

On the Tenth Anniversary of Pamela Regis's *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*

Sarah S. G. Frantz

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About the Author: Sarah Frantz is a recovering academic, a former romance reviewer, and a full-time editor. She has a Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of Michigan, edited two academic anthologies, published numerous academic articles, and is founder and former president of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance. She abandoned all this and a tenured university professorship to become Acquisitions Editor at Riptide Publishing, an up-and-coming press publishing GLBT romance.

In Los Angeles in 2004, I sat down next to Pam Regis at the annual conference of the Jane Austen Society of North America—in fact, I sought her out in order to sit down next to her—and told her how much I loved her book. I had finished my dissertation the previous year and was in my first semester of a tenure-track position. I had three published articles, two on Jane Austen's construction of her heroes, and one on popular romance fiction. Pam's book, which came out after my own article, "Expressing' Herself: The Romance Novel and the Feminine Will to Power," told me that there were more scholars out there interested in popular romance fiction. While not a community, not in 2004, what Pam and I discovered then is that we were not alone, as we had each once thought. Finding Pam in Los Angeles was what spurred me to help build a community of scholars of popular romance, so that others could have that same feeling of sitting down with a friend, with another scholar interested in the same concerns.

Now, in 2013, in Washington D.C., I sit down next to Pam Regis at the annual conference of the Popular Culture Association, and say to her, "I love your book." I am tenured. I have ten published articles and two published edited collections: one on female novelists' constructions of masculinity, one on popular romance fiction. I have cited Pam and *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* in every article I've published since 2003, proving its invaluable contribution (to my scholarship, at least). In 2009, I helped found and since then have been the president of the International Association for the Study of

Popular Romance, an important step toward establishing the community Pam and I found together.

Fundamentally, as a scholar, I'm a feminist narratologist. I look at the way in which novels are constructed—sentence by sentence, scene by scene, trope by trope, convention by convention—and attempt to examine the ways in which these constructions—particularly of romance heroes written by female novelists—reveal cultural and social negotiations around gender and sexuality. Pam's Eight Essential Elements have given me the foundations from which to begin that analysis in popular romance fiction. Using her Essential Elements, I am able to compare, for example, the emotional development of Austen's Darcy and J.R. Ward's Black Dagger Brotherhood. The Essential Elements allow me to discuss the ground-breaking, multi-book emotional arc of Suzanne Brockmann's Sam Starrett, and give me solid basis from which to speculate about the construction of multiple axes of sexuality in BDSM romance. Without *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, my scholarship would have been much more difficult.

Beginning in May, 2013, I'll be stepping outside academia, starting a job as a full-time, salaried acquisitions editor at Riptide Publishing, a small LGBT romance press. And I would argue that *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* is more important for my editing work than my academic work. I proselytize Pam's Eight Elements to my authors when I edit. While the romance writing community has its own terminology for some of Pam's Elements—all romance authors know what "The Dark Moment" is, and understand it better than "Point of Ritual Death"—I'll hammer home "Attraction" and especially "Barrier" to the authors I work with. Sometimes I'll receive a submission about two characters falling in love that might be sweet and wonderful, but isn't a good romance narrative, because there's no narrative tension, nothing to keep the reader moving forward. When I talk with the author, I'll pull out Pam's Essential Elements list and it helps authors understand that I'm not just being mean, that "essential" means precisely that, and that understanding these elements can help them formulate ways in which to build a better romance narrative for publication.

So if, as Pam claims, "any given romance text is more important and more valuable than any work of criticism, period," then *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* is now doing even more important and valuable work than she might have anticipated when she wrote it: helping novelists construct romance novels as well as giving scholars the tools to analyze them. For which all we can do is thank Pam again.