considered categorical absolutes, notably the "declaration" of love, identified as one of the eight essential elements of the genre by Pamela Regis in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. How can characters or readers trust a declaration of love made by a con artist who has a pattern of lying to both family and friends? More important, *do* readers trust such a declaration, or are they just charmed by the writers and the generic promises of romance?

To talk about Crusie and the con is to enter into at least three existing critical conversations. First, Crusie's writing is of interest to romance scholars, as this edition of JPRS attests. Herself a literary critic as well as a novelist, Crusie has weighed in on the long-standing debate of whether romances are "bad" for readers or "good" for readers (see, for example, Radway, Modeleski, Krentz et al, Regis, Crusie herself). My consideration of the con in Crusie's work, and my argument that the exchange between romance writer and romance reader itself resembles a con, focuses on the agency of the reader in the exchange, on her willing participation in this literary shell game. If we extend the conversation beyond the moral debate, the author's intent, or the text's effect, we can consider more completely the reader's role in constructing the meaning and negotiating the impact of the text.

The second conversation that informs this study of Crusie's cons is research that has been conducted by communication scholars and those who study criminal justice. Con games rely on old and established patterns of interpersonal behavior like flattery and concession, well documented in a variety of scholarly and practical publications. I rely on several of these sources to illustrate the criminal behavior and highlight the precise parallels between a con and a romance.

Finally, Crusie's con artist characters are part of a tradition in American literature, most famously dramatized in Herman Melville's last novel, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). Although Crusie alludes to that story and its steamboat setting in the opening lines of *Trust Me on This*, her con artist characters are more in the spirit of Horatio Alger, Jr.'s *Ragged Dick* (1868). Karen Halttunen identifies this character as part of a late nineteenth-century shift, when the figure of the confidence man changed from threat to model. She argues that "Dick's rise depends on three qualities new to American success ideology: aggressiveness, charm, and the arts of the confidence man" (202). In the three Crusie novels about cons, there is only one con man who plays the part of a (not very villainous) villain. Instead, "aggressiveness, charm, and the arts of the confidence man" are apt descriptors of the romantic heroes and heroines in the novels.^[1]

As the characters who con become increasingly central to the romance story, their paths to Happily Ever After endings are complicated by the shifting terrain of trust, intent, and capacity. In fact, the very qualities that make a character a capable con artist make him or her unlikely to be successful in other, more lasting interpersonal relationships. To trust that such characters will arrive at their HEA regardless of such history or tendencies may

be a well-established genre expectation, but it also requires a reader response well worth our critical attention.

Part I: *Trust Me on This*—Chasing the Con

As its title suggests, Crusie's 1997 Bantam "Loveswept" novel *Trust Me on This* examines the ways that trust is essential to a Happily Ever After ending in a romance. If hero and heroine can learn to trust each other, the novel hypothesizes, they are well on their way to their HEA. Only in its broadest strokes, however, does the novel support that reading. The devilish details suggest instead that the appearance, statements, actions, and intentions of the "heroic" couples and the "villainous" one are disconcertingly similar. According to one criminal investigator, "Successful con artists are charming, manipulative, and able to exploit the innate trust and greed of many people."^[2] By that definition, protagonists Dennie Banks and Alec Prentice, as well as their "sidekicks" Harry and Victoria, are as guilty of conning as the alleged con artist in the novel. All four of those characters are rewarded with a happy ending, though none of them is unconditionally trustworthy.

Crusie's heroine, Dennie Banks, is a reporter trying to get a story, and her hero, Alec Prentice, is an undercover cop trying to get the conman. Alec attends a literary conference taking place, with a nod to Melville's *Confidence-Man*, at the "Riverbend Queen Hotel,"^[3] hoping to catch Brian Bond, a con artist who is there to perpetrate what seems to be a real estate scheme. Alec also hopes to apprehend the mysterious brunette who is Bond's partner in crime. Interestingly, there is initially nothing in Alec's appearance, actions, or statements that would encourage Dennie to trust him. His manner and appearance are much like those of Brian "Bondman," the name the con man uses in this caper. His interest in Dennie stems primarily from his suspicion that she is the "mysterious Brunette" who often helps Bond perpetrate his schemes. In his effort to trap, or entrap, Bond, the romantic hero lies to the heroine, the villain, and several secondary characters, charming and manipulating them all into a situation where Bond is likely to step across a criminal line.

Likewise, Dennie's trustworthiness is frequently called into question, despite her ostensible role as the novel's romantic heroine. Her appearance is not a reliable indicator of her trustworthiness; her brunette hair makes her fit the description of Bonds' partner-in-crime. Furthermore, Dennie changes her clothes to change her appearance of reliability, choosing a gray suit to be "serious" and showing cleavage when she's trying to manipulate someone. Neither are Dennie's thoughts and actions trustworthy. Dennie fakes a personal interest in Alec to secure an introduction to his aunt; she fakes a personal interest in Bonds to encourage his fraudulent behavior.

The blurred lines between heroic and criminal behavior continue down to the level of the secondary characters. The conman, Brian Bond, spends most of the novel telling the truth: he is sincerely romantically (or at least sexually) interested in Dennie and he really does have some land in Florida to sell. By contrast, Alec's Aunt Victoria, initially a model of forthright speech, eventually joins Dennie in the series of falsehoods and lies that will lure conman Brian Bond into a legal trap. Victoria also lies to her would-be suitor Donald, a

secondary character whose only purpose in the novel is twice to play the gullible, romantic fool. Victoria expresses a romantic interest in him when she in fact sees no such potential; instead, her objective is to enhance the trap that Alex and Harry are setting for Bonds.

