

***A Natural History of the Romance Novel's* Enduring Romance with Popular Romance Studies**

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About the Author: An Goris is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Princeton University and the University of Leuven (Belgium), where she received her PhD in 2011 with a dissertation on American romance author Nora Roberts. She is currently writing the first academic monograph on Roberts. Her research focuses on the relation between genre, gender and authorship in contemporary popular literature, specifically the romance novel. An is the Managing Editor of the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* and the Vice President of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance.

A Natural History of the Romance Novel is one of the most pivotal works on popular romance that has ever been published. In terms of influence it is right up there with Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (1984). In fact, although the academic community at large seems mostly to associate the study of the popular romance novel with Radway's work, I think many of you will agree with me when I say that in the last ten years Pamela Regis's work has matched if not surpassed Radway's in terms of importance to the emerging field of Popular Romance Studies. This rise to prominence has a lot to do with the by now famous definition of the romance novel that Regis coins in this study. This definition— both its short version as “the romance novel is a work of prose fiction that tells the story of courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (19), as well as the more elaborate version with the essential eight elements of the romance novel (27-46)—is used, quoted, or in some other way referred to in most of the romance scholarship that has been published in the last decade. These citations say something about the central position *A Natural History* occupies in the field. It also says something about our collective need to be able to define the object that we are studying. It is very difficult (not to say impossible) to study something that you cannot at least begin to define. Regis's book, perhaps better than any other that I have come across, enables the process of formulating a definition of the romance novel.

I choose my words carefully here. I deliberately use the terms “enable” and “process” because I do not necessarily agree with Regis’s definition. Or, to be more precise, I take issue with the essentialist paradigm in which it is formulated. Indeed, I am one of those scholars who, as Regis puts it, is scared by the use of words like “essential” and “must” when it comes to definitions and categorizations of literature. As a scholar reared in a much more constructionist paradigm, I am fundamentally uncomfortable with the exclusive focus on textual (that is, narrative) elements in this definition and have long argued for the inclusion of other, specifically paratextual parameters in definitions of the romance novel. I, then, certainly welcome a reframing of this definition as practical or pragmatic, and have long thought of it myself as “prototypical”—that is, in my view it describes the prototype of the romance novel. Individual instances of the genre may be more or less prototypical.^[1]

The main value of this definition, however, lies perhaps not so much in whether we agree with it or not, but in the fact that it has given us something tangible to agree or disagree about. Indeed, the eight elements in particular have quickly become a central point of reference in any academic discussion about what the romance novel is (and is not). We might choose to adapt, replace, re-label, reframe, re-conceptualize or rearrange them, but we cannot deny they provide a point of departure and a kind of baseline for any such further definitional endeavors on the romance novel. As anybody who has ever tried to define something as unwieldy as a genre knows, this is no small feat.

Another significant feat of this study is the way in which it embodies one of the most important ongoing evolutions in Popular Romance Studies. This is the shift from studies that seek to focus on similarity to those that aim to study differentiation within the genre. Many early studies of the romance genre—such as Modleski (1982), Radway (1984), Jensen (1984) and Mussell (1984)—sought to describe the general characteristics of the romance novel, often in an attempt to determine how romances are different from other kinds of literature. Such studies are frequently based on a conceptualization of the romance genre as internally homogenous. In their ardor to describe the specificity of romance in comparison to other genres, they tend to overlook the many kinds of variation and stratification that exist within romance itself. Although this genre-wide approach has by no means completely disappeared from the field, there is certainly an evolution towards romance scholarship that has a much more narrow and specific focus. Many recent romance studies take on specific subgenres, series of novels, or even individual texts. These studies often aim to highlight how particular romance texts differ from others within the genre. These works adopt, in other words, a fundamentally heterogeneous conceptualization of the romance genre that aims to recognize instead of obscure the diversity within its fluid borders.

This shift is in an almost iconic way embodied within the covers of *A Natural History*. The first two parts of this study (“Critics and the Romance Novel” and “The Romance Novel Defined”) are clearly situated in the genre-wide tradition. Here Regis seeks to describe general characteristics of the romance in order to point out how it is different from other kinds of literature. She coins her famous definition of the romance novel in these pages. The third and the fourth part of the study (which take up about 150 of its 200 pages) describe and discuss a number of individual romance novels (*Pamela*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Jane Eyre* all come up) and (even more importantly in my eyes) a number of individual romance authors—including contemporary ones.

Indeed, part four is entirely dedicated to a discussion of the twentieth-century romance novel and is organized on the basis of authorship. It contains, amongst others, chapters on Janet Dailey, Jayne Ann Krentz and Nora Roberts that—ten years after the book's publication—continue to be amongst the primary academic resources on these novelists (which, honesty compels me to add, says perhaps as much about the innovative turn in Regis's work as it does about the rather lackluster state of authorial studies in romance criticism). In all of these discussions Regis consistently seeks to place the novel or author in the traditions of the genre as she has outlined them in the first two parts of her study even as she articulates how these works/authors are idiosyncratic and have, each in their own specific way, made unique contributions to the long history and enduring traditions of the romance novel that the study as a whole uncovers.

If one of the challenges our field as a whole faces in the next decade is the study of the individual romance author, as I have argued in my own paper at this conference, then I think *A Natural History* provides a good place to begin. One of the unsung qualities of this work is the way in which it begins to formulate a romance canon—a canon of the most important novels and authors in this truly massive genre. It is a task that is in no way complete and that I think might provide one of the focus points for our field in the next decade. If in this endeavor we manage to follow in the impressive footsteps of *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, then the future of Popular Romance Studies looks bright indeed.

[1] For more on the notion of prototypical conceptualizations of genre, see De Geest and Van Gorp (1999).

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