

## How to Tame a Dragon: Ten years after *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*

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**About the Author:** Jayashree Kamble is Assistant Professor of English at CUNY-LaGuardia Community College in New York. A two-time recipient of the Romance Writers of America scholarly research grant, she is also the author of the essays "Female Enfranchisement and the Popular Romance: An Indian Perspective" and "Patriotism, Passion, and PTSD: The Critique of War in Popular Romance Novels." She is currently working on a book titled *Making Meaning in Romance: An Epistemology of Popular Romance Fiction*.

I started graduate school in 2000 with the intent of studying Shakespeare and film. In 2002, when I expressed some uncertainty about my doctoral focus, I was advised by a professor to write my dissertation on the works I like to read even when I don't have to read them. Since I read romance fiction, I started emailing the department faculty to see who would work with me on popular romance novels. It may shock you to know that there was no stampede. The few who responded told me to read Janice Radway. It was a bit frustrating, not because I don't appreciate the contribution made by *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, but because the book was written in 1984. Did no one know or care about romance fiction scholarship (or even related scholarship) that had occurred in the intervening eighteen years?

Luckily, there were a few professors who did stop me from sliding into despair, the first being a wonderful nineteenth-century Americanist with whom I started studying popular romances, as well as novels like *Charlotte Temple* and *The Wide, Wide World*. She was also the one I ran to with the news that someone named Pamela Regis had written *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. I think I said something to the effect of "This woman wrote my dissertation! What the hell am I going to do now?" (I confess I hadn't read the book at that point, but the notion that someone had traced the history of current mass-market romance fiction to works like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre* seemed alarmingly close to what I had hoped to do.) My reaction betrayed my belief that there was only one

study to be done on the genre—and someone else had beaten me to the punch. Oh, woe is me! Fortunately, my professor talked me off the ledge, explaining that this book was a good thing because someone had built a foundation on which I could now rely. I think this roundtable and the growth of the field testifies to the truth of her statement for many of us who began this endeavor with little in terms of accessible or useful scholarly models in relation to romance fiction.

In re-reading the book for this roundtable, I was struck by how carefully it marks its territory. I have yet to master this skill of fighting literary battles on my own terms and turf. In my early scholarship, for instance, I often faced questions about my seemingly scatter-shot selection of romance novels (when my intent had been to adopt a deductive model rather than the inductive one that has so plagued the genre's scholarship, much to its detriment). In the past, I have also struggled with using a plethora of literary and cultural theories that are vital to analyses of the genre but which I deployed in ways that left my work open to strong challenges on an overwhelming number of fronts. I think *A Natural History* finds a fine balance between such extremes. It takes great care to outline its textual concerns and theoretical lens, forestalling the otherwise inevitable arguments that greet works that seek to define a large corpus: "But why did you include X?" or "Why didn't you include Y?" or "Isn't Z just an exception to the rule?" etc. Its statement of what it is creating (a genealogy for the mass-market romance based on a Frygian conception of comedy) and what it intends to offer the reader (close readings of selected novels going back to *Pamela*) is impeccable and explicit. It thus offers an excellent model for scholars (including graduate students) who work with similar concerns (of genre or textual selection from a large pool).

## Quo Vadimus

In the last ten years, scholars on the genre have branched out in various directions. I do not fear, as I once momentarily did, that there is no more left to be said After Regis. As her own talk has shown, there is work to be done in looking at the past with a sharper lens. I myself hope to dive back into my notes (written one summer on site at the British Library in London) on pre-1960s Mills and Boon romances, because that is a chapter in the genre's history that needs greater attention. I also hope to visit the firm's archives, which were once off-limits but are now accessible through the University of Reading.

Apart from these diachronic readings, more synchronic ones are needed in order to capture the stable yet flexible workings of the genre, since it changes dramatically and yet not traumatically within a small period of time. To illustrate, the genre has grown in just a century from British novels about working class characters or colonial bureaucrats to the more dramatic military and medical romances and then to glamorous short travelogues starring billionaires, and from the Gothics and long historical novels written in the U.S. to the paranormal and urban fantasy sub-genre that is now in its heyday; yet new forms do not abandon previous ones but, rather, exist alongside them in a rhizomatic structure, with each node signaling new thematic and ideological confluences that feed into the others. My fellow panelists are exploring these issues at the micro and macro level in the genre's

Anglo-American as well as non-Anglo-American forms and I hope others will step up to do so as well.

I want to end with the exhortation that popular romance studies must strive to be in conversation with scholarship in related areas in literary studies. In just the last two months, I happened to be at two talks that struck a chord in me as a romance scholar, although they were not about romance fiction per se. One was by the Americanist Christopher Looby, who is in the exploratory stages of a project that he has provisionally titled, "The Literariness of Sexuality: or, How to Do the (Literary) History of (American) Sexuality"; the other, by David Earle, was called, "The Popular Front: Pulp Magazines as Anti-Fascist Propaganda." Both talks examined narrative forms whose content, reception, publication, or legacies intersect in some way with the work that is underway (or should be) in romance fiction scholarship. It is vital to keep abreast of such endeavors in order to create new opportunities that will help our field expand and mature. At the talk by Dr. Earle, I also made the acquaintance of a collector of pulp who is digitizing hundreds of these texts and is happy to share them with scholars for a small fee. I myself intend to get in touch with him for a potential project on this oft-overlooked step-sibling of the romance fiction genre. Both talks and the chance meeting reminded me that the streams of romance fiction flow from different springs to many oceans; it will profit us to try and navigate as many as we can so there will no longer be a map of literature, as Regis has said, that stops at romance with the legend: "Here there be dragons."