Because the romantic principals do not trust each other for much of the novel, and are not reliably trustworthy for the rest of it, their potential for a happy romantic ending actually comes to rest on their intent. Alec and Dennie address this issue explicitly more than halfway through the novel, as it is clear that Dennie still does not trust Alec.

“Do you think I’m a crook?” Alec smiled his open, honest boyish smile at her. “I think you could be.” Dennie stared back, unsmiling. “I think you’d probably do just about anything if you thought the reason was right. And I haven’t known you long enough to know what reasons you think are right.”^[4]

Once Dennie understands Alec’s reasons for his behavior, she does come to trust him. For his part, Alec learns to trust Dennie when she finally joins him in Chicago to marry him and live with him after she has the career success she has been pursuing all along.^[5]

Trust Me on This serves as a good introduction to the discussion of the shared ground between a romance and a con. It posits and then dismisses the idea that trust is easy to give or to come by. It rejects the notion that trustworthiness can be ascertained by appearance, actions, or statements, and insists that trust is only established once characters know each other well enough to ascertain intent, an issue fundamental to Crusie’s next con novel, *Welcome to Temptation*.

Trust Me on This likewise raises the issue of the reader’s response in accepting the supposition that situational trustworthiness and honorable intent are necessary to secure a happy ending, even in the world of a romance novel. Brian Bond, for example, goes to jail at the end of the novel, despite the fact that he turns out to have been behaving in a trustworthy manner and had, in this case, honorable intentions, until Dennie bared enough cleavage to entrap him into lying to her and promising something he could not legally deliver. His erstwhile assistant Sherée, in contrast, goes free and seems rewarded for her stupidity and mendacity by a new relationship with a man who will “take care of her” (Victoria’s silly but sincere suitor Donald). Is the reader’s sense of justice not engaged in her reading of the novel? Is it served well enough by the happy endings doled out to the two romantic leads and their loved ones? Is the reader’s pleasure instead in the seeming irony in the details of the ending? In these complications and contradictions Crusie’s novel asks not the question of what the reader’s response might be, but why she might respond the way she does to the various outcomes of the novel.

Part II: *Welcome to Temptation*—Abandoning the Con

Crusie’s single-title release *Welcome to Temptation* (2000) includes a hero who is trusting and trustworthy, while the heroine, for most of the novel, is neither.^[6] In terms of a discussion of the parallels between romance and a con, Crusie’s inclusion of a con artist as one of the romantic principals complicates the question of trust and suggests that it is not as essential to romance as it might seem. As they were in *Trust Me on This*, issues of trust in

this novel are ultimately trumped by the question of intent. In the later novel, however, the happy ending depends not on clarifying characters' intents but in changing them.

The romantic hero is Phineas T. Tucker, the mayor of a small Ohio town, who has very little to hide. The heroine, Sophie Dempsey, has by contrast very little she is willing to reveal. Phin is a life-long resident of Temptation, who has reluctantly followed in the footsteps of his great-grandfather, his grandfather, and his father in serving as mayor, despite the fact that he would rather be spending time with his daughter Dillie, working in his bookstore, or playing pool. Sophie and her sister Amy are makers of wedding videos who have come to Temptation to make a "comeback" film for a former resident, Clea Whipple, who used to star in porn films and B-movies and used to be married to Sophie and Amy's brother Davy. When Amy and Sophie end up on the wrong side of a town ordinance prohibiting the filming of porn, Sophie and Phin's burgeoning relationship is threatened by her uncertain allegiances and the damage to his reputation as mayor. The conflict is resolved when Sophie charms and cons the town council and populace, restores Phin's reputation, and agrees to stay in Temptation and marry him.

Issues of trust and intent are predictably crucial in a romance between a con artist and an upstanding mayor. Sophie arrives in Temptation intending to go straight, but she's quickly sucked into her sister Amy's agenda to make a (possibly illegal) soft-porn film and to exploit the participants by simultaneously shooting a documentary about the filmmaking. Sophie's relationship with Phin begins as one of satisfying, casual sex, so she does not have many qualms about using their real-life dealings and dialog as fodder for her film script. Having previously been burned by the rich scions of Small Town, USA, Sophie neither trusts Phin nor expects him to trust her. Further, Sophie is hardly unique in her lack of full disclosure; at one point in the novel, Phin observes to his friend the police chief Wes Mazur that everyone is lying to him (including Phin himself).^[7] In short, almost no one in town is entirely trustworthy. Because the sheer number of lies and liars negates temporarily the issue of trust, the crucial qualities of the characters become instead one of intent: what are their reasons for lying? The reasons are as varied as the characters—self-defense, sex, money, political gain, family, love— but only the last two are ultimately established as acceptable reasons.

From the start Sophie is a somewhat capable if reluctant con. She deploys her share of the family's gift for the game in order to protect herself, her sister, and later her brother. As her feelings for Phin change and grow, so do her conflicts. Phin says with certainty that Sophie isn't playing him, when in fact she is.^[8] When a disgruntled citizen broadcasts the soft-porn film Sophie and her sister have made, Phin confronts her about her lying, and about the fact that she used some of their conversations for dialogue in the film:

"You're not supposed to betray the people you sleep with," Phin said.
"By the time I realized there might be something to betray, it was too late,"
Sophie said. "I owed Amy, too. And we didn't think anybody would ever
know."^[9]

If Sophie's trustworthiness were the first and last issue, this confrontation might well signal the end of the relationship. Instead, the novel introduces the relevance of intent. Phin ultimately recognizes that Sophie has been lying to him to protect her siblings; his own inclinations have been to protect his family, including his meddling mother. Sophie's

Happily Ever After is a result of her willingness to redefine her family, to abandon her siblings to their own devices, and to make Phin and his daughter the family she'll do anything to protect. She reassures Phin as she decides to take his name, and his "Tucker for Mayor" posters, that there is "Nothing but good times ahead." After watching the lengths to which Sophie will go to protect those she loves, readers leave the novel reassured that Phin and Dillie, as well as most of the town of Temptation, are in the slightly shifty hands of a woman who wants the best for them, and is likely to be able to deliver.

Sophie and Phin have both been intensely loyal to their families of origin, so their happiness seems secured when they shift that loyalty to the new family they will form with each other and Phin's daughter Dillie. Even Sophie's brother, who benefited from his older sister's protection, encourages this shift: "Listen to me: Marry the mayor and keep the dog and live happily ever after in this house. That's what you want. Forget about me and Amy and go for it."[\[10\]](#) With her brother's blessing, Sophie does shift her allegiance to Phin and his daughter and her newly-adopted town. The novel rewards not her trustworthiness but her good intentions.

As if to accentuate the fact that trustworthiness is not enough and intentions are what dictate outcomes in the fictional world of Temptation, even Phin, who has been trustworthy throughout, must reconsider his intentions. His loyalty to his mother must be tempered if he and Sophie are to build a successful and independent family unit.

"She's corrupted you," Liz said, almost spitting in her frustration. "She's—"
"Well, it runs in her family," Phin said. "The rest of your grandchildren are going to be half-degenerate."
Liz froze.
Phin nodded at her sympathetically. "Yeah, I have to marry her. I'm sorry, Mom. I know this wasn't what you had planned. Any last words before you disown me?"[\[11\]](#)

Liz's initial reaction may be one of intense distrust and concern, but she too is able to shift her loyalties to include Sophie once she understands that Sophie has been the target of another town matriarch who has been trying to clear the way for her own daughter to marry Phin. She warns Virginia Garvey, "Don't ever come after my family again," and then adds, "And that includes Sophie."[\[12\]](#)

In an overall analysis of the parallels between romance and con in terms of trust, intent, and ability, *Welcome to Temptation* makes a strong case for the importance of the characters' intents. Sophie comes from a family of cons and will probably always be somewhat of a con, but once her schemes are used to help Phin and the town, the fact that she is usually lying or misleading seems to stop being an obstacle to her Happily Ever After. The final scene of the novel includes Phin's proposal and Sophie's agreement to marry him, but that standard element of the genre[\[13\]](#) segues quickly into Sophie's decision to become a politician and run for mayor once Phin retires. With an eye toward the four thousand *Tucker for Mayor* posters still available, Sophie announces

"I think I'll take your name," she said, smiling up at him sweetly. "Sophie Dempsey Tucker. It sounds..." She looked at the ring again. "...powerful."

“Why do I have a bad feeling about this?” Phin said, and she said, “Because your life just changed, but it’s okay. You can trust me.”[\[14\]](#)

This exchange captures several con elements that might well undermine Sophie’s assertion in the last line of the book, “Nothing but good times ahead.” A married woman could be expected to take her husband’s name, but a con artist also changes her name to suit her purposes. Phin is at least somewhat uncomfortable with Sophie’s oblique reference to some future plans, a reminder that she had lied to and manipulated him through most of their courtship.[\[15\]](#) Sophie’s acknowledgement that Phin’s life has drastically changed is quickly followed by her reassurance that he can trust her, but on what would that trust be based? For Phin, and for Crusie’s readers, to believe that there are nothing but good times ahead for these two characters requires them to accept Sophie’s word and/or to believe that she has changed as much, and even more, than he has.

Part III: *Faking It*—Embracing the Con

In the sequel to *Welcome to Temptation*, Crusie takes the romance/con connections one twist further. She has established by the outcomes of the two earlier books that even a romance hero or heroine may not be entirely trustworthy when it comes to what he or she says or does; she has argued, by way of granting limited “Happily Ever Afters,” that love and family are the best of the good intentions. In *Faking It* (2002), she introduces the Goodnights, who revisit all those same questions and add one crucial question more: does the character have the ability to deliver on the promises that he or she has made? Because Sophie and Phin had demonstrated their abilities to keep their promises to their families of origin, no matter how misguided those promises may have been, the ways in which their romance was a con are presumably curtailed once they are each other’s first loyalty. *Faking It* presents some characters for whom that presumption falls flat.

In the newly-introduced Tilda Goodnight and her love interest Davy Dempsey (Sophie’s brother), readers find a heroine/hero pair who are suspicious of everyone, for very good reasons. Each has something—in fact, many things—to hide. Further, they, like some of the characters in Crusie’s previous work, seem better off establishing some healthy boundaries from their families of origins rather than falling into martyr roles that would have them protect the family at too much cost to themselves. The way each character must determine his or her loyalties going forward, raises, as it did in *Temptation*, the issue of intent. Finally, Davy and Tilda have been playing their con games for so long, they are unwilling or unable (or both) to stop. Their relationship—both emotional and sexual—works best when they embrace their own, and each other’s, authentic selves, complete with criminal pasts and a penchant for performative play. The end of the novel, which acknowledges their mutual shiftiness even as it posits a Happy Ever After ending, calls in to question whether these characters have the ability to keep the promises they will make.

Davy and Tilda’s paths first cross when they are both chasing Clea Whipple. Tilda is trying to recover a painting she forged, Davy is trying to recover some money Clea took, and they work together to recover the other five “Scarlet” paintings so Tilda can put her fraudulent past to rest. Davy moves in with Tilda and the Goodnights initially to be close to

Clea, but he eventually stays because of his affection for them and his inclination to be their protector.

Taking literally the old con cliché of “honor among thieves,” Crusie establishes trust between Davy and Tilda in the opening scene of the novel when they simultaneously break into the house where Clea is staying, Tilda to get her painting, Davy to get his money. Tilda kisses Davy and asks him to steal the painting for her, but importantly she does both in the anonymity of a dark closet. He moves her physically into the light before he agrees to the crime, but the metaphor only serves to accentuate how little about Tilda can actually be “seen” at this stage of the story. Tilda is disconcerted when Davy follows her home, but she continues to trust him with her agenda of acquiring all the Scarlet Hodge paintings, without revealing to him that she is the artist/forgery. Davy initially will not disclose his criminal agenda at all. Their second “breaking and entering” adventure includes another closeted kiss, but it culminates in an unsatisfying sexual encounter back at the gallery/apartment building where Tilda is, as the title forecasts, “faking it.”

As partners in crime who trust each other as much as they trust anyone, Davy and Tilda embark on a series of performances to con or steal back the six Scarlet Hodge paintings. But the performances themselves serve ironically to reveal the various truths of Tilda. As she takes on the roles of the sexy Vilma, the sweet Celeste, the talented Scarlet, the shy Betty, the virago Veronica, she is actually showing, rather than hiding, aspects of her personality. Tilda’s sister Eve serves as a foil in this respect as she has two separate personalities: “Eve,” Nadine’s mild, schoolteacher mother, and “Louise,” the erotic singer who performs at her gay ex-husband’s nightclub. Eve/Louise makes clear that a healthy relationship is not about having multiple personalities, as both of her romances end painfully (her marriage, and her fling with Davy’s friend Simon). Instead, Crusie argues through the implications of these various performances, a healthy relationship seems to depend on the partners’ ability to embrace—both literally and figuratively—all of the existing and developing facets of the person they love. In Davy and Tilda’s relationship, that success is dramatized by their last and best sexual interaction, on the bed Tilda has painted in “Scarlet’s” style, as Tilda regales Davy with family tales from a long tradition of art and fraud, “naked and unashamed.”^[16] In this scene Tilda finds the self-confidence to reveal everything, and Davy accepts and loves her not in spite of those long-hidden depths but, in many ways, because of them.

Because Crusie establishes “trust” among these thieves so quickly, that element of their relationship does not function according to romance genre expectations. Both Tilda and Davy seem to give and take trust on credit they have not yet earned with each other. Crusie also complicates the question of “intent” in this novel, calling attention to the power of charm, and the need to distinguish somehow between charm and a con. Davy’s father, Michael Dempsey, provides a foil for Davy in this regard as he, like Davy, needs a place to stay and establishes a “romantic” relationship to secure lodging. While Michael is presumably having sex with building resident and painter Dorcas Finsterto secure a place to sleep, Davy is not having sex with Tilda in order to acquire the same. Michael is a charmer who cons people to get what he wants, and the Goodnights recognize those qualities quickly. Gwen acknowledges that Michael would probably “sell everything they have including [the dog] and then leave with the money.”^[17] Crusie uses limited omniscience as this novel’s narrative voice, so any character assessment of Michael is based

on what he says and does, and on the other characters' opinions of him. Readers gain no additional information and Gwen's assessment of Michael proves accurate.

In contrast, Davy's intentions are revealed by his thoughts, which the narrator does provide. At one point after he has established himself at the gallery and among the family he thinks, "This family needs a keeper,"[\[18\]](#) and he proceeds to fill that role. While Michael secretly takes money, Davy secretly gives money, paying off the mortgage on the building to free Gwen and Tilda and Eve from that responsibility and restriction.

On multiple occasions, Davy's intentions seem unarguably good, which is why his argument with Tilda over whether or not to tell Simon that Eve and Louise are the same person raises such effective questions about the value of intent.

"Face it," Tilda said. "You want to tell him because it's the right thing for you to do, not the right thing for him to hear."

Davy frowned at her. "So I'm a selfish bastard for wanting to do the right thing."

"Yes," Tilda said.

"I know that's wrong." Davy stood up. "Let me get back to you on why."

"Well, until then, keep your mouth shut," Tilda said. "You honest people can make life hell for everybody else."[\[19\]](#)

This exchange highlights a variety of ways that Crusie is complicating concepts like trust and intent, and consequently subverting the expectations of genre romance. First, Tilda's instructions for Davy to "Face it" resonate nicely with the title's suggestion to "fake it," which is exactly what Davy will need to do if he keeps this knowledge from his best friend. Often in this novel, "faking it" is an efficient idea and sometimes even a moral one. Second, Tilda suggests that doing the right thing might not always lead to the right result; that the truth, in cases like this, is not always welcome. This subversion of a seeming good, like "truth," suggests a rather complicated morality. Tilda's assertions here seem valid for two reasons: in this scene, Davy cannot rebut them; and in a later scene, Tilda's prediction about Simon's reaction to the "truth" about Eve/Louise proves accurate and heartbreaking. Finally, Tilda is encouraging Davy to "keep [his] mouth shut," in order to spare others pain. In a genre that may be assumed to expect truth and declarations, this exchange nicely constructs the possibility of a greater good, and one that is far more difficult to achieve and maintain.

In *Faking It*, Davy is one of a series of characters in a variety of situations whose good intentions are doomed. Gwen's intention to protect the family and the gallery has actually kept her and her daughters trapped in unfulfilling lives. The Giordano/Goodnight family ancestors intended to leave valuable fakes for their descendents' profits, but those locked-up paintings are actually a major source of Tilda's pain. Nadine may intend to follow in her progenitors' footsteps and choose a career that can take care of the family, but those paths are not choices that any of the people who love her would be happy to see her make.

Crusie's con novels all interrogate whether characters have good intentions and whether good intentions lead to good outcomes, questions which seem more suitable to ascertaining whether someone has been conned than whether a romance will succeed. The lying, greedy assistant to the villain of *Trust Me on This* is rewarded by a relationship

(however unsatisfying to the other characters or the reader) which perfectly fulfills her desire to be taken care of by a wealthy man. Sophie Dempsey's good intention in *Temptation*, specifically to protect her siblings from their own suspicious behavior, leads to seeming disaster before she begins to effectively use her conning skills to help Phin instead. Michael Dempsey has the best of intentions when it comes to visiting Sophie and meeting his grandson, but every involved character, except for him, clearly sees how such a visit could be ruinous.

In his desire to have close relationships with his grown children, Michael Dempsey manifests the final, telling parallel between romance and a con: he is incapable of realizing that kind of relationship. Whether characters are trusting or trustworthy, whether their actions and iterations are sincere, and whatever their intentions might be, they have to be able to "deliver the goods." If they cannot, because they do not own the land they are selling or because they are making interpersonal promises they will not be able to keep, there can be no "Happily Ever After."[\[20\]](#) Although he is a secondary character in the Dempsey character stories, Michael serves a crucial role, and he may be the best indicator of the work the reader is doing in crafting her response to the romance and its standards. Like the grown Dempsey children, Michael believes himself trustworthy to his family, though not to strangers. He intends to love and support his children, although references to their unsettled childhood provide evidence to the contrary.[\[21\]](#) Most important, Michael Dempsey lacks the ability to sustain any of the good impulses he may feel. When he heads to *Temptation* to see Sophie, Davy calls her husband Phin to intervene:

Phin picked up.

"What's wrong?" he said. "Dillie says it's an emergency."

"It is," Davy said. "Dad figured out where you are. He's heading your way. Hold the fort until I get there and remove him. Do not let him alone with Sophie and do not give him money."

"I'm not stupid," Phin said.

"Neither is he," Davy said. "I like to think of him as washed up, but the man can talk anybody into anything."[\[22\]](#)

Davy's use of military jargon ("hold the fort," and later in the scene, "Head for high ground") suggests that Sophie's family is under siege during her father's visit. He has been presented as the foil to Davy and the exception to the new Dempsey family rule of love, trust, good intentions, and long-term commitment, but he haunts the pages as a reminder of the kind of toll one person can take on another if his charm is a cover for his con abilities rather than the surface demonstration of a real ability to effectively love. To believe that Davy Dempsey and Sophie Dempsey will get their enduring HEAs, readers must either ignore the specter of Michael Dempsey and his destructive impulses or convince themselves that he is now the exception to the new Dempsey family rule.

Part IV: Conclusions—Buying the Con

By calling attention to these powerful parallels between romance and a con, Crusie is then simultaneously subverting and substantiating the genre. Her books that include cons and con artists can be read as completely undermining genre staples like the “declaration” of love between the two main characters.^[23] If, for example, Davy and Tilda’s declaration scene that ends the book uses their nicknames to indicate their mutual familiarity, intimacy, and *joie d vivre*—Davy calls her “Matilda Scarlet Celeste Veronica Betty Vilma Goodnight,” for example—on the other hand it also highlights the possibility that these two declarations are empty iterations and mere verbal play.^[24] In some ways, Crusie demonstrates that romance is always a con, a series of moves one communication scholar interestingly calls “stroking”: “verbal reinforcements that create a feeling of happiness, success, and well-being.”^[25] For this ending to be a happy one, characters and readers alike must believe that the statements of these two life-long liars are not just lines, but are somehow utterly and enduringly true.

So are readers of *Faking It*, readers of Crusie, readers of romance in general, making a leap of faith, or are they themselves being conned? What would such a con look like? What is at stake? *Faking It* offers a provocative if unflattering comparison in the success Michael Dempsey has in selling the awful paintings of Dorcas Finster.

Davy watched for a moment to see Michael’s newest mark turn to him and expand under the light in his smile and the glint in his eye. *That’s wrong*, he thought, but she looked so happy as she bought a Finster that it was hard to explain why it was wrong.

Maybe when she woke up the next morning and realized she’d bought a watercolor of sadistic fishermen drowning fish, maybe that was when it was wrong. Assuming she did. Maybe she’d look at it and remember how she felt when she bought it. Maybe it would make her happy.^[26]

Readers know Michael Dempsey cannot be trusted in what he says; his intentions are almost exclusively and unapologetically mercenary. His son Davy knows these facts better than anyone, and yet he seems to suggest an interpretation of this con game that lets the outcome, not the intent, determine whether or not a con has occurred. Caveat emptor, indeed.

Crusie declared her intent early in her writing career, as she made the choice to switch from studying romance to writing it: “By the end of the month, I’d skimmed or read almost a hundred romance novels and two life-changing things happened to me: I felt more powerful, more optimistic, and more in control of my life than ever before, and I decided I wanted to write romance fiction. Anything that did that much good for me, was something that I, as a feminist, wanted to do for other women.”^[27] But writerly reassurances and genre guarantees aside, one might well wonder to what extent Crusie is romancing, or conning, her readers. She even explains, over the course of *Welcome to Temptation* and *Faking It* exactly how she might pull off such a scheme, in her dramatization of the Dempsey family’s five steps to making people do what you want them to do. In the opening pages of *Welcome to Temptation*, Sophie Dempsey attempts to “con” Stephen Garvey to minimize the damage of the fender bender they’ve just had. As she feeds him the appropriate lines, she holds up the relevant number of fingers behind her back to

communicate to her sister Amy, who also knows this game, exactly what she's attempting to accomplish:

"One: make the mark smile."

"Two: make the mark agree with you."

"Three: make the mark feel superior."

"Four: give the mark something."

"Five: get what you want and get out."[\[28\]](#)

Because Amy interrupts the process, Sophie does not succeed at this particular con. Crusie, however, has just given readers an outline to understanding this particular interpersonal relationship, one which shows how the criminal version of this game is played in real life.[\[29\]](#)

In this discussion of the parallels between romance and a con, however, it's worth taking a meta-cognitive moment to look at the parallels between romance fiction and a con. The opening pages of *Welcome to Temptation*, for example, up to and including the scene between Sophie and Stephen Garvey, themselves seem to follow the steps of a Dempsey con. Several examples of Crusie's wit abound in the first few pages to "make the mark smile." The limited omniscient narrator gives readers insight into Sophie's thoughts, so while the character is earnest, readers are laughing: "More riotously happy, southern Ohio landscape. That couldn't be good."[\[30\]](#) Readers familiar with Crusie's biography and her own affection for "riotously happy, southern Ohio landscape" are rewarded with an additional layer of humor, as the character's feeling diverges so completely from the author's.[\[31\]](#)

An early example of the way these opening paragraphs might parallel the second step in a con, "make the mark agree with you," involve a wink toward generic conventions. As Amy tries to offer her sister reassurance about their time in *Temptation*, she asks, "What could go wrong?" Sophie responds, "'Don't say that.' Sophie sank lower in her seat. 'Anytime anybody in a movie says, 'What could go wrong?' something goes wrong.'"[\[32\]](#) Movie quotes are a Dempsey family hobby, but the observation is apt for popular fiction as well; in this case, the fender bender with the Garvey's Cadillac is literally just around the bend.

The third step in the con process, "make the mark feel superior," has to be handled delicately in the courtship of both a real-life mark and a romance reader. If the mark feels too superior, she may get suspicious or lose interest. Crusie and other romance writers would lose readers who felt superior to the writers; it might not be worth the reader's time or money to continue with the text. Similarly, if readers feel too superior to the characters, they may rapidly lose interest. A key ingredient to comic genres, those with happy endings, is the audience's certainty that everything will work out even as the characters worry about impending disaster. In the opening pages of *Welcome to Temptation*, readers can sympathize with Sophie's desire to avoid trouble even as they know with certainty that her story will have a happy ending. A detail like Sophie's romance with her (ex) therapist, for example, lets readers know that this character has some growing to do on this journey without costing her their attention or their sympathy. Sophie initially feels guilty about her sexual experimentation with Phin, and she calls Brandon, her ex-therapist and current significant other, to confess. He seems unconcerned with the infidelity, misdiagnosing her

motivation and reassuring her that “When you get home, we’ll have a long talk and get you straightened out.” [33] Readers may quickly see, as Amy does, that Phin has better potential as a partner than Brandon, but until Sophie sees that for herself, readers may well have the sensation of feeling superior and knowing better than Sophie does.

The last two steps in a con, “give the mark something” and “get what you want and get out” raise interesting questions about reader response, the relationship between Crusie and her readership, and the relationship between romance readers and writers in general. In the first eleven pages of *Temptation*, for example, Crusie provides snappy dialogue, an engaging setting, a sympathetic heroine, a pesky sidekick, an infuriating villain (or two), and an oblique introduction to a worthy hero. In fact, in Sophie and Amy’s easy and erroneous dismissal of “the mayor” who must be as old as the signs with his name on them, Crusie foreshadows both Sophie’s tendency to misunderstand Phin and her accurate assessment of the importance of town, the Tuckers, and tradition in the story to come. As the first eleven pages deftly serve as a microcosm of the novel they launch, Crusie has in some ways been able to get what she wanted and get out. That is, she has both established and raised reader expectations, and, if the novel’s run on the *New York Times* Bestseller List is any indication, hooked her reader.

Perhaps the metaphor of romance and romance writing as a con works best when we consider it as a kind of courtship. Generic expectation dictates that romance writers will “stroke” their readers, offer them assurance in the story’s openings that they’ll get what they came for. With an established writer like Crusie, readers can trust the author, can rely on her intent, can have confidence in her ability to “deliver the goods” as she has so many times before. [34] In her capacity to deliver happy endings, Crusie meets genre expectations and readers are rewarded.

While such happy endings may be read as substantiating the genre and all of its potential to please readers, they also can be read as calling somewhat circumspect attention to the genre itself. In some ways those Happily Ever Afters that the genre promises, writers like Crusie deliver, and readers enjoy, are a version of the “three-card monte” at which Michael Dempsey and Davy Dempsey are particularly masterful. Michael teaches Tilda’s niece Nadine how the game is played, but Davy shows her how the game is beaten.

“I love it,” Nadine said. “It’s a sure thing.”

“There are no sure things.”

“Oh, yeah?” Nadine said. “You can’t beat me.”

Davy took a five out of his pocket and slapped it on the table. “Where’s yours?”

Nadine held out her hand to Ethan, and he sighed and dug a five out of his pocket and handed it to her. “You’ll get it back, Ethan,” she said.

“No you won’t, Ethan,” Davy said. “Deal ‘em.” He watched her shuffle the cards, show him the queen, and then palm it while she moved the rest around. For only having practiced a couple of hours, she was damn good.

“Okay,” Nadine said, still moving cards. “Now, where’s the queen?”

“Right here,” Davy said, putting his finger on the middle card.

“Well, let’s look and see,” Nadine said, smug with her queen up her sleeve.

“Let’s,” Davy said, keeping his finger on the middle card. He turned over the eight of clubs to the right and the four of spades to the left. “Will you look at that? Neither one is the queen, so it must be the middle one.” He took the two fives on the table.[\[35\]](#)

Davy beats the game by not looking under the third card, by not showing what isn’t there. The happy endings of romance fiction may work the same way. It might be an oversimplified ending to a category romance where the unworthy criminal and the worthy heroines get the same reward, as in *Trust Me on This*. It might be the blithe reassurance that a hero and heroine who have only known each other for three weeks, who have painfully different backgrounds and complicated families, will successfully blend into an ideal family unit—parents, child, dog, and Dove bars—as in *Welcome to Temptation*. Or it might be faith in a promise of commitment from two people with limited experience in keeping promises or commitments, as in *Faking It*. Trust me on this. Nothing but good times ahead. The happy ending is that queen, the unrevealed card, unless what really lies under that third card might be a Dorcas Finster painting.

If the relationship between a writer of romance fiction and a reader of the genre does share some qualities of the kind of courtship in a con or a romance, readers may never know that they have been scammed. Fraud investigators call this step “losing the mark”; “the victim is separated from the scam operation, often not realizing that she has been victimized.”[\[36\]](#) Double entendre aside, verbal “stroking” is not the only way that a scheme engages a victim’s physiological response: “swindlers commonly employ rewards that appeal to visceral factors when luring potential victims. [. . .] The common thread is simply an appeal to basic human desires.”[\[37\]](#) Desire can short-circuit deliberation: “visceral factors are often associated with a feeling of being ‘out of control’. [. . .] Thus, rational, considered deliberation is a small part of the decision process. Instead, action is driven by instinct and gut feelings, and careful analysis is abandoned.”[\[38\]](#) When Crusie’s heroes are in a state of sexual arousal, she often describes them as feeling as if they have “no blood left in the head.” This is as much a psychological description as a sexual one: watching Sophie work over the pool table wearing a tight pink dress and no underwear, Phin cannot think “straight,” despite the fact that Sophie is finally admitting that she’s crooked.[\[39\]](#)

Researchers Jeff Langenderfer and Terence A. Shimp observe that “With cognitive resources devoted to reward attention, people under the throes of visceral influence are more likely to ignore the nuances of the transaction and fail to decode the scam cues that a cooler, more cognitive evaluation might uncover” (770). That varying level of cognitive ability to discern a fraud in the face of desire might explain why Michael Dempsey sees immediately that Eve and Louise are the same woman, Davy sees it once his attraction to Eve is tempered by his connection with Tilda, and Simon never sees it at all. Like lust, Langenderfer and Shimp report that “visceral influences tend to produce decisions that are nearly devoid of cognitive deliberation, at least in the traditional sense” (769); Michael sums up the research with his own common-sense version of why Davy couldn’t see through Louise to Eve, “You were distracted. . . . Sex will do that to you.”[\[40\]](#) Perhaps sex will do that to readers, too.

In the ongoing albeit somewhat tired debate about the status and worth of romance fiction, those who argue that the genre is unhealthy, ideological escapism are frequently rebutted by readers and writers who claim that nothing that makes so many people happy

can be inherently unhealthy or unworthy.[41] Over and over again the relationship between romance fiction, writer, and readers comes to a mutually satisfying conclusion for the players involved. In highlighting all the parallels between a con and a romance, Crusie has also called to our attention to the similarities between a con and romance fiction. Readers choose writers like Crusie because they trust the kind of book they will get; writers like Crusie have declared their good intentions and demonstrated their ability to deliver the goods: the Happily Ever Afters that work as long as no one gets a closer look under that third card. Romance fiction would then represent an escape in the sense that readers agree not to look too carefully at the endings, which might not be reassuring at all in a real-world context, just as something that looks exactly like a romance might turn out to be a con.[42]

In my opinion, the most important conclusion we might draw from the moral ambiguities of Crusie's con novels is that readers are, in fact, choosing their part in the play. The overly optimistic endings of romance novels are not necessarily creating unrealistic fantasies in the minds of readers, nor reinscribing the subtle laws of patriarchal fathers. And, despite the declared good intentions of Crusie and other romance writers, not every reader will leave a romance novel uplifted and with a more optimistic outlook on life, certain there are "Nothing but good times ahead." Some will, as Crusie has acknowledged, walk away. I would like to see our ongoing critical conversations about Crusie's work and other popular romance embrace a more nuanced approach to reader response.

We can start with an acknowledgement that readers have willingly paid to play. We can consider the pleasures of escape into fantasy[43] without worrying that readers cannot distinguish between the real and the fantastic. We can factor in the physiological responses of laughter and arousal that romance reading may evoke. We can acknowledge that sometimes people find pleasure in being swindled or conned, especially when the stakes are not too high. Romance readers continue to buy in, risking their own five dollars for the pleasures of watching a character like Davy Dempsey handle the cards. Our critical examination of complex writers like Crusie can help us to continue to move the conversation from whether they should, to why they do.

Thanks to Eric Selinger, Rachel Toor, and two generous anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this article.

[1] For a list of romance novels featuring characters who are cons, see the website *All About Romance*: <http://www.likesbooks.com/cons.html>

[2] Scott O'Neal, J.D., "Interviewing Self-Confident Con Artists," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* (March 2001): 16.

[3] Jennifer Crusie, *Trust Me on This* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), 1. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

[4] *Trust Me on This*, 145-46.

[5] *Trust Me on This*, 207.

[6] On her blog, Crusie recently distinguished her various publications among the genres of "chick lit," "romance," "women's fiction," "romantic adventure," and "paranormal

romance.” She calls the stand-alone novels published by St. Martin’s Press, “women’s fiction”: “sometimes... romance, but...always about a woman’s emotional journey”

(<http://www.arghink.com/2010/04/08/trade-paperback-reissues-the-covers/#more-3002>). For the purposes of this paper, I’ll be focusing on the romance elements of the two SMP stand-alones I consider.

[7] Jennifer Crusie, *Welcome to Temptation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 237. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

[8] *Welcome to Temptation*, 212.

[9] *Welcome to Temptation*, 343.

[10] *Welcome to Temptation*, 327.

[11] *Welcome to Temptation*, 352.

[12] *Welcome to Temptation*, 358.

[13] See Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*.

[14] *Welcome to Temptation*, 381.

[15] Although Crusie does not identify this line in her list of movie quotes for the novel (<http://www.jennycrusie.com/trivia/moviequotes.php>, accessed 08/01/2008), this line is resonant of the many declarations of “I’ve got a bad feeling about this” in George Lucas’s screenplays for the *Star Wars* films. In that way it serves as a reminder that often the Dempseys are, in one way or another, saying a line and/or reading a script. Phin has usually missed such references, but here he is offering more of the same.

[16] Jennifer Crusie, *Faking It* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 317. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

[17] *Faking It*, 291.

[18] *Faking It*, 247.

[19] *Faking It*, 264.

[20] In criminal proceedings such situations can be prosecuted as “Intent to defraud.” [Scott O’Neal, J.D., “Interviewing Self-Confident Con Artists,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* (March 2001): 18.]

[21] See, for example, *Welcome to Temptation*, 39.

[22] *Faking It*, 367.

[23] See Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 14.

[24] Read from one perspective, Tilda is really none of those people, as all of those names (Scarlet, Celeste, Veronica, and so on) are identities she can put on and take off. Who, then, is Davy marrying? From another perspective, however, Crusie is also calling attention to the fact that Tilda is all of those women, and each name or nickname represents an aspect of her whole person that Davy knows, respects and loves. (412)

[25] Agnes Hankiss, “Games Con Men Play: The Semiosis of Deceptive Interaction,” *Journal of Communication* 30 (1980): 105.

[26] *Faking It*, 330.

[27] Jennifer Crusie, “Romancing Reality: The Power of Romance Fiction to Reinforce and Re-Vision the Real.” *Jenny Crusie* website.

[28] *Welcome to Temptation*, 7.

[29] Criminal investigators and other social researchers have outlined the regular steps of a fraud. See for example, Patrick D. Walsh, "Scams," *Encyclopedia of White-Collar & Corporate Crime*.

[30] *Welcome to Temptation*, 1.

[31] See, for example, notes on Crusie's website: "She lives on the Ohio River where she often stares at the ceiling and counts her blessings." <http://www.arghink.com/>

[32] *Welcome to Temptation*, 1.

[33] *Welcome to Temptation*, 103.

[34] As an example of Crusie's consideration of reader expectations, see the discussion on "Reader Rage" on her website, where she reports her own "rage"-filled reaction to being let down by two of her favorite writers and asks her readers what makes them "walk away" from a book; <http://www.arghink.com/2009/11/23/reader-rage/#more-2083>

[35] *Faking It*, 281-282.

[36] Patrick D. Walsh, "Scams," *Encyclopedia of White-Collar & Corporate Crime*.

[37] Jeff Langenderfer and Terence A. Shimp, "Consumer Vulnerability to Scams, Swindles, and Fraud: A New Theory of Visceral Influences on Persuasion," *Psychology & Marketing* 18 (2001): 768.

[38] Jeff Langenderfer and Terence A. Shimp, 769.

[39] *Welcome to Temptation*, 311.

[40] *Faking It*, 330.

[41] See, for example, many of the entries in Mussell and Tuñón's *North American Romance Writers*.

[42] Crusie has used John G. Cawelti's phrase "moral fantasy" to describe this dynamic. Cawelti writes, "these formulaic worlds are constructions that can be described as moral fantasies constituting an imaginary world in which the audience can encounter a maximum of excitement without being confronted with an overpowering sense of the insecurity and danger that accompany such forms of excitement in reality." John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 16.

[43] See, for example, Diana Palmer's "Let Me Tell You About My Readers" in Krentz et al. *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women* (155-57).

Bibliography

- Cawelti, John G. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976. Print.
- Crusie, Jennifer. *Faking It*. New York: St. Martin's, 2002. Print.
- . "Romancing Reality: The Power of Romance Fiction to Reinforce and Re-Vision the Real." *Jenny Crusie.com*. Web. <http://jennycrusie.com/essays/romancingreality.php> (accessed June 16, 2008).
- . *Trust Me on This*. New York: Bantam, 1997. Print.
- . *Welcome to Temptation*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000. Print.
- Halttunen, Karen. *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982. Print.
- Hankiss, Agnes. "Games Con Men Play: The Semiosis of Deceptive Interaction." *Journal of Communication* 30 (1980): 104-12. Print.
- Krentz, Jayne Ann, ed. *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women*. Ed. Jayne Ann Krentz. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992. Print.
- Langenderfer, Jeff, and Terence A. Shimp. "Consumer Vulnerability to Scams, Swindles, and Fraud: A New Theory of Visceral Influences on Persuasion." *Psychology & Marketing* Vol 18 (7). July 2001. 763-83. Print.
- Modeleski, Tania. *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*, 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- O'Neal, Scott, J.D., "Interviewing Self-Confident Con Artists," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* (March 2001): 16-21. Print.
- Palmer, Diana. "Let Me Tell You About My Readers." *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women*. Ed. Jayne Ann Krentz. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992. 155-158. Print.
- Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, 2nd Ed. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991. Print.
- Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Print.
- Walsh, Patrick D. "Scams." Encyclopedia of *White-Collar & Corporate Crime*. Web. <http://O-sage-e-reference.com.libsys.ewu.edu/corporatecrime> (accessed August 12, 2008